Introduction

Several Jewish thinkers of the XXth century have focused on the name as a critical feature of their thought, as well as on singularity which they found missing from the philosophical tradition of the West, shaped mostly by idealism and, in Theodor Adorno's words, its "icy wasteland of abstraction." Walter Benjamin developed an entire theory of the name; Adorno defined his utopia of reconciliation as a multitude of singulars: *Eingedenken des Vielen* and *Miteinander des Verschiedenen*. Buber, Cohen, Levinas and Derrida tried to develop ethics of singularity rather than of a universal law. Would it thus be justified to talk about *Jewish nominalism* as an overall theoretical attitude, which privileges the singular name over the general concept?

The essays in this issue of *Bamidbar* deal with the following questions: what form does this 'nominalist' idea take in the work of various contemporary Jewish thinkers? Can the difference between Jerusalem and Athens, which has been abandoned by the majority of contemporary thinkers as no longer tenable, be nonetheless once again redefined by pointing to the opposition between singular names given to things by the Biblical Adam and the general ideas that are to be known by the Platonic philosopher? Is there a link between the Jewish concept of creation and the possibility of a singular-plural ontology? And, last but not least, is the Messianic idea associated with the nominalist 'promise of the name'?

The first essay in this volume, "The Promise of the Name.'Jewish nominalism' as the Critique of Idealist Tradition" begins with a discussion concerning terminology. Is it worth at all to maintain the term 'nominalism' and apply it to the Jewish concern with singularity despite its association with the late-medieval 'nominalist school' of William Ockham and his followers? Agata Bielik-Robson claims that the term 'nominalism' can be rescued for the purposes of Jewish philosophy, provided one stresses the characteristic Jewish *clinamen* which was best expressed by Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*: "For name is in truth word and fire, and not sound and fury." Against the nominalist skepsis, which sees

in the name nothing but a conventional *flatus voci*, Rosenzweig insists on the peculiar substantiality of the proper name, and this insistence turns out to be a characteristic feature of all Jewish thinkers who attempt to "save the honor of the name" despite its degradation in modern philosophy, both idealist and empiricist. Bielik-Robson argues that while modern Jewish thought accepts the two typically nominalist solutions – the thesis on the 'univocity of being' and singularization of ontology – it avoids the pitfalls of Western nominalism by its unique focus on the alternative epistemology of the name as, in Benjamin's words, the "true call of language." By constructing a seemingly unlikely constellation comprised of Franz Rosenzweig, Georg Lukács, and Saul Kripke, Bielik-Robson demonstrates that they all refer to the "power of the name" in order to criticize the idealist tradition of the West and to foster a philosophical "concretion" based on the positive use of nominalist arguments.

The next essay, Michael T. Miller's "Chaos and Identity. Onomatology in the Hekhalot Literature" takes us back to the theory of naming – most of all, naming God – in the early texts of Jewish mysticism. Miller wants to establish that the multiple angelic stratifications, which some scholars have seen as representing a severely compromised monotheism, may also be read as a sophisticated onomatology, i.e. as an alternative epistemology of naming. By applying Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, Miller shows that the Hekhalot theory of divine names closely fits Kripke's concept of the "rigid designation" where privilege is given to reference over descriptive meaning. God can be named only because he cannot be completely revealed, i.e. "flattened out" in an exhaustive description. The procedure of "naming God," therefore, suggests an interesting third option between apophatic and kataphatic approaches to the divine knowability. In Hekhalot literature, God is both transcendent *and* present: but this dualism must be understood epistemologically. God is not so transcendent as to be unimaginable, unthinkable or unknowable. But what we can know of God must be tempered by a knowledge of our own minds' tendency to reduce and compress information into a subjective form. This bringing into the subjective realm, or *making-knowable* of the divine is essential in any theology which claims revelation, yet the knowledge must not be mistaken for the thing-itself. The Hekhalot 'nominalism' maintains a balance between these two extremes by presenting divine names as God's aspects or "faces" which always reveal *some* of God's presence, but never the whole of his undisclosable essence which can only be "referred to," never "described."

The third essay, Caspar Battegay's "The Infinite Citation: Walter Benjamin *and* Franz Rosenzweig" focuses on Benjamin's theory of language as the best illustration of what we have called here tentatively 'Jewish nominalism.' By privileging name and citation, Benjamin gives primacy to the materially concrete aspect of language over the idealist-hermeneutic-symbolic aspect of meaning. In Battegay's interpretation of Benjamin's theory of the *reine Sprache* [pure speech], the name sublates the instrumental relation between thing and sign and thanks to this sublation realizes the authentic form of language. The focus on the name is also crucial for understanding one of Benjamin's most difficult essays, devoted to Karl Kraus, where Benjamin says: "From within the linguistic compass of the name, and only from within it, can we discern Kraus's basic polemical procedure: quotation. To quote a word is to call it by its name." Assuming that Benjamin was influenced by his readings in scholastic philosophy of language, the sentence "To quote a word is to call it by its name" could be interpreted as an ironic and cryptic quotation of the scholastic definition of the so called *suppositio materialis* (the notation of a logical relation where the term/word relates to the term/word itself). And although Benjamin's 'Jewish nominalism' is not fully congruent with classic medieval nominalism, this little remark refers paradigmatically to Benjamin's praxis of citation, in which every quote can also be read as a performance of citationality in a general sense. For the citation is the place where the linguistic potential of language per se, "language as such," comprised of names only, is properly performed.

The last essay in this issue is David Suchoff's "Family Resemblances. Ludwig Wittgenstein as a Jewish Philosopher." It convincingly shows how the Wittgensteinian notion of "family resemblance," which, in a typically nominalist manner, privileges indefinite, concrete affinities between singulars against the well-defined denotation of a concept, emerges out of the polemic with the idealist notion of a fixed identity. Here also the figure of Karl Kraus appears essential. Suchoff argues that while Kraus became a touchstone for German Jewish writers from Franz Kafka to Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, he also shed light on the situation that allowed Wittgenstein to develop his own non-essentialist notion of identity. He thus claims that the very term "family resemblance" emerged from Wittgenstein's revaluation of the discourse around Judaism, particularly around the Jewish, mixed and unclear, identity of *der Knäuel* (meaning also a "tangle" or a "bundle"). In an act of an ironic provocation

which turned vice into a virtue, Wittgenstein transformed this borderline category into the breakthrough notion of "family resemblance," conceiving of identity in a non-essential and porous form. Thus, in the process, Wittgenstein became a Jewish philosopher of a 'nominalist' denomination in a manner, and as Hilary Putnam suggests: a thinker who re-discovers the medial zone of contact between what had been considered diametrically opposed identities – teaching a Jewish openness to singular, concrete difference as a way of life.

   Perhaps, then, it is possible to talk about 'Jewish nominalism' after all? The essays collected in this issue demonstrate that the unique Jewish focus on the power and promise of the singular name as opposed to the "icy wasteland of abstraction" is not an ephemeral phenomenon but a solid trend, present in Jewish speculation from its very beginning, which deserves a separate philosophical name of its own.

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