Preface

Schweid's Crossroads and our Own

In 1948, the young Eliezer Schweid stood at a crossroads. In 2007, the world stands at a crossroads.

The common denominator of those two crossroads is the theme of the current book.

In 1948, Eliezer Schweid, a soldier in the new Israeli Defense Forces, had to confront his responsibilities as an Israeli and as a Jew. As an Israeli, he had to act in the interests of his country, to defend its interests and stand firm against any adversaries who might pose a threat to him and his loved ones. As a Jew, he had to examine the moral dimensions of his actions, to consider their ramifications in the light of their impact to all parties affected, to all humanity, to God (if there was a God). The tension between these two perspectives led Schweid to digress from his chosen path as Zionist pioneer and kibbutz-member and to research the history of Jewish philosophical and moral thought, in order to obtain guidance for how he and his comrades ought to act in such cases as their fragile history repeatedly forced them to face. This led ultimately to his embarking on a career as philosopher, scholar, educator and public intellectual, in the course of which he has written extensively on the history of Jewish thought in all periods and taught thousands of students the legacy of Jewish traditional wisdom and its application to our time.

Schweid's dilemma in 1948 may be summarized: Is national interest enough for the members of a nation to decide a common course of action? Or must their deliberation be rooted in something deeper, "long-term memory," the wisdom of the ages, rooted ultimately in an attitude toward the transcendent?

In 2007, the world faces a three-way crisis. One way points to economic optimization on a globalized model: calculate what will achieve the highest standard of living for the most people in the most efficient way. A second way points to religious-political fundamentalism: adopt some ancient scriptural tradition and clothe yourself in it, using it as armor to block out the monster of modernity and hopefully re-establish your tradition's hegemony along medieval lines — find God's will in your scripture and impose it on the world, whatever the cost. The third way is what Schweid calls "creative mediating interpretation": affirm your cultural tradition as an ever-evolving, ever-adapting complex entity, rooted in ancient narratives and folkways, but open to assimilating the experience of the present and dialogue with other cultural traditions, forming syntheses of past and present that can address new challenges based on the best available wisdom, rooted in patterns of value that have stood the test of time.

The Uses of "Culture"

"Culture" is a central notion for Schweid throughout most of his thought and writings. The various uses of this term that he developed elsewhere are important background for the current work.

In *The Idea of Jewish Culture: Its Origins and Development in Modern Times*, Schweid spoke of "culture" in at least three senses:

1. In the period of Emancipation, "culture" (actually, modern European culture) confronted ghettoized Jewry as the challenging Other. "Acquire culture" meant: leave the ghetto; shed your medieval, too-Jewish garb; become modern, European, "enlightened," "man-in-general"! In the moderate version, this meant: become a *maskil*, an Enlightened Jew, after the example of Moses Mendelssohn and his followers. In the extreme version, this meant: assimilate; drop your Jewishness altogether!
2. In the next generation (the period of *Jüdische Wissenschaft*, i.e. historical Jewish scholarship), "culture" was used in a different sense: Are not Jews a culture? By studying Judaism as a culture, one defended Jews' right-to-exist against the challenge of the extreme modernizers, but at a price. Judaism had to give up its traditional pretense of being the exclusively God-ordained correct way of thinking and living, and had to view itself as a human creation — in dialogue with God, but of human authorship — like any other national-historical tradition.

This historical-cultural view of Jewish existence was linked to a prescription for Judaism's continual existence, which found expression in the modern liberal Jewish religious movements: Jews could constitute themselves as a religious minority in the context of Western national societies, cultivating their own tradition in dialogue with the more dominant religious and cultural traditions of their host countries.

3. But already almost at the same moment in history, another sense was coined: Is not Hebrew the authentic Jewish cultural language? Is not Israel its historical homeland? For Judaism to truly exist as a culture in the modern world, it had to achieve national rebirth and reconstitute itself on its homeland, reviving at the same time a secular-national Jewish culture that would be as fully autonomous as ancient Hebrew culture. This was the ethos of cultural Zionism, which together with political Zionism was dominant in the founding of the modern state of Israel.

In his Introduction to the current volume, Schweid speaks of "culture" in a fourth sense.

4. In our post-modern age, we are confronted with the fragmentation and collapse of cultural tradition altogether, and with it a challenge to moral education as the formation of purposive personalities rooted in a consciousness of group-belonging and historical continuity. Culture, rooted in long-term group historical memory, is the matrix of society as an ongoing project which can give a sense of purpose and meaning to the individuals nurtured in it. As such, it cannot be taken for granted but must be consciously cultivated if we are to remain truly human.

The Bible and Culture – Word of God and Word of Man

The Bible is central in the formation of Jewish culture, and also of Western culture, in the senses specified. In speaking of "philosophy of the Bible as foundation of Jewish culture," Schweid explicitly addresses the second and third senses of "culture" just enunciated, but implicitly the fourth as well. Jews living in post-modern societies, both in Israel and in the communities of the Diaspora, are challenged to preserve cultural continuity as Jews, and to share in the general human challenge to preserve a basis of meaningful existence as human beings. Schweid proposes his "creative mediating" reading of the Bible's message as a central resource in addressing all these challenges.

Neither Jewish existence nor general meaningful human life is possible on the basis of throwing away the historical past, which after all has shaped our societies and ourselves as cultural beings. Both will survive but only in a narrow, stunted way — at the cost of escalating intolerance and violence — if the past is adopted as a straitjacket, in a literalist sense. It is only by adopting the past as a treasurehouse of archetypes and models for creative elaboration that it can both guide our efforts at self-definition and allow us the freedom to develop our unique identities as variations on these time-honored themes.

The thinkers whom Schweid cites as models in his interpretation are keys for understanding its objectives. Hermann Cohen was among the most rationalistic and universalistic of modern Jewish religious thinkers. Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel were among the most personalistic (“existentialist”) and committed to Jewish particular survival (though in neither case contradicting their equal commitment to universal human causes). This signals to us that this interpretation will feature a mediation between rational and personalistic perspectives, between universal and particularistic concerns.

Heschel spoke of the Bible as “the word of God and the word of man.” Franz Rosenzweig similarly expressed that though the address of God to humanity is at the root of the Biblical outlook, it is the human interpretation of that encounter that finds expression in the Bible’s words. Both were influenced by the 19th-century German philosopher Schelling, who considered early myth (including both the Bible and Greek myth under this rubric) as reflecting to us the dialogue between early mankind with divinity, filtered by the cultural consciousness of the peoples at the inception of their cultural traditions. Schweid echoes this idea here, saying that “the narrative of Genesis is thus a dialogical confluence of divine thought relating to humanity and human thought relating to God, taking into account the boundaries that limit the human being’s ability to see.”

Divine Action Frames Human Action

Schweid probes the rhythms of the Genesis narrative to reveal the continuity and subtle transition from the mythic preamble of creation to the quasi-historical narratives of the patriarchal and subsequent periods. “History” in Hebrew is *divrei ha-yamim* — “the accounts of the

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days," and the enumeration of days starts at the beginning, with the "days" of creation, which gradually accumulate into weeks, months, years and generations. This continuity points to a deeper continuity between the acts of God and the acts of human beings. Human endeavors — whether on the personal, familial, or historical level — thus derive their significance from being framed by God's cosmic drama. When they succeed, they aspire to sanctity; when they fail, they fall into the wretchedness of evil. Yet there are always "second beginnings," and even "dreams" (the most famous being Jacob's Ladder) in which heaven and earth imaginatively touch each other for a fleeting moment to light the way for the hard journey ahead.

In this context, a new people — Israel — arises, to help initiate a "second beginning" on behalf of all humanity. Their mission is fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, they have the potential to be "different" in a positive way, discovering how to live in accord with God's will and to be an example to all. On the other hand, they are subject to the same rules — and the same temptations — as everyone else, as well as the additional temptation of spiritual pride. Schweid shows how the narratives of Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob, Rachel and Leah are emblematic of the historical dilemmas which the nation of Israel has faced throughout its history, and still must cope with today.

Every generation must read the Bible afresh. By offering his own reading, Schweid challenges us to come up with our own. What kind of God does the Bible portray? What is the world's origin and purpose? What is our task in it as human beings — in relation to ourselves, our families, our compatriots, the human race, and the world itself? How do the days of creation unfold into the days, years and generations of human history? What is special about Israel, and what are the limits of that specialness? What can we learn about the achievements and failings of the Biblical heroes and heroines to guide our own lives? The author addresses all these issues and more with originality, insight, warmth and humor.

Leonard Levin,
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THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE BIBLE

**AS FOUNDATION OF JEWISH CULTURE
PHILOSOPHY OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE**