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The Emergence of Postmodern Jewish Theology and Philosophy

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In *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (JPS 1991), the renowned Jewish theologian, Eugene B. Borowitz, offers a history of his intellectual and spiritual calling to serve as philosophical pastor to Jews in a postmodern world. He has been so influential and representative a modern Jewish thinker that this personal odyssey illustrates the emergence of postmodern Judaism in general: from its complaints against the religious authorities of the past, through its disillusionments with modernity's secular vision of the future, to its efforts now to renew the present by re-reading the past.¹ Jewish modernists may have sought to abandon traditional teachings about Torah, God, and Israel. Rather than abandon Jewish modernism, Borowitz rereads it in terms of these teachings, introducing Jewish postmodernism as the relational life—or covenant—that binds Jewish modernity to the traditions of its past, rather than as an alternative to either.

If Borowitz' narrative is to be read in this way, then its theory of renewal is a theory of rereading, and its own virtues will be displayed through the ways in which it is reread, rather than through any single attempt to portray its intrinsic meaning. In only three years after its publication (when this book was conceived), Borowitz' work already attracted a family of readings; it has been the subject of two conference sessions and

ten journal reviews. This means that it was soon possible to read Borowitz' book through its effects rather than just its words: simultaneously reading the book and re-reading its initial *readings*—to read it *along with* a community of fellow readers, rather than reading it alone. This, in fact, is the subject of this volume: a study of the *reception* of Borowitz' book by the *community* of postmodern Jewish theologians who, gathered around and alongside Borowitz, have begun the task of both reviewing and renewing the Jewish covenant in a postmodern world.

Reviewing the Covenant: Eugene Borowitz and the Postmodern Renewal of Jewish Theology is postmodern in both its subject matter and method. The authors participate in an emergent community of thinkers, first gathered in 1991 as members of the *Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network*: an electronic dialogue network and quarterly journal devoted to articulating the varieties of Jewish philosophy that have emerged after the demise of the dominant modern paradigms of Kantian or transcendental Jewish thought—including their existentialist, phenomenological, and analytic expressions. In this book, the postmodern thinkers reason about Borowitz' way of renewing the classic Jewish themes of Torah, Covenant, God, Commandment, the people Israel, and Evil. They reason through their own manner of renewing the classic Jewish methods of commentary, response, interpretation, and redacted dialogue. And they reason in light of postmodern concerns with Holocaust, conceptual imperialism, deconstruction, feminism, pluralism, and life-after-disillusionment.

Since this is a book that re-reads Borowitz, some readers may want to have a first look at *Renewing the Covenant* before proceeding. Other readers, however, may enjoy these re-readings as an introduction to Borowitz' project: reading from effects back to cause, the way traditional students might read rabbinic commentaries before the biblical text, or the way Franz Rosenzweig says he reads books from their concluding chapters back to their beginnings. In this case, such reading back will be both clarified, enriched, and complicated (or "doubly coded," to anticipate Edith Wyschogrod's words) by the ways Borowitz' readers both teach his basic claims, celebrate his overall project, and also raise questions about this or that element of it.

There is some drama behind these questions. Here is the great theologian and moralist of liberal Judaism, known for his Kantian-like concern for universal ethics and later for his Jewish existentialism—a scholar of

modern Jewish philosophy, but always attentive as well to everyday life in the American Jewish communities—a social commentator, pastoral teacher, and rabbi to Reform rabbis. What is he doing in the company of, at times, highly specialized academic postmodernists, denizens of deconstruction and suspicion—albeit within the context of religious studies, Jewish thought, and also Christian theology? And what is their interest in him? Can Reform Judaism really participate in the postmodern critique of religious rationalism and of universalizing ethics? Can liberal Judaism more broadly take part in the specifically Jewish postmodern and post-Holocaust turn toward ethnic and religious particularity and communalism? Can academic postmodernists, on the other hand, really share in an effort to renew theology, and a Jewish-Covenantal theology at that?

These questions animate all of the chapters to follow, as leading thinkers on religion and postmodernism enter into a lively dialogue with Borowitz' book and as Borowitz responds to them. In the second chapter of this introductory section, Gene Borowitz offers an opening account of the terms he brings to the dialogue: what Jewish postmodernism and Jewish theology mean to him. In this first chapter, I offer an opening thesis: not to anticipate or prejudge the debates to follow, but perhaps to raise the stakes. My thesis is that this volume exhibits the complementary challenges faced today by both liberal Judaism (and liberal religion) on the one hand and academic, postmodern Judaism (and postmodern religion) on the other hand. Liberal Judaism's challenge is to recover text- and tradition- and community-based religiosity while maintaining its respect for the dignity of the individual person, for Jewish moral obligations to the non-Jew, and for standards of rational discourse among communities and traditions. This is a difficult challenge, because Jewish communalism appears to conflict with liberal doctrines of individual rights and of universal ethics, and text-based religiosity appears to conflict with liberal standards for rational discourse. Postmodern Judaism's challenge is to maintain its disciplined criticisms of modernism while also recovering bases for individual moral agency, for trans-national or trans-communal standards of reason and of ethics, and for referring to love of (and relationship or obedience to) God as a legitimate element of public discourse. While leaving detailed analyses for the chapters to follow, I will say a little more here about these postmodern challenges; the terminologies are so abstruse and controversial that readers would most likely welcome some preliminary

definitions. Readers must bear in mind that, in the postmodern context, to offer a definition is also to make a choice among possible meanings and, therefore, to assert some thesis: the definitions I propose here, or that I borrow from Borowitz' work, may be modified or even controverted by other authors in this volume!

Modernism: We might start by using the term to refer to a complex of values and behaviors that have accompanied the world hegemony of Western (and to some extent northern) European civilization in the seventeenth through the twentieth century. This complex includes the emergence of mercantilism, capitalism, the search for worldwide economic resources and markets, the Industrial Revolution, the nation-state and its variously parliamentary, autocratic, or totalitarian governments; the liberal ideals of individual autonomy, individual and universal rights, and democracy; as well as the various socialist ideals that emerged from and came to oppose the liberal ideals. When academic postmodernists refer critically to "modernism," they are usually referring to some set of anachronistic, inflexible, and now demonstrably harmful societal values and behaviors that have emerged from this complex and that continue to be reinforced through patterns of political, economic, and *academic* behavior as well. Different postmodernists characterize the harmful elements of modernism in different ways and offer different remedies for them. Among the more typical targets of opprobrium are:

Epistemological Foundationalism: This refers, first, to what the pragmatist John Dewey called "the quest for certainty": the desire of individual modern thinkers to achieve personal certainty about the universe they inhabit and what they are to do in it. It is associated, next, with what the philosopher Richard Bernstein has dubbed "the Cartesian Anxiety": a fear that we will, ultimately, find no order to this universe at all unless we, as clear-visioned individual thinkers, can see for ourselves what is true and what is false and, therefore, have our own indisputable criterion for distinguishing between them. Bernstein's insight is that this hyperbolic need to know is associated, not with the human condition, but with a particular psychosocial condition in the modern West: associated with the absence of strong social bonds and functional traditions and, thus, with the compensatory desire to salve the individual consciousness with rational certainty as substitute for relationship, behavioral purpose, and love. Bernstein's analysis is

influenced, in part, by what may be the first, postmodern-like critique of Cartesian efforts to discover an Archimedean point on which all knowledge could be based. This is the American philosopher Charles Peirce's critique of what he called the "Cartesian tendency" in modern science and logic and ethics, which is to believe that knowledge is grounded in individual intuitions that are self-legitimizing: such as the naive realist's belief that "I see what I see and it must be so," or the idealist philosopher's belief that "with my disciplined powers, I see clearly and distinctly certain universal propositions of logic," or with the biblical literalist's belief that "the text means just what it says, and I know directly what it plainly says." Ludwig Wittgenstein and his students have since given postmodernists the terminology of "foundationalism" per se and of the studies that correct it, particularly of natural languages and their inherent vaguenesses of meaning.

Individualism, Atomism, and Egoism: Beginning with Peirce, the early postmodernists also criticized the individualist theories of ethics, metaphysics, and psychology that are inseparable from the foundationalist theory of knowledge. Peirce and Dewey offered Aristotelian-like arguments about the social character of human beings. Wittgenstein criticized the illusory character of doctrines of private knowledge and private language. The early Jewish postmodernists, from Martin Buber through Emmanuel Levinas, directed much of their criticism against the egocentric ethics and metaphysics of modernism.

Self-presence: Just as Peirce criticized the modernist notion of self-legitimizing intuition, so Jacques Derrida has criticized the myth of self-presence that is implicit in modern metaphysics: the belief that the real makes itself known to its observer and, thus, that knowledge is a function of self-disclosure. For Derrida, this belief displays the effort of Western metaphysicians, classic through modern, to identify signs with their objects and, thus, appropriate the sign's deferred presence: as if the object could be possessed, wholly, now; or as if, in the terms of Martin Buber's related criticism, we could possess the things we know, as "Its" captured by our "I's." The postmodern critique of self-presence necessarily leads to some theory of signs, or semiotic: if things do not simply make themselves known to us, then we must come to know them by interpreting the signs of which they are objects. Knowing entails interpreting. Languages are not the only sign systems we know (there is knowledge without language), but

they are the ones we know best. For this reason, postmodern studies of knowledge tend to begin, and sometimes end, with studies of language. While languages are both oral and written, written languages illustrate more readily the distance between signs and their absent objects, and oral discourse illustrates more readily the give-and-take that is part of the activity of receiving and interpreting signs. For these reasons, perhaps, postmodern theorists tend to adopt the model of written language to illustrate their theories of interpretation in place of self-presence, and they tend to adopt the model of oral speech to illustrate their dialogic, rather than static, theories of how interpretation works. In either case, postmodern theorists are also attentive to the multidimensionality of any activity of interpretation. For one, there is enough distance between sign and object that the signs may point to it in more than one way; for two, a given sign may point to, or reflect the influences of, more than one object; for three, we who read the sign may bring to our reading more than one interest, or more than one habit or rule of interpretation.

Universalism: A recurrent postmodern theme is that modernist thinkers attribute “objectivity” and “universality” to their own subjective interpretations of the world around them, thereby overgeneralizing the domain of their own knowledge and veiling its dependence on some finite context of knowledge and interpretation. One theory is that this reflects the modernists’ “Cartesian anxiety”: overly suspicious of their own traditions of knowledge and relation, modernists seek hyperbolic reassurance that what they believe must be *the* truth. A related theory is that the modernists’ individualism *and* foundationalism both lead them to believe that knowledge must be unreliable if it is not ultimately self-evident and, if self-evident, it must be so for all observers universally. The various postmodern alternatives tend to emphasize the probabilistic, social and context-related character of human knowing; from this perspective, the polarities “universal *vs.* individual” represent abstract ideals of little use in understanding how we actually know the world or know others.

Master Narratives: François Lyotard has introduced the term “master narratives” to refer to the West’s efforts to privilege certain models for human behavior, as if these models were self-evidently necessary or good for all humans. His critique, adopted by many recent postmodern theorists, is that, by way of such narratives, ruling classes or dominant subcultures insert self-promoting world views into Western societies without offering

those views, overtly, for inspection or argument. The critique here is not necessarily of the content of such narratives, but of their use as means of covert social control. Lyotard is calling for them to be subject to self-conscious disclosure and examination. Unexamined, such narratives function for an entire subculture the way self-legitimizing intuitions function for the modernist individual: reinforcing assumptions uncritically, but under the guise of some description or account of the world. In Edith Wyschogrod's terms (from a previous essay), the postmodernist complains that modern philosophy's

thought constellations are concealed narratives that lay claim to . . . being all-encompassing frameworks into which the contingencies of aberrant experience and social and linguistic context are stretched to fit and must be interpreted as such.²

Colonialism and Imperialism: According to postmodern critics, modernist epistemology and ethics have tended to generate, or at least accompany, hyperbolic political and social agendas. Some examples are the need to solve a social problem by overturning, rather than reforming, a particular social system, followed by a need to advertise, share, and then perhaps impose the same method of revolution on all neighboring societies as well. In general, the political and ethical criticisms of modern Western colonialism complement the previous epistemological criticisms: the problem, once again, is located in efforts to objectify and universalize the perceptions, beliefs, or, in this case, communal or national policies of some social entity—individual, group, or institution—that is not merely finite, but also individuated, or separated from relation to other such entities.

Postmodernists: There are many different claimants to the title “postmodernist.” In her chapter, Wyschogrod alludes to the origins of the term in turn of the century architecture and the dominant, contemporary use of the term to refer to the work of certain French thinkers (Derrida, Lyotard, and Michel Foucault prominent among them), to genres of literary criticism associated with them, and with related cultural critics on the Continent and, more recently, in the United States. Self-described “postmodern” Jewish *and* Christian religious thinkers are not, however, necessarily loyal to the dominant academic uses of the term. In our case, I find it helpful to distinguish among several, different claimants to the title “postmodern” and to imagine their being arrayed in something like the following continuum

of movements: what I will label secular academic postmodernists placed arbitrarily on the left, neo-Orthodox somewhat anti-academic post- or anti-moderns on the right, and other variants, including postmodern Jewish theology somewhere in-between. Over the past eight years, members of the Society for Textual Reasoning have, to varying degrees, adopted all of these movements as conversation partners. I provide somewhat more detail for the latter movements on this list, because readers may be less accustomed to identifying them as “postmodernists” *and* because their postmodernism may prove to be closest, in the end, to Borowitz’.

French or Continental: Secular academic postmodernists. Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault are the most quoted, with influences from Franco-German critical philosophy, Marxism, phenomenology, existentialism, and Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic distinction between sign (*signe*) and signified (*signifié*). Emphasizing the disclosure of covert power relations, totalizing assumptions, and also layers of conflicting, “double-coded” meanings behind the West’s dominant narratives, including those expressed in the form of philosophic argument or scientific analysis. In his contributions to this volume, Borowitz will clarify which aspects of postmodern criticism he shares with the French school and which aspects he does not share.

Varieties of Literary Criticism: Secular academic postmodernists, in the United States and Europe, who adopt the French theories as bases for deconstructing modern literature, as well as for identifying various forms of modern expression, including philosophy, *as* literature. Includes critics who emphasize psychology, Julia Kristeva, feminist theory, Luce Irigaray, and semiotics, Gilles Deleuze.

American Neopragmatists: Academic postmodernists, for the most part secular, primarily in the United States. These are philosophically trained social critics, such as Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Cornell West, who re-read the pragmatists William James and, especially, John Dewey, as precursors to the French postmodernists. They tend to rewrite modern philosophy into a form of literary criticism, but applied to the broadest set of cultural forms, especially political discourse.

American Pragmatists: Academic philosophers with postmodern tendencies, mostly secular, but including religious philosophers (such as the Jewish thinkers Mordecai Kaplan and Max Kadushin, and the Christian

thinkers Reinhold Neibuhr and John E. Smith). Like the neo-pragmatists, they reinvoked the classical pragmatists, including Charles Peirce, but do not interpret the pragmatists' critique of modern philosophy to signal the end of philosophy, ethics, or metaphysics as legitimate disciplines. They believe it is possible to place these rational disciplines in the service of social criticism and reform, without risking foundationalism, false universalism, or philosophic individualism. In their logic of problem-solving, pragmatists tend today to make use of a form of sign-theory, or semiotics, that is unlike the Continental model, because it is based on a three-part distinction of sign/meaning/context-of-interpretation, rather than de Saussure's two-part distinction of sign/signification. This approach draws the pragmatists close to Wittgenstein, who replaces logic with grammars of natural language, and to Rosenzweig, who replaces logic with what seems to be the grammatical/semiotic study of "speech thinking" (*Sprachdenken*). By way of illustration, I believe that the kind of postmodernism Borowitz envisions is compatible with a religious pragmatism.

American Process Theologians: Academic, religious philosophers with postmodern tendencies, who base their critique of modern philosophy and modern culture on the work of Alfred North Whitehead, or later Charles Hartshorne. Most are Christian, but there are significant Jewish thinkers as well (such as Norbert M. Samuelson), who associate the work of Mordecai Kaplan (and to some degree Max Kadushin) as much with process thought as with pragmatism. Like the pragmatists, process thinkers combine their critique of modern philosophic foundationalism, individualism, and totalism with a persistent trust in the usefulness of philosophic disciplines to solve problems of ethics and social life. Like the pragmatists, they make use of a logic that emphasizes relations over atoms or individuals. Many pragmatists, however, tend to criticize the process thinkers' metaphysical system-building as overly general, or universalistic in the modern fashion. Borowitz would share in this criticism, as well as in a critique of the process thinkers' naturalistic understanding of God. Nonetheless, some aspects of Borowitz' vision may remain compatible with some aspects of Jewish process thought.

Christian Postliberal Theologians: Academic theologians whose work and influence extends outside academe to clergy and congregants. The most well-known post-liberals are sometimes labeled the "Yale school." These

are colleagues and students of the Yale professors, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, who derive from Karl Barth and other sources, including Wittgenstein and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, an argument for a postmodern renewal of the theological programs of Martin Luther and John Calvin as well as of the early Church. Frei invokes deconstruction's "immanent subversion" of modern totalism and foundationalism. He argues, however, that such subversion is misapplied to classical Christian *or* rabbinic hermeneutics. Postmodern criticism should apply only to the West's efforts to universalize, or over-extend, finite conceptual constructions, but biblical religion lends authority to traditions of interpreting texts whose meanings cannot be limited to any finite conceptual constructions. Lindbeck criticizes efforts *within* the Christian biblical tradition to identify the meaning of Scripture with either propositional statements (such as "God is *x* or *y*") or with expressions of experience (such as claims that God is known through experiences of the "numinous"); such meaning inheres only in what he calls "cultural-linguistic" traditions of practice, or of living according to the Bible as a rule of life. Borowitz' postmodern approach to Judaism may correspond in many ways to this postliberal approach to Christianity.

What then, of *Jewish postmodernism*? Within that, what of the *postmodern Jewish philosophy* of most of this book's respondents? And what, finally, of Borowitz' *postmodern Jewish theology*? I hope that this expanded list of self-described "postmodern" options may already have suggested to the reader additional ways of answering the questions raised earlier about Borowitz' relation to the postmodern movement. The rest of this chapter will serve as an introduction to the specifically *Jewish* view of modernism that Borowitz offers. Since this Jewish view is not identical to the *general academic* view described above, it may offer readers an even more expanded context for interpreting this volume's dialogue among different kinds of biblical and of Jewish postmodern inquiry.

A JEWISH VIEW OF MODERNISM

One subject of this volume is Borowitz' *movement* from a modernist to a postmodernist approach to theology. Even in his earlier work, however, Borowitz rejected the thoroughgoing *constructivism* of the modern West:

that is, the effort to build theological, philosophic, and ethical systems *de nouveau*, directly out of the creative faculty of the human mind. The alternative is to enlist human reason, hermeneutically, as critic, commentator, and editor of received knowledge. While Borowitz has joined his theology to the contemporary hermeneutics of rabbinic texts and of Scripture, his prior and still significant focus has been on a hermeneutics of history and of social practice. As I read him, he has not turned from a liberal conceptualist (adopting certain philosophic principles as privileged rules for interpreting the meaning and norms of Jewish tradition) to some post-liberal textualist for whom the words of Bible or Talmud replace the first principles of reason. I would say, instead, that he began as and remains a liberal Jewish theologian whose first principles are defined by the way *clal yisrael*, in its historical situation, can best live its Covenant with God, and, more specifically, about how American Jews can best live a non-Orthodox, religious life. From this perspective, his postmodern turn concerns his judgment about the interpretive tools that the community of Israel uses in its efforts to understand Torah and God's will. He has always been "post-modern" in the sense of interpreting Torah from within the historical context of Israel's life, rather than from out of certain privileged principles. In his early work, however, he respected the significant role of several conceptualized principles of interpretation *within* the community of American, liberal Jews. In the last decade or two, he has observed this community's loss of faith in such principles; he now reassures the community that it can maintain its covenantal religiosity *and* its non-Orthodoxy by replacing those principles with the family of interpretive practices that he discusses in his book and which we review in this book. As in this sense a theological servant of his community of Israel, Borowitz' theological argument evolves with the historical evolution of his community. To understand his most recent evolution, it may be best to ask how he believes liberal religious Jews have previously lived their modernism and, then, how he believes they now seek something beyond it.

Modernism as Emancipation and Enlightenment

In Borowitz' history of Judaism, Jewish modernism is, first, a sociopolitical condition, and only consequently a source of certain epistemological and ethical claims. This modernism is initiated by the Emancipation:

After more than a millenium of ostracism and persecution, European Jews were astounded when the French Revolution signaled a turn to political equality in Europe, including even Jews. . . . Slowly, often begrudgingly, states granted Jews civil and social equality—a process not fully realized today even in the United States, the freest of modern nations. Regardless, Emancipation revolutionized Jewish spirituality, for whenever Jews were permitted to modernize, they did so avidly, and uncomplainingly accepted its accompanying secularization.

The startling effects of this fundamental shift of cultural context cannot be overemphasized. Freedom from segregated existence brought on a transition from a life oriented by revelation, tradition, and a sense of the holy to one in which religion became privatized if not irrelevant or obsolete. This had the advantage of making a Jew's religion no longer a public handicap. It also meant that as the realm of religiously neutral activity expanded, the twin questions of Jewish identity and continuity became increasingly troublesome. Jews began to ask, "What does it mean to be a Jew today? Why should one undertake its special responsibilities?" Modern Jewish thought arose as Jews sought to respond to these questions in ways that would be culturally credible and Jewishly persuasive.³

Masses of Jews sought to escape, readily, not only from the ghettos imposed on them, but also from age-old practices of self-segregation: from life in autonomous Jewish communities, governed by Jewish communal authorities, Jewish social customs, and by practices of biblical-rabbinic education, study, and law (*halakhah*). By what criteria would they now choose which aspects of their Jewishness to retain and which to discard?

According to Borowitz, modern Jews chose criteria offered by Western, Enlightenment sources rather than traditional, rabbinic sources: sharply separating private and public spheres; relegating religion to the private sphere; and adopting, for the public sphere, the rules of scientific reason, modern statehood, individual rights, and universal ethics.⁴ The modern nation state was the agent of Jewish emancipation, an expression of the state's movement toward democracy. Both citizenship in the state and democracy brought with them the substitution of individual for communal enfranchisement and rights:

To European Jews, [this enfranchisement] seemed nearly miraculous, for political equality was given to everyone. . . . The intellectual-ethical roots of the emancipation were rationalistic. Citizenship was to be universal. . . .

Living largely among gentiles created a conflict with what the rabbinate taught was the necessary form and tone of Jewish life. To some extent the Torah directly mandated a good measure of Jewish separatism; more critically the recent centuries of segregation and persecution had heightened the desire for self-isolation. . . . In response, many Jews simply did what modernity had taught them: they made up their own minds about what they ought to do. . . . In all [the] new modes of Jewish existence, the modern concept of ethics was essential, providing Jews with their essential view of being human and staying Jewish.⁵

Basically a “Greek way of looking at duty [as]. . . derived from reason,”⁶ ethics offered modern Jews a way of continuing the Jewish value of caring within the terms of modern Europe’s liberal rationalism. In a statement that could almost have been drafted as a manifesto for liberal modernist Judaism, Jürgen Habermas explains:

The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic.⁷

Wyschogrod explains:

the leitmotif of liberal modern Jewish theology has been what is perhaps the grandest of Enlightenment modernity’s metanarratives, that of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. Moses Mendelssohn, Kant’s contemporary, offered a Jewish theological version of this narrative . . . when he argued that Judaism’s belief in God’s existence and just governance of the world are in conformity with the requirements of reason and as such, available to all rational beings.⁸

For both Wyschogrod and Borowitz, Hermann Cohen articulated the overlapping interests of Kantian moral philosophy and the liberal Jewish theology of Emancipation. For Cohen’s “ethical monotheism, [h]uman-kind is engaged in an infinite task of self-betterment,” whose vehicle is scientific reason, but only as completed by the infinite idea of God.⁹ This God is the God of Israel, but only as studied in the university by Jewish thinkers, who later brought Cohen’s philosophy of ethical monotheism with them to the United States, initiating American professors of Jewish studies into the Continent’s traditions of ethical universalism.¹⁰ This does

not mean that Cohen should be defined strictly as “Jewish modernist,” but only that his writing served the needs of Jewish modernists. From Borowitz’ perspective, however, “Jewish modernism” will also contain the seeds of self-criticism or even self-negation, since it represents an historically particular condition of social assimilation that cannot over time adequately represent, or serve, the people Israel’s covenantal norms of community and traditional religious law. Cohen’s writing would also serve the needs of those seeking to recover such norms in the midst of modernity. The same can be said of Borowitz’ early work which, in dialectical fashion, not only served the liberal Jewish community in its modernist condition, but also serves the current, postmodern turn.

Borowitz first came to broad public attention as a Reform Jewish thinker who offered religion and theology for Jews living in the modernist context.¹¹ In his many journal essays, as well as his first major books in the late 1960s, however, his message was already complex. He wrote, at once, as Jewish philosopher, as pastoral rabbi to the liberal religious Jewish community, and as theologian and teacher of the Reform movement. He thus spoke to and for liberal Judaism’s vision of the individual Jew’s personal autonomy, and against the *halakhic* and ideological authority of the traditional rabbinate. He spoke of the Jew’s moral and *halakhic* “choice” rather than “inheritance.” But he already wrote of this choice as “an act of faith,” and he described a liberal’s faith as paradoxical:

One does not arrive at the content of Judaism without faith, but liberals also believe they cannot affirm everything to which believing Jews in the past centuries have been committed. That is why they seek to limit their faith in Judaism by some sort of regulating principle. Only now it is clear that no self-justifying, autonomous principle exists, but all the possibilities themselves involve a prior act of faith. Thus, one can delimit Jewish faith only by acknowledging that one has a prior faith in whose name he is willing to alter and revise traditional Judaism. . . . Thus the structure of Jewish theology is tripartite and its work is dialectical. It begins in faith and this makes possible the work of reason which, in turn, ends with faith—from this point on, it is always faith followed by reason followed by faith in infinite, better messianic development.¹²

This leaves open the question, still, “in which approach shall liberals today put their faith?” Borowitz’ answer, already in 1968, was:

Theologians in the past century have acted as if they knew a truth superior to Judaism. But I do not know a body of knowledge or a system of understanding God and man and history superior to Judaism. I do not have a faith more basic to my existence than my Judaism.¹³

This existentialist conclusion also displayed its own dialectic: between personal existence—that situation into which Borowitz the individual is thrown—and the historical situatedness of one's community of Israel: call it a covenantal existentialism. Borowitz already invoked a doctrine of Covenant in his 1957–58 Ed.D. dissertation. In short, his Jewish modernism was multileveled and dialectical from the start: a doctrine of personal autonomy tied to an anti-rationalist search for Covenant, a critique of the rabbinate's and the rabbinic tradition's authority over the Jewish person's everyday life tied to a critique of modern Jewish secularism, antinomianism, and individualism. While arguing in 1969, for example, for a personalist albeit religious Jewish sexual ethic, Borowitz added:

What I have tried to do in this analysis is to comprehend the problem in its contemporary setting and speak to those it concerns in their own language. Many of the most thoughtful things college students themselves say about sex ethics are put in terms of what it means to be a person. I imagine they think of that as a purely secular value. For me it is a matter of religious belief. . . . I do not see how secularism alone might validate such a fundamental faith in persons—all persons—today. . . . Had I not believed in what Judaism has taught me about what it means to be a person, I could not have written as I have. I spoke to a universal problem in universal terms in order to be understood. But that universal is based on a quite particularly Jewish faith.¹⁴

Borowitz continues his explanation by writing about the Jews' Covenant with a God who "is not neutral, but Holy," and about the role of the Jewish person in that Covenant.

Jewish Disillusionment with Modernity

Borowitz made no effort to cover over the dialectical tensions inherent in his Jewish modernism. The Jewish Covenant accompanies Jews in their modern movement to Emancipation and assimilation, but it allows this movement to go just so far. Well before the Shoah, two world wars, and the dehumanizing excesses of industrialism, nationalism, colonialism, and

commercialism bred a growing Jewish disillusionment with the seductions of modernity:

For most of two centuries almost all Jews who could modernize did so. They knew that modernity was good for them, that the great gains that equality and opportunity brought made the problems connected with modernization acceptable. But as the twentieth century waned, doubts about modernity's beneficence arose throughout Western civilization. People were profoundly disturbed by the deterioration of the quality of life. A great deal of their unhappiness was disappointment. The Enlightenment, the intellectual credo of modernity, had promised that replacing tradition with rational skepticism, hierarchy with democracy, and custom with freedom would bring messianic benefit—and certainly it hasn't. . . . On a much deeper level, this loss of confidence in Enlightenment values has come from the collapse of its philosophical foundations. All the certainties about mind and self and human nature that once powered the bold move into greater freedom now seem dubious.¹⁵

Borowitz notes how this disillusionment with Enlightenment has been experienced, specifically by American Jews since the 1960s:

This remarkable amalgam of social experience, self-interest, and moral intuition [in the Jewish liberal movement through the early 1960s] then began to fall apart as each of its components came under increasing challenge. As a result, the meanings popularly associated with the terms *Jewish ethics* and *Jewish ethics* were thrown into doubt.

To begin with the social context . . . American democracy, with surprising quickness, lost much of its moral stature. A strong civil-rights law did not lead to full equality for blacks, and as numerous other minority groups learned the politics of confrontation and protest, the limits of American tolerance became clear. The Vietnam War made suspicion rather than respect the common attitude toward government. . . . In the Jewish community, the general misery had pointed focus in the special pain of the Holocaust. Modern culture, even democracy, did not prevent such ineffable evil. It took American Jews nearly twenty years to face this horror—one intimately connected, I am convinced, not with the death of a biblical God that a largely agnostic community no longer affirmed, but with the loss of its operative faith in Western culture and human competence. . . . The depth of anti-Semitism in Western culture seemed immeasurable . . .

Intellectually, too, the vision of humankind as rational and rationality

itself implying a Kant-like ethics lost its old compelling power, perhaps mostly as a result of the incredible carnage of World War I. What remained of Kantian ethics faded as psychoanalysis from within and anthropology and Marxism from without demonstrated that, realistically, “conscience” mostly meant the introjected parent or group interest . . .

The postmodern situation begins with the recognition that ethics has lost its old certainty and priority. . . . It should come as no surprise, then, that the familiar identification of Jewish ethics with liberal politics also has been rejected. . . . The needs of the State of Israel also militated against identifying Jewish ethics with liberal politics.¹⁶

At the same time, Borowitz also notes that the disillusionment of liberal Jews with their modern, secular ideals led very few to anti-modern orthodoxies:

Most Jews, despite their disillusionment with modernity, have refused to give up its teaching about ethics. [Among the reasons are] a revulsion at the extremism and fanaticism that an unmodernized religious traditionalism can readily engender. . . . Modernists also reject Orthodoxy as a therapy for our society’s moral ailments, because they find its social vision more inner-directed than they believe right in our democratic situation. . . . This issue becomes particularly upsetting when some Jews insist that the Holocaust proves people cannot be expected to act ethically towards Jews so we have good reason to concentrate on taking care of ourselves. . . . Third, feminism has provided a dramatic, specific focus for the limit to the modernist’s embrace of the Jewish tradition.¹⁷

Borowitz concludes that the result of these disillusionments and resistances is an uncertain, ambivalent, and even cynical liberal American Jewry. While their optimism about humanity and reason has faded, liberal Jews remain compulsively resistant to God and to rabbinic tradition.¹⁷

In *Renewing the Covenant*, Borowitz offers a personal—and personalist’s—history of how such a loss of confidence led him and fellow liberal Jews to a spiritual and intellectual crisis. “Modernity betrayed our faith,” he writes, referring to faith in “the one ‘god’ in whom [all] moderns had avidly trusted—ourselves, humankind.”¹⁸ It was humankind that failed: its universal visions bred also imperialisms, colonialisms, and, ultimately, totalitarianisms; its critical rationality bred also moral disarray and

anomie; its scientific and technological discovery and ingenuity brought the worst as well as the best human designs to fruition—and the worst have defined our memories of this century: civilizational miseries of many sorts, most vividly, unspeakable wars and Holocaust.¹⁹ Jewish disillusionment with modern humanity has had many sources, but all are sealed by reflections on the Holocaust as ultimate expression of the dangers of modern European civilization. Borowitz cites Elie Wiesel's observation that "the death camps, rather than shattering the faith of the traditionalists, most fully undid the worldview of the [modern] intellectuals and liberals."²⁰

What then? To speak of unadorned disillusionment with modernity is not yet to speak of any alternative vision: this is postmodernism's early point of negation and that is all.

POSTMODERN RESPONSES TO LIBERAL JEWISH DISILLUSIONMENT

Without putting it in these exact terms, Borowitz' postmodern writings allow for a distinction between a strictly "anti-modern" and a "non-modern" response to liberal disillusionments with modernity. The anti-modern response is to seek some way of cutting off all explicitly modern rules of behavior or ways of thinking: out of the ashes of a modern past, in other words, to build a world unfettered by modernism. According to the non-modernist, such revolutionary anti-modernism would, in fact, replay the logic of modernist criticism: judging one's (modern) practices to be wrong and *therefore* wholly wrong and unusable as a source of guidelines for correct (non-modern) behavior in the future. To avoid replaying this sort of over-generalized criticism, the non-modernist would envision a messier future: seeking, over a long period of time, to strengthen dimensions of contemporary Jewish thought and practice that are not subservient to modernist rules and ideals but that remain, instead, vehicles of a more deep-seated, reliable, and enduring Covenant. Such a Covenant is not anti-modern, nor even thoroughly non-modern, but simply irreducible to the terms of any single period of Jewish life and thereby pertinent to each period.

Borowitz identifies both secular and religious expressions of anti-modernism. The secular expression would include the sorts of non-religious, academic postmodernisms that were outlined earlier in this chapter, for

example, Continental philosophic and literary critics of modern master narratives, universalisms, or rationalisms. The religious expression would include neo-Orthodox or traditionalist thinkers who criticize all *secular* master narratives, universalisms and rationalisms and who replace them with selective arguments on behalf of *certain* communal traditions and their master narratives and recognized teachers. Various twentieth-century fundamentalisms illustrate a type of religious anti-modernism; for example, efforts among the Christian Right in the 1990s to draw sharp contrasts between the evils of liberal individualism and the good of Christian faith, generalized as a vehicle for better government in the United States. Another illustration is the increasing militancy of Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy in the 1990s in both the United States and Israel: displayed, for example, in ultra-orthodox efforts to identify as “not Jewish” both the liberal governments of Yitzhak Rabin, *z”l*, and Shimon Peres, and the liberal religious movements of Reform or Conservative Jewry. In the latter case, “not Jewish” would be equivalent to “expressing merely human and therefore localized interests,” or “not worthy contributors to any master narrative.”

In *Renewing the Covenant* and other recent writings, Borowitz is as much a critic of anti-modernism as he is a critic of modernism. He argues, on the one hand, that secular anti-modernists search for an absolute to substitute for the modernism they had once adopted, in turn, as substitute for rabbinic religion:

The postmodern search for a substitute absolute began as it became clear that modernity had betrayed our faith. Repelled by the social disarray and moral anarchy around us, we are attracted by systems which provide clear cut authoritative direction . . . that is, a strong absolute.²¹

One direction has been a flight to ethnicity, another to Zionism, yet another to Holocaust study. But, for Borowitz, these all remain false absolutes: appropriate subjects of concern, but not of absolute and exclusive concern. They are attempts to replace an absolutized modernism, altogether, with one of its imagined contraries. Borowitz argues, on the other hand, that religious anti-modernism is no more legitimate than the secular variety. Orthodox Jews today offer legitimate criticisms of the failings of modernist humanism, from its permissivism to its imperialistic universalisms, but they use the very logic of modernism to promote a contrary ideal: a Judaism without humanism, permissiveness, or universality.

Had orthodox religions not behaved so badly when they had effective power, liberal religion would most likely not have come into being. . . . Liberals reject Orthodoxy not because, given the power, orthodoxies *will* [necessarily] be intolerant, but because their basic faith can generate extremism, zealotry, and fanaticism—something they have often done in the past and still do today. These, simple human experience has taught us, desecrate God's name while claiming to exalt it and therefore are among the foulest of human sins.

Among the particular areas of Orthodoxy inimical to what Borowitz considers enduring concerns of Judaism are democracy and some manner of appealing to a supra-legal conscience, to supra-ethnic loyalties, to supra-communal obligations.

Orthodoxies have a principled problem with democracy . . . [and pluralism, even though, within themselves,] orthodoxies often disagree as to what constitutes God's own will. . . . The general discomfort of orthodoxies with sinners and evildoers creates another of its problematic manifestations: the limited moral horizon we call ethnocentrism. . . . [E]ven in less self-ghettoized settings the orthodox appreciation of the universal can highly constrict, and charity, most broadly construed, not only begins at home but tends to stay there. . . . All [such] unhappy consequences of orthodox theories of revelation come to a climax in the orthodoxies' necessary subordination of persons to text, interpretation, structure, and precedent. God stands behind just these words and no others . . .²²

Borowitz argues that these orthodox positions are not to be identified, however, with the demands of Torah, as if a liberal Judaism was a compromise with the non-Jewish world, rather than a means of heightening dimensions of Judaism that are selectively suppressed in orthodox reactions to the modern world. For Borowitz, postmodernism does not, therefore, preclude the possibility of liberal Judaism. Modernism may have provided Reform Judaism with powerful instruments for separating Judaism from what Reform leaders considered oppressive forms of medieval rabbinic authority, but these remained instruments rather than defining principles. For Borowitz, the spiritual and moral challenge of postmodern and post-Holocaust Jewish life is to transform the instruments of liberal Judaism but not its ends, which are defined now, as before, by Israel's Covenant with God.

In sum, this dialectical postmodern evolution has brought much of world Jewry to a paradoxical spiritual situation. We are too realistic about humankind