

JEWISH
LITURGICAL
REASONING



Steven Kepnes

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STEVEN KEPNES

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For Rachel and Ari

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Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the many friends and colleagues who supported me in the writing of this book. The book began to come together in my mind as I grew frustrated with certain fanciful and nihilistic trends in philosophical postmodernism that had preoccupied me in a book I edited entitled *Interpreting Judaism in a Post-modern Age*. I became attracted to the postliberal model for religion offered by George Lindbeck and the Yale School, and I worked to refine this model for Jewish thought while at the Hartman Institute for Advanced Jewish Study in Jerusalem. This returned me to earlier hermeneutical models of philosophy and theology that I learned from Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy at the University of Chicago, and through my work on Martin Buber with Paul Mendes-Flohr at the Hebrew University. Yet the germ of the idea for the book goes back some twenty-five years to when I first read a November 1924 letter that Franz Rosenzweig wrote to members of the German Jewish adult-education center called the *Lehrhaus*. Allow me to confess that I have been transfixed by this letter since reading it and have continually returned to its words as one of the most significant portraits of the power of liturgy.

All the days of the year Balaam's talking ass may be a mere fairy tale, but not on the Sabbath wherein this portion is read in the synagogue, when it speaks to me out of the open Torah. But if not a fairy tale, what then? I cannot say right now; if I should think about it today, when it is past, and try to say what it is, I should probably only utter the platitude

that it is a fairy tale. But on that day, in that very hour, it is—well, certainly not a fairy tale, but that which is communicated to me, provided I am able to fulfill the command of the hour, namely, to open my ears.¹

Here, Rosenzweig acknowledges what all of us as heirs to the Enlightenment know to be true: that we can no longer simply take the Torah as God's revelation to Moses from Sinai. As most people walk and work in the secularized world, they cannot help but think of a story of a talking ass as a nice story, as a fairy tale. But then Rosenzweig opens up another possibility. While Jews are in the synagogue, on Shabbat, and in the context of the communal and liturgical reading of the Torah, another avenue, a unique order of reality is opened wherein suddenly, yes, some Jews cannot only imagine the ass speaking but even hear her speak. And she is speaking not only to Balaam but also to them!

This book is an attempt to explain and illuminate the power of liturgy for our understanding of God, time, space, community, and ethics. The book argues that liturgy is an underappreciated semiotic form for reasoning. Liturgical reasoning enables humans to “perform” communal acts of thinking and behaving that bring them to certain fundamental truths. Liturgical reasoning takes advantage of the multiform character of liturgy to engage the body, mind, and soul in acts of spiritual transformation through which they are renewed and motivated toward acts of healing the world.

I am especially indebted to Peter Ochs, who has read chapters in various stages of my writing. I also want to thank Zachary Braiterman, Michael Zank, and Robert Gibbs, who commented on sections of the manuscript. I have benefited greatly from insights into Christian liturgies given to me by David Ford, Dan Hardy, Ben Quash, and Nick Adams, and by insights into Islamic prayer from Omid Safi, Muhammad Suheyl Umar, Basit Koshul, and Annabel Keeler, which I received in the liturgy group of the Scriptural Reasoning Theory Conferences at Cambridge University in 2004 and 2005.

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Randi Rashkover and C. C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 34-56.

Finally, I must thank my wonderful family. My wife, Arlene Kanter, continues to be the love of my life and a constant source of support and wisdom. My children, to whom I dedicate the book, have truly been God's gifts to me.

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Abbreviations

- Btal Babylonian Talmud.
- J* Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem; Or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, with introduction and commentary by Alexander Altmann (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983).
- Jtal Palestinian Talmud.
- MJ* Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum. Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart: F. Frommann Verlag, 1983), 8:99–204.
- ND Franz Rosenzweig, “Das neue Denken,” in *Der Mensch und sein Werke: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Reinhold and Annemarie Mayer (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 3:139–63.
- NT Franz Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking*, ed. and trans. Alan Udoff and Barbara Gallie (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).
- RDV* Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft: Aus den Quellen des Judentum* (2nd edition, 1928; Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1966).
- RR Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).
- Star* Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Gallie (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

- Star*, 1985 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallie (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
- Stern* Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern Der Erlösung* [2nd edition, 1930], in *Der Mensch und sein Werke: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Reinhold Mayer (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976).

Jewish Liturgical Reasoning

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Introduction

After Postmodernism to Liturgical Reasoning

This book asks you to consider the practice of synagogue liturgy as the focal point for contemporary Jewish philosophy. When we begin with liturgy, we begin in a collective activity, an activity of the present moment that was nevertheless performed in the past and will be performed in the future. Beginning with liturgy, we begin with a communal performance of word, text, and song, in a space set apart, in a “sacred space.” In this book I argue that, in liturgy, the communal body becomes the organ of the reasoning of Judaism; or, as Hermann Cohen puts it, liturgy is “the language of reason of the congregation.” For me, this means that liturgy is not a passive recipient or mere vessel of reason but that, in liturgy, the white light of universal reason fans out into a spectrum of colors and hues so that its concepts and ideals are clothed in particular images and displayed in ritual actions. In liturgy, the clarion call of reason becomes a melody that is varied, repeated, submerged, and revealed anew as in a musical fugue. As every liturgical event is dependent upon the time and place and players who enact it, the reason of liturgy is temporal and spatial. Because liturgy is performed by a specific group at a specific time and place, it is never the same. Because liturgy is a living performance that is dependent upon the skill and attitude of its players, it always varies from its script. Thus, liturgical reasoning is always new. It is neither preexistent nor static; it is discovered and revealed in every liturgical performance.

In developing my notion of liturgical reasoning, I begin with the great modern German Jewish philosophers, Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, and Franz Rosenzweig.¹ As both philosophical and

religious thinkers, these figures necessarily bring us into dialogue with Continental Philosophy in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.² We will see that each of these philosophers read the philosophical issues of his day in a unique way and developed uniquely Jewish solutions to the problems he encountered. It is a somewhat overlooked fact that synagogue liturgy is an important theme of the work of each of these figures. Of the three, Rosenzweig was most explicit about the philosophical and theological power of Jewish liturgy. In part 3 of the *Star of Redemption* (1921), Rosenzweig refers to liturgy as an *Organonstellung*, a “logic” or “system of reasoning” for Judaism; and he suggests that, in and through liturgy, the Jewish community finds its proper destiny and unique role in the historical drama of redemption. Given that Rosenzweig took liturgy most seriously, this book can be broadly construed as a Rosenzweigian project. Yet this book is not intended as work in intellectual history or as a detailed explication of the writings of Mendelssohn, Cohen, and Rosenzweig in their historical and philosophical contexts. This book is not an exercise in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the “science of Judaism.” Rather, the book is intended as an interpretive and constructive endeavor that uses the modern Jewish philosophers as a springboard to articulate a new form of Jewish philosophy for the twenty-first century. The constructive aim of this project is to engage contemporary discussions of liturgy³ in postliberal theology, in ritual and performance theory, in hermeneutic and semiotic theory, and in the emerging interfaith movement of Jews, Christians, and Muslims called Scriptural Reasoning. The study, however, is less a systematic philosophy of liturgy than a display of the possibilities of liturgical reasoning for addressing select issues in Jewish thought.⁴ The issues I focus on are enlightenment semiotics and the representation of God (chapter 1), the ethics of the self and other (chapter 2), sacred time (chapter 3), sacred space (chapter 4), and the semiotics and theology of the preparatory morning prayers (chapter 5). Because liturgical reasoning is most properly seen as a group performance, a book on liturgical reasoning by one author is necessarily limited. Writing on liturgy occurs either before the liturgical event, as preparation, or after the event, as recapitulation and analysis. Yet even with these limitations, a book on liturgical reasoning can reorient Jewish philosophy and provide it with new tools, new terms of discourse and analysis, and a new sensibility.

Liturgical reasoning follows the modern Jewish philosophers in their claim that the elements of liturgy—word, symbol, music, costume, action—have a rational, ethical, and theological importance. This view is clearly opposed to views of liturgical actions as secondary to beliefs, or liturgy as hardened “institutional” expressions of religious charisma.⁵ It is also different from various psychological views of liturgy as a vehicle of unconscious feelings and thoughts that have only individual and not collective meaning. The approach I take in this book is indebted to sociological theories of religion that present ritual as the heart of religion and as the primary vehicle of socializing the young and

reminding the old of the leading values and overarching worldview of a religion. Yet it goes beyond sociological views of ritual by suggesting that liturgy does not function merely to indoctrinate and recall set values and beliefs but also to create a space in which constructive thinking occurs. Liturgy is, thus, not merely a vehicle of indoctrination; it is a sphere in which thinking about primary existential, metaphysical, and theological issues occurs. In addition, as a form of communal action, liturgy helps mediate between certain philosophical and existential dichotomies such as belief and behavior, thought and action, mind and body. Liturgy, is not only a tool of socialization, it is a normative philosophical enterprise that enters individuals into the quest for the true, the good, and the ethical. If the last statement holds, then this book ventures to make an additional claim for liturgy, and that is that liturgy provides a model for all Jewish and even non-Jewish thinking! Thus, I will take the communal process and “event” quality of liturgy and, moving beyond the sphere of the synagogue (and church), I will suggest that we look at philosophy as a ritualized communal process and a social event. I then conclude, in the epilogue, with the suggestion that truth, itself, is liturgical!

This view of philosophy as a kind of liturgical logic finds its original form in liturgy but also resonates with central themes in modern Jewish philosophy and in varieties of semiotic, hermeneutic, and pragmatist thought. All these philosophical movements begin with a critique of various forms of idealism and of rational foundational claims of modern Western philosophy. This critique focuses on the inadequacies of the Cartesian cogito and the Kantian autonomous rational self as the origin and criterion of philosophy and offers alternative models for philosophy based on the powers of language. The turn to language involves not only the recognition that all thinking is done in language but that language is not merely a vehicle for thought: it contributes unique qualities to thinking.

On the one hand, reason enters language and is refracted like light through a prism. On the other hand, language, in its structure, semantics, and various rhetorical forms, displays and creates thinking. Adapting a famous expression of Paul Ricoeur, we could say that “language gives rise to thought.” Language is seen as a particularly agile and fruitful source and model for thought, for it is a communal form that displays systematic “synchronic” features yet also changes through time and thus can be understood diachronically or historically as well. Language is a universal feature of human societies, yet language is always particular to a specific people and geographic region. And language takes concrete form in texts that fix and preserve thought in writing.

Despite Derrida’s claims for the superiority of writing over speech, I follow Martin Buber, who argues that the greatest power of language is its ability to put thought in dynamic play in speech and dialogue where thinking becomes a social event. Here, in the social and event quality of language, the liturgical quality of thinking becomes most evident. Philosophy, on the model of liturgy,