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- 2 Letters
- 7 Publisher's Page
- 8 Editorials: Mississippi Burning; Shamir's "Peace Plan";  
Rabin as Pharaoh; No Arms for the Saudis

## Articles

- 13 The Transformative Possibilities of Legal Culture *Peter Gabel*
- 17 Killing the Princess: The Offense of a Bad Defense *Elisa New*
- 20 The Nostalgia Disease *Sven Birkerts*
- 23 Welfare Reform: Maximum Feasible Exaggeration *Howard Jacob Karger and David Stoesz*
- 26 Toward a Jewish Dramatic Theory *David Cole*
- 29 Twice an Outsider: On Being Jewish and a Woman *Vivian Gornick*
- 32 Malamud *Richard Elman*
- 35 The Problem with Halakhic Ethics *Moshe Ish Shalom*
- 39 The Bible's Sleeping Beauty *Arthur Waskow*

## Special Feature: The Tikkun Conference

- 42 Introduction: The Meaning of the Conference
- 47 Claiming Our Rightful Role *Nan Fink*
- 51 A Worldview for Jewish Progressives *Michael Lerner*
- 58 What Rides the Wind *Marge Piercy*
- 62 Negotiations Now *Abba Eban*
- 65 A Call to Action *Letty Cottin Pogrebin*
- 68 Phony Gardens with Real Toads in Them *Todd Gitlin*
- 70 The Anti-Communist Past of the Neoconservative Present *Ilene Philipson*
- 72 Theses on Liberalism *Eli Zaretsky*
- 75 Victimology *Jessica Benjamin*

## Poetry

- 78 Hospice *L. S. Asekoff*
- 79 Anger *Caroline Finkelstein*
- 79 The Wrestler *Richard S. Chess*

## Fiction

- 80 Edict *Edith Pearlman*
- 81 The Confession *Robert Cohen*

## Reviews

- 83 On Vietnam War Films *Jenefer P. Shute*
- 85 Picasso's *Man with a Sheep* *Marx W. Wartofsky*
- 90 *Deceptive Distinctions* by Cynthia Fuchs Epstein *Joan Wallach Scott*
- 92 *Women Adrift* by Joan Meyerowitz *Elizabeth Lunbeck*
- 94 *On Bended Knee* by Mark Hertsgaard *Jefferson Morley*
- 96 *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis* by  
Simon Greenberg (ed.) *Daniel H. Gordis*
- 99 *Zion and State* by Mitchell Cohen *Madeleine Tress*

## Current Debate: Nature and Domination

- 102 On Autonomy and Humanity's Relation to Nature *Michael E. Zimmerman*
- 104 A Response to Michael Zimmerman *Steven Vogel*

Front cover art: "Leah in the Lightbox" by Jerome Witkin. Oil on linen, 1987, 26 × 72 inches. The photograph on the back cover is by Paula Rhodes. The line drawings in this issue are by Asaph Ben Menachim.

# Toward a Jewish Dramatic Theory

David Cole

Is there a characteristically Jewish way to think about theater? Asking this question is not the same as asking whether there is such a thing as “Jewish theater.” Clearly there are Jewish stage traditions (the modern Yiddish and Hebrew theater movements), Jewish theater forms (the Purim play), a Jewish dramatic literature (*The Dybbuk*, *The Golem*), and even something of a contemporary Jewish “theater scene” (thirty-odd production organizations currently active in North America alone). Beyond this, one might well feel that whole areas of Jewish life—Hassidic worship, talmudic study-circles—reflect a displaced theatrical impulse; or even that Jewish life itself, considered as an inevitable dialectic of adherence to/departure from “what is written,” bears a certain resemblance to theater work. (A small, select group goes off by itself to perfect its performance of the actions specified in a text whose author’s view of experience the group seeks to embody—have I just given a description of Jewish life under religious law or of rehearsal work on a script?)

It is not, however, an inquiry into Jewish theater, but the possibility of a Jewish inquiry into theater, that I wish to pursue. My question is whether Jewish intellectual and spiritual tradition might conceivably provide the concepts and images out of which a model of the theatrical process could be fashioned.

It certainly does not set out to provide them. The Talmud contains no tractate on dramatic theory, and, on one of those rare occasions when an early rabbi alludes to the stage, he does so in the following way: “I thank Thee, Lord, that I spend my time in the temples of prayer instead of in the theaters.”

How can one interrogate a tradition concerning matters to which it is clear the tradition itself has never given a thought? With respect to theater, such an inquiry is not so hopeless as it appears. For though Jewish thinkers have not lavished much reflection upon theater, many of the questions upon which they inces-

santly reflect are also questions that theater constantly asks itself. Jewish tradition may not have much to say about the three unities or the well-made play or “the illusion of the first time,” but it has plenty to say about interpretation, textuality, representation, and enactment—all of which are, inevitably, central concerns of dramatic theory. Suppose, when midrash, Talmud, and scripture speak upon these topics, one were to insist on hearing them as if they were speaking about theater. What would one hear? Midrash, I will suggest, may be heard as propounding a Jewish model of the acting process; Talmud, a Jewish model of the dramatic text; and certain biblical episodes, a Jewish model of the theatrical event itself.

Midrash is a rabbinic interpretive practice that, as midrashic scholar Barry Holtz puts it, “comes to fill in the gaps” of scripture, “to tell us the details that the Bible teasingly leaves out.” What kind of fruit did Adam and Eve eat: an apple, a grape, or a fig? Why did the serpent seek the fall of humankind? Where was Adam during the temptation of Eve? These are the sorts of questions midrashic commentators routinely ask. But they are also the sorts of questions actors routinely ask. The actor, too, is concerned with establishing physical circumstances (this fruit I hold in my hand is a . . . ), with supplying the subtextual basis of dialogue (I urge her to disobey God in the hope that . . . ), with constructing a through-line of action (after I leave her alone onstage I proceed to . . . ). To act, one might say, is to deliver a midrash on role, to fill in the details that the dramatic text “teasingly leaves out.”

Consider, for example, the actress Uta Hagen’s preliminary note for her work on the role of Martha in Edward Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “The house is messy. . . . Loose records lying around. *The Eroica*? Or the *Missa Solemnis*?” To ascertain exactly what “familiar music” is always ready to come on full blast in George and Martha’s living room the moment the right button is pushed is a typically midrashic project, not only in the fact that a detail is sought but in the motive for seeking it. “From believing in the truth of one small action,” writes Constantin Stanislavski in *An Actor Prepares*, “an actor can come to . . . have faith in the reality of a whole play.” It matters to Uta

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Hagen whether the music George and Martha move to is the *Eroica* or the *Missa Solemnis* for the same reason it matters to the midrashist whether the fruit Adam and Eve ate was an apple or a fig. The criterion for actor and midrashist alike is: which detail will be more of a revelation?

The midrashic commentator needs to know, as actors performing the episode would need to know, exactly *how* Cain kills Abel. (With a staff-blow to the throat, according to Midrash Genesis Rabbah.) Of course, the midrashist does not go on to deliver the staff-blow he has imagined, but to recognize this fact is less to distinguish midrash from acting than to state the relation between them. What the actor does is, precisely, to *enact* the sort of reading undertaken by the midrashist. The midrashic commentator fills in the blank of the text with imagined connections. The actor, having imagined the connections, fills in the blank of the role with him- or herself.

If midrash provides a Jewish prototype of acting, or at least of the actor's way of reading the dramatic text, Talmud, the other major mode of Jewish commentary, provides a prototype of the dramatic text itself. One might argue for such a parallel simply on the grounds that the Talmud, like most plays, is written in dialogue—a dialogue that often becomes quite “dramatic,” in the colloquial sense. But there are dramatic texts that are not written in dialogue (Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words*, Peter Handke's *My Foot My Tutor*), and there are texts written in dialogue that are not written for the stage (Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, Nathalie Sarraute's *The Golden Fruits*). The real analogy between a script and a page of Talmud is at once less apparent and more fundamental than the fact that both are written in dialogue.

From one point of view, the Talmud presents itself as a transcription of earlier conversations between rabbis: what Sumchus said, what Samuel objected to, what Rav Judah replied, and so on. But from another point of view, the Talmud presents itself as a pre-scription for future conversations between its teachers and students, who, in their classrooms and study groups, will reenact the rabbinic conflicts it preserves. The talmudic text is thus “located” somewhere between an earlier oral interchange that it professes to record and a later oral interchange that it hopes to instigate.

This “in-between” status is precisely that of the dramatic text. A printed play, too, offers itself as at once a transcription of an earlier exchange (what the Ghost said to Hamlet that night on the battlements) and, at the same time, as a pre-scription for future exchanges (what the actor playing the Ghost will say to the actor playing Hamlet tomorrow night at 8:47). In this respect,

the Talmud models a key characteristic, perhaps even the defining characteristic, of the theater script. The question posed by Jacques Derrida in *On Grammatology*—whether writing really does “come after” the speech that it claims to be only setting down, or whether it in some sense “comes before” speech—is a question already posed by the nature of the talmudic and dramatic texts. Like each other, but unlike every other sort of text, the Talmud and the playscript each present us with a writing that somehow comes both before *and* after speech—before the speech of actors, which it pre-scribes, and after the speech of characters, which it transcribes. Set in juxtaposition with the Talmud, the dramatic text reveals its dual nature as transcript and prescription.

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Turning to the Bible itself, we find plenty of episodes that suggest theatrical performance and theater work. When Ezekiel eats a scroll containing the prophecies he is to deliver (Ezekiel 2–3), we may well take his conduct as an image of the acting process; for actors, like prophets, begin by introjecting the word of Another, which they then seek to “realize” in significant actions. Or when Ezra, the “second Moses” (as he is known in later Jewish tradition), reads aloud to the refugees from Persia (Nehemiah 8) the very laws that Moses himself had once read aloud to the refugees from Egypt (Exodus 24), we may feel we have before us an image of performance as *the reenactment of reading*.

But as my chief example of a biblical text that, while not setting out to speak of theater, may nonetheless be *heard* as speaking of theater, I propose to examine the Exodus account of Moses' shattering the Tablets of the Law in response to Israel's worship of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:5–6, 15–19):

<sup>5</sup>[Aaron] built an altar in front of [the Golden Calf] and . . . issued this proclamation: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” <sup>6</sup>They rose up early in the morning and offered up burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. Then the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. . . . <sup>15</sup> Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand. . . . <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was God's, engraved on the tablets. <sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the uproar which the people were making, he said to Moses: “There is the sound of war in the

camp.”<sup>18</sup> But Moses answered: “It is not the sound of the cry of victory, / Nor the sound of the cry of defeat; / It is the sound of singing that I hear!”<sup>19</sup> As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged, and he flung the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

It is certainly not difficult to find theatrical resonances in the Golden Calf ceremony. Organized around the appearance of a god, featuring song (v. 18), dance (v. 19), and audience participation (v. 6), the worship of the calf is a communal rite of the very sort that, in ancient Greece and elsewhere, gave rise to theater.

What, however, warrants seeing Moses’ activity here as, in any sense, theatrical? For one thing, it clearly has the character of (and has traditionally been interpreted as) a symbolic enactment. Moses shatters the tablets to symbolize the shattered state of the covenant between God and Israel. This symbolic performance constitutes a precedent for what scholars of later Hebrew prophecy refer to as “acted prophecies”: Jeremiah going about with a yoke on his neck to symbolize the necessity of submission to Babylon (Jeremiah 27); Ezekiel knocking a hole in the city wall, packing his bags, and “setting off into foreign parts” as an image of the coming Exile (Ezekiel 12); and so on. In the absence of anything approaching theater in ancient Israel, the prophets themselves sometimes approached it; and in this, as in every other aspect of the prophetic vocation, Moses, traditionally regarded as the first and greatest of the prophets, is the prototype.

But Moses’ symbolic miming does not simply offer an alternative to the calf-worship; it amounts to a *counterperformance*, replying to and commenting on the calf ceremony point for point. Moses hears the calf-worshippers singing (v. 18), and *he* immediately bursts into song (the poetry of v. 18). He sees the calf-worshippers dancing (v. 19), and *he* promptly comes up with some symbolic movement of his own: he shatters the tablets. Moses, one might say, is fighting theater with theater.

**W**hat gives point to the contention between these rival “theater pieces” is that each depicts essentially the same situation—the dilemma of those who would make theater in the face of the Second Commandment’s prohibition against making images of any kind: “You shall not make for yourself an image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or the earth below.” The injunction clearly prohibits the worship of the calf, but the tablets also seem to be a visual sign of the sort that the Second Commandment forbids. That the calf, upon which the

Israelites’ performance centers, is meant as a sign of God, rather than a substitute *for* Him, is clear from the people’s initial reaction to it: they take one look and exclaim, “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). Aaron, moreover, describes the upcoming ceremony in honor of the calf as “a feast *to the Lord* [emphasis added]” (32:5). The seeming inadequacy of a calf to serve as an image of the divine—a detail over which generations of exegetes have puzzled (why not a golden bull or serpent or lion?)—reflects the inadequacy of *any* sign to perform such a task. But the tablets, upon which Moses’ “performance” centers, are also a sign—a sign of the covenant between God and Israel. And if the Calf “Show” culminates in an act of transgression directed toward the sign in question, so does the Tablets “Show,” though in a slightly different way: the people “r[i]se up to play” before the calf; Moses “breaks the Law.”

All these parallels suggest that Moses does not simply dismiss the vision of theater put forward by the Calf “Company.” Rather, he offers a performance that, by its very similarities to the Calf Show, seems to acknowledge the valid impulse in that ceremony. In fact, he then goes on to do more powerfully the very thing that the Calf Show has attempted. The Calf Show wants to be subversive, transgressive, a “theater of revolt,” in Robert Brustein’s phrase. And rightly so! Theater had better be a source of subversive energy, and the ambition to make it such is clearly shared by Moses himself. His smashing of the tablets is a far more radically transgressive gesture than anything the calf-worshippers can manage.

For how, after all, do the members of the Calf Company commit their transgression? They first prostrate themselves before a sign (the calf) and then go off to release their subversive energy at random, in the orgy or riot described in verse six. Moses’ counterperformance, his shattering of the tablets, seems to comment: “In your orgy before the calf, you first prostrate yourselves before a sign and then release your subversive energies at random. In my breaking of the tablets, I release my subversive energy *into the act of shattering the sign*. In fact, I *make my performance* out of shattering the text with which I have been entrusted.”

To make a performance out of shattering the texts with which one has been entrusted—this, it seems to me, is the model of theatrical production that Moses offers, a model that reconciles the Jewish obligation to shatter signs with the theatrical obligation to make a performance—or rather, reveals these obligations to be two different aspects of a single commitment.

“Shattering the text” may well stand as a trope for theatrical activity as such. To rehearse a script is to break it down into scenes or sections, and to break the scenes

*(Continued on p. 122)*

contract services from organizations, such as the Enterprise Foundation or the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, that have established a successful track record in economic development. For communities experiencing acute dislocation, a system of incentives, including tax credits, would be instituted to retain and promote entrepreneurial activity.

Funding for the CEZ program could be gotten from a CEZ insurance fund created by taxing private and public construction. In 1986, for example, a 2 percent tax on construction in the United States would have netted \$77.7 billion, more than the amount identified by Jesse Jackson during his 1988 presidential campaign as necessary for domestic economic development and neighborhood revitalization. In effect, CEZ funding would protect communities against economic dislocation by providing them with a safety net. Since benefits would be drawn from a self-financing insurance fund, they would not be as vulnerable to budget rescissions imposed on programs that are dependent on general revenues.

Proponents of welfare reform must get beyond the intuitive response of defending programs grounded in the New Deal and creatively address the role of the welfare state in a postindustrial, global economic environment. If welfare reform is to be more than an illusion, the welfare state must be reorganized to address the current realities of an increasingly complex economy unable to provide a high volume of good-paying jobs, economic mobility for large numbers of its citizens, stable employment situations, and the promise of occupational mobility and full employment. Unable to keep pace with the new economy created by the mobility of international capital, the concentration of corporate power, the decreasing competitiveness of American industry, and the export of relatively good-paying jobs, the current welfare state is anachronistic—grounded in another age of real economic growth, occupational mobility, and an expanding industrial base.

If the left is to reassert its moral leadership in social policy, it must deal realistically with welfare reform. The failure to consider tough questions, such as social control of the underclass and the competence of welfare administrators, will leave progressives on the sidelines of the debate—in the words of policy analyst Lawrence Mead, “defensive, bemoaning the cuts [in social programs] but helpless to do much about them.” In the absence of an appreciation for the structural problems of the American welfare state—which are so evident in the Family Support Act—social welfare will founder as new proposals fail. The eventual disappointment with workfare will result only in increased hostility toward the poor, with both policymakers and workfare recipients being held responsible for another failure in welfare reform.

This is clearly a difficult time for the American welfare

state. Despite enormous investments in social programs, the United States ranks twenty-third internationally in terms of the comprehensiveness of its welfare system, according to professor of social work Richard Estes. Progressives recognize that the social development of the United States is unlikely to advance based on the job market alone, but illusory welfare reform will not solve the problem either. Welfare reform that incorporates the economic and social needs of the nation, on the other hand, stands a good chance of reestablishing the welfare state as a viable institution in American culture. Rather than accept the inadequate provisions of the Family Support Act as authentic reform, progressives should seize the challenge of creating a more just society within existing limitations. What is needed is a radical pragmatism that acknowledges the present economic reality but proposes policies that reflect the need for social justice, a communitarian approach to society, and a heavy dose of compassion. □

## JEWISH DRAMATIC THEORY

*(Continued from p. 28)*

or sections down into individual impulses, moments, choices. To stage a text, however reverently, is to shatter it: one shatters it as pure verbal construct and rebuilds it, out of other materials, into something else. But “shattering the text” may also stand as a trope for Jewish interpretive activity as such. Midrash fragments the biblical passages it explicates. The Gemara (commentary) portions of the Talmud break off sections of the Mishnah for analysis. Later commentary breaks down the page of Talmud itself. “It was necessary for Moses to break the book in order for the book to become human,” writes the French-Jewish experimental novelist Edmond Jabès. *To break the book in order for the book to become human* accurately describes the persistent efforts both of Jewish commentators to relate the sacred texts to common experience and of theater artists to bring dramatic texts before us in the flesh.

If midrash, Talmud, and even scripture itself can thus all be heard as speaking of theater, why has there been so little place for theater in Jewish tradition? While rabbinic attitudes toward representation in general, and toward the late Roman stage in particular, no doubt played some role, Judaism’s recoil from theater is first and foremost a recoil from something in Judaism itself.

A theatrical performance, whatever it may happen to be a performance of, always involves “another world” erupting into the audience’s time and space: the world of the script’s events and characters. Judaism was, at one point in its development, supremely hospitable to

eruptions of this sort. What, after all, were the Sinai theophanies—the burning bush, the fiery cloud, and the mountain storms recounted in the book of Exodus—if not such visible and audible “explosions” of a numinous “other reality” directly into our space, our time, our world?

But over the centuries Judaism has gradually lost confidence in its own capacity for theophanic experience. There is a midrash to the effect that the slaves at Sinai saw and heard what not even the most righteous people who come after them will see or hear. The God-revealing flame that flared upon bush and mountain peak in Exodus is subsequently accessible to Ezekiel only as a visionary experience (the fiery chariot of Ezekiel 1) and to the kabbalists only as a philosophical theme (the light of the *Ein Sof*). The God-disclosing voice that resonated in the air over Sinai becomes, by the time of Elijah, the “still, small voice” of 1 Kings (19:12), then the merely human voices of the later prophets, and at last the merely textual “voices” of rabbinic commentary. To us, meanwhile, Elijah, the later prophets, and the rabbinic commentators are all available only between the covers of a book.

The great texts of Jewish tradition may thus be seen as marking the sites of so many vanished theophanies. The same thing could be said of *dramatic* texts, which also present themselves as events that have unaccountably “lapsed” from their event-status into mere writing. And theatrical production amounts to a procedure for reversing this lapse, for restoring to the “lost” events of the dramatic text their status as present theophanies. By routinely achieving such restorations, theater demonstrates the continuing availability of a kind of experience that Judaism has long since come to regard as irrecoverable. Viewed in this light, theater work appears to be not so much a practice alien to Judaism as a possible *way of return* to a forsaken region of Jewish experience.

Of course, to speak of “return” in such a context is to speak metaphorically. Theater cannot put the children of Israel back on the mountain with the fire and the thunder playing about them, and it cannot reinstate Judaism in its moment of direct theophanic encounter. What theater can do is to provide its audience with the imaginative equivalent of a return to such a moment.

Thus, it is not by espousing Jewish values or treating Jewish themes that theater enters into a relationship with Judaism, but simply by being the kind of event it is: a present otherness, Theophany Now. And this fact in turn suggests where the emphasis must fall in any effort to think about this relationship theoretically. Not a theater of Jewish aims, but the aims of theater itself, understood in terms of their implications for Judaism—here, it seems to me, is the appropriate focus for a Jewish dramatic theory. □

## TWICE AN OUTSIDER

(Continued from p. 31)

defend oneself *as a Jew*. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man [emphasis in original].” I read that and I was ready to change the sentences to read, “When one is attacked as a woman, one must defend oneself *as a woman*. Not as a Jew, not as a member of the working class, not as a child of immigrants.”

**M**y father had to be Jewish; he had no choice. When he went downtown he heard “kike.” I live downtown, and I do not hear “kike.” Maybe it’s there to be heard and I’m not tuned in, but it can’t be there all that much if I don’t hear it. I’m out in the world, and this is what I *do* hear:

I walk down the street. A working-class man puts his lips together and makes a sucking noise at me.

I enter a hardware store to purchase a lock. I choose one, and the man behind the counter shakes his head at me. “Women don’t know how to use that lock,” he says.

I go to a party in a university town. A man asks me what I do. I tell him I’m a journalist. He asks if I run a cooking page. Two minutes later someone asks me not if I have a husband but what my husband does.

I go to another party, a dinner party on New York’s Upper West Side. I’m the only woman at the table who is not there as a wife. I speak a few sentences on the subject under discussion. I am not responded to. A minute later my thought is rephrased by one of the men. Two other men immediately address it.

Outsidership is the daily infliction of social invisibility. From low-grade humiliation to life-threatening aggression, its power lies in the way one is seen, and how that in turn affects the way one sees oneself. When my father heard the word “kike” the life-force within him shriveled. When a man on the street makes animal-like noises at me, or when a man at a dinner table does not hear what I say, the same thing happens to me. This is what makes the heart pound and the head fill with blood. This is how the separation between world and self occurs. This is outsidership alive in the daily way. It is here, on the issue of being a woman, not a Jew, that I must make my stand and hold my ground.

A few years ago I taught at a state university in a small Western town. One night at a faculty party a member of the department I was working in, a man of modest intelligence, said of another teacher who had aroused strong feeling in the department, “He’s a smart Jew crashing about in all directions.” I stared at this man, thinking, “How interesting. You *look* civilized.” Then I said, quite calmly, “What a quaint phrase. In New York we don’t hear ourselves described as smart