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# HISTORIOSOPHY AND ZEV GARBER, A NEOLOGISM: HIS TEACHING METHODOLOGY, LITERARY INVESTIGATIONS, AND ENGAGEMENT WITH ZIONISM.

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Zev Garber's signature mantra, *historiosophy*, demonstrates his commitment to using sacred text to shine a light on the moral issues of contemporary life, in general, and the life of the Jewish people, in particular. Garber's existential voice calls for the celebration of life, the power of faith, and the importance of moral action in the midst of confusion and evil, insisting that these are the secrets for survival. His teaching, his aesthetics, his epistemology, and his politics form a holistic approach to life, learning, and beauty. This essay explores, using a figural structure, the dimensions of Garber's voice—suggesting PaRDes.

*Mavenfest* and his own *opus* suggest that the scholarship and academics of Zev Garber can be organized as expressing four different figures of speech—metonymy (literal), metaphor (symbolic), synecdoche (moral), and anagogy (mystical).

At the metonymic level, Garber's editorial work as editor of *Shofar* from 1994 to the present, his books, edited collections, encyclopedia and journal articles, book reviews, lectures, etc. cover twenty-four pages in *Mavenfest*. His teaching at the community college was a five-class-a-semester schedule.

C. Jan Colin, in "Traveling in Ga(r)berdine," writes that Garber's teaching is described as "essentially postmodern ... without any of the post-modern relativism ... but rather teaching students how to fish; how to think; how to use critical skills and (inter)disciplinary toolkits ... [to] teach the paths whereby students can discover their own truths."<sup>1</sup>

According to Marvin Sweeney, Garber teaches that Jewish literature always had a didactic level, a level which, if read properly, would teach us a lesson about how to live.<sup>2</sup>

Steven Jacobs, in his introduction to *Mavenfest*, writes that Garber is "Master of the teachable moment."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Colin, "Traveling in Garberdine," in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> M. Sweeney, "Conference Events," *Shofar* 28.1 (2009): 8.

<sup>3</sup> S. L. Jacobs, "Introduction," in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), p. 2.

Garber, himself, talks about his teaching philosophy as being in the style of midrash. Education takes place when student and teacher are engaged in active discussion, sharing ideas.<sup>4</sup>

His fall 1994 Special Issue, “Perspectives on Zionism,” lays out a syllabus for a class on Zionism that covers the history, politics, religion, and sociology of the movement and the continued challenges to the state of Israel today.<sup>5</sup>

Garber’s dedication to Jewish-Christian dialogue inspired James F. Moore to write in his conference tribute to his mentor, “An Infusian Method for Teaching Judaism,” about how honored he felt, as a Christian, to be invited to contribute to Garber’s edited volume, *Academic Approaches to Teaching Jewish Studies*. Moore describes his strategy of infusion, inspired by Garber, which is a largely multi-cultural, inter-disciplinary approach to infuse his current courses with Jewish content.<sup>6</sup>

At the metaphoric level, Garber demonstrates his love of language both oral and written. His essay, “The 93 Beit Ya’akov Martyrs Towards the Making of a Historiosophy,” intertwines the Hillel Bavli (1892–1961) poem with Garber’s reflections on evil, politics, and history; on forced labor, rape, suicide; and on rhetoric and aesthetics. After an examination of the syntax and language style of the poem, Garber confirms the importance of this poem which he believes mythicizes history.<sup>7</sup>

Garber focuses on the human face of Jewish history with his interview, “Faith from the Ashes: An Interview with Sibylle Sarah Niemoeller von Sell,” telling the story of this courageous woman, a German, converted Jew, and shoah survivor, who speaks about the banality of evil in Hitler’s Germany and the many secrets still kept to hide culpability.<sup>8</sup>

At the synecdochic lens, Garber’s signature word, *historiosophy*, demonstrates his commitment to using sacred text to shine a light on the moral issues of contemporary life. Garber used his editorship of *Shofar* to focus on political and literary issues central to Jewish life. When Mel Gibson’s movie debuted, Garber edited the collection of essays, *Mel Gibson’s Passion: The*

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<sup>4</sup> Z. Garber, “The Flood and the Fig Tree: Teaching, Text, and Theology,” *Bulletin: The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 35.3 (2006): 53.

<sup>5</sup> Z. Garber, “Teaching Zionism: The Introductory Course,” in *Academic Approaches to Teaching Jewish Studies* (ed. Z. Garber; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000), p. 294.

<sup>6</sup> J. F. Moore, “An Infusion Method for Teaching Judaism,” in *Academic Approaches to Teaching Jewish Studies* (ed. Z. Garber; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000), pp. 247–266.

<sup>7</sup> S. L. Jacobs, ed., *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Garber and B. W. Zuckerman, *Double Takes: Thinking and Rethinking Issues of Modern Judaism in Ancient Contexts* (Studies in the Shoah 26; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004).

*Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications*. His own essay on the topic, “The Jewish Jesus,” expresses his recognition of the midrashic nature of the Synoptic Gospels. But the Mel Gibson film represents anti-Semitism that once again positions the Jew as Christ killer.<sup>9</sup>

Garber sees Israel as an essential part of the Jewish people. In his review of Amnon Rubenstein’s book, *From Herzl to Rabin: The Changing Image of Zionism* (2001), Garber concurs with the author that “Israeli policy should be a pluralistic and democratic one, not buried by parochialism and ancient creeds, but living in the present, and committed to the full rights of individualism and freedom.”<sup>10</sup>

When Garber focuses on an anagogic, the spiritual or mystical, range, it is not to make philosophic or abstract commentary but rather to make sense out of that which is not understandable—the nature of good and evil—the presence of suffering—the spirit of *tikkun olam*. James Moore lauds Garber for his chapter, “Deconstructing Theodicy and Amalekut: A Personal Apologia,” in his book, *Shoah, The Paradigmatic Genocide: Essays in Exegesis and Eisegesis*. In the role of a latter day Abraham, Garber pleads for humanity against the stern divine decree to annihilate the Amalekut. Garber makes the appeal claiming that it is the sin and not the sinners, the evil deed that must be fought. Instead of Amalekut, the external, a people to be executed, Garber reads Amalekut as the internal force, the seed of evil that must be engaged and eliminated.<sup>11</sup>

Garber’s article, “Terror out of Zion: Making Sense of Scriptural Teaching,” in Jacobs’s *Confronting Genocide*, considers the Deuteronomic order for the destruction of the seven nations of Canaan by the Israelites and argues that there is no divine sanction in genocide whatsoever in the twenty-first century, according to Jewish law. His salient point is that “killing the enemy in combat is an evolving cultural imperative and not a religious warrant.”<sup>12</sup> Fast-forward to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and Zev warns against the Amalek-phobia that radicalizes politics on either side.

In a moment of ecstasy, Philo, quoted by Feldman, describes “a sudden inability to think or conversely a sudden fullness of thought, so that, under

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<sup>9</sup> Z. Garber, “The Jewish Jesus,” in *Mel Gibson’s Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Garber, “From Herzl to Rabin by Amnon Rubenstein,” *Congress Monthly* 68.4 (2001): 21.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Garber, “Deconstructing Theodicy and Amalekut: A Personal Apologia,” in *Post-Shoah Dialogues: Rethinking Our Texts Together* (Studies in the Shoah 25; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Z. Garber, “Terror Out of Zion: Making Sense of Scriptural Teaching,” in *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 279–290.

the influence of Divine possession, he was filled with ... frenzy.”<sup>13</sup> But, rather than ecstatic experience, Garber focuses on the responsibility of the individual in the face of evil, and how, not only to survive, but to celebrate life.

In his “Thoughts On and From the Thought of Richard L. Rubenstein,” in *Hearing the Voices: Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations*, Garber opines about good and evil and the power of God and writes:

To see the *Shoah* in Kabbalistic light is to contemplate the problem of evil not in a Ying-Yang imbalance that results in decay and death but in the context of faith and halakhah, which, while not obliterating the reality of evil, diminishes its power by virtue of cosmic or mythic perspective. That is to say, there is a symbiotic interaction between God and Man, in which the moral actions of *etaruta deletata* (the Lower World) have an impact on *etaruta dele`ela* (the Upper World).<sup>14</sup>

Garber’s sense of the mystical suggests that of Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his “Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Paths to God,” Harold Kasimow discusses this mystic and political activist. As a political activist, Heschel walked with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, to demonstrate against racism. Kasimow cites Heschel’s mystical view that *mitzvot* bring humanity closer to God.<sup>15</sup> Thus action, for both Heschel and Garber, is a way to access divine presence.

As *Mavenfest* and his *opus* show, Zev Garber can be honored by examining his metonymic teaching, allegorical muse-ing, synecdochal preaching, and anagogic walking.

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<sup>13</sup> L. Feldman, “Philo and the Dangers of Philosophizing,” in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), p. 155. Feldman notes that Philo expresses his own mystical experience in bodily terms.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Garber, “Thoughts on and from the Thought of Richard L. Rubenstein,” in *Hearing the Voices: Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations* (Studies in the Shoah 19; ed. M. Hayse et al.; Merion Station, Pa.: Merion Westfield Press International, 1999) p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kasimow, “Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Paths to God,” in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (ed. S. L. Jacobs; West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), p. 177.