

The Dialectic Between Faith and Rationality: Peretz's Reconciliation vs. Kafka's Modernity-or-Bust

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Abstract— Two of the dominant Jewish writers of modern Jewish literature, I.L. Peretz and Franz Kafka, embody entirely distinct attitudes towards the faith and reason and the relationship between the two schools of thought. Peretz attempts to reconcile the two dissimilar creeds, establishing a structure within which both faith and reason could coexist in harmony. Kafka, meanwhile, endorses reason and modernity, wary of a faith-based existence, a fear rooted in his childhood and upbringing. Yet Kafka's position is more nuanced than simply an open hostility towards tradition. Portions of his work betray his perhaps unconscious regard for Judaism as a haven of safe refuge. Ultimately, however, the dialectic essentially runs between Peretz's conciliatory stance and Kafka's reliance on and preference for practical reasoning.

Pope John Paul II introduces his momentous 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio* (lit. "Faith and Reason") with the following line: "Faith and Reason are like two wings of the human spirit by which it rises to the compilation of truth."¹ *Fides et ratio* was the first encyclical to address the relationship between faith and reason since Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* in 1879,² a telling indicator of this dialogue's importance within Catholicism. Yet in the modern age of Jewish literature, characterized as the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the defining dialectic is between the schools of faith-based existence and a reality grounded in reason and rationality. It is a struggle articulated through the works of some of the most notable writers of the period: Franz Kafka and I. L. Peretz. Kafka, despite the implications of his insinuating his regard for Judaism as a source of refuge and familiarity, is exceedingly interested in reason and modernity and is wary of the conception of faith, whereas Peretz is far more invested in attempting to reconcile the two disparate philosophies, constructing an ideology which inculcates the fundamental truths of both belief systems. Peretz makes conscious attempts in his various texts to defend both traditional Judaism and secular thought, attempting a middle ground approach in which he strives to integrate the two contrasting philosophies.

A common theme present in Kafka's works is his hostility towards the archaic traditions of the Jewish faith and his desire, instead, to assimilate and secularize within broader European culture. However, there are sporadic mentions throughout Kafka's work which purportedly suggest indications of religious leanings. This paradoxical thought is most evident in the short story "Letter to his Father," published in November 1919. Kafka's "Letter to his Father" is an epistolary exploration of his relationship with his father and the various feelings and grievances he associates with their relationship. Within the narrative Kafka delves into the memories of his childhood and explores his father's emotionally abusive and hypocritical behavior towards his son. Thereupon he reflects upon those memories and how they have shaped his own perceptions

¹https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html

²<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/education/catholic-contributions/fides-et-ratio-faith-and-reason.html>

of Judaism. At one point during his memorandum Kafka addresses his adolescent encounters with Judaism. Surprisingly, he refers to a Judaism which would seemingly be uttered by an individual of a traditional community. In an idealized state, Kafka relays what he believes Judaism could represent: “[in Judaism] some measure of escape would have been thinkable in principle, moreover, it would have been thinkable that we might both have found each other in Judaism or that we even might have begun from there in harmony.”³ There is an implicit understanding within Kafka’s philosophy that Judaism is supposed to be a space of harmony, refuge, and reconciliation. Concurrently, relating to his dynamic with his own father, Kafka perceives Judaism’s ability to foster intergenerational relationships predicated upon the passages of values and ethics. Kafka feels as if his father’s Judaism has failed him; his father’s inactivity within the congregation, his unwillingness to participate, hardly served as a model for religious practice or encouragement. Nor did the failure of his father and other childhood mentors to convey the importance of many of the respective traditional practices expected to be passed on to him. He finds the long-winded services dull, and lacks the desire to participate.⁴ Nevertheless, Kafka maintains this internal connection to the faith, despite the many actively discouraging factors. It may have been tarnished and battered by external forces, a product of evolving conditions for the Jewish communities of Europe, but the core sentiment remains: Kafka exhibits some semblance of positive regard towards Judaism.

While Kafka’s optimism regarding aspects of his own faith are limited to “Letter to his Father,” he elsewhere, in other literary texts, exhibits reluctance towards the Westernization of European Judaism. Kafka’s 1917 “A Report to an Academy” is written from the perspective of an ape who has undergone a process of learning to behave like a human being; throughout the short story, the ape, mockingly dubbed “Red Peter” due to an ugly red scar suffered during his captivity, presents the account of his transformation: from undomesticated to orderly. Red Peter recounts his tumultuous journey: he was captured during a hunting expedition in West Africa before being loaded and kept aboard a ship for the journey back towards Europe. Caged in a minuscule enclosure, Red Peter, in a desperate attempt to secure his freedom to move without shackles, begins to study the crew and imitates them. He accomplishes this surprisingly easily, and upon arriving in Europe, devotes his energy towards becoming wholly human. At the conclusion of his story he accomplishes his goals of becoming a successful performer, yet his transformation to humankind is so utterly absolute that he cannot recall particular feelings from nor much of his life as an ape. Red Peter’s reflection at the culmination of the story sheds light on Kafka’s attitudes towards the Westernization and increasing assimilation of Judaism that occurred in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Essentially, Kafka, a witness of and participant in the rapid secularization and assimilation of the German and Czech Jews, conveys a subliminal message through Red Peter’s own reflections about his own perceptions of this tremendous shift. Red Peter remarks that as he surveys the various developments and progress in his own life, he cannot complain, yet he is not “complacent.”⁵ He notes that although he achieved what he initially set out to achieve, he by no means believes it “was worth the trouble.”⁶ This message can reflect in several ways on Kafka’s views of humanity and the society around him; one explanation is that this is a commentary on the evolutionary pattern of mankind, and perhaps it would have been better for humanity to cease evolving at a certain point. A second explanation, one that definitely has a more relevant and impactful message, is that Kafka is decrying the shift in religiosity, observance, and identity of Europe’s Jews. His point is that, similar to Red Peter’s unsatisfactory transformation from ape to enlightened human, likewise with Jews the transformation will be unsatisfactory. They may look, dress, and act like the society around them, but it will never feel wholly complete. It is also a commentary on Jews who had already assimilated into general culture and the struggles they face as societal members of Jewish origin; it is a struggle they constantly wrangle with, and despite all their

³ Kafka “Letter to his Father,” 146

⁴ Ibid., 148-149

⁵ Kafka, “A Report to an Academy,” 258

⁶ Ibid., 259

efforts to blend into the surrounding greater community, they are unable to due to their inherent Jewishness.

Although Kafka devotes several writings towards his hesitance regarding the assimilation of traditional Jews into the wider secular culture surrounding them, he primarily remains fascinated with modernity and rather critical of the traditional Jew and their associated faith. In a 1921 letter he writes to his dear friend Max Brod Kafka employs the denigrating term “*mauscheln*” in reference to German-Jewish author Karl Kraus and to the score of aspiring young German-Jewish writers. He criticizes them for utilizing this deformed hybrid of Yiddish and German, a Yiddishized German if you will, a usage of the German language inflected with Yiddish and other Jewish-associated characteristics.⁷ He infers that when Jews employ German, especially in their literary pursuits, they sully it and it is as if they are stealing it. Kafka proceeds to accuse Jewish writers of being mired in the past, as he so colorfully demonstrates: “. . . with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father’s Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground.”⁸ Kafka compares their connections to their Judaism to an insect with its legs stuck; due to their relationship with Judaism and their affinity for its culture and traditions, they are unable to move forward and evolve. As he so emphasizes, Jews only serve to sully German; they are not natural speakers and are thus incapable of fully grasping the pure language. These sentiments are echoed in “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk.” This short story revolves around a musical artist named Josephine and her audience, the so-called Mouse Folk. Initially, Josephine and her frequent performances are of vital importance to the community and she is much beloved; however, as time progresses and she suffers weariness due to a lack of rest, she ultimately abandons the community; however, contrary to how it may have appeared when she was present, the community still continues on, and gradually she all but fades from their collective memory. Within this piece Kafka inadvertently addresses the concept of *mauscheln*, applying it especially to Josephine’s voice and calling it “piping,” connoting vulnerability and a lack of forcefulness and speciality.⁹ The Mouse People are also thought to be representative of the Jews; they are a simple people, weak, lacking the graceful arts, unenlightened. And though they appreciate Josephine and what she represents, they soon forget her following her disappearance. In a stark turn from the sentiments witnessed in his epistle to his father and “A Report to an Academy,” Kafka assumes a belligerent approach to the Jewish tradition and faith and denounces any semblance of a faith-based approach to modern culture. As is evident in his letter to Max Brod, Kafka is definitely not supportive of the German-Jewish arts and literary tradition, and wants it firmly distinct from German high society. His approach is at odds with I. L. Peretz who, despite his leaving the traditional community at a young age, consistently fought to reconcile traditional Judaism with the rising tide of modernity and reason.

The esteemed Polish author and journalist I. L. Peretz encountered and lived among both traditional Orthodox Jews and embraced the *Haskalah*; as such, it is no surprise that in his writings and throughout his life he frequently wrote about both. However, what is astonishing about his efforts is his lifelong fight to reunite and integrate both the traditional Jews of his childhood and the enlightened philosophy of his adult life. As Harvard professor Ruth Wisse writes in her biographical work *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, Peretz “fought simultaneously on several fronts,” notably “against reactionary Jews who resisted all modern ideas” and “against Jews who saw no further use in Jewish survival.”¹⁰ He argued for a middle ground, a meshing of modernism and tradition. This reconciliatory attitude of Peretz is demonstrated at length throughout his *Impressions of a Journey Through Tomaszow Region*. In this anthology, centered around a statistician visiting the Polish Jewish countryside to investigate allegations of evading military service and prove the anti-Semitic accusations false, Peretz

⁷ Kafka, “Letter to Max Brod,” 288

⁸ *Ibid.*, 289

⁹ Kafka, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk,” 364

¹⁰ Wisse, “Reason and Faith,” 27

exhibits disdain for their meekness and resignation, yet urges them to consider their worldly needs while preserving their spirituality and faith which he so esteems.¹¹ His sentiments are depicted in “Lashev,” in which the narrator engages in a conversation with one Levi Isaac. The narrator questions Levi, inquiring about his family, his living situation, his livelihood. The poor villager scorns the narrator’s questions, and his outlook on livelihood and life is summed up in the following passage:

[NARRATOR]: “What is your business?”

[ISAAC]: “Who has a business?”

[NARRATOR]: “Then how do you live?”

[ISAAC]: “Oh, is that what you mean? I manage to live, that’s all.”

[NARRATOR]: “From what?”

[ISAAC]: “From the good Lord’s bounty. When He gives, people have enough to get by.”

[NARRATOR]: “God doesn’t throw an income down from heaven.”

[ISAAC]: “Yes He does! . . .”¹²

The conversation continues along similar lines, and Isaac rants and raves about how God provides for his faithful Jews, and while the secular Jews might possess more material means, traditional Jews live their lives devoted to God and rely on God to provide. The narrator expresses disbelief at this idea and attempts to convince Isaac of his folly, to no avail.

Yet elsewhere in the anthology Peretz’s narrator conveys admiration for the traditionalists. In “Faith and Trust” he confronts Reb Baruch over his hypocrisy regarding his livelihood and general outlook; he informs the narrator that he is wholly reliant on God, yet he himself is constantly stressed over mundane matters. Why exert such strenuous effort if he knows that God will provide and ensure all will be well? Reb Baruch is unfazed at this abrupt and aggressive question; God may be the source of all sustenance and God may be omnipotent, but “the affairs of individuals?”¹³ That remains solely in the domain of said individual. The structure of his response and the story itself is significant; Reb Baruch is unfazed at the narrator’s questioning, confident in his beliefs that although God is this ultimate power, humanity is responsible for itself. Each individual is responsible for their own actions and lives. Reb Baruch is also granted the final say in this short story, and, as Wisse states, “in giving Reb Baruch the last word, Peretz ascribes to him a gritty outlook, intellectually and psychologically tougher than the narrator’s.”¹⁴ The narrator, intended to represent modernity and the mundane world, is shoved aside, at least for the moment, by the traditionalist.

Towards the end of *Impressions of a Journey Through Tomaszow Region* the stories become longer and more detailed; the narrator becomes more embroiled in the events surrounding him and he embellishes the various stories he is documenting. He even acquires a certain positive stance towards these Jews whom he previously had viewed only with scorn and misunderstanding. In “Yom Kippur in Hell” the narrator ascribes to the cantor a voice so melodious and so full of meaning that “it could melt a heart of stone like wax.”¹⁵ It is excerpts like this that provide an accurate and honest look into Peretz’s mind as he wrote the anthology; he has so many positive thoughts towards faith and tradition, yet he cannot fathom their attitude towards livelihood and self-sufficiency.

There is a severe difference in the manner that both Kafka and Peretz approach the dialectic about reason and modernity versus faith and tradition. Kafka is vehemently opposed to the traditionalist ways of the Jews - he castigates them, degradingly dubs their literary and

¹¹ Tikkanen, “I. L. Peretz”

¹² Peretz, “Impressions of a Journey Through Tomaszow Region,” 87

¹³ Ibid., 52

¹⁴ Wisse, “Reason and Faith,” 23

¹⁵ Peretz, “Impressions of a Journey Through Tomaszow Region,” 334

artistic efforts as *mauscheln*, and, despite his subliminal and subtle views on Jewish assimilation into European high society, is overwhelmingly interested in modernity and turns his back on the faith of his childhood which he feels has failed him. Peretz, alternatively, embraces traditional Judaism. He may not hold to the same convictions, but he admires their spirituality. As the Encyclopedia Britannica asserts, Kafka, “critical of their humility and resignation . . . urged them to consider their temporal needs while retaining the spiritual grandeur for which he esteemed them.”¹⁶ He commended their spiritual highs and commitment to faith, but exhorted them to become more integrated into society and earn their keep. There is a startling similarity between Peretz’s views and those of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik; both maintained that both faith and tradition *and* education and integration into the surrounding society were crucial to the furtherance of Judaism. While it is definite that the details of their respective arguments are exceedingly dissimilar, at surface level their arguments are alike.

There is an implicit warning within Peretz’s work that links his views to Kafka’s regarding Jewish assimilation. Kafka’s *Report to an Academy* is an exhortation against rampant mass assimilation; just as Red Peter has failed to be satisfied with his transformation and in fact has found it to be a waste of his time, so too Jews should not exert effort towards such a futile task. Peretz provides an argument with the same end goal, if not the same reasons for why. Throughout the short stories the narrator rediscovers the world he had previously abandoned, and he begins to understand the value of all he left behind. He failed to appreciate the life he had, and although he is content with his journey and his life, he is by no means satiated. As Wisse parses out, “his adventures warned against the overhasty move from traditional faith to ‘progress.’”¹⁷ It is crucial that one understands and learns to appreciate what they have, whether regarding religion, family, or other such aspects of one’s life. Do not rush irrationally towards change, towards a drive to join the majority; consider, first, what may be abandoned and lost, and debate all factors before embracing such change.

¹⁶ Tikkanen, “I. L. Peretz”

¹⁷ Wisse, “Reason and Faith,” 35