CONTINGENT JUDAISM:
RENEWED PRAGMATISM FOR A POSTMODERN AGE

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Abstract

Inspired by the long tradition of Jewish thinkers adopting and adapting the philosophical insights of their times, this thesis endeavors to respond to the challenges posed by the linguistic turn and postmodern philosophy. Chapter 1 sets the intellectual "scene" of the past half century, offering a cursory explanation of the linguistic turn and its impact on critical theory and philosophy. It then turns to the particular challenges postmodernism presents for Jewish life and thought, specifically regarding metaphysics and religious truth-claims. With this in mind, it ventures to offer a different model of Jewish neo-pragmatism guided by the thought of Richard Rorty as presented in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. It endeavors to show that Rorty's particular brand of postmodern thought might offer a useful model for how we understand Jewish identity and authenticity. The chapter concludes by advocating for a non-essentialist, non-metaphysical Jewish metanarrative that celebrates redescription, reinterpretation, and plurality of expression as the foundational elements of a newly poeticized Jewish culture.

Chapter 2 applies Rorty's thought more narrowly to Jewish conversion, viewing it as a paradigm for Jewish identity formation as a whole. It highlights the tension between ideology, praxis, and genealogy in modern formulations of Jewish identity. Responding to the double-standard that often mars the conversion process, it seeks to present converts to Judaism as Rortian ironists *par excellence*, who incorporate new and unfamiliar metaphors into their final vocabulary on their process of self-creation. It argues that this process should not exclusively apply for those who accept Judaism later in life, but rather that in the postmodern world, we are all Jews-by-choice. This process also offers a model for Jewish solidarity as a whole, illustrating that what binds Jews one another are not shared beliefs, principles, or even ancestors, but instead a metaphoric kinship guided by an engagement with the vast sea of metaphors granted by centuries of Jewish tradition.

Chapter 1: Richard Rorty and Postmodern Judaism

The Linguistic Turn and The Postmodern Condition

The extent to which history can be divided into distinct epochs is the subject of much scholarly debate. As with any attempt to label and organize complex subjects, the imposed boundaries between eras are, at their core, heuristics employed on the basis of their utility, not necessarily their correspondence with external reality. That said, there are certain inflection points within the vast ocean of history that witness profound shifts in the way humanity describes and interacts with the world around it. We could point to many inflection points within the past two centuries that fundamentally shaped the world as we experience it today—tectonic shifts in technology, industry, and political and economic structures—all of which impacted the way we think about the world as well as our place in it. Specifically within the realm of critical theory and philosophy, one such shift took hold over the course of the 20th century, which cast profound doubt on our ability to produce language that presents a one-to-one correspondence with the world "as it is."

Commonly referred to as the "linguistic turn," this inflection point destabilized long edified notions of truth, knowledge, and ethics. Namely, it posed a challenge regarding whether human beings confined to ways of thinking about the world shaped by their respective cultural frameworks can identify and describe such abstract concepts with any degree of certainty. Largely built from the work of German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), and bolstered by advancements in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology, this shift asserted that human language, along with the meanings and descriptions it seeks to convey, can only function within particular parameters set by the community utilizing it for a specific purpose. These parameters lay the contours for what Wittgenstein refers to as "language games," distinct spheres of discourse through which

human beings communicate thoughts, beliefs, and information about the world around them. Depending on the reason for communication, different rules might apply. To use a simple example, if I have just sat down at the restaurant and the server asks, "How are you today?" and I respond, "An object in motion will in motion unless acted upon by an outside force," my sentence may carry meaning and offer a useful description of the world, but it violates the parameters of the language game of greetings and pleasantries in a social situation, undoubtedly leaving a perplexed server waiting for an answer to their question.

It is easy to see how Newton's first law of motion must be situated within a particular realm of discourse, which in most cases does not apply to enjoying a meal in a restaurant, but the challenge comes when we seek to analyze substantial claims about more ephemeral concepts like truth and justice, right and wrong. What Wittgenstein showed is that any claim to describe such concepts must originate within particular language games, informed by assumptions about what we intend to accomplish by employing our words. This flew in the face of basic premises, which had grounded philosophical discourse since the time of Descartes (and perhaps before); namely that through careful reasoning and flawless deduction, reflective minds could discern the core essences of truth, morality, and the nature of the physical world. Coinciding with that assertion was the belief that reason, or at least reason at it occurred in the mind of European intellectuals, could offer a new path forward for human civilization, shattering the shackles of superstition and blind faith. However, Wittgenstein and his ilk showed that this project was also grounded in beholden to parameters dictated by the various cultural frameworks in which it came to fruition. For him and many others, any claims to truth are contingent upon inherited cultural and conceptual frameworks—neither eternal nor uniquely accessed by a particular form of discourse. Hope

in the possibility of Cartesian certainty and Kantian universal moral principles, which so fiercely fueled the builders of a new political order, had fizzled into mere embers.

This collapsed optimism sent shockwaves throughout academies and institutions in the "Western" world.[1] However, no intellectual pursuit was more substantially impacted than the longstanding philosophical sub-discipline of "metaphysics." A difficult concept to define, metaphysics is generally the pursuit of identifying and describing elements of existence beyond the physical world, such as first principles, forms, and other essences that transcend the constraints of time and place. One result of the linguistic turn, accompanied by unprecedented developments in our understanding of natural sciences, was the death of metaphysics as a valid or useful form of discourse. While this did not present a profound challenge for many, it struck at the heart of many fundamental claims of religious traditions. With metaphysics in doubt, discussions of God, revelation, covenant, redemption, and eternal notions of right and wrong became relegated to the sphere of culturally contingent language-games, with no assured correspondence to external reality. Understanding the implications of the linguistic turn, how could any such discussions, which had occupied the minds of religious thinkers for generations, maintain any meaningful relation with the world as people experience it? So, the age heralded by Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God" posed a serious challenge to those who remained committed to a particular religious tradition's claims to eternal notions of truth and morality.

[1] The appellation of "Western philosophy" as a distinct tradition dating back to the days of Plato and Socrates is, in itself, a fabricated narrative meant to ground the claim that the developments of the Renaissance and Enlightenment merely continued the "progress" first achieved by the ancient Greeks. Its function is largely political, meant to describe a more "enlightened" Western Europe from the "backwards" Eastern, and predominantly Muslim, centers of civilization. In fact, the cultural heritage of the ancient Greeks was preserved and transmitted by scholars in the Islamic world long before entering what is now England, France, Germany, and others.

To add to the complexity, the linguistic turn and its subsequent impact on philosophy (as well as other forms of critical inquiry), also cast doubt on the validity of larger narratives of human existence. Often referred to as "metanarratives," these are the guiding narratives that place particular communities and individuals within a larger trajectory of human existence. They often employ concepts like "destiny," "fate," and "special purpose" to justify the ideology that informs a certain human collective. For Jews, a common metanarrative is the notion that God created the world (Creation), and bestowed a unique teaching to God's chosen people (Revelation), which they are to observe and safeguard until the eventual reunion of the eternal God with temporal, physical existence (Redemption). Another common metanarrative is progressivism—the belief that human existence gradually ascends in knowledge and perfection over the course of time. This metanarrative guided much of the Enlightenment and its political iterations, which operated on the assumption that with more reason, knowledge, and, in many cases, democracy (all of which just so happened to look like 17th-18th century Western European society), humanity could ascend to greater heights than previously conceived. A well-known contemporary example of this progressive approach is the famous statement of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Many have noted that this line is often misunderstood out of context, but its wide popularity among Americans today testifies to the power of the optimistic overarching metanarrative it conveys.

These totalizing narratives, which garnered the unquestioned faith of so many in the past, are no longer taken for granted among thinkers and critics informed by the philosophical developments of the past half-century. To borrow the terminology of John D. Caputo, many who take seriously the conclusions of the linguistic turn and succeeding

developments in history, both political and intellectual, are without a guiding star, a larger narrative that explains all and gives our particular existence meaning. Caputo's poetic encapsulation, in good postmodern style, hinges on the etymology of "disaster" being derived from *dis-astrum* meaning "without a star." As he writes, "To suffer a disaster is to lose one's star (*dis-astrum*), to be cut loose from one's lucky or guiding light. For me, the stars above twinkle in a void, without concern."[2] He continues, "We pass our days on the surface of a little star which drifts aimlessly through endless skies, inventing such fictions as we require to make it through the day and to persuade ourselves of our meaning and significance."[3] The days of confidence that the particular truths and moral sentiments, which inform how we live and build communities, contain some particular resonance with the wider cosmos are, it would seem, long gone.

The lasting impact of the linguistic turn laid the foundations for what many refer to as "postmodernism" or the "postmodern condition"—namely, the idea that any claim to objectivity is constrained by the particularities of culture and language. In this view, reason and logic (particularly in the European philosophical sense) are not inherently superior to other modes of discourse; metaphysical certainty about universal truths is unattainable, and each community or ideology is guided by metanarratives—stories and metaphors particular to them that do not necessarily hold exclusive claims to truth or morality. To be sure, not all theorists and philosophers over the past century ascribe to each of these core assumptions, but their far-reaching implications have significantly shifted the landscape of critical theory and intellectual pursuits.

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[2] John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1993), 6.

[3] Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 17.

Postmodernism and Judaism

The assumptions that guide postmodernist thought pose a significant challenge to core elements of traditional Jewish philosophy and theology. In her recent book seeking to construct a viable Jewish theology informed by postmodern thought, Miriam Feldmann Kaye succinctly outlines these challenges as:

1. The assertion that one particular ideology espoused by one specific group comprises a mere drop in an intellectual ocean of ideas. How can this ideology claim any form of superiority over the myriads of alternative ones?
2. The assertion that [language, and by extension, any] religious language no longer holds the key to describe or access reality. How can a single language, that happens to be one's own, purport to convey universal or absolute truths?
3. The assertion that the tools for empirical verification have been shattered: many postmodernists would assert that a logical thought system is no more valuable or trustworthy than any other. If this claim is viewed as persuasive, religion would no longer require logical justification.[4]

One might ask whether such assumptions truly lead to an existential crisis among liberal Jews.[5] Many liberal streams of Jewish thought have long recognized the human influence on texts like the Tanakh and Talmud, acknowledging that traditional Jewish conceptions of God as a masculine, regal entity with providential influence over all aspects of human life are largely metaphorical and not to be taken literally. However, it is safe to say that many liberal Jews maintain some semblance of belief in the core essentialisms of Jewish thought—namely, that the core texts of Judaism convey universal moral values, that they are, in some way or another, divine and eternal in nature, and that Jewish tradition is both well-suited and

[4] Miriam Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 7.

[5] I use this term to include the Reform, Conservative, Renewal, and Reconstructionist movements within the American Jewish milieu, which can be broadly categorized by their emphasis on personal autonomy with regard to *halakhic* observance, willingness to apply modern (and perhaps postmodern) criticism to canonical Jewish texts, and openness to creative innovation in liturgy and communal worship.

firmly bolstered by rational inquiry as it has developed in European and American critical discourse.

Perhaps, the doubts cast by postmodern assertions may not impact the religious mindset of the average "Jew in the pew," but for those in the Jewish community who strive to, in the words of Maimonides, "hear truth from whoever speaks it," and venture into the expansive world of theory and philosophy to benefit from its many gifts, such challenges demand a response. Thus, in continuing with the long tradition of Jews employing contemporary intellectual insights to their inherited tradition, the purpose of this thesis is to offer one way in which postmodern philosophy provides a useful framework for understanding, learning, and teaching Jewish tradition. It will focus specifically on the work of American philosopher Richard Rorty and his notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity—best summarized in his book of the same name. However, before introducing Rorty's thought, it is important to acknowledge, albeit on a surface level, other Jewish responses to the postmodern condition.

Miriam Feldmann Kaye presents one example of a contemporary Jewish response and serves a valuable resource for the lay of the land, as it were, of Jewish philosophy in the wake of postmodernism. In contrast to her stated project, many Jewish thinkers of the past century recognized the pitfalls of metaphysics and its influence on Jewish thought. Instead, they shifted to an emphasis on praxis, highlighting the ability of Jewish traditions and rituals to offer meaningful ways of life, even if they do not correspond to eternal, essential structures "out there" in the world. Kaye categorizes these thinkers as "neo-pragmatists,"

meaning that they broadly view religious life in terms of its function for constructing community, not its correspondence with the physical world.[6]

Her categorization includes more recent scholars such as Peter Ochs, Hannah Hashkes, and Avi Sagi, as well as earlier 20th century thinkers like Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Elizer Goldman, David Hartman, Mordecai Kaplan, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Of these, perhaps only Kaplan would refrain from shuddering at the "neo-pragmatist" label, but all share in the recognition that modern developments in technology, science, and critical theory necessitated newly conceived models of meaningful Jewish life that exhibit a certain degree of metaphysical minimalism. Other responses to the challenges posed by the metaphysical and epistemological uncertainty of the modern (and postmodern) age would include the builders of the recent neo-Hasidic movement—namely Arthur Green and Zalman Shachter-Shalomi—as well as Jewish existentialists like Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Franz Rosenzweig. Though the projects and methods of these thinkers vary greatly, they all emphasize the role of subjective and inter-subjective experience in religious life, the ethical obligations prescribed by Jewish tradition, and strive to lay the foundations for a reinvigorated, newly meaningful approach to Jewish life and practice.

For Kaye, the turn to neo-pragmatism on the part of many Jewish philosophers is insufficient to answer the challenges posed to those committed to Orthodox Jewish praxis and belief. For her, and for the thinkers she synthesizes, traditional praxis must include some form of theological underpinning, even if it accepts the death of metaphysics. As she writes, "I concur with [Cass] Fisher that the claim that Judaism always expressed greater concern for praxis rather than theology is in fact characteristic of a post-theological age. It therefore

[6] Kaye, *Jewish Theology*, 9.

appears necessary to *restore* a Jewish non-metaphysical theology, for the sake of renewing the practice of theology in our times."[7] Her book seeks to accomplish this restoration through the thought of Tamar Ross and Shimon Gerhson Rosenberg (commonly known as "Rav Shagar"), both of whom dealt heavily with the possible benefits of postmodern thought for traditional Judaism, particularly when framed within the language games of Jewish mysticism. Her work offers a viable path forward for the Orthodox believer acquainted with modern and postmodern thought, along with accessible translations and syntheses of Ross and Shagar's thought in the English language.

The questions and challenges that underpin Kaye's project are mostly not shared by those of a more liberal Jewish mindset, even if they maintain some level of traditional Jewish observance. So the question arises: Why respond to the challenges of postmodernism if liberal Jews no longer feel constrained by the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of traditional Jewish thought? Are we not content to continue reconstructing meaningful forms of Jewish communal life without the need for systematic theologies? These are valid questions, firmly grounded in the neo-pragmatic heritage bestowed upon us by our 20th and 21st century predecessors. There are, however, non-theological issues that *do* challenge the contemporary liberal Jew—namely questions of identity (Who is considered a Jew? How are we to understand the conversion process? What makes Messianic Jews not accepted as part of the Jewish community? What are the benefits or dangers of intermarriage?), authenticity (What constitutes "authentic" Jewish expression? Can someone be a "good" or "bad" Jew and how? How do we, as liberal Jews, relate to the forms of Jewish life practiced by our near and distant ancestors?), and self-image (Is Judaism a religion or an ethnicity/peoplehood?

[7] *Ibid.*, 12.

What do we consider "Jewish values"? How do we understand Zionism as a political ideology framed in what many see as "religious" language?). This discussion seeks to show that postmodern thought in general, and Rorty's notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity in particular, may offer a useful framework for addressing these core issues that concern so many Jewish communities and institutions today.

Introducing Rorty

Before delving into Rorty's thought, it is important to first offer a rough sketch of his background and the philosophical trends that marked his intellectual journey. In order to track his journey, we must introduce the commonly imposed division in modern (and specifically European/American/Australian) philosophy between Analytic and Continental. Beginning with the turn of the 20th century, analytic philosophers recognized the inherent messiness and indeterminacy of language when it comes to identifying and describing objective truth. In response, they sought to "purify" philosophical language, ridding it of the particular, culturally-contingent elements of language that contribute to its epistemological unreliability. Building on the work of early analytic thinkers like Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, their prize achievement was the creation of "First Order Logic," a set of symbols and logical axioms that reduce argumentation to its most simple elements, in hopes that philosophical inquiry might proceed with the same certainty as other scientific disciplines. This contrasted with Continental philosophy, which shared in the analytical philosophers' rejection of metaphysics, but largely gave up on the project of epistemology or any self-proclaimed "objective" modes of philosophical discourse. Rather than align themselves with

the sciences, continental philosophers turned instead to the humanities, focusing on literature, metaphor, and subjective experience as the most valuable media for philosophical discourse.

Trained as an analytic philosopher, Rorty eventually began to question its value for greater society. His primary accusation aimed at its confinement to the halls of academies, where philosophers could inhabit worlds of pure reason instead of serving as productive social critics and builders of culture. This was largely the result of the gradual professionalization of philosophy and criticism, which once sought to act as a beacon of reason and higher culture to the uninitiated.[8] With the linguistic turn and its deeper understanding of cultural contingency, those who could no longer find pure reason in the world around them decided to construct a new realm for themselves, one where they could escape the inconsistencies and uncertainties of common language-use. Rorty came to reject this intellectual seclusion, adopting instead a pragmatist stance that venerates stories, rather than theories, as powerful agents of social change. As he writes, "In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away 'prejudice' or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers."[9] The preference for literature over theory and the function of language over presuming that it seamlessly corresponds with reality, lies at the core of Rorty's thought.

So what might this philosopher of philosophers offer the liberal Jews of today? One could argue that Jewish tradition, by its very nature, is founded upon literature. For centuries, Jews have lifted stories and metaphors to the highest level of sanctity. In a certain sense, this

[8] See Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso Books, 1996) for an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon.

[9] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

is true. However, various periods of Jewish history have sought to identify universal philosophical groundings for Jewish life. The best example of the pre-modern era is Maimonides, who famously applied Aristotelian science and logic to the foundational narratives of the Jewish worldview, striving to show them as not only compatible, but mutually beneficial. Part of his project was to diminish "prejudices," to use Rorty's term, in Jewish faith—beliefs about God he found incompatible with reason. We see this clearly in his "Thirteen Articles of Faith," which sought to distill Jewish thought and belief to its most basic, essential elements. In this sense, while Jewish culture celebrated the power of narrative and metaphor in its many historical iterations, many like Maimonides felt a strong urge to ground Jewish ideologies in the philosophical discourse of their time using what they described as "universal" and "unchanging" notions of truth and reason. Thus, even a subtle and nuanced philosopher like Maimonides felt obligated to provide an essentialist encapsulation of Jewish belief similar to other religious creeds of his era. In many ways, his "Articles" laid the path for modern attempts to distill the rich and diverse world of Jewish life into a core set of beliefs or ideas. So, it would seem that Rorty's critique of modern philosophy's fixation on essentialist notions of eternal truths and objective knowledge might also extend to modern Judaism in general, and the desire to ground Jewish belief and practice on "rational," timeless principles in particular.

We need not look far in modern times to see the products of such desire. The German and American Reformers of the 19th and early 20th century sought to reconstruct Jewish life on the basis of modern rationality and the findings of the nascent *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the critical study of Jewish texts and traditions). They, like their European philosophical influences, wished to rid Judaism of the cultural "prejudices" that had distorted

and obfuscated its core "essence" over the course of time, aiming to separate the wheat from the proverbial chaff. Building from the intellectual heritage from Spinoza, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and others, they applied contemporary philosophical insights to Jewish texts and practices in hopes of refining Jewish belief in accordance with the findings of modern reason. This had wide-reaching implications for Jewish life and ritual—both in terms of praxis (which customs and rituals retain their traditional meaning) and ideology (what can or cannot be said about God). We see this in the early development of Reform prayerbooks, where, to use a common example, the language of the *G'vurot* benediction in the *Sh'moneh Esrei* was changed from *m'chayeh hameitim*, acknowledging a God "who revives the dead," to a God who does not suspend the laws of nature, but one who *m'chayeh hakol*, "who gives life to all." Additionally, early builders of what is now the Reform Movement emphasized the universal ethical claims of Jewish tradition over more particularistic metaphors, an approach that naturally aligned with the core assumptions of the Enlightenment regarding human equality and individual autonomy. These are but a couple of examples of how early Reform thinkers sought to incorporate notions of knowledge and truth granted by the philosophical insights of their time into Jewish life and thought.

But their dream of a newly purified, rational Judaism eventually gave way to the reality that the "prejudices"—the superstitious traditional beliefs which so offended them—proved to be irreplaceable in the hearts of many Jews coming from very different cultural milieus than those of Central Europe and America. Thus, the newly purified, rationalized, ethical monotheism they fashioned in their cultural image proved not so universal after all. Although the Reform movement has shifted from such ideological stringency and profound optimism in the redemptive qualities of reason, the legacy of its predecessors still rings

clearly in the platforms and denominational framework that continues to shape much of Jewish life in America. A postmodern outlook, and particularly Rorty's notion of contingency, irony, and solidarity, might allow us to shift from the ideological fixation that dominated our Reform forebears.

Contingency

Rorty's embrace of contingency as an organizing principle for his philosophy extends to language, selfhood/identity, and community. At its core is a plea for humility regarding the concepts we use to understand and interact with the world around us. His argument outlines the trends of European/American philosophy over the past two centuries, which he criticizes for its commitment to the notion that certain forms of language correspond to external reality better than others. As he puts it, "The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak."[10] Accordingly, human history should not be understood in terms of a metanarrative that moves from ignorance to knowledge or superstition to fact, but instead as a complex progression of new ways of describing the world. Since language is a human creation, it can only address and describe the world, not resonate with it on some deeper level. The far-reaching implication is that all language is metaphor, pointing to the world but never adequately encapsulating it.[11]

To think of the history of language as the history of metaphor is, in his words, to "drop the picture of the human mind, or human languages, becoming better and better suited

[10] Rorty, *Contingency*, 6.

[11] Rorty's understanding of all language as metaphor relies heavily on the work of Donald Davidson. While this discussion will not include an in-depth summary of his work, Rorty provides this brief summary: "This account

to the purposes for which God or Nature designed them."[12] Rorty's argument seeks to tear down the notion that the metaphors of the modern era are somehow better suited to describe the world "as it is," but instead have enabled us to interact with it, and each other, in new and innovative ways. This claim can be difficult wrap our heads around, particularly those of us who, implicitly or explicitly, hold dear to the notion that the language we speak, or the language of venerated scriptures, is the "best of all possible languages" (to borrow from Leibniz's famous adage). It encourages us to take pause and realize that our way of describing the world is but one of many, with its own strengths and weaknesses. If we are to take the claims of the linguistic turn (which some refer to as the "cultural-linguistic" turn) seriously, we then see that language, metaphor, and culture are all interlinked. As Rorty puts it, "Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids."[13]

It is important to distinguish between Rorty's use of the term "language" and its common meaning in colloquial use. The latter generally categorizes the particular use of symbols, alphabets, and grammatical structures in different communities (i.e. English, Spanish, German, Hebrew, Arabic, etc.). Rather, Rorty understands the term more broadly as a collection of metaphors used to facilitate communication and description. Such metaphors might share common etymological origins, but may also originate from different cultures

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of intellectual history chimes with Nietzsche's definition of 'truth' as a 'mobile army of metaphors'…But in order to accept this picture, we need to see the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in the way Davidson sees it: not as a distinction between two sorts of meaning, nor as a distinction between two sorts of interpretation, but as a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks," (17).

[12] *Ibid.*, 16.

[13] *Ibid.*

(e.g. the integration of Yiddish terms into American English). Eventually, Rorty shifts to a more useful term, "vocabularies," which are larger collections of metaphors, terms, and symbols shared by human collectives at any given moment.[14] Though we can point certain trends and characteristics in language-use, vocabularies are inherently fluid—constantly shifting according to the needs, tendencies, and circumstances of the communities that employ them. Their effectiveness is not grounded in their correspondence with reality, but rather in their utility for human beings to communicate and collaborate. As he writes, "When we consider examples of alternative language games—the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson's, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud's, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, the idiom of Blake versus that of Dryden—it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world deciding between them."[15] For Rorty, human collectives in conversation with one another are the ultimate decision-makers, even if they are not always conscious of the process.

Building from his acknowledgment of contingency, Rorty goes on to show how individual and communal identity are largely conceptualized and described in terms granted by their particular historical, cultural milieu. Our ideas of who we are and how we fit in the world around us do not generate *ex nihilo* from within, but rather grow out of our adoption and adaptation of the vocabularies we encounter throughout our lives. Similar to theories of composite identities in modern psychology, Rorty understands the process of arriving at self-understanding as recognizing the causes and contexts that all led to who we are, how we speak and think, and how we understand the world. This might present a limiting view on

[14] Rorty's notion of vocabularies bears many similarities with French thinker Dan Sperber's "shared representations." See *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

[15] Rorty, 5.

identity, casting doubt on the possibility of originality and individual uniqueness. Rorty recognizes this fear when he writes, "To admit that mere spatiotemporal location, mere contingent circumstance, mattered would be to reduce us to the level of a dying animal."[16] Instead, Rorty frames the process of gradually acknowledging one's contingency as one of self-creation rather than self-discovery. Here, Rorty relies heavily on Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of perspectivism. He summarizes his approach to identity when he writes:

> Nietzsche did not abandon the idea of discovering the causes of our being what we are. He did not give up the idea that an individual might track home the blind impress all his behavings bore. He only rejected the idea that this tracking was a process of discovery. In his view, in achieving this sort of self-knowledge we are not coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time. Rather, he saw self-knowledge as self-creation.[17]

In this sense, by tracking the many causes and contingencies that led to our particular sense of self, we have the opportunity to liberate ourselves from the constraints of circumstance and begin to create ourselves anew.

This is because just as any given language cannot better correspond with reality than another, the metaphors by which we understand our place in the world cannot fully capture our uniqueness. As Rorty explains, "The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language—that is, of thinking up some new metaphors. For any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail."[18] By their very nature, the metaphors we inherit will not be sufficient to capture our particular experiences, desires, and constructions of identity. So in a certain

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[16] Rorty, 26.

[17] *Ibid.,* 27.

[18] *Ibid.*

sense, each person must invent a "new language" that builds from their contingent, inherited metaphors, but offers a new reconstruction to better suit their world. Again, this self-creation cannot occur *ex nihilo*, but must utilize the language and metaphors made available by cultural and historical circumstance.

Contingency and Society

The people best equipped to engage in this process of self-creation, overcoming the constraints of their inherited vocabulary and envisioning new metaphorical descriptions, are not philosophers but poets. Specifically, Rorty points to the "strong poet" as a paradigm of human self-realization. This concept derives from the literary critic Harold Bloom, who distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" on the basis of "the line between using language which is familiar and universal and producing language which, though initially unfamiliar and idiosyncratic, somehow makes tangible the blind impress all one's behavings bear."[19] The "blind impress" to which Rorty refers is a person's singular, inimitable expression.[20] Their innovative redescriptions do not reach any closer to "the world as it is," but instead reshape how a given individual or community expresses identity and meaning.

Often times, the unfamiliar language-use of a strong poet can take hold in a generation long after their death. History is filled with countless examples of *avant garde* artists, writers, and thinkers who challenged the boundaries of their culture in ways that only came to be appreciated after their death. Rorty views this process as the ideal foundation for culture and society. Here, Rorty shows a certain limitation in his worldview, likely guided by

[19] *Ibid.*, 29.

[20] The phrase comes from Philip Larkin's poem "Continuing to Live," with which Rorty begins the second chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

his own cultural-historical framework. As will become more clear in the application of his thought to Jewish topics, his emphasis on strong poets as individual figures is highly individualistic. Often times, innovative development of vocabularies can result from collective dialectic, not just individual genius. The notion of individual greatness that extends to all of society is largely a myth of modern culture. Regardless, in emphasizing an ever-evolving process of innovative language-use, Rorty argues that we should strive for a "poeticized" rather than "rationalized" or "scientized" culture, one guided by the appreciation for the plurality of human expression instead of a fixation on absolute Truth.[21] Modern culture inherited the latter position from a "traditional story," or metanarrative, of human progress common to many thinkers who defend the core project of the Enlightenment. This metanarrative takes an asymptotic approach to history, in which reason and debate converge ever more closely to eternal, unchanging concepts like "Truth" or "Justice."[22] Rorty wants to replace this metanarrative with "a story of increasing willingness to live with plurality and to stop asking for universal validity."[23] Such a society would both enable and appreciate ongoing creative processes of metaphorical redescription.

Rorty's vision of a poeticized culture emphasizes freedom of self-expression so long as it safeguards this process for all of its members, which it ensures by placing strictures working to mitigate cruelty and domination by a select few. Without delving too deeply into his political philosophy, Rorty envisions society "as a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common

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[21] *Ibid.*, 53.

[22] Here Rorty primarily takes aim at Jürgen Habermas's notion of "communicative reason." See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

[23] Rorty, 67.

goal."[24] In this sense, communal cooperation does not originate from any collective agreement on "universal principles" or even "shared values" other than the need to ensure the safety and well-being of all. This conception lies at the core of Rorty's use of the term "liberal," which he borrows from Judith Shklar, who describes liberals as "people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do."[25] Safeguarded by institutions that seek to prevent cruelty and domination, this poeticized culture will enable individuals and communities to engage in the process of self-creation by adopting and adapting the metaphors granted to them by spatiotemporal circumstance. In the words of John Dewey, "imagination is the chief instrument of the good…art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo…The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable."[26]

Irony and Society

Of course, the vast majority of people do not ascend to the level of "strong poets." This paradigm is reserved for the few in history who offer new forms of language-use that come to shape a culture's self-consciousness. However, the embrace of contingency and the process of self-creation is not confined to the extraordinarily articulate. Rorty also offers a paradigm for a typical member of his poeticized culture, which he calls a "liberal ironist." He explains that each individual carries within them a "final vocabulary," an amalgamation of words, stories, and metaphors through which human beings justify their actions, express their

[24] *Ibid.*, 59.

[25] *Ibid.*, xv.

[26] *Ibid.*, 69. From John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 348.

beliefs, and understand their lives.[27] Their finality lies in that fact that they can rarely be justified, but simply constitute the linguistic building blocks for conceptions of self, community, and purpose.

With the notion of final vocabularies in mind, let us turn to the conditions that define Rorty's "ironist:"

1. She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered.
2. She realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts.
3. Insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.[28]

An internalized destabilization of one's final vocabulary enables the ironist to traverse many different vocabularies and evaluate their metaphors for the purposes of self-recreation. In doing so, they maintain a certain humility when it comes to their inherited vocabulary. More often than not, people who encounter new stories, languages, ideas, and metaphors come to realize that each offers its own unique benefits and challenges. Some may even resonate with them deeply, to the point that they adopt them for their own process of identity formation.

Naturally, an ironic mindset is useful for philosophers, critics, and theorists who seek to describe and analyze the human experience. However, it also serves as a productive social force for all members of society. When we encounter ways of thinking about the world that are different and unfamiliar, we gain a renewed empathy for people outside of our particular

[27] Rorty, 73.

[28] *Ibid.*

cultural sphere. As opposed to a faceless other, we see a fellow "eccentric," striving to survive and make sense of an often chaotic and tragic world. For Rorty, accepting a pluralism of vocabularies leads to a shift in the common hope for society, which for him, should be grounded in a shared human susceptibility to suffering and humiliation. By encountering different vocabularies, we can formulate a new vision for human solidarity, one that does not rest on ahistorical notions of knowledge, truth, or a world beyond our own. Instead, "what unites [the liberal ironist] with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation."[29] The empathy gained by such exploration does not rest on rational argumentation ("it will not produce a *reason to care* about suffering"), but rather leads to a heightened awareness of that suffering. As Rorty writes, "What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs."[30] A poeticized culture would encourage stories that attune us to this humiliation, bringing us to more empathy and a renewed dedication to combatting it in our communities.

In summary, Rorty's notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity offer a new vision for a poeticized, non-metaphysical, and non-essentialist culture that celebrates a pluralism of vocabularies and grounds human solidarity in a sensitivity to humiliation and suffering. It conceives of society as a "band of eccentrics" guided by a shared desire for mutual protection and the prevention of cruelty, which allows individuals and communities to engage in a gradual processes of self-creation through metaphorical redescription. In doing so, it aims to facilitate the emergence of innovative vocabularies by strong poets, who offer novel

[29] *Ibid.*, 92.

[30] *Ibid.*, 93.

redescriptions that allow for new insights and means of collaboration for subsequent generations. This embrace of the imagination as the "chief instrument of the good" will allow new utopian visions to take hold and expand the possibility for redemption.

Applications for Jewish Thought

I acknowledge that the preceding discussion is mired in technical language and highly abstract philosophical discourse. However, it is required to facilitate the development of a new conceptual vocabulary for how we understand and teach Jewish tradition—one that offers a distinct neo-pragmatic response to the challenges of postmodern thought that addresses neither praxis nor theology (though it undoubtedly has implications for both), but rather identity, authenticity, and Jewish self-image. Though its applications are many, it is worth offering an introductory vision for how Rorty's thought can allow for a renewed appreciation for the multivocal, diverse Jewish landscape of the 21st century.

Any encounter with Jewish tradition is in itself an encounter with contingency. We can see this clearly when we begin, as many Jews do, with the Hebrew Bible. Modern Biblical criticism has shown the immense cultural gap separating us from the authors of the texts within the Tanakh. It operates under the assumption that in order to glean meaning from its narratives and metaphors, we must reconstruct the cultural and intellectual world that guided its formation. This hermeneutical approach implicitly operates on an acknowledgement of contingency as Rorty presents it—the notion that the way we perceive, understand, and communicate our understandings of the world through language is grounded in particular historical and cultural circumstances. In the case of the Tanakh, these circumstances are the political and ideological developments across centuries in the region

scholars generally refer to as the Ancient Near East (depending on which approach one might take to the specific context of its redaction). Within its many genres, one encounters a plenitude of vocabularies through which scribes and their patrons understood the world around them and their place in it. In many cases, it shows evidence of the reinterpretation that figures so heavily in Rorty's thought, in which later generations respond to and build from the metaphors bequeathed to them by their predecessors.[31] To evaluate the Tanakh in terms of its correspondence to ahistorical notions of "Truth", "knowledge", or "reason," is to impose impossible criteria on a text produced by poets of different cultural contexts, operating within distinct, historically contingent language-games.

Of course, we know that the process of reinterpretation and redescription does not end with the final redaction of the Biblical text. As self-titled "Rabbinic Jews," we place ourselves within the fold of a particular stream of interpretation that has adapted and actualized Biblical metaphors in distinct ways, all of which were guided by cultural and historical circumstance. Of the many quotations drawn from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* in this discussion, perhaps none better encapsulates Jewish history than Rorty's explanation that "Metaphysicians see libraries as divided according to disciplines, corresponding to different objects of knowledge. Ironists see them as divided according to traditions, each member of which partially adopts and partially modifies the vocabulary of the writers whom he has read."[32] Any Jewish educator who has endeavored to assemble reading lists or curricula organized according to the modern categorization of "subjects"

[31] The analysis of this process of response and reinterpretation is generally referred to as "intertextuality". See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) and Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

[32] Rorty, 76.

knows this well. How does one differentiate between theology and literature, history and ritual, life-cycle and liturgy? Rorty's analysis gives new voice to this conflict and shows us that these constraints are not inevitable, but very much to product of our modern proclivities.

Within the larger compilation of Rabbinic Jewish tradition, we also find numerous smaller traditions recognized by Rorty's ironist. To use a concrete example, we might turn to Jewish mysticism, specifically as it was shaped by the medieval redactors of the *Zohar*.[33] Among its pages, we find the adaptation and reinterpretation of vocabularies found not only in the Biblical text and Rabbinic anthologies (often referred to as the "Oral Tradition"), but also *Merkavah* literature, *Sefer Yetzirah*, and *Sefer HaBahir*. Though the Zohar's perspective is certainly not ironic, displaying no explicit self-consciousness of its contingency within the context of medieval Iberian mystical discourse, it clearly demonstrates Rorty's process of self-creation in presenting an innovative redescription built from synthesizing and expanding its inherited metaphors. The product of this self-creation fulfills the role of Rorty's strong poet, offering a new language that profoundly impacted the religious conscience of subsequent generations.

Jewish history also offers more typical examples of strong poets, whose idiosyncratic language-use significantly impacted the trajectory of Jewish thought, even if it was too unfamiliar to be fully appreciated in their own time. Of the many examples, perhaps the most accessible and well-known is Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides). Confronted by the distinct yet equally rich vocabularies of Aristotelian philosophy and Rabbinic Jewish canon,

[33] The compositional history of the *Zohar* is the subject of much scholarly debate. Traditionally, it is attributed to the *tanna* Shimon bar Yochai, and was later published by Moshe de León in the 13th century. However, modern scholars have cast immense doubt on this story, instead viewing it as the product of potentially multiple generations of redactors. See Ronit Meroz, "The Archaeology of the Zohar *Sifra Ditseni'uta* as a Sample Text," in *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah*, no. 82 (2016), pp. IX-LXXXV.

Maimonides sought to harmonize their apparent incongruencies and offer a new language that could enable Jews to maintain their commitment to Jewish praxis while benefitting from the many insights offered by the Greek sciences in his magnum opus *Moreh Nevuchim (The Guide for the Perplexed)*.[34] The novelty of his adaptation of different vocabularies does not originate *ex nihilo*. Maimonides did not invent as much as he interpreted and synthesized metaphors inherited from earlier Jewish redescriptions. As Rorty writes of the strong poet, "The most they can do is to manipulate the tensions within their own epoch in order to produce the beginnings of the next epoch."[35] As with many strong poets, Maimonides' unique adaptation of these vocabularies was perceived as unfamiliar, and even heretical, to certain Jewish communities in his time. Many of them rejected his reinterpretations and burned his books out of pietistic zeal. However, from our current historical perspective, we see clearly how his innovative adaptation of multiple vocabularies profoundly shaped subsequent developments in Jewish thought and practice.

As noted previously, Rorty's paradigmatic strong poet might rely too heavily on modern myths regarding the genius of a single individual. When applied to the development of Rabbinic Jewish tradition, we might expand this model to include intellectual communities who engaged in the process of self-creation by adopting and adapting inherited vocabularies. We need look no further than the ancient Rabbis, who reframed Temple-based Jewish practice in terms of prayer, study, and geographically non-specific *halakhic* observance

[34] The *Guide* does actually show glimpses of an ironic perspective. Maimonides was very much a believer in metaphysical certainty and the universality of reason, but he also seemed to allow for a plurality of expression through the different metaphors of other religious traditions. See Menachem Kellner, "*Farteicht un Farbessert* (On 'Correcting' Maimonides)," in *Meorot: A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse*, Marheshvan 5768 (October 2007), pp. 2-13.

[35] Rorty, 50.

following the destruction of the Second Temple and the resounding failure of the Bar Kokhva revolts.[36] Peering through the vast anthologies of Rabbinic tradition, we see that these strong poetic figures also sought to adapt the vocabularies of their milieu alongside Biblical metaphors. The extent to which Greco-Roman and Babylonian metaphors factored into the early Rabbinic process of redescription has been well attested to by modern scholars. In this sense, the function of a strong poet need not be confined to individual genius, but may also be assumed by communities of poets who produce innovative redescriptions that allow for the continual reconstruction of meaningful Jewish life.

Rorty's thought offers immensely useful insights for the current landscape of Jewish life. Though we now recognize that Jewish tradition has never been a monolith, but a diverse, polyvocal set of metaphors and cultural practices, the modern age has witnessed a gargantuan surge in the diversity of Jewish expression. As with any period of Jewish history, these shifts have been guided by the contingencies of the past few centuries: the emancipation of Jews in Europe and America and its implications for Jewish communal and political life; the rapid advancements in modern technology allowing for unprecedented access to canonical Jewish texts; and the impact of modern textual criticism on Jewish thought and belief. This has all led to a renewed need for models of Jewish pluralism that account for a variety of Jewish vocabularies.

Rorty provides such a model. His philosophical framework could be employed to raise a new generation of Jewish ironists, who acknowledge the contingency of their final vocabularies and engage in the gradual process of self-creation by adopting and adapting the

[36] There is significant evidence that conceptualizations of non-Temple focused Jewish life began even before its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. This is also bolstered by evidence of a thriving exilic community. Regardless, the forceful end of Temple sacrifice only strengthened the need for a new redescription of service to God early Jewish communities.

many ways Jews have engaged with their identities. Jews raised with an ironic mindset might better articulate the insufficiency of terms like "religion" or "peoplehood" when encountering Jewish communities who employ different vocabularies from their own. For those of us raised in the American Reform milieu, this would mean acknowledging that the foundational metaphors of our communal identity, namely that Jews are united by a common "faith" grounded in certain beliefs about God, ethics, and the aesthetics of living Jewishly in the 21st century, is but one of many potential Jewish vocabularies. This may ease the existential angst brought by encounters with other vocabularies employed by "secular" Israelis or Orthodox practitioners of *halakha*.[37] Instead of asking questions like "How do you know that God hears your prayer?" or "How do you know that the only way to religiously express Judaism is through Orthodox praxis?", the Jewish ironist might instead ask "Why do you talk that way about your Jewish identity?", seeking to track the contingencies of their vocabulary and obtain a glimpse of their particular process of self-creation.[38]

In doing so, the Jewish ironist can continue their distinct process of self-creation by examining the contingency of their own Jewish perspective, and eventually determine how they wish to shape their final Jewish vocabulary. It may turn out that the final vocabularies through which they first encountered Jewish tradition resonate with their current self-image. It may also happen that their inherited vocabulary is insufficient or constricting, necessitating further adaptation of metaphors that speak to their particular spatiotemporal circumstance. This is perhaps most significant when grappling with gender dynamics in Jewish life

[37] The Israeli term "secular" beautifully exposes the constraints of the modern Jewish language-game. It is grounded in the bifurcation of Israeli Jews in terms of *halakhic* observance ("religious" and "secular") despite the fact that the metaphors engrained in modern Hebrew and the national ideology of Zionism are very much drawn from the wells of "religious" Jewish tradition.

[38] Rorty, 51.

resulting from the patriarchal domination of Jewish metaphors throughout the course of history. In accordance with Rorty's view, bringing modern positions regarding gender and equality to bear on foundational elements of Jewish life and practice will be an ongoing process of self-recreation.[39] Of course, this does not happen within a sealed vacuum of Jewish vocabularies. The Jewish ironist must also address the many vocabularies they encounter throughout their lives, constantly evaluating and interpreting along their journey of self-creation.

One of the many benefits of modern technology is that future Jewish ironists will not only have access to contemporary sets of metaphors, but also have the ability to explore the vast collection of vocabularies and redescriptions offered by nearly three millennia of interpretive tradition, many of which have only recently been recovered. Jews in the modern age can interact with diverse, contemporary Jewish communities unfamiliar to them, which have been shaped by distinct cultural and historical contingencies, while also exploring the creative expressions of Jewish consciousness presented by the texts, practices, and symbols of previous generations. Without the limitations of having to determine whether these metaphors are better or worse at describing the world "as it is," or Judaism "as it is," they can adopt and adapt different Jewish vocabularies in a way that allows them to construct meaningful Jewish lives.

Raising a generation of Jewish ironists will also create healthy conditions for innovative and idiosyncratic strong Jewish poets, whose process of self-creation can provide creative employments of metaphors that may eventually guide the self-consciousness of later

[39] In her application of postmodern thought to Jewish theology, Orthodox thinker Tamar Ross develops a similar notion in order to maintain the concept of revelation. She explains it as "cumulative revelation", which grows and expands with each generation. See Kaye, 127 and Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Feminism and Orthodoxy* (Waltham: Brandeis University, 2004).

generations of Jews. This will allow for a newly poeticized Jewish culture that is no longer burdened by the need for "pure" ideology or "absolute" validity. Instead, it will be guided by an imaginative process of self-creation, which encourages new redescriptions and utopian visions of redemption. Such a culture would recognize the importance of thick descriptions and particular narratives that offer insights into Jewish vocabularies distinct from their own. It will value the many forms of Jewish expression both in their times and in generations past, and acknowledge the contingencies that shaped them. The newly recovered stories, texts, and creative expressions of Jewish communities, which were previously lost to the tides of history make the potential output of this process all the more exciting. Taking contingency to heart, a poeticized Jewish culture will have the humility to admit that its particular final vocabulary is not the "best of all Judaisms," but one of many. Rather, it would encourage further redescription in accordance with the continually shifting demands of cultural and historical circumstance.

A newly poeticized Jewish culture would also allow for a renewed conception of Jewish solidarity—one that celebrates diversity and remains attuned to the susceptibility to humiliation and suffering that endangers us all. As Rorty explains, "Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it."[40] The new generation of Jewish ironists will give up on the process of seeking out a Jewish "ur-language" that speaks to all Jews at all times. It will recognize that what it means to express Jewish identity can comprise many different things, at many different times, in the many different places where Jews come together to construct meaning in community—each adopting and adapting their inherited

[40] *Ibid.*, 94.

vocabularies in ways that best allow them to understand themselves and their place in the world. With this in mind, what binds us to Jews of different beliefs and practices is our companionship in the experience of being human, and our shared response of seeking to integrate the obligations of tradition with the realities of spatiotemporal contingency.

In a postmodern age that has exposed the deficiencies of overarching narratives, an embrace of contingency and irony might offer a path towards a new Jewish metanarrative—one that, in accordance with the insights brought by the linguistic turn, is both non-metaphysical and non-essentialist, and encourages perpetually unfolding process communal self-creation and redescription. What distinguishes it as "Jewish" would not be foundational principles of belief or stringent parameters of praxis, but rather its engagement with the vast ocean of inherited vocabularies bestowed upon it by previous generations. Such a metanarrative would celebrate the reinterpretation of those vocabularies, acknowledging them as evidence of our ancestors struggling with the same questions of meaning and metaphor amidst a tragic and chaotic world.

Chapter 2: Conversion, Identity, and Solidarity

Defying Determinism

The preceding discussion introduced the potential benefits of applying Rorty's notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity to Jewish thought in the postmodern age. It also noted potential challenges to Rorty's framework, one of which being the limiting nature of selfhood and identity in light of his embrace of contingency. For him, the Nietzschean conception of self-creation, which has the potential to propagate new and innovative vocabularies, requires some level of self-discovery, whereby an individual begins to trace the many spatiotemporal circumstances that came to influence how they speak, think, and relate to the world around them. Rorty's ironist recognizes the benefits and limitations of their final vocabulary, and seeks to encounter different, foreign vocabularies that may provide metaphors more capable of facilitating cooperation within a distinct community as well as the creative self-expression of a particular individual. Although Rorty sees the cause-tracking process as setting the stage for individual uniqueness, his embrace of contingency does open the door for accusations that he maintains a deterministic view of identity—the notion that who we are and what we believe are purely the result of circumstance.

It is important to note that encountering different vocabularies must include Rorty's "cause-tracking" process. Ideally, an appreciation of the contingencies of new and unfamiliar vocabularies will guard against harmful forms of cultural appropriation. In common use, this accusation takes aim at the use of cultural symbols and metaphors without any appreciation for their historical sources. However, it must be noted that some degree of appropriation takes place in any development of new and innovative vocabularies. As will be illustrated later in this chapter, the communal dimension of the conversion process then becomes all the more important in order to prevent the potential harms of appropriation. Addressing similar

concerns that arise from Rorty's notion of self-creation deserves further discussion beyond the current analysis.

For Jews, as well as any community guided by metanarratives that grant them a sense of historical purpose, a wholesale embrace of contingency can be discouraging, to say the least. For those born and raised within the Jewish community, the awareness of a heritage and tradition stretching back many generations carries immense meaning. Even if blind mechanisms of chance just so happened to place us as inheritors of our tradition, there is a deep sense of purpose that comes with the notion of being born into a community for a specific, albeit mysterious, purpose. However, contingency shows us that we cannot control the complex and largely unpredictable accidents of history that lead to who we are and how we understand ourselves. Rather, meaning comes from our creative engagement with the metaphors of our environment, striving to shape our particular final vocabulary that fits our unique circumstance, and may also provide a useful framework for others struggling through the same process. In this sense, the deep resonance or sense of purpose granted by being born within the Jewish community is by no means inherent to that circumstance, but instead grows from our active engagement with Jewish metaphors and participation in the many types of communities who cherish them as foundational building blocks for meaningful lives.

Rorty's notion of the contingency of self is, perhaps, even more challenging to Jews who came into the fold of Jewish community not by birth, but through encountering Jewish vocabularies along their path of self-creation, learning the history of these vocabularies and joining a community that continues to reap meaning from their metaphors. Understandably, they may furrow their collective brow at the notion of selfhood being confined to time and place. Were this the case, they could have never found a different religious community and

accepted its vocabulary as their own. Instead, they would have been forever relegated to the metaphors granted to them by birth and circumstance.

However, Rorty is careful to mitigate such an extreme implementation of his argument. He encapsulates this fear when he writes, "To admit that mere spatiotemporal location, mere contingent circumstance, mattered would be to reduce us to the level of a dying animal."[1] Instead, Rorty argues, by embracing the contingency of our final vocabularies (the words, symbols, metaphors, and representations we employ to understand and express our place in the world), we no longer feel a blind devotion to their superiority over others. Ironists are then liberated from the constraints of their inherited vocabularies, and granted the opportunity to explore others and reshape their own final vocabulary along the way. With this in mind, Rorty's embrace of contingency would likely view converts as ironists *par excellence*, who no longer accepted the confines of their inherited vocabularies and sought out new metaphors with which to create meaningful identity. Simply put, those who enter the community of Israel without being born or raised within it laugh in the face of contingency and determinism, choosing their own path rather than being bound by the path set before them as a result of spatiotemporal circumstance. The purpose of this chapter is to further explore constructions of Jewish identity as presented by the modern conversion process using Rorty's schema. The goal is to illustrate the ways in which the conversion process should serve as a model for Jewish education as a whole, equally applicable for those born within the Jewish community as those who enter later in life. As ironists *par excellence*, their process of integration into the Jewish community has much to contribute to raising a new generation of Jewish ironists and a newly poeticized Jewish culture.

[1] Rorty, 26.

Conversion and Ideology

As with most elements of Jewish life, the meaning and process of conversion has shifted and adapted according to the needs of the times. While this analysis will not offer an extended history of conversion in Jewish practice, the core questions of conversion naturally address the ways in which Jews conceptualize their identity. As discussed in the previous chapter, the modern age has led to immense variety in the language Jews employ to understand and express their identity. For many, it is an ideology—a set of beliefs about God, the world, and how to live an ethical life. For others, it is a rigid system of praxis that guides one along a spiritual path (*halacha*) with the promise of eventual collective redemption. For still others, it is a nation or ethnic peoplehood characterized by its centuries of wandering and otherness vis-à-vis the cultures that surrounded it. Unsurprisingly, the discourse surrounding Jewish identity grounds itself in metaphors shaped by prevailing cultural representations of belief, practice, and identity. This flux in how Jews understand and articulate their identity brought with it a similar flux in how Jews construct the process of conversion.

The preceding chapter briefly discussed how Jewish identity in the modern world has been largely grounded in ideological terms in accordance with the Western European and American desire to build a "rationalized" culture. Thus, diversity amongst Jews came to be expressed in "denominations" with varying ideological platforms, particularly in liberal streams of Jewish thought that no longer felt obligated by the stringencies of Orthodox praxis. What divided Conservative and Reform Jews was, in their original conception, beliefs surrounding canonical Jewish texts, the role of personal autonomy in the observance of Jewish law, and the spiritual necessity of Hebrew language in worship. These early shapers of Jewish life in the United States felt the rising discord sown by the encounter between

different Jewish cultures, within the context of a new political order that constructed religious life on the basis of volunteerism without any central religious authority. Looking towards their Christian neighbors, they similarly organized themselves along denominational lines, building institutions and communal infrastructure that, in many cases, continues to function today.

However, while most of the surrounding Christian denominations distinguished themselves on the basis of belief, Jewish identity has always incorporated elements of belief as well as praxis. The rationalism championed by the Enlightenment, and its political expressions, led many early Jewish reformers to firmly assert that what makes a Jew is not the clothes they wear or the food they eat, but rather their belief in one God, the unique mission of Israel in the world, and other attempted distillations of the "essence" of Judaism as a religion. Even the terminology of "religion" is grounded in Western European, predominantly Christian, language surrounding the political agenda of the Enlightenment to drive a wedge between "religion"—collections of beliefs and rituals addressing God, history, and redemption—and the "state," meaning the ruling political regime. Part of this distinction was the notion of participation in civil society being granted to all men regardless of religious persuasion. Applied, Jews were simply citizens who go to a different "church" rather than constituting a unique community within the larger culture. Of course, the events of the 20th century in general, and the horrors of the Holocaust in particular, significantly impacted this approach.

By contrast, those who disputed a predominantly ideological distillation of Judaism, along with its implications for liturgy and the aesthetics of communal worship, saw halakhic praxis as equally "essential" to Jewish identity as the "ethical monotheism" presented by

their reform contemporaries, if not more so. Compared to the early progenitors of modern Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy, they generally took more liberal stances with regard to halakhic observance, but they remained committed to the notion that solely belief does not make a Jew. These figures would become the early formers of the Conservative Movement, while their more emphatically ideological counterparts came to shape the Reform Movement.

This brief discussion of Jewish denominationalism is admittedly cursory in its treatment of broad historical trends in recent centuries.[2] It does, however, highlight a core tension extant in any discussion of Jewish identity, particularly in the modern age; namely, whether Jewish identity should be primarily understood in terms of personal/communal praxis or ideological consistency. Added to this complicated web is the inescapable ancestral component of Jewish identity. The notion of Jews as an "ethnicity," to use a modern metaphor, determined by ancestry is an inescapable element of Jewish identity, even reaching back to the emphases on genealogy and endogamy preserved in the Tanakh. It also plays an important role in the diversity of Jewish expression in the 21st century, both in terms of the now commonly used label of "culturally Jewish," and as a basis for the various forms of Zionism and their political expression in the modern state of Israel. Any discussion of conversion, especially when understood in terms of Rortian contingency, irony, and solidarity, must address this element of Jewish identity. However, for now at least, we will explore the tension between ideology and praxis as foundational elements of Jewish identity.

According to where they fall on the ideology-praxis spectrum, various Jewish communities will issue different requirements for potential converts. In a modern context, the

[2] For a more extended discussion of early attempts for reform and how they came to shape Jewish life in America see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1995) and Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Boston: Yale University, 2004).

difference between the Reform and Conservative/Orthodox approaches highlight this tension. However, before addressing them directly, it is worth examining certain classical Jewish texts that lay the foreground for more contemporary debates. The first is a tannaitic tradition brought in BT Yevamot 47a:

> The Sages taught: A potential convert who seeks to convert at this time (when the Jews are no longer in the land of Israel), say to them, "What did you see that led you to convert? Are you aware that Israel (the Jewish people) are anguished (*d'vuyin*), suppressed (*d'chufim*), despised (*s'chufim*), and harassed (*m'turfim*), with hardships visited upon them?" If [the potential convert] says, "I am aware and I am unworthy [to share in the suffering of the Jewish people]", then [the community leadership] accepts the potential convert immediately [to begin the process].[3]

What follows is a brief discussion outlining the core ideology grounding the performance of *mitzvot*; specifically, a simplified version of deferred compensation whereby transgressions are punished in this world and the true reward for observance is to be gleaned in the "World to Come." Guided by this characterization of Jewish life as one of profound suffering, the Sages of this tradition explain that the rewards promised by the observance of Jewish law are presently out of reach for the Jewish community in its present reality. As the text states, "The World to Come is reserved only for the righteous, and Israel at the present moment cannot receive [it]." In this respect, the acceptance of a convert primarily results from their identification with the historical experience of the Jewish people. The specifics of ideology and praxis, it would seem, come secondary.

Looking to the typical Biblical paradigm for conversion, the book of Ruth, we find a similar ambiguity regarding what defines a person as an Israelite or, in our context, a Jew. In response to Naomi's encouragement that she return to her father's house, Ruth famously proclaims, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you

[3] Translation is my own with the assistance of Steinsaltz's commentary.

go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."[4] Considering the aforementioned tension between ideology and praxis, we modern Jews are left to wonder: Which is more important to being considered a part of the Jewish collective—our God or our peoplehood? The answer will likely depend on who is asked this question and the cultural and communal norms that inform their particular understanding of Jewish identity. However, the book of Ruth offers no such parameters for Israelite identity. Ruth's acceptance into the Bethlehem community, and the Israelite nation as a whole, does not derive from a profession of shared ideology, but instead springs from her offering of compassion (*chesed*) and consolation in the face of immense tragedy. As will become more clear, it is this commitment to "casting her lot" with a community with whom she feels a deep sense of solidarity that initiates her transformation from Ruth the Moabite to Ruth the foremother of Israel's greatest king.

Returning to the Yevamot text, the early *tannaim* of the Mishnah would certainly view situations of matrilineal descent, in which a child is born to a Jewish mother, as clear with regard to traditional Rabbinic notions of Jewish identity. Simply put, a person born to a Jewish mother is a Jew regardless of their beliefs, practices, or participation in Jewish communal life. Were they to enter into another religious community, they are considered as an "*Israel mumar,*" or an "apostate Jew." Without delving too deeply into the halakhic discourse surrounding such cases, this approach derives from BT *Sanhedrin* 44a, which states, "A Jew, even though they may sin, remains a Jew."[5] According to this line of thought, neither ideology nor praxis are required to maintain the Jewish identity of one born into the

[4] Ruth 1:16.

[5] Citation and translation of this text comes from the CCAR Responsum "On Patrilineal Descent, Apostasy, and Synagogue Honors" NYP No. 5758.11, https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/on-patrilineal-descent/.

community of Israel. Though they may not actively engage with Jewish life, they remain a Jew.

Grounding Jewish identity in pseudo-biological terms challenged many Reform thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries. As mentioned earlier, they viewed Judaism on primarily ideological grounds, a set of beliefs and ethical principles that, for them, accorded with the conclusions of modern reason and science. In contrast to the language of "nationality" or "peoplehood," they believed that the essence of a Jew is not to be found in their blood, but in their heart and their mind. Their logic enabled them to assert that "Judaism" is fundamentally a "religious" identity that does not hold sway on political concepts such as "nationality" and "citizenship." Being a Jew was not simply the consequence of ancestry and historical circumstance, but an active commitment to rational principles and ethical monotheism guided by the "Truth" granted by the Enlightenment. Accordingly, the "superstitious," pre-Enlightenment cultural trappings that Jews had accumulated over their centuries of wandering and seclusion could be shed, and they could exist as citizens of their particular nation, maintaining a connection to the traditions of their ancestors in how they worship and what holidays they celebrate. Broadly speaking, their conception of Jewish identity was founded in prioritizing ideology over praxis, belief over custom.

Though the Reform Movement of today has shifted in response to the historical developments of recent decades, it maintains this ideological approach to Jewish identity, particularly as it concerns conversion and questions of children born to Jewish and non-Jewish parents. This is clearly evidenced in CCAR Responsum 5758.11, entitled "On Patrilineal Descent, Apostasy, and Synagogue Honors," which cites the 1983 CCAR

Resolution on Patrilineal Descent. It reads, "The Central Conference of American Rabbis declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage *is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people."*[6] The responsum goes on to state explicitly that "Jewish status is not conferred upon the child of one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent. The child's Jewishness is a 'presumption' which must be established through a pattern of behavior which testifies to the desire of the parent(s) to raise the child exclusively as a Jew." This position regarding the identity of a child born to a Jewish and non-Jewish parent points to the distinctly ideological Reform construction of Jewish identity.

Although the responsum is careful to indicate public forms of identification with the Jewish "people," as well as its core beliefs, as sufficient for conferring Jewish identity, implicit in its argument is the notion that the content of Jewish identity is not purely grounded in ancestral heritage. That said, a child born to two Jewish parents seemingly would not present any halakhic difficulty, regardless of the family's engagement with Jewish practice. This is likely why early Reformers, borrowing from their Christian neighbors, instituted the ritual of Confirmation in the 19th century.[7] They hoped to ensure an ideological affiliation with the core "truths" (in their words) of the "Mosaic faith" among burgeoning Jewish adults rather than some empty tribal identity devoid of deeper meaning. In this sense, the Reform prioritization of ideology over genealogy has yet to escape the grip of centuries

[6] CCAR Responsum "On Patrilineal Descent, Apostasy, and Synagogue Honors" NYP No. 5758.11, https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/on-patrilineal-descent/. Emphasis is mine.

[7] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 310.

of tradition emphasizing ancestral Jewish identity, but it still largely maintains the primacy of belief over praxis, unlike its more orthopractic counterparts.

On the opposite side of the ideology/praxis spectrum are the more traditional streams of Judaism, which emphasize orthopraxis as the essence of what it is to be a Jew. Undoubtedly, they too maintain a certain level of stringency regarding proper belief, but assert that solely ideas are not sufficient to grant someone Jewish identity. With this in mind, it is unsurprising to reflect upon Miriam Feldman Kaye's categorization of modern Jewish thinkers as being primarily focused on praxis and phenomenology instead of theology and epistemology. Implicitly, they viewed traditional forms of Jewish practice as essential, even if the findings of modern science and philosophy cast doubt on traditional beliefs regarding God, revelation, and the people of Israel. Preserving custom and continuity with centuries of tradition meant that ideology could not categorically supersede praxis, at least for those who ventured into the world of secular thought. In many ways, Kaye's project of reforming theological discourse in light of postmodern thought is built on a similar premise—the desire to maintain traditional forms of Jewish praxis, prayer, and community while engaging with the philosophical developments of the past half century.

The process and meaning of conversion becomes all the more complicated when viewed in light of the many, varied approaches presented by a diverse chorus of Jewish vocabularies. Questions of ritual, stringency of observance, and recognition of conversions performed within different Jewish communities, which concern so many in the Jewish world today, are fundamentally grounded in these core questions of identity, ideology, and praxis. The CCAR recognizes this early on in their "Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim." Under the section entitled "Initial Contact," they indicate that clergy

must inform potential converts of "the history of and present state of Jewish attitudes about *gerut*" along with "the diverse standards of acceptance maintained by the various streams of Judaism in North America, Israel, and elsewhere, as well as our understanding that *giyur* means becoming a member of *Am Yisrael* as a whole, not becoming a member only of the Reform Jewish community."[8] The conversion process laid out in the pages that follow offer guidelines for certain core elements including participation in Shabbat and holiday observances, learning about Jewish history, experimenting with *kashrut* practices, and developing at least basic skills in reading Hebrew, among others. It seeks to provide potential converts with the tools to explore the wider Jewish world, while remaining committed to the notion that conversion must be done within the context of a particular community, guided by its cultural norms and nurtured by the care and active involvement of its members.

Yet, it is difficult to feel excited for the diligence and commitment demanded by this process without cringing at the double standard it presents when it comes to Jewish identity. Whether the community emphasizes praxis or belief as the core element of what it is to be Jewish, it inherently demands far more of converts than it likely does of members born into the community. For example, encouraging someone seeking to enter the community of Israel to experiment with *kashrut* practices fells disingenuous, to say the least, within the context of a community that does not value keeping kosher as a core element of Jewish praxis or belief, as is the case in many liberal Jewish circles. Similarly, converts to Judaism are often required to express their commitment to the "Jewish faith," which generally includes the existence of one God and, in our predominantly Christian world, the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Yet, it is safe to say that at any given moment, in any given synagogue, individuals coming

[8] CCAR Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim (Adopted June, 2001).

together to pray in community will have wildly different beliefs regarding God, revelation, history, and the people of Israel. Their Jewish identity is rarely, if ever, called into doubt. The same is true of Jews born to Jewish parents who do not keep kosher or other traditional markers of Jewish praxis. Hence, the requirements placed upon converts are not commensurate to the constructions of Jewish identity internalized by the wider Jewish community.

Such is the convoluted environment of conversion in the 21st century, which is so often burdened by the vocabularies granted by the American cultural milieu. If Judaism is a "religion" grounded in ideology—a set of beliefs about God and the world—then many Jews should no longer be included within the fold due to their doubts about God and the nature of God's relationship with the world. If Judaism is a "religion" grounded in praxis—a set of practices, rituals, and customs demanded of its practitioners—then the millions of Jews who no longer find meaning in stringent halakhic observance fall outside the fold of "authentic" Jewish life. All of this comes into conflict in the shadow of the inescapable construction of Jewish identity being granted by ancestry or genealogy. To be sure, it is quite the mess, and one that fuels immense harm and hatred both within and outside the Jewish community.

Rorty's notions of vocabularies, irony, and contingency can help ease this strain, both in terms of conversion, and more broadly, as a useful model for understanding the development of Jewish identity among all of *Am Israel*. If we view potential converts as ironists seeking to encounter new vocabularies and the ways in which a particular community employs them to create meaningful lives, we may no longer find ourselves in the inescapable limbo of ideology versus praxis, belief versus custom, nationality versus religion. By exposing the potential convert to the vast diversity of Jewish vocabularies and how Jewish

identity remains contingent upon historical processes and contemporary circumstance, they can begin to discover which metaphors and practices resonate with them, tracing their causes while beginning a process of self-creation.

Most importantly, this should not be a process exclusively crafted for the conversion process. Instead, all who receive a Jewish education should gain the tools to navigate various Jewish vocabularies, exploring their historical causes, and hopefully encountering metaphors that become part of their final vocabulary, allowing them to discover and create their Jewish identity simultaneously. In this sense, we must *all* continually learn, explore, and engage with Jewish life in its many diverse forms, in hopes that by doing so, we will shape dynamic forms of Jewish engagement that allow creative, innovative redescriptions of the inherited metaphors granted by tradition. As educators seeking to facilitate this process, we must develop a deep sense of humility and a willingness to set aside any devotion to our particular form of Jewish expression as the "best" or "truest" form of Judaism. As with any vocabulary, the one that may resonate with us in a particular moment has its limitations—potential stumbling blocks on the next generation's unique path to engagement with Jewish life.

Before proceeding, it is important to remember that Rorty's notion of vocabularies does not imply ideology. In fact, if we examine carefully, the language and metaphors many of us employ on a regular basis carry the ideological residues of many a bygone era.[9] This is important with regard to conversion because despite the historical tendency of American Jews to organize around ideological differences, the reality is that certain vocabularies might

[9] Metaphors that have lost their cultural resonance yet still can be used to convey particular meanings are generally referred to as "dead metaphors."

find resonance within a particular individual without any consideration for its rational premises or ideological content. As Rorty explains:

> We should see allegiance to social institutions as no more matters for justification by reference to familiar, commonly accepted premises—but also as no more arbitrary—than choices of friends or heroes. Such choices are not made by reference to criteria. They cannot be preceded by presuppositionless critical reflection, conducted in no particular language and outside of any particular historical context.[10]

Though the context in which Rorty makes this claim varies greatly from discussions of Jewish denominationalism in America, his assertion illustrates that what draws any particular Jew to one synagogue or another, one movement or another, is not the result of careful, rational consideration within an influence-free vacuum. Rather, such decisions are always impacted by that individual's experiences, expectations, and preferences for what it looks like to live a Jewish life in community. In spite of the early institutional builders' fixation with ideology, what distinguishes Jewish communities from one another are most often cultural and aesthetic preferences, typically shaped by where their members came from and what it was like to live as a Jew within that context.

With this in mind, we can then begin to see that a person's preference for more traditional vocabularies in the realm of prayer and halakhic observance does not imply their ascription to a more traditional ideology. Similarly, those who connect with the vocabulary of Reform prayer and do not find deep meaning in orthopraxy may still hold traditional beliefs regarding, for example, God, the Divine nature of the Torah, the unique nature of the Jewish people, etc. Understanding Jewish plurality in terms of vocabularies and aesthetics will liberate us from discourse about what constitutes "real" or "true" Judaism, as if such a monolithic concept could exist. It will enable us to see the beauty of a plurality of Jewish

[10] Rorty, 54.

vocabularies, both in the living collections of metaphors used by communities today and throughout an historical tradition curated by centuries of Jewish creativity.

Conversion, Contingency, and Solidarity

Nearly any conversion process in the modern age includes a broad survey of Jewish history, including the many places in which Jews lived and developed their own distinct cultures. This extensive exploration of Jewish history undoubtedly strives to foster an appreciation for the vast textual and cultural heritage bestowed upon an individual entering into the community of Israel. At the same time, it also encourages the potential convert to foster an empathic connection with the many forms of persecution and exile suffered by Jews over the course of past millennia. In this sense, the requirement to learn of the trials and tribulations of Jews over the centuries builds on the aforementioned tannaitic tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, which states that anyone overseeing the conversion process must first ensure that the potential convert is aware that "Israel (the Jewish people) are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, with hardships visited upon them." This encapsulation of the state of Jewish affairs indicates the contemporaneous suffering of the community (indicated by the phrase "*bazman hazeh"* or "at the current time"), but it is fair to say that such an "awareness" in our times involves both the persecutions of previous generations as well as the current challenges facing Jewish communities around the world.

The weight of this history, and its significance for core Jewish metaphors and narratives, must come to fall on the shoulders of the convert in the same way that it rests upon those born as Jews. Such an identification with the less-than-ideal state of the Jewish community at any given time likely informs the common rabbinic use of the "yoke"

metaphor in discussions surrounding conversion. One example is in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, where he writes regarding the conversion process, "Throughout the generations, non-Jews who desire to enter the covenant and come under the wings of the *Shechina* accept upon themselves the yoke of Torah."[11] Employing this phrase as a technical term, the "yoke of Torah" generally means a conformity to the behaviors and observances incumbent upon all members of a particular Jewish community—likely including some blend of praxis and ideology depending on the specific community. However, with the Yevamot text in mind, the "yoke of Torah" might mean not only the responsibility of Jewish religious observance, but also an internalization of the tragedies and traumas of the past. In this sense, someone who willingly enters the community of Israel fulfills the rabbinic call to "*nosei v'ol im chaveiro,*" which literally translates as "lifting the yoke with one's companion," but more generally means "sharing the burden of one's companion."[12]

Interestingly enough, the CCAR Guidelines for Conversion alter the traditional language used to indicate a convert's acceptance of the obligations placed upon them by the Jewish community. It is traditionally phrased as "*kabbalat ol hamitzvot*" meaning "acceptance of the yoke of the commandments," but the Guidelines' version says simply "*kabbalat mitzvot*" or "acceptance of commandments." The authors explain that "The traditional formula for an individual's acceptance of the system of Jewish observance…is no longer descriptive of Reform attitudes to Jewish life." They specifically refer to the definite article "*ha*" as indicating a prescribed set of observances to be accepted holistically. Instead, the altered formula recognizes that incoming converts, as well as ancestral Jews, craft their

[11] *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah,* 13:4.

[12] *Pirkei Avot* 6:6.

religious observance in ways that do not encompass *all* halakhically dictated practices. Though it is not mentioned, the omission of the term "yoke" also indicates the common Reform sentiment that engaging in Jewish practice is not a matter of dread and subservience, but is instead a positive, joyful, and meaningful choice to live as a Jew. The historicist approach outlined by the preceding discussion might offer a new interpretation of the "yoke" metaphor in a way that deepens the obligation for all Jews to appreciate the weight previous centuries of wandering, suffering, and trauma that so often guides Jewish cultural and religious activity.

Looking to the story of Ruth, we find a similar expression of "sharing the burden of one's fellow." In response to the tragedy of famine, loss, and socio-economic instability, Ruth chose to "cling to" Naomi—to remain by her side as she returned to her ancestral homeland.[13] Her decision to stay with Naomi in support and solidarity did not come from any recognition of the "truth" of her Israelite ideology, nor the "unique benefits" of Israelite culture, custom, or practice. Instead, it originated from a wordless and fundamentally human obligation to care for people with whom we feel a deep connection. Rorty beautifully expresses this type of solidarity when he writes, "In the end, pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right."[14] Ruth chose to cling together with Naomi and her community against the darkness of the world, lending her hand to "lift the yoke with [her] companion."

[13] "They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her." (Ruth 1:13)

[14] Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166.

As noted, part of gaining an understanding of and appreciation for the weight of Jewish tradition must involve tracing the historical development of Judaism (specifically, Rabbinic Judaism). This is, to use the Rortian term, an exercise in contingency. It is akin to the process of "tracking one's causes home,"[15] tracing the many historical and cultural factors that led to the plurality of Jewish expression we encounter today. However, this process is not merely a pseudo-scientific process of discovery, uncovering the threads of history purely for the sake of objective knowledge. It is also, building from the Nietzschean paradigm, a process of self-creation through an encounter with new metaphors and vocabularies. Understood within the context of Jewish culture, it is the process of sifting through the sea of tradition, text, and cultural creativity and encountering artifacts, metaphors, characters, or historical figures that resonate with us at the core of our being—perhaps giving voice to aspects of ourselves that previously laid dormant and silent.

Someone engaged in this journey through history, who feels a resonance with Jewish vocabularies calling from centuries past might feasibly begin to see themselves in different terms and feel a deep metaphoric kinship with the tradition and the communities that cherish it as a guide for crafting meaningful lives. If by happenstance they were not born Jewish, such a person likely has embarked on a path to conversion, beginning to incorporate new metaphors into their final vocabulary in order to eventually understand and create themselves anew. However, such an experience should not be relegated to potential converts, but should be our shared goal as fellow travelers along the path to self-creation. As Rorty writes, "the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about

[15] Rorty, *Contingency,* 27.

one's causes in a new language."[16] Those who are drawn to conversion undoubtedly undergo this process of self-recreation, telling a story of their causes in a new language, even if that language comes from a new and different community. Additionally, those born as Jews must also seek to tell a story about their causes in a new way that adopts and adapts the vast collection of vocabularies bequeathed to them. This process of discovery and creation would allow for thick, rich, and continually evolving Jewish identity on both the personal and communal levels.

It is this metaphoric kinship, this gradual acceptance of the language and metaphors offered by a distinct tradition into one's final vocabulary, that is the true mark of both conversion and a wider sense of Jewish solidarity. However, it is important to note that the conversion process cannot happen in a vacuum, completely separated from a communities that cherish and employ Jewish vocabularies. Conversion must always happen within the context of a particular Jewish community, framed by its culture and norms, and solidified according to rituals that bring its guiding metaphors to bear on the physical, unique being of the individual. A convert's profound journey of personal transformation is thus shaped by the living vocabulary of the community, not simply the vocabularies recorded in common Introduction to Judaism books. Additionally, the formal rituals cementing an individual's conversion do not, as many conceive, constitute a change in "essence," but instead formalize the metaphoric kinship that binds all Jews, regardless of ancestry.

The dialogic encounter between an individual and the community that welcomes them also finds expression in the Biblical story frequently cited as the paradigm of Jewish conversion. In her 2006 article entitled "Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness,"

[16] *Ibid.*, 28.

Eunny P. Lee explores the dialogic nature of identity formation within the book of Ruth. As she explains, the frequent designation of Ruth as a Moabite clearly demonstrates the author's willingness to deconstruct, and reconstruct, notions of identity and otherness. Throughout the Biblical text, Moabites are seen as dangerous yet familiar "others" against which much of Israelite identity is constructed.[17] Ruth, however, flips the script, demonstrating a devotion to the people of Bethlehem despite her marginal connection to them through marriage. As Lee illustrates, this profound *chesed* impacts Boaz and, allegorically, the Israelite community as a whole. She writes of Ruth's final confrontation with Boaz:

> Her bold initiative and direct confrontation shocks him into recognition, forcing upon him a new apprehension of who she is and who he is in relationship to her. The comparison with Tamar and Judah (see Gen 38:24-26) suggests that this is indeed an epiphany for Boaz. She wrenches Boaz out of his ethnocentricity, his insecurity, his passivity, and dramatically alters his self-understanding.[18]

According to her, the dialogic relation between Ruth, a Moabite other, and Boaz, a Judahite insider, has an immense impact on not only her, but the nation as a whole. This adds yet another potentially transformative dynamic to the conversion process, which profoundly impacts not only the newcomer, but also the community that welcomes them. By offering to "share the burden" and "cling together against the dark," the one who comes to adopt a Jewish vocabulary later in life can call their newfound community to a reinvigorated sense of identity and solidarity.

When confronted by the tragic historical circumstances of the Jewish people, the imagined convert in Yevamot 47a should respond, "I am aware and I am unworthy." It is

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[17] Eunny P. Lee, "Ruth the Moabite: Identity, Kinship, and Otherness," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 90-93.

[18] Lee, "Ruth the Moabite," 98.

easy to see how an awareness of the contemporaneous challenges facing the Jewish people is desirable for potential converts, but the additional assertion of humility in response this awareness indicates a deeper, more empathic relation between the potential convert and the experiences and metaphors that continue to shape the community of Israel. Such reverence in the face of a new and different vocabulary adds an important nuance to Rorty's Nietzschean model of self-creation, as exemplified by "strong poets," when applied to conversion and Jewish identity. The will to self-create through unique language-use operates on the notion that inherited vocabularies are inherently insufficient in capturing the uniqueness of an individual or their spatiotemporal circumstance. As he writes, "To fail as a poet—and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being—is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems."[19] This informs his celebration of idiosyncrasy and individual genius as the driving factors for cultural change. However, as has been noted in the previous chapter, intellectual ingenuity within the Jewish context must include some sense of communal dialectic, guided by an obligation to engage with the metaphors bequeathed by previous generations, and reinterpret them in unique ways according to the contemporaneous insights granted by historical and cultural contingency.

Conversion as Paradigm for Jewish Identity

In his book *Against Ethics*, John D. Caputo beautifully encapsulates human condition when he writes, "We are disasters all, some of us more than others, but this for me has the effect of binding us together. We are all siblings of the same dark night, tossed by the waves of the

[19] Rorty, 28.

same dark sea, huddled together for companionship and mutual support, held in a fragile link by a *pathos* of proximity and *consolatio.*"[20] His encapsulation offers a similar model of solidarity to Rorty's description of society as "a band of eccentrics" "clinging together against the dark," as well as the words of *Pirkei Avot* calling upon us to "help lift the yoke of [our] companion." All of them point to the striking, yet inescapable reality of our collective, chaotic existence on a tiny planet floating in a far off corner of an expansive universe. By building community, caring for one another, and striving to shape meaningful lives, we share in this burden together, huddling for warmth in the face of a tragic and often cruel world. What characterizes our particular huddle as "Jewish" are the metaphors that provide us comfort, the narratives that guide our journey, and the tradition of interpretation and redescription that has accumulated over our centuries of wandering. Our engagement with these inherited vocabularies, along with their continual implementation through ritual, prayer, and intellectual creativity, is the metaphoric kinship that binds us to Jews across time and location, despite the fact that they may have talked, thought, or understood their Jewish identity in terms profoundly different from our own.

In this sense, there is no difference between a convert and a born Jew, because what allows for Jewish solidarity is an awareness of, reverence for, and empathic engagement with the metaphors and narratives that shape Jewish life, whether it be the wanderings guided by the Torah each year, the cycle of Creation-Revelation-Redemption facilitated by each worship service, or the calls to care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow that inform our active engagement in communal life outside of a particularly Jewish sphere.[21] It is the

[20] Caputo, 54.

[21] This approach to Jewish identity certainly clashes with, for example, the genealogical essentialism laid out by Yehuda HaLevi in the *Sefer Kuzari*, which views ancestral Jews as carrying a higher capacity for prophetic

metaphors and vocabularies granted to us by our cultural tradition that lay the contours of distinct Jewish identity, not the rigid notions of praxis, ideology, or genealogy that have come to dominate Jewish discourse in recent centuries. Moreover, it is the convert's willingness to accept these metaphors as their own within the context of a particular Jewish community, to "lift the yoke with their companion," that defines them as a Jew.

A simple example of the metaphoric kinship that binds not just converts, but all Jews, in solidarity with their inherited tradition can be found in the early debates surrounding whether or not converts may recite the passage in the "Ancestors" benediction of the *Amidah*, which typically reads, "*Elohei avoteinu*" meaning "The God of *our* ancestors." *Mishnah Bikkurim* 1:4 states clearly that a *ger* (convert) must not publicly pray using the phrase "God of our ancestors" unless their mother is a Jew.[22] However, this sharp distinction in ritual practice between converts and non-converts did not appear to last. Roughly a millennium after the compilation of the Mishnah, Maimonides writes in a letter to a convert named Ovadiah, saying:

> You should recite the prayers in their normal form and not change a word. Just as every Jew prays and recites blessings so you are fit to bless and pray…Since you have come under the wings of the *Shekhina* and joined [God] there is no distinction here between us and you, and all the miracles that have been performed were, so to say, performed for us and you…There is no distinction whatsoever between you and ourselves in any respect.[23]

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activity. It is not difficult to look at analogs of this logic in modern times, which unfortunately dovetails with disturbing forms of eugenics. Needless to say, the argument presented here rejects any such recourse to some unique genealogical trait on the part of people born into the Jewish community. Language, culture, and metaphor are what lay the contours of identity, not genetics.

[22] וכשהוא מתפלל בינו לבין עצמו אומר: "אלהי אבות ישראל" וכשהוא בבית הכנסת אומר: "אלהי אבותיכם" ואם היתה אמו מישראל אומר: "אלהי אבותינו"

[23] Moses Maimonides, "Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte," trans. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1972), 475-476.

He goes on to explain that even all ancestral Jews may not necessarily be able to trace their families all the way back to the patriarchs and matriarchs, citing as proof the mention of the "mixed multitude" that accompanied the Israelites upon their departure from servitude in Egypt.[24] In this, Maimonides does maintain certain ancestral paradigms for Jewish identity. He likely believed that individuals born into Jewish community could, for the most part, trace their lineage back to the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. However, he also asserts that converts are bound to the community by a metaphoric kinship that is in no way inferior to the solidarity shared amongst those born as Jews. In this sense, Maimonides hints at a different conceptualization of Jewish identity and solidarity that is not solely reliant on genealogical lineage.

Modern advancements in genealogical research have only expanded the tools available to those who hold fast to notions of Jewish solidarity built from ancestral heritage.[25] Many ground feelings of pride in their Jewish identity in their ability to trace their family's Jewish roots back centuries. Certainly, being born to a Jewish family with a long history of maintaining and facilitating Jewish identity is deserving of such pride, particularly when the contingencies of historical circumstance have made achieving that immensely difficult. Yet, for those of us who doubt the historicity of many Biblical narratives, claims of tracing one's lineage back to, say, Abraham and Sarah, are irrelevant. Instead, what binds us to them as founders of our religious community is our active engagement with them as metaphors that in some way enable us to foster meaning and identity in our lives. Even if many Jews remain

[24] "A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with much livestock, both flocks and herds" (Exodus 12:38)

[25] Such discourse could be seen clearly on social media and other forums as a response to claims of Black Israelites being the "true descendants" of the Biblical nation of Israel.

committed to a provable, traceable ancestral linkage with the Biblical Israel, it is likely that someone in their family, somewhere along that nearly three millennia long journey, entered into the community of Israel as a result of the metaphoric kinship granted by an acceptance of Jewish vocabularies in their process of self-creation. In this sense, the metaphoric kinship granted by the engagement with Jewish vocabularies past and present offers a more lasting, malleable paradigm for Jewish identity and solidarity.

With this paradigm in mind, all those who actively participate in Jewish life are "Jews by choice," ironists who recognize the many varied vocabularies available to us, and willingly cling to Jewish metaphors as foundational stepping-stones on our journey towards self-creation. This process must involve an appreciation of contingency, an awareness of the many historic and cultural dynamics that shaped the Jewish vocabularies of the past as well as the diverse languages of Jewish expression in the present. Appreciating irony and contingency with regard to Jewish tradition may instill within us a revised sense of solidarity with Jews then and now, all of whom we recognize as fellow companions huddling against the dark sea of a chaotic, tragic world. This reconceptualization of identity and solidarity will no longer ground Jewishness in terms like "ideology," "praxis," or, even, "religion," but instead recognize the metaphoric kinship that binds us to the community of Israel as a continual, polyvocal tradition of redescription and reinterpretation. As Rorty writes, channeling American pragmatist William James,

> Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made. James…was reminding us that our glory is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects, not in our obedience to permanent nonhuman constraints.[26]

[26] Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," 166.

Understood in this way, our relation to Jewish tradition must include a sense of reverence, an exclamation that "We are aware, and we are unworthy!" That is, we are aware of and humbled by the immense creativity of generations past in their innovative use of Jewish metaphors. It must also include a sense of confidence and eagerness to engage in this creative process ourselves. We, like our predecessors, have an opportunity to develop our own unique language of redescription that brings our inherited metaphors to bear on the particular circumstances of our age. It is through this dialogic encounter between the current generation and the vocabularies of tradition, like the encounter between the newly initiated Jew and a community of ancestral Jews, that new and innovative forms of Jewish language-use can take hold.

The reconceptualization of Jewish identity and solidarity as a metaphoric kinship would also be indicative of a newly poeticized Jewish culture, one in which every Jewish learner gains an appreciation for the contingency that guides not only the Jewish vocabulary bequeathed to them by their community, but also the plurality of Jewish expression, both past and present. In this sense, the deep learning often required of converts should in no way differ from standard Jewish education, with the caveat that it is done with respect to understandings of developmental appropriateness according to age and maturity. Like potential converts, Jewish ironists will hopefully experience the dual emotions of familiarity and foreignness in their encounter with the many varied vocabularies bequeathed by Jewish tradition. There will be no way to predict which metaphors or practices will find resonance or which will be rejected as obsolete or harmful, but the role of the educator is to guide this process of self-creation, offering mutual support and consolation as a fellow sibling of the same dark night.

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