

## *Critical Notice*

Reuven Agushewitz: *Faith and Heresy* Translated by Mark Steiner (New York: Yeshiva University Press and New Jersey: Ktav, 2006) and *Principles of Philosophy* Translated by Mark Steiner (New York: Yeshiva University Press and New Jersey: Ktav, 2008).

**By: MEIR ZELCER**

### **Introduction**

The two books under consideration—*Principles of Philosophy* and *Faith and Heresy*—were originally written in Yiddish by Reuven Agushewitz in 1942 and 1948, respectively. *Faith and Heresy* has been translated into Hebrew (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1951). Mark Steiner, who has worked on a number of Hebrew-English translations, undertook these English translations at the behest of one of the author's students, who envisions the translation as a way to rescue his beloved teacher's work from the oblivion that much Yiddish literature now faces.

### **Biography**

Many details of Reueven Agushewitz's life are unclear. We do know that he was born in the Lithuanian town of Sislovitsh in 1897. As a child Agushewitz studied with his older brother in their father's *heyder*, together with the now famed Rabbi Aharon Kotler, who hailed from the same town. Agushewitz went on to study at more advanced yeshivot, until World War I forced him to postpone his formal Torah education. Thereafter, like many of his day, he dedicated himself to agitating for Zionism, Socialism, and perhaps even Communism. After that he seems to have returned to his Talmudic studies in the yeshivot of Mir and Slobodka, before having to flee to Western Europe, where he either studied or wanted to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. He then continued studying Torah, and was ultimately given

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Meir Zelcer received his PhD in Philosophy from the City University of New York Graduate Center and currently teaches philosophy at Baruch College, CUNY.

a position as Rosh Yeshiva by his friend R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel, who was a rabbi in Antwerp at the time and later was to become the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. After five years in Antwerp Agushewitz immigrated to the United States, where he had some family and was naturalized in 1929. He spent the majority of his remaining days teaching students in order to support his meager lifestyle. He taught only to make ends meet and allow him to sit in solitude in New York's 42nd Street Library, where he pursued his personal studies and writing. He never married and had only a close group of students and friends who recognized and revered his genius. He died in 1950.

Besides the two books we examine here, Agushewitz authored others, first a book on ancient Greek philosophy, *די אלט-גריכישע פילאזאפיע פון טהאלעס ביז איבער די פיטאגאעער*, published in 1935,<sup>1</sup> and later a volume of his Talmudic commentary on *Bava Kamma*, released after his death. The remainder of his work on *shas* is still unpublished. He also wrote many articles for the popular Yiddish press.

## Summary of the two books:

### 1. *Principles of Philosophy*

*Principles of Philosophy* is primarily a meditation on and an analysis of three principles that Agushewitz takes to be the basis of science and ultimately of all existence. These principles determine our general psychological direction; they guide our will and govern our decision making, preferences, and intuitions both as individuals and collectively as a society. They also account for the varieties of organization of all matter in the universe. These principles are the very underpinnings of science and are thus broader than particular scientific principles.

The first is the “principle of unity,” the second is the “principle of diversity,” and the third is the “principle of progress.” The principle of unity declares that both the world and the humans in it will tend toward a need to have everything unified, uniform, organized, and coherent. The principle of diversity declares that the universe “prefers” variety, novelty, and multiplicity. Ostensibly these two prin-

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Steiner is currently translating this book into English as well.

ciples are incompatible until we add the third—the principle of progress—which reconciles the way unity and diversity work together synergistically, to foster advancement in human society and in the world at large.

There are many forms and manifestations of unity and diversity. Agushewitz gives numerous everyday examples illustrating the types and forms of each principle. (E.g., people’s appreciation for matching clothing and their tendency to “follow the crowd” illustrate examples of “similarity,” the first kind of unity.) He also notes that young people generally favor reform (i.e., diversity), while older people tend to favor order (i.e., unity). Bringing about reform often requires a change in generations. Agushewitz sees this alluded to in *Bereshit Rab-bah* 9:5, “‘Very good,’ this is the Angel of Death.”

We are not given what philosophers call “necessary and sufficient conditions” for these principles. That is to say, we are not given exact definitions carefully delimiting exactly what does and does not count as an instance of a particular principle. Nor are we given a plan for how to recognize some manifestation of unity, diversity, or progress in nature. Rather Agushewitz gives us a plethora of examples that nudge our intuitions in the direction of these ideas and gives us enough pieces to build a mental picture of them. We are made to see how the world and everything in it is guided toward unity, diversity and ultimately progress.

As we shall see shortly, Agushewitz intends for these principles to be taken not merely as a philosophical stance, but as a fundamentally religious one.

## ***2. Faith and Heresy***

*Faith and Heresy* is the later and more mature work. The book is a sustained attack on the predominant materialism and atheism of the 1930s and 1940s, and simultaneously a reconciliation of a religious world-view and a scientific one. In the process Agushewitz skillfully marshals a wealth of philosophical ideas both as support for his argument and as fodder for his acerbic criticism.

To fight materialism and atheism, Agushewitz uses a particularly interesting philosophical maneuver and identifies God with all the non-material parts of nature, such as forces, energy, and so forth. In doing so, he can show that we live in a world where God plays a significant role because almost everything involves energy, forces, and

the like.<sup>2</sup> Religion can then be contrasted with materialism because the non-material is all that is relevant in religion. The non-material is identified with God and also exhibits His role in the universe. So Agushewitz's priority is to show that there are various forms of non-physical, non-empirical, non-material agencies at work and manifest in the world. If he can do so he thereby disproves atheism.

To start, Agushewitz challenges the scientific pretensions of atheism. One aim of the book is to show that when religion—Judaism in particular—is viewed properly, it is religion that legitimately holds the claim to a truly scientific world view. But first, what is Judaism? Agushewitz characterizes Judaism by (a) the belief in God and (b) the belief in a relationship between God and man. And what is God? The answer he gives is one that carefully and deliberately avoids any hint of anthropomorphism. Agushewitz claims, for reasons that should be familiar to readers of his *Principles of Philosophy*, that God is at once the unifying force that binds the universe together in all ways, the force within the universe that allows for things to cease being unified, to change, separate and diversify, and is also the power that allows for progress in the world. These “powers” are manifest in the universe as non-material forces, and therefore so is God.

The book then launches into arguments against various kinds of materialism. *Faith and Heresy* discusses and attempts to refute, among many other doctrines, ancient and modern versions of materialism. It also tries to reclaim Spinoza from the materialists, arguing that while Spinoza has generally been taken as a materialist, he in fact was not. It enlists Zeno's ancient paradoxes on the incoherence of the infinite to show how space and time cannot be easily understood as material. And finally Agushewitz argues that materialists have a harder time making sense of morality than religious thinkers do, as materialism implies significant selfishness whereas morality implies a level of altruism.

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that just a few years before, Agushewitz's nephew, the philosopher Jacob B. Agus, argued almost the exact opposite position, claiming that “Conceptions of God as a ‘power’ or as a ‘process’ are altogether worthless for religion...” (*Modern Philosophies of Judaism: A Study of Recent Jewish Philosophies of Religion*, New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1941, p. 346.)

## **Analysis**

Summaries of the books, especially *Faith and Heresy*, can hardly do justice to the wide range of topics that Agushewitz clearly mastered. Given his first book, it should come as no surprise that the author feels very much at home in the world of the ancient thinkers whom he clearly greatly respects. In fact the author traces most of the issues he addresses to their ancient roots. But in addition to Zeno, Democritus, Epicurus, Parmenides and Plato, we find sophisticated discussions of Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Bergson, Russell, and Cantor. We also find discussions of such topics as free will, the concept of infinity, the relation of the mind to the body, the purpose of intelligence, the nature of science, and much else.

So despite his obvious devotion to Torah study, the author does not approach philosophy with the pen of a novice. The discussions are not only philosophically sophisticated, but also informed and up-to-date. The books are responding to the then-current philosophical climate, and more specifically, to the large number of Jews who adhered to the fashionable materialist atheism of the 1940s.

Materialism is the name given to a group of related doctrines concerning the nature of the world that puts matter in a primary position and everything else—including forces, energy, soul, spirit, mind, and God—in a secondary one, or even dismisses their existence altogether. (Materialism as the pursuit of material goods expresses a different use of the word.) Karl Marx’s variety of materialism—dialectical materialism—merges materialism with the notion that there is an inevitable progress in the world stemming from the constant “dialectic” between historical movements and their oppositions. In Agushewitz’s era the predominant philosophical stance was Logical Positivism, a movement often identified with Bertrand Russell’s atheism. In Yiddish-speaking intellectual circles Bundism, a uniquely Jewish philosophy that derived from Marxist socialism, was also often identified with materialist atheism.

While the three principles found in the *Principles of Philosophy* may betray some clues as to the author’s earlier Marxist leanings (e.g., in describing how the “dialectic” of unity and diversity leads to progress), *Faith and Heresy*, along with the use that the author makes of the three principles, soon disabuses us of any illusion that he has any materialist sympathies whatsoever. It is almost as if the author turns Marx on his head, making religious principles out of atheist ones!

Doing this is important for Agushevitz, as he may be the first Orthodox Jewish thinker since Maimonides to so completely identify philosophy with religion. This identification allows him to stay true to the religious Judaism he took so seriously and show that it is possible to harmonize it with the philosophy that he believes is the path to “justice, social reform, and immeasurable welfare and spiritual elevation.”

Though he did not deviate from Orthodox Judaism, his philosophy can be construed as somewhat outside the mainstream. Seeking principles of philosophy, or fundamental essences that guide the universe, leaves Agushevitz as somewhat of an outsider, given the way philosophy is currently practiced and was practiced sixty years ago. Steiner rather aptly labels Agushevitz’s philosophical approach as “classical.” The idea of a “principle of nature” is a pervasive theme common among theists in the 17th and 18th centuries, and so Agushevitz is following a venerated, if somewhat dated tradition in philosophy. Nonetheless, we are not implying that the works are philosophically obsolete. Steiner, himself a well-regarded philosopher of mathematics, has expressed some sympathy with the general direction of Agushevitz’s project. If nothing else, this alone makes the work somewhat more than a historical curiosity.


## **On Yiddish Philosophy**

Throughout the history of Yiddish literature, works in that language were rarely written with an eye to enrich an existing scholarly discussion in an academic field. After all, Yiddish was hardly the *lingua franca* for any discipline, except perhaps Jewish *belles-lettres*. That is part of what makes the two works under consideration so remarkable. Both make original contributions to philosophy. While Yiddish is still a spoken language and books are still being written in Yiddish, they are rarely on science and even less so on philosophy. At one time, however, there was a burgeoning market for Yiddish philosophy and science, both from religious Jewish Yiddish speakers and from secular Jews who were participating in a Yiddish culture. But the Yiddish philosophy books that were published were generally translations or expositions of those philosophers who were sources of *Yiddishe nachas*. As such there were intellectual biographies and expository works on some of the great Jewish thinkers—especially Maimonides, Spinoza, and Marx. There were also many translations of philosophi-



be conveyed by translation. Steiner is far more generous than most with the original Yiddish and Hebrew words he sprinkles throughout the texts. It would have been nice, however, to see the words in Hebrew characters instead of in transliteration. The occasional Yiddish word in Hebrew characters would have illustrated to the reader how the book appeared to its intended audience—*והמבין יבין*.

### Conclusion

The important figures of Orthodox Judaism today are hardly philosophers. Few outstanding religious intellectuals have the ability to contribute meaningfully to the religious discourse on classical texts and contemporary Jewish issues while simultaneously producing writings that philosophers would recognize as novel philosophical contributions. In the medieval period there were a significant number of men capable of producing such work. But few individuals today have both the intimacy with *shas* and *poskim* and the philosophical tools and the fluency with the western intellectual tradition that Maimonides, Gersonides, and Saadia had in their times. Given the widespread antipathy among the Orthodox community toward philosophy, this lack of philosophical familiarity is especially acute among those who shape our current understanding of Orthodox Judaism. Rabbis J. B. Soloveitchik and Eliezer Berkovits come to mind as rare exceptions from the previous generation. (R. Soloveitchik was, incidentally, a friend of Agushewitz, and wrote a letter of endorsement of his commentary on *Bava Kamma*. The letter is appended to this article together with R. Aharon Kotler's endorsement.) It is refreshing to see that there is still sufficient interest in philosophical works by a genuine *talmid hakham* to merit their translation into English. We can only hope that this enthusiasm endures and new gifted members of the Orthodox community are inspired to make contributions that follow in these venerated footsteps. 



מכתבי ברכה

בית מדרש גבוה באמריקה

בעזה"י.

הנה כבוד ידידי הרב המופלג בתורה נכבד ונעלה וכו' הרי"ל אגושביץ שליט"א הביא לפני קונטרסים חדושי תורה על מסכת בבא קמא, מאתיו המנוח הרב הגדול בתורה וחכמה משכיל ביראת ד' מר דאובן אגושביץ ז"ל [בנו של הרה"ג ד' אליהו הירודנער ז"ל מעיר מולדתי סוויסלאטש שלמדתי אצלו גפ"ת בילדותי]. והנה מעוצם טרדותי לא הספיק הזמן לעיין בהם רק איזה גרגרים ומצאתי בהם הערות יקרות וחדושים הראויים להאמר. גם הכרתי את הרב המחבר ז"ל לאיש יקר וישר, חכם וסופר, ויהיו דבריו בהלכה שרשם לעצמו בדרך למדו למזכרת עולם ושפתותיו דובבות. הכותב וחותם לכבוד התורה, הוגי ומשחרי, יום ה' לסדר וירא, ט"ו מרחשון, שנת תשס"ו.

אהרן קטלר

יוסף דוב הלוי סולוביציץ

יום שני, ו' באדר, תשס"ו.

תלמידי החביב, מר אהרן פדר.

שלום וברכה!

שמחתי באומרים לי, כי אתם עומדים להדפיס את חידושי רבך, ר' ראובן אגושביץ, ז"ל, המסודרים למס' ב"ק. שמחתי כפולה היא, ראשית דבר, ידעתי את האיש ואת שיחו, ומדומני, כי הקהל התורני לא הכירוהו והעריכוהו כהוגן. תלמיד חכם מצוי, הוגה דעות, צנוע ונחבא אל הכלים, היה, גישה פשטנית, משוללת עיקומי פלפול, והסבר מברר ומחודד היוו כלי תשמישו בהלכה. דאיום דבריו להקבע בדפוס, שנית, יישר כחך על נאמנותך לרבך, שקבלת תורה מפיו; הרי היא בהתאם למסורת ישראל, שכל כך הרגישה את הויקה הנפשית ההודית של רב ותלמיד. עלה והצלח!

בחיבה ובכבוד,

יוסף דוב הלוי סולוביציץ

A rare sight: side-by-side letters from Rabbis Aharon Kotler and J. B. Soloveitchik sent in praise of a philosopher. These appear in Agushewitz's *Be'ur Reuven*, his commentary on *Bava Kamma*.