



A New Journal from Passagen Verlag:

Bamidbar

Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy

Edited by

Agata Bielik-Robson
Petar Bojanic
Willi Goetschel
Orietta Ombrosi

“Taking the Jewish experience of diaspora and exile as a critical base for thinking about Jewish philosophy is a creative and much-needed stance today.”

Natalie Davis

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Editors:

Agata Bielik-Robson is a fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Science in Warsaw and a Professor of Jewish philosophy at the University of Nottingham.

Petar Bojanic is director of the Centre for Ethics, Law, and Applied Philosophy and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade. He is a visiting fellow at the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in London.

Willi Goetschel is Professor of German and Philosophy at the University of Toronto and member of the Centre for Jewish Studies.

Orietta Ombrosi has been a professor at the University of Bologna and is now Associate Professor at the University of Rome, La Sapienza.

Mission Statement

Bamidbar is a new journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy. It takes its name from the Biblical experience of exodus “in the desert,” the opening line and the theme of the Book of Numbers that gave the fourth book of the Pentateuch its Hebrew name. Bamidbar is also a crucially formative moment that foregrounds and frames the narrative of Jewish history and has become a constitutive part of Western historical narratives. *In the wilderness, in exile, and on the way*, Bamidbar signals the explorative, searching trajectory of exilic experience. Critically constitutive, exile and diaspora figure as grounding context for Jewish philosophers.

Currently, there is no place where European Jewish philosophers can explore and debate questions and issues central to both Jewish concerns and to philosophy. *Bamidbar* seeks to address that lack. The journal is meant to serve as a critical forum for open discussion.

The editors’ agenda is to take as broad an intellectual and cultural stand as possible to create a forum beyond the existing venues that represent the perspectives of the American and Israeli centered discussion. To leave a Eurocentric approach behind, the editors argue for the need to take the European branch of Jewish thought seriously on its own terms and in its particular historical specificity. American and Israeli centered discussions continue to remain deeply informed by a European genealogy they often deny, where they are most dependent. The editors understand that in order to break free from, and critically respond to the problem of Eurocentric fixation the problem cannot be dodged but must receive critical attention. *Bamidbar* seeks to recover a European tradition of philosophical critique that has consistently and often with rigorous verve articulated a critique of imposed Eurocentric protocols. To break the spell of such received fixations, *Bamidbar* intends to critically reconnect – by giving them renewed attention – to the complexly situated constellations in which that critique emerges, as it were, from an outside within.

Exploring the rich experience of Jewish philosophers in modernity with an eye to the specificity of their complexly woven historical contexts holds the promise of a liberating impulse in philosophic critique. Rethinking the

projects and trajectories of Jewish philosophers presents the possibility of recovering creative responses to the claim to a monolithic, homogenous Europe as a received fiction of a reality that never existed. The spell of Eurocentric claims, in other words, is broken once Europe's own but suppressed creative openness, its internal difference, is brought to critical attention as that other Europe, the Europe whose recognition remains threatened by the forgetfulness of a universalism that has become oblivious of its own critical roots and the multiplicity of its creative origins.

This inaugural issue brings together essays by the editors and one of the managing editors. It is meant to highlight in practice, our programmatic statement of the purpose of *Bamidbar*. Reflecting different styles and approaches to the shared project of rethinking contemporary philosophy from the different perspectives of Jewish concerns, the essays argue for dialogue as a moment critical to the creative movement of philosophy, Jewish or not. Most important, and we hope most liberating, is that they argue for the need to continue rethinking the parameters of what we do as philosophers as the very necessity of our projects. To move, open up the discourse, and renegotiate these parameters is what after all constitutes the critical moment of philosophy. We invite the readers to join our project and participate in this discussion.

Our standpoint is that we do need a stand to move, not to rest on. The journal will have both special theme issues and open issues. With the launching of the journal, there will be a standing call for papers. Editors may also invite guest editors for special theme issues. All submissions are read and discussed by the team of editors and are peer reviewed.

While most issues will consist of 96 pages, priority is given to content. Individual issues may therefore occasionally vary in length. The sum of each volume consisting of two issues per year, however, will total 192 pages. The inaugural issue exceeds the page limit for obvious reasons, as the editors present different aspects, concerns, and approaches of the vision they share.

**Spring 2011 / Issue #1:
Perspectives on Jewish Philosophy**

Willi Goetschel:

Athens, Jerusalem, and the Orient Express of Philosophy

The distinction between Athens and Jerusalem plays a prominent role in the discussion on Jewish philosophy. While it has gained a certain popular currency, the article argues the distinction is false. It does, however, express a sentiment that sheds illuminating light on the history of the institutionalization of philosophy as a discipline taught at the modern university in “the West.” Originally a patristic distinction, it gets curiously adopted by philosophers such as Leo Strauss. A closer look at the trajectories of Jewish philosophers from Spinoza and Mendelssohn to the present shows that there is little room left for a philosophical argument for maintaining the distinction. Rather, the distinction works much like the Orient Express that did reach Istanbul but never left the European continent. Just like the Orient Express, the distinction between Athens and Jerusalem runs on a track that seems to highlight the difference between destination and point of origin but ultimately only proves the deep nexus established through the link along which the distinction runs.

Petar Bojanic:

Franz Rosenzweig’s Ground of War

During the last years of the First World War Rosenzweig served as Austrian soldier at the front in the Balkans in the anti-aircraft defence, and penned a few texts regarding the politics of war. Examining Rosenzweig’s texts in the context of contemporary geo-political thought to understand war, the appropriation of territories, the conception of borders, space, nations, the relationship between land and sea, the article examines what it means to understand these in the context of Rosenzweig’s philosophical thought. The article poses the question of the relationship of these political inter-

ventions to Rosenzweig's philosophy and how his Jewish outlook might have determined his view on war and peace.

Orietta Ombrosi:

History, Memory, Forgiveness: the Philosophy of History of Levinas and Benjamin

The concept of the philosophy of history in Levinas and Benjamin examines a few excerpts from *Totality and Infinity* by the French philosopher and from *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*On the Concept of History*) by the German philosopher. These are not mere echoes: The two also illuminate each other showing how the philosophers envision, although in very distinct ways, a radical shift of focus concerning historical reflections, in which both attend to singularity in critical difference to the usual privileging of universality in interpreting history or the philosophy of history. Both authors reach the same conclusions independently. In fact, in their opinion official history is created by the "victors" and expresses the victor's viewpoint. As a counterpart to such a history Benjamin and Levinas propose another history, that of the defeated and victims of history. In this philosophy of history the authors delineate a particular concept of history, of time and perhaps of the messianic era.

Agata Bielik-Robson:

Messiah without Resentment, Or What Remains of Messianism in Giorgio Agamben's Remnants of Auschwitz

The aim of my essay is to extract the idea of messianism that emerges from the writings of Giorgio Agamben, particularly from *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a book, which forms a central part of the *Homo Sacer* trilogy. I will try to demonstrate how Agamben's attempt to overcome the traditional dualism of Athens and Jerusalem, executed with his favourite rhetorical tool of "the cut of Apelles,"¹ radically transforms the meaning of the two, in his theory no longer opposed, categories: on the one hand, philosophical *amor fati*, which privileges ultimate reconciliation with the world, and, on the other, messianic resentment towards being, which feeds on the restless spirit of negativity. "The cut of Apelles" is a particularly subtle line which divides the already existing line of division; this figure

of speech derives from the legendary story in which Apelles, a famous painter of Greek antiquity, won a competition with another celebrated master, by drawing a line so fine that it runs inside the already very fine line which was drawn previously by the other. The peculiarity of Agamben's cut consists in the fact that it produces no stark oppositions but a subtle kind of difference, which simultaneously differentiates and reconciles. Yet, there is a risk involved in such a deconstructive procedure. For, it may well be that the transformation of the messianic Agamben has in mind is, in fact, self-canceling, i.e. it not only deactivates ossified dualisms but also deactivates the very idea of the messianic which Agamben claims to have rescued for contemporary thinking.

Adam Lipszyc:

Silence Incribed: Derrida Reading Rosenzweig, While Reading Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard's distinction between the tragic hero as an ethical figure and the knight of faith who goes beyond the realm of ethics and language has been challenged by a number of thinkers rooted in the Jewish tradition, such as Buber, Levinas and – most elaborately – Rosenzweig, all of whom assumed that ethics, religion and language cannot be separated. My suggestion is that Derrida's analysis of Kierkegaard as expounded in *The Gift of Death* should be read against the background of this tradition. Namely, his reading shows its full potential only when we see it as the result of a mutual deconstruction of Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig. In particular, Derrida inscribes the moment of silence, characteristic of true religious existence for Kierkegaard, into the dense texture of the linguistic and communal order of religious life as envisioned by Rosenzweig. In other words, while belonging to the tradition of Jewish criticism of Kierkegaard, Derrida uses Kierkegaard to balance certain inadequacies and dangers inherent in this criticism that are best exemplified by Rosenzweig. The result is yet another vision of our philosophically abused father Abraham and yet another vision of religious community: a deconstructed – which does not mean destroyed – synagogue.

**Autumn 2011 / Issue #2:
Rethinking the Theological-Political Complex: Derrida's Spinoza**

Based on Jacques Derrida's lectures on Spinoza of 1981/82 in the context of his lectures on "Language and Descartes' Discourse on Method," this issue discusses aspects of Derrida's reading of Spinoza.

Jacques Derrida, from the Lectures on Language and Descartes' Discourse on Method.

Warren Montag, Immanence, Transcendence and the Trace: Derrida between Levinas and Spinoza

Gerard Bensussan, The Fear of Spinoza: Derrida reading Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise

Willi Goetschel, Rethinking the Theological-Political: Derrida's Spinoza

Future issues

2012:

#3: Messianism and Psychoanalysis (edited by Agata Bielik-Robson)

#4: Jewish Women Philosophers (edited by Orietta Ombrosi)

2013:

#5: Messianic Action (edited by Adam Lipszyc)

#6: Jewish "Nominalism": Benjamin, Rosenzweig and the Question of Language (edited by Willi Goetschel)

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