

From Between to Before: Unslatables in Rabbinic Thought Between Philosophy and Literature

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An Introduction to This Special Issue

This Special Issue seeks to explore the space between philosophy and literature, taking rabbinic thought as a site where these domains intersect, diverge, and mutually illuminate one another.¹ The essays collected herein do not treat this between merely as a boundary or point of contact but as a dynamic blind zone in which the three traditions are negotiated, contested, and reimaged.

We understand rabbinic thought, like philosophy and literature, as operating along three interrelated registers: history, memory, and theory. Each has its own mode of engaging with the past as past. History attends to the traditions of traditions, tracing the evolution of rabbinic forms, philosophical schools, and literary productions while seeking patterns, continuity, and transformation. Memory evokes the lived recollection of these traditions, their modes of self-narration, and the ways communities embodying these traditions remember themselves over time; theory aims to conceptualize what these histories and memories often leave unspoken—the blind spots representing perspectival limits that focus the tradition on itself from within as well as shaping the relationships between them that no single tradition fully controls.

Positioning the between in relation to these three registers of history, memory, and theory provides a guiding lens for this Issue. Rabbinic thought does not simply reflect philosophical schools or literary formations; it engages, contests, and sometimes subverts them. Philosophy, in turn, is challenged by rabbinic modes of reasoning, narrative, and citation, which refuse the closure of conceptualization, let alone systematization. Literature, too, resonates with the dialogical and performative character of rabbinic reasoning, modelling forms of articulation that emerge only in the interstice between remembrance, interpretation, and refutation. By articulating the between in terms of history, memory, and theory, this Issue gestures toward a broader project: one in which the work beginning here continues, exploring how traditions, whether philosophical, literary, or rabbinic, might acknowledge and theorize their own perspectival blind spots, and how engagement across these traditions can generate new forms of understanding, rigour, and ethical insight.

Chronologically, this Issue addresses rabbinic corpora from late antiquity to modernity in various manifestations and genres, both within and beyond rabbinic institutions, in relationship with the traditions of philosophy and literature. In its short form, the guiding question was: where do rabbinic texts and thought belong in the unfolding history of relationships between philosophy and literature, logos and mimesis, concept and image, word and world, forgetting and remembering? These terms—defining the differences and connections between philosophy and literature—multiply and unfold, just as the history of their relationships does.



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We begin from an observation that in a regnant understanding, philosophy traditionally works in and with concepts, while literature in and with images. However, words, a seeming middle ground between concepts and images, can both strive for clarity like concepts and also remain opaque and laden with hidden regions of meaning like images. Words both enable and resist conceptual clarity, eradicating and evoking opaqueness. Traditionally, philosophy and literature engaged words differently: literature let words be, allowing for their intrinsically enigmatic nature, whereas philosophy worked through the opaque matter of words toward seemingly translucent meaning and spirit. Historically, this tension marked a “struggle for words,” an either/or between philosophy and literature. Yet over time, a space in-between, a third ground, began to emerge.

In the last and current centuries, both philosophy and literature have renegotiated the relationships between concept, image, and word, raising a new question: where does rabbinic thought belong in this newly charted space in which words mediate, resist, and generate forms of thinking that exceed traditional disciplinary boundaries? The aim of this Issue is to explore that question across a variety of approaches and chronological periods, with special attention paid to rabbinic states and acts of mind—mental acts and states that are not only described but performed in rabbinic corpora. If noetics names the study of mental states and acts, then this Issue seeks to examine rabbinic noetics in its broadest sense.

A longer-term goal of this project was initially seen as to lay the groundwork for a historical dictionary of rabbinic states and acts of mind—a version of the “Dictionary of Untranslatables” (Cassin and Apter 2014) with a focus on rabbinic noetics spanning late antiquity to modernity. As the “dictionary” was envisioned, the essays were used to trace historical developments or analyze textual fragments, figures, and practices that illuminate how rabbis understood, discussed, and performed mental acts and states, and how these practices intersected with philosophy and literature. Contributors were invited to consider both broad historical perspectives and close, text-based analyses, exploring how terms, figures, or practices of thought within rabbinic, philosophical, or literary corpora relate to mental acts and states, both individual and collective.

It was also taken into account that despite the apparent modern novelty of the questions about philosophy and literature and concept and image, these questions have a long, continuous history. Influentially, scenes from this history are no less medieval and late ancient than only modern.

A well-studied medieval example offered in the call for papers is the Averroist controversy, which examines the roles of material/passive intellect, which involves gathering images, versus the active/poetic intellect, which extracts concepts from images to establish objects through the combination of image and concept. This controversy raises questions about human responsibility: does the active intellect act in me, in my soul, when thinking occurs, or is it me/my soul who thinks and acts? Answering this question defines who is responsible for actions one performs.

A late ancient—and heavily understudied—example is rabbinic engagement with concepts exclusively via word–image exemplifications. In the Mishnah, for instance, a goring ox exemplifies a never-abstractly formulated concept of “damage,” extending far beyond the empirical ox. In Midrash, scriptural wording and imagery are reconfigured, refuted, and defended to clarify practical concepts. The underlying mental states and acts—both individual and collective—enable this symbiosis of concept and image. Medieval and modern rabbinic engagement with conceptual exemplification extends from late antiquity to contemporary thought, in dialogue with ethical, political, and epistemological concerns that philosophy and literature articulate through their histories.

This ongoing negotiation is envisioned as framed in the history of noetics—the study of mental acts and states in their untranslatability between images in literature, concepts in philosophy, and memory in the mode of refuting itself in the rabbis. Rabbinic noetics, in this sense, concerns how rabbinic works, including their reception in literature and philosophy across periods, practice, deploy, and discuss mental states and acts. Analysis requires attending not only to how rabbis thematize mental acts but also to how they perform them in discussion, debate, and textual exegesis. How rabbis and readers know what they know—and how this places them in relation to philosophy and literature—forms a guiding question for this Issue.

Even more fundamentally, the question envisioned was: what does “mental” mean in rabbinic texts and thought? Max Kadushin’s coinage of “rabbinic mind” allowed for two approaches to be isolated. In *via positiva*, scholars appreciated Kadushin’s organic metaphor of mind as an organism in which specific “concept-values” function as organs, always present but never fully articulated. In *via negativa*, others prioritized empirical philology, analyzing rabbinic texts’ versions and variants while deferring consideration of the “mind” or “spirit” until textual components were fully established. Both approaches, however, rely on modern assumptions about mind, including authorial intent and overarching categories of mental states.

Beyond Kadushin’s organic metaphor, the concept of mind has a complex history of conflation and differentiation, which are not organic wholes. In a modern iteration, mind may belong neither to a pre-existing author nor to a text-embedded figure/subject position (Foucault). Greek traditions of *nous* (intellect, including *nous poieticon*), *doxa*, and *psyche* intersect with Latin *mens* and *spiritus*, raising questions about mind and spirit and about translations of Hegel’s *Geist* into French and English.

Another set of invited inquiries concerns the “who” of mind: whose mind is operative in thought? One answer rejects the question: mind as *mens* belongs to nobody, echoing Augustine, raising challenges for individual responsibility. This tension is epitomized in the Averroes–Thomas debate: does an individual think and act, or does mind/intellect operate in the individual? The stakes are ethical, theological, and practical: can individuals sin, and can they be saved?

Modern developments in the philosophy of consciousness reframed mental acts as attributable to the “I,” a thinking agent fully responsible for thought and action. Later, this gave rise to the Freudian impersonal “it,” contrasting with Augustinian non-ascribable mental states. In this historical scope, the question arises: where does rabbinic work belong in the history of mental acts and states? Does it align solely with Aristotelian, Augustinian, or Averroist frameworks, or does it follow a distinct line—from Philo through Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis to medieval and modern thinkers—that complicates the dominant narrative?

Philo and his Latin interpreter Victorinus, for instance, address *existentia*, a notion distinct from *mens*, which cannot be attributed or reduced to definable essence yet still participates in thought. This historical lineage suggests that rabbinic noetics may constitute a line of thinking alongside, but not reducible to, established Aristotelian, Augustinian, or Averroist traditions.

Responding to these initial forms of thinking come the contributions, and what follows is the editors’ reflection on them by thinking forward rather than producing a mere summary of their claims, as the latter, in the framework of this edition, would be redundant.

Elad Lapidot and Noam Hoffman collectively exemplified the unslatable between in their focus on the rabbinic base-word and untranslatable concept as well as practice of Mahloqet/Makhloket; the unslatability of which the authors performed even at the level of transliteration. Hoffman developed a philological account of the development of

the concept “Maḥloqet” as it emerged and tacitly changed historically, tracing shifts in usage, scope, and implicit assumptions across rabbinic corpora until Maimonides. Hoffman showed how maḥloqet undergoes tacit historical transformations even where the tradition insists on its conceptual continuity. Then, Lapidot demonstrated why and how the concept and practice of “makhloket” is programmatically different from the Western tradition’s practice and self-perception of itself as “polemos.” Instead of insisting on the closure of polemos by victory, makhloket cultivates a disciplined understanding of almost fatally irreducible positions by first eliminating pseudo-differences (those arising from equivocation or unacknowledged blind spots) and only then attending to what remains irreducibly distinct. The scope of maḥloqet/makhloket extends from the present into a past that cannot be mapped, demanding listening beyond what slating the present positions allows and evoking makhloket and maḥloqet alike in inextricable relation to the past as it works in the present.

Ezra Tzfadya similarly engages with unslatability through the concept of “blood.” His essay delicately argues for the impossibility of detaching blood from substantialization as race while simultaneously resisting essentialist reduction. The essay insists on a double impossibility: blood cannot be detached from racial substantialization, yet it also cannot be retained within it without collapsing into essentialism. Blood, in Tzfadya’s reading of Franz Rosenzweig, emerges as a blind spot mediating racial and communal perspectives, symbolizing a community whose past cannot but must be accessed directly, a constellation for which blood is an image.

Azzan Yadin contributes a comparative study of Platonic and rabbinic anamnesis. He demonstrates that in Plato, memory is recovered knowledge of ideas the soul attained pre-birth, whereas in rabbinic thought, it is the fetus who is taught the Torah, immediately forgetting upon birth. The contrast reassigns the roles of body and soul in learning and forgetting, such that in the rabbinic model it is embodiment itself—rather than pre-existent knowledge—that structures anamnesis. The result is a contrast between the stability of ideas the soul sees, forgets, and recalls and the openness of the inscription of the Torah as also a skill of learning which the fetus embodies but loses at, and reinstates after birth. Two mutually untranslatable and unslatable models of anamnesis emerge, illuminating how memory itself is never a guaranteed access to the past.

Aviad Markovitz addresses rabbinic noetics in the context of transformation of the medieval notions of intention and subiectum into their modern avatars of intent and subjectivity. He engages with Alain de Libera’s archeological account of the modern “Self,” showing how Aristotelian impersonal notions of *hupokeimenon* and patristic personal notions of *hupostasis* intertwine in the birth of the modern subjectivity. Markovitz reconfigures this account to show how rabbinic tradition retrospectively rearticulates its own subjectivity, as if the modern notions of intention and selfhood were always present in rabbinic texts. This marks an instance of untranslatability within the tradition itself.

Comparably in historical gesture, Roni Bar Lev, Hananel Rosenberg, and Chen Sabag-Ben Porat examine Soloveitchik’s thought on repentance, ethics, and temporality. Their analysis shows how a rabbinic view of tradition converses simultaneously with the modern history of subjectivity and ethical thought (e.g., Max Scheler and Henri Bergson), demonstrating how interpretation of the past is inseparable from ongoing philosophical dialogue.

Libera Pisano interrogates the modern placement of Jewish thought, particularly in relation to Susan Taubes. Exodus, rather than exile, becomes the governing figure: not displacement from an original home, but expulsion from a place one never properly inhabited. This addresses translation and unslatability in political and theological contexts and allows, contra Heidegger, the slatability of the thought to be questioned. In Pisano’s analysis, Susan Taubes thinks only from and due to her unslatable position of constant

movement and foreignness in the world, resulting in a political noetics of unslatability as a paradigm of thinking and action.

Ilya Dvorkin's essay reconceives rabbinic tradition as a hermeneutics of dialogue that precedes ontology. The argument anchors in medieval Arabic and Hebraic grammars and draws implications for the modern debates the role of ontology. In the grammars, speech is always addressed to the only present, the addressee and concerns the only absent, that about which that speech is. That establishes presence before any account of being and renders being absent by default but brought forth in the addressation to the person to whom speech addresses. Such modern reconfiguration of medieval thought opens a dimension beyond translation: not translating absences but creating presences through addresses.

Andrew Schumann radically extends this inquiry by situating Judaic hermeneutics within a global history of logic and rhetoric, showing that only such a widened scope allows the stakes of rabbinic hermeneutics to become visible. Only against a genuinely global horizon of logical traditions do the stakes of rabbinic hermeneutics, which have been often misconstrued as insular, come into focus, revealing a hermeneutics of hermeneutics across traditions.

Finally, my own contribution explores memory-first versus forgetting-first approaches in the case study of conjoined twins or bicorps as a foundational rather than deviant human condition. I did not act as an editor of this contribution and thank the journal and Dr. Kotel Dadon for their editorial support.

Reflecting on the trajectory from the initial call for papers to the outcomes of this Issue, a conceptual shift emerges. The original frame invoked "untranslatability" as a model of pluralism. The contributions, however, reveal limitations: elements outside any system of translation cannot be slated at all. This insight suggests a refinement: from untranslatability as a model of pluralism to unslatability as a mode of thinking. Unslatability acknowledges the irreducible between that emerges when ostensibly self-contained traditions enter conversation, revealing their blind spots beyond conventional metaphors of pluralism.

This Special Issue thus inaugurates a sustained exploration of the *between* as also a *before*: a direction of questioning in which disciplinary boundaries, historical trajectories, and theoretical frameworks are not merely negotiated but reimaged as ways of relation to the past as past. It situates rabbinic thought as a critical interlocutor in the ongoing dialogue between philosophy and literature, tracing the emergence of the between as a means of understanding the past as past: how the before remains fully operative without ever becoming either present or absent. Such an attunement to the past as past enables these traditions to orient themselves toward their particular senses of historical and conceptual inheritance, none of which can be fully owned. Summarized in a sentence, this envisions a movement toward a new pluralism, not hindered by universal translatability, not limited by multiple untranslatables, but accounting for the unslatability of traditions with respect to their own multiple, intersecting, and inaccessible pasts. The blind spots this attunement maps do not mark a failure. Rather, they collectively chart the human condition as always a relationship to the past as past and to the *between* of these three traditions as always the *before* none of them can fully claim but all of them collectively carry *forward*.

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Reference

Cassin, Barbara, and Emily S. Apter, eds. 2014. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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