Jewish Philosophy: A Personal Account

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This essay relates my life story as a Jewish philosopher who was born and raised in Israel but whose academic career has taken place in the United States. The essay explains how I developed my approach to Jewish philosophy as intellectual history, viewing philosophy as cultural practice. My research evolved over time from preoccupation with medieval and early-modern Jewish philosophy and mysticism to contemporary concerns of feminism, environmentalism, and transhumanism. Through a personal life story, the essay makes the case for doing philosophy in a contextual, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary way, integrating the desire for universality and the commitment for differentiated particularity. Jewish philosophy offers a viable model for the intellectual challenges facing all people in the twenty-first century.

Key words: Jewish philosophy; intellectual history; Judaic humanities; feminism; interdisciplinarity; religion and ecology; Jewish environmentalism; transhumanism

It is an honor to contribute an autobiographical essay to the *Journal of World Philosophies*. Born and raised in Israel, I am a Jew by birth who has written extensively on medieval Jewish philosophy, on Jewish philosophy and gender, on Jewish environmentalism, and on religion, science, and technology. I have also contributed to the field of Jewish philosophy as the editor of *Jewish Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century: Personal Reflections* and *The Future of Jewish Philosophy*, and as the editor in chief of *The Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers* (2013-2018), a set of twenty-one volumes that features outstanding Jewish thinkers.[1] In all of my publications, I have showcased the robust debate about the meaning and scope of Jewish philosophy. Is Jewish philosophy a philosophy written by Jews, a systematic reflection about Judaism, or a particular way of doing philosophy? What makes one a *Jewish* philosopher? What is the subject matter of Jewish philosophy? Who is the audience of Jewish philosophy? How does Jewish philosophy relate to Jewish theology or to the hermeneutics of Jewish sacred texts? How does Jewish philosophy relate to culture, either Jewish or non-Jewish? Academically speaking, is Jewish philosophy a discipline, a sub-discipline of philosophy, or an area study? What is the proper academic home of "Jewish philosophy" (e.g., departments of philosophy, religious studies, history, or comparative literature)? These questions have generated numerous and conflicting answers and they will continue to be debated in the future, so long as Jews exist.

As an intellectual historian, I view Jewish philosophy as cultural practice. From antiquity to the present, Jewish philosophy has emerged out of the life of the Jews, it has reflected on Judaism both as a belief system and as a way of life, and it has engaged a rich and variegated textual tradition, both Jewish and non-Jewish, through interpretation, dialogue, and debate. My approach to Jewish philosophy is contextual, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural. As an intellectual historian, I situate Jewish philosophy in its socio-historical context and explore the conditions that have shaped the philosophic discourse in each generation, both within Jewish society as well as in the relations between Jews and non-Jews. Jewish philosophy has been the main vehicle for the intellectual exchanges between Jews and other civilizations, cultures, schools, and modes of thought. As a pursuit of truth and wisdom about God, the world, and the human, Jewish philosophy cannot be disengaged from other forms of Jewish creativity, including law, hermeneutics, mysticism, liturgy, the arts, the sciences, and medicine. My inclusive, pluralistic, and dialogical understanding of Jewish philosophy leads me to define Jewish

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philosophy as "a sociocultural force that generates reflexive, critical thinking as well as transformative action through education" (Tirosh-Samuelson 2018: 7).[2]

How did my life trajectory lead me to be interested in Jewish philosophy, to develop this approach to Jewish philosophy, and to focus on medieval philosophy, feminism and gender, ecology and environmentalism, and science and technology? [3] My path began in the Kibbutz Afikim, Israel, where I was born in 1950. A product of Socialist Zionism, the kibbutz was secular, but Zionist secularism was not devoid of "religion." Rather, the culture of my kibbutz did not negate traditional Judaism but secularized traditional Jewish practices, beliefs, and values, expressing them in a new Hebraic, modernist, and nationalist idiom. My education was a unique fusion of European humanism, democratic Socialism, Zionist historicism, and Judaism. This educational program privileged the study of the past, both Jewish and non-Jewish, but the past was framed without reference to the divine intervention common in traditional Judaism. Although secular, the study of the Jewish past did not ignore the religious dimension of Jewish culture. Thus, we were introduced to rabbinic texts as part of Jewish history in antiquity and we studied religious movements (e.g., Hasidism or the Musar Movement) as part of the modern Jewish experience. With a strong penchant to speculative thought, I was attracted to Hasidic theology and wrote my honors thesis on a Hasidic text. It was through Hasidism that I got to know the Jewish mystical tradition, and the relationship between the mystical and philosophical strands of Judaism has remained a continuous interest of my academic career.

After the compulsory army service, I enrolled at Hebrew University and majored in the Department of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah (later to be renamed the Department of Jewish Thought) and in the Department of Hebrew Literature. These two departments were part of the Institute of Jewish Studies, whose methodology and conventions were governed by the historicist conventions of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its Rankean commitment to discover the past "at it truly was." I became a historian of ideas who focused on the medieval and early modern periods. My doctoral dissertation on Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon (ca. 1470-ca. 1535) explored the relationship between philosophy and a kabbalah, between medieval scholasticism and Renaissance humanism in his thought, against the background of his life as an Italian exile in the Ottoman Empire. In 1977, the last year of my graduate studies, I married an American Jew and came to live in the United States. There I encountered Jewish life, Jewish studies, and Jewish philosophy in ways that were quite different from my upbringing and training in Israel. In the US, I became familiar with Liberal and Progressive forms of Judaism and became aware of the difference between the academic study of Jewish religious texts and the experiencing of Judaism as a way of life with particular rituals at home and in the synagogue. Eventually, I would become quite comfortable with Jewish traditional observance, but it remained a learned activity, not unlike acquiring fluency in a foreign language.

Finding academic employment in the United States in the late 1970s was not difficult because Jewish studies programs were being established in public and private universities. The growth of Jewish studies reflected the increasing pride of being a Jew in the United States (inspired in part by Israel's swift victory in 1967) as well as the changes in American higher education, which allowed for new academic disciplines such as women's studies and black studies. Women and African-Americans not only demanded inclusion, but they also challenged the dominant narrative and its theoretical underpinnings rooted in the Enlightenment. The intellectual justification for these claims came from the postmodernist critique that problematized the Enlightenment's ideal of objectivity, its view of the autonomous Self, and the naïve belief in human rationality. Jewish studies directly benefited from these developments, and I could teach Jewish philosophy and mysticism either in departments of history or in departments of religious studies. Both options were available at Columbia University, where I taught in the Department of History during the 1980s. At Columbia I began to hone my approach to Jewish intellectual history, studying Jewish philosophy in relationship to other forms of Jewish literary creativity and in light of the intellectual strands that dominated majority culture,

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be it pagan, Christian, or Muslim. I paid attention not only to the interrelationship of texts, authors, and ideas but also to social institutions, to the traffic of ideas between Jews and non-Jews, and to social implications of Jewish intellectual activities. I demonstrated my approach to intellectual history in my books, *Between Worlds* and *Happiness in Premodern Judaism*.[4] The first focused on one thinker as a case study for larger cultural processes, and the second traced the development of one theme across time. As exercises in intellectual history, these studies exemplified what Shmuel Trigano called "Judaic Humanities."[5]

In the late 1980s, I moved from Columbia University to Emory University, and there I was challenged to rethink the "Judaic Humanities." Studying the Jewish intellectual past could not be a matter of mere disinterested scholarship, because how we interrogate the past reflects our sociocultural location, prejudices, and blind spots. This awareness, of course, was the result of a growing exposure to postmodernism that has challenged the modernist stance I had taken for granted at the Hebrew University. I now had to engage Jewish intellectual history personally, theologically, and existentially, and that meant first and foremost acknowledging the fact that I am a woman, or more precisely, a Jewish woman. I started to wrestle with the implications of feminism, feminist philosophy, and Jewish feminism for the study of Jewish philosophy,[6] and came to the conclusion that the category of gender is relevant to philosophical analysis and that Jewish philosophers (both women and men) must take feminist philosophy seriously. When the response to feminist philosophy was slow to come, I convened a conference in 2001 at Arizona State University, my new academic home, after nearly a decade at Indiana University.[7] The published volume demonstrated how the discipline of Jewish philosophy could be transformed by women and gender studies.[8] More recently, I summarized the intellectual achievement of Jewish feminist philosophy and theology,[9] though feminism's impact on Jewish philosophy has remained rather limited even though Jewish feminism has profoundly transformed many aspects of contemporary Jewish life in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Feminism compelled me to pay attention to the life of women and to claims about women's nature. One such claim was that women are inherently connected to nature more than men and that there is a causal connection between the marginalization and exploitation of women in western society and the denigration of nature that has brought about the current ecological crisis. These notions constitute ecofeminism (namely, the feminist critique of environmentalism), and ecofeminism comes in several flavors. As I became familiar with different strands of ecofeminism, I also evaluated them from the perspective of Judaism: some strands (especially social ecology and socialist ecofeminism) are very compatible with Judaic views, whereas others (especially "earth-based spirituality") are more problematic from the perspective of traditional Judaism.[10] My engagement with ecofeminism was part of my growing involvement with the academic field of religion and ecology, to which I was introduced in 1997 at a conference on "Judaism and the Natural World" organized by the Harvard Center for World Religions. I was asked to edit the volume, and became engaged in the field of religion and ecology, representing the Jewish voice in this inter-religious conversation.[11] For the past two decades I have written extensively about Judaism and the environment and about Jewish environmentalism, even though I am not an environmental activist. I believe that my kibbutz upbringing inculcated in me a deep love of nature and a deep concern for the negative human impact on many ecosystems of our precarious planet.

In my publications about Jewish environmentalism I have shown that reflections on nature have been central to Jewish religious and philosophic self-understanding over time. Within the context of reflections on nature, Jewish thinkers have sorted out their understanding of the origin of the world, the dialectics of divine transcendence and immanence, and the ethics that bind humans to God's creation. As in the case of feminism, to develop a Jewish environmental philosophy requires one to participate in a larger intellectual conversation, in this case the science of ecology, and to spell out the distinctive Jewish contribution to it.[12] Such engagement also bridges the gap between scholarship, faith, and activism, making intellectual

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activity inseparable from public life.[13] More broadly than Jewish environmentalism, I argued for the public obligations of the scholar of Jewish studies at the annual conference of the Association of Jewish Studies in 1998. That speech created quite a controversy because it made the case that Jewish academics should be involved in Jewish communal life outside the academy.[14] However, this call for public engagement has been endorsed by my current academic home, Arizona State University, where I am the Director of Jewish Studies, and where social engagement is part of the mission of the public university. Moreover, the philosophers featured in my Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers have also demonstrated how scholarship and public engagement can be integrated.

Writing the history of Jewish conceptions of nature has been one way in which I got involved in yet another academic discourse: the dialogue of religion and science, another field in which Jews are underrepresented, even though Jews have been overrepresented in the natural sciences, since science paved the way for Jewish social integration into western society. The perception of science as a secular endeavor has meant that observant Jews find science irrelevant to their practice of Judaism, and conversely, that secular, non-observant Jews have regarded Judaism to be irrelevant to their scientific commitments. I regard this as an unfortunate state of affairs because the discourse of religion and science offers enormous potential for expanding and deepening Jewish philosophical self-understanding. For the past decade I have worked tirelessly to make Judaism, Jewish studies, and Jewish philosophy engage the field of religion and science by managing the annual conferences of the Judaism, Science and Medicine Group (JSMG)—an international society that is committed to generating constructive dialogue between Judaism, the sciences, and medicine—and by editing a special volume on Judaism and science.[15]

Modern science, of course, is inseparable from technology, and contemporary technology has not only transformed human relations with the physical world but also changed every aspect of the human world. Contemporary daily life, transportation, communication, leisure, health, education, warfare, and even death are all dependent on and shaped by tools, appliances, devices, gadgets, machines, and instruments. Technology is ubiquitous and universal, crossing national, linguistic, ethnic, religious, and local boundaries, although technology also enables communities to express themselves in distinctive local ways. Contemporary technoscience, and in particular converging technologies (i.e., genomics, nanotechnology, informatics, robotics, and applied cognitive science) have given rise to a new understanding of being human advocated by the movement transhumanism. Transhumanism is the ideology that claims that humanity is on the verge of a new phase in its evolutionary development, a phase that will culminate in the fusion of humans and machines. Engaging transhumanism as an intellectual historian,[16] I have shown it to be a secularist faith rooted in ancient Judaic and Christian motifs, a secularization which I find to be rather problematic.[17] I have argued that transhumanism is flawed because it offers a misguided view of the human pursuit of perfection, because it envisions the planned obsolescence of humanity as a biologically embodied species, and because transhumanist eschatology preaches the abrupt rupture of history predicted in imagined Singularity.[18]

My critique of transhumanism is deeply indebted to Hans Jonas (1903-1993), the German-Jewish philosopher, scholar of Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, and Zionist who left Israel in 1954 and settled in the US. Jonas understood the power and centrality of technology in shaping the modern condition, and counseled caution and humility. Jonas elevated nature by endowing organic life with moral meaning that puts limits on human-made technology. Jonas correctly understood that modern technology is a source of human alienation from nature and identified in modern technology disturbing nihilistic tendencies that had to be critiqued and addressed by a philosophy of nature that protects its inherent moral worth. For Jonas, nature was a source of human vitality and meaning, rather than dead matter to be used for human progress, a position that I have endorsed as well in my work on Judaism and ecology. I never met Jonas, but I deeply resonated with his critique of technology, his interdisciplinary approach

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to learning, and with his approach to intellectual history. In 2005, I convened an interdisciplinary conference on Jonas at ASU, and its proceedings were published in 2008.[19] Jonas for me illustrates how intellectual history can be best applied to the discourses of religion and ecology and religion and science, as well as how intellectual history can make normative claims regarding human responsibility.

In sum, by engaging Jewish philosophy as an intellectual historian I have sought to encompass its complexity and richness and to tease out its significance for Jews and for all people who care about the future of humanity and the future of the world. Jewish philosophy is particularly relevant today at a time when totalitarianism and anti-Semitism have resurfaced all over the world, when the physical environment of our planet is under serious duress, and when people all over the world are struggling to assert their rights and dignity against the encroachment of dehumanizing technologies. Jewish philosophy can address all these challenges precisely because it is rooted in the paradox of universality and particularity.[20] As philosophy, it makes claims of universal validity, but it makes these claims out of the lived experience of one particular group, the Jews, and the particular Jewish textual tradition. The paradox of universal particularity or particular universality is what the world experiences today as all sorts of boundaries have collapsed while new boundaries are being erected once again, as people become increasingly close to each other by means of technology, but also more isolated and alienated from each other, and as people rightly demand equality but refuse to give up their differentiated identity. Jewish philosophy is not only for Jews. Rather, Jewish philosophy offers people all over the world ways to think about the human condition and the challenges that face us all. Since the *Journal of World Philosophies* honors diversity, plurality, and particularism as much as it endorses global intellectual exchanges through dialogue and cultural cross-fertilization, the readers of the journal might find Jewish philosophy most relevant. Jewish philosophy could serve us as a guide at a time of profound perplexity.

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1 See: ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, *Jewish Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century: Personal Reflections* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014); idem. *The Future of Jewish Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); idem. *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers,* 21 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2013-2018).

2 Tirosh-Samuelson, "Jewish Philosophy as Cultural Practice," in Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes (2018: 3-27*)*.

3 For a fuller discussion of my intellectual trajectory see Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "The Preciousness of Being Human: Jewish Philosophy and the Challenge of Technology," in Tirosh-Samuelson, and Hughes (2014: 428-57).

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4 Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds: The Life and Thought of Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge and Well-Being* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2003).

5 See Shmuel Trigano, "In Search of Eternal Israel: Back to an Intellectual Journey," in Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes (2014: 458-80).

6 Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, "'Dare to Know': Feminism and the Discipline of Jewish Philosophy," in *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, ed. Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum (New Haven CT: Yale University Press), 84-119.

7 At Indiana University I became more familiar with the history of interpretation and with ethics. My book, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism,* and my essay, "The Bible in the Jewish Philosophical Tradition," in *Jewish Studies Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1948-75, reflect that methodological expansion during my time at IU.

8 ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

9 Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Feminism and Gender," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: The Modern Era*, ed. Martin Kavka, Zachary Braiterman, and David Novak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 154-89).

10 Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Religion, Ecology, and Gender: A Jewish Perspective," *Feminist Theology* 13, no. 3, (2005): 373-97.

11 See: ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Since that publication I have published many essays on Judaism in reference books on religion and ecology as well as an extensive annotated bibliography, "Judaism and the Environment," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

12 See Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Judaism and the Science of Ecology," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, ed. James Haag, Gregory Paterson, and Michael Spezio (London and New York, 2012), 345-55.

13 Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Jewish Environmentalism: Bridging Scholarship, Faith and Activism," in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, ed. Daniel Lasker (Hebrew), English Section (Beer Sheba: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2012), 65-117.

14 The speech was reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in January 1999 and it has generated many written responses, including by people who did not hear or reach the speech. For a recent reference see Martin Kavka, "Transgression in the Field: The Heresy of Jewish Philosophy," in *AJS Perspectives; The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies*, the Transgression Issue (Spring 2017): 6-8.

15 ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Philip Cohen, "Judaism and Science," Special Issue of *CCAR: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 2012). Information about the conferences of JSMG is available on the website of the Center for Jewish Studies at ASU.

16 ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Kenneth L. Mossman, *Building Better Humans? Refocusing the Debate on Transhumanism* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012); ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and J. Benjamin Hurlbut, *Perfecting Human Futures: Transhuman Visions and Technological Imaginations* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).

17 Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a Secularist Faith," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47, no. 4, (2012): 710-34.

18 See Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Utopianism and Eschatology: Judaism Engages Transhumanism," in *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, ed. Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen (Santa Barbara CA: Praeger, 2015), 161-80; idem, "Technologizing Transcendence: A Critique of Transhumanism," in *Religion and Human Enhancement: Death, Values and Morality*, ed. Tracy J. Trothen and Calvin Mercer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 267-84.

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19 ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Christian Wiese, *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

20 See Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, "Introduction: Jewish Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century," in *Jewish Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, 1-10. Two volumes of the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers explore this paradox directly: *Jonathan Sacks: Universalizing Particularity*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), and *Menachem Kellner: Jewish Universalism,* vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

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