

# Ten Theses on Jewish Studies<sup>i</sup>

Martin Shuster

1. What is the utmost task for Jewish Studies in the academy right now? To understand its relationship to *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. What does this really mean? To understand how the desires of the past affect the present but look entirely different when refracted from today's moment—the way in which funhouse mirrors distort their image. What makes this task especially difficult now? Late capitalism. What makes it difficult to realize that this task is difficult? Identity politics.
2. Jewish Studies creates jobs, linked intimately to the market. Books must be sold; classes must be filled. The market, however, perpetually actualizes a myth—the myth that identities are finished, existing outside of relations of recognition. (This is one way to understand Marx's sense of the "ghostlike" elements of modern capitalism, where the qualities the market has produced spectrally appear as inherent to the things in question.) What—or more accurately *who*—do we need to recognize *this*?
3. The point of Jewish Studies cannot be linked to the necessity of feeling the point of Jewish Studies, immediately or otherwise. Nonetheless, we might ask, where is the *impact* of Jewish Studies most felt? In the hearts of donors. Where is it least felt? Everywhere else. And the hearts of students? They do not feel Jewish Studies, they only "take" it. How could you explain all of this? Certainly not while standing on one leg, because in general—for the contemporary university—there is simply no leg to stand on. In this respect, to be fair, Jewish Studies is no more unique than any other discipline in the contemporary university. Life is much more than information.
4. An impact, say, of Chican@ Studies, Black Studies, and Jewish Studies? The concept of internal colonialism. One way to understand this concept—speaking all too

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- abstractly—is to note that the desire for recognition by a majority always ravages a minority. In order to understand the significance of this concept in each field, however, simply trace the proximity of each discipline to whiteness.
5. The underground punk band KOSHER! once sang "We are the Jews, we nailed your god up on the cross, just to show you who's the boss." The motivational undercurrents behind KOSHER!'s lyrics can also be found in Jewish Studies, just without the humor. To the extent that KOSHER! is merely applying Nietzsche's aphoristic method to Nietzsche himself, remember that he stresses that the morality of resentment begins with a death on the cross.
  6. If disciplines are like trees, then Jewish Studies looks like a premier pine or olive tree ready for cutting and use, no matter the purpose. In reality, it is an old tree, so crooked that it is entirely useless for lumber of any sort, so much so that it will petrify and shatter any blade that tries to touch it. Remember, though, that when usefulness is prioritized above everything else, being useless can become a virtue. To understand this so as to move forward, just think of what sort of root system must support an old crooked tree. Jewishness or Judaism is this root system, never finished—tradition as mycelium.
  7. Every discipline is an answer to a question or series of questions. What is the question to which Jewish Studies is the answer? —*Why me?*—obviously. Just kidding. (I do not mean to suggest that Sholem Aleichem didn't understand funhouse mirrors, however

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... albeit by analogy: he showed how the air quality around a tree can deeply affect our access to its roots.) Jewish Studies addresses the classical questions— theoretical and practical—around the concepts of God, antisemitism, redemption, and humanity (sometimes presented simply as God, world, and Jew). The answer to each, regardless at which level of meta-analysis your inquiry is operating, is the same, and can best be summed up in one word: anachronism.

8. Judaism as “the simultaneous presence of a youth that is attentive to reality and impatient to change it, and an old age that has seen it all and is returning to the origin of things” (Levinas). Whether it aims to run with the fads or to buckle against them, Jewish Studies also never quite fits in. This is why it is simultaneously too white and yet never exactly white. In large part this is because its subject matter is Judaism, but in large part it is also because its subject matter is oftentimes not really Judaism. I think here of Michael Jordan, who once noted that the imperative is always to take something that’s perceived as a weakness and turn it into a strength.
9. The Harvard philosopher Burt Dreben was once said to have said that “philosophy is garbage, but the history of garbage is scholarship.” (Saul Lieberman once introduced a Gershom Scholem talk with a similar formulation—Martin Kavka notes that Dreben’s first wife was Raya Spiegel, the daughter of Shalom Spiegel, a colleague of Lieberman’s at JTS.) I do not want to say the same about Jewish Studies. (I am not even sure I even believe it of philosophy.) But it does suggest the idea that the history of Jewish Studies can help us do Jewish Studies, in all subfields, better. (Compare to Robert Pippin’s suggestion that philosophy *just is* the history of philosophy.) What would it mean to do Jewish Studies better? To be honest that Jewish Studies is *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as a late style.
10. Theodor W. Adorno once remarked that late style must always be understood as “the collision between the experience of aging and completely different historical situations.” Is the role of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* here merely rhetorical then? In part. But it also helps us to acknowledge that aging is a universal

phenomenon, one that applies equally to movements. Grasping the universality of this phenomenological point opens all Jewish sources—no matter how particular—towards universal aims. *Jewish Studies as unfinished in the same way that modernity is unfinished*. The next question: Could Judaism or Jewishness themselves be late styles? An overlooked significance of Mara Benjamin’s *The Obligated Self*. Jewish Studies wholly in command of itself but nonetheless turned against itself, commitment through alienation.

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i Nietzsche once wrote that “most thinkers write badly because they communicate to us not only their thoughts but also the thinking of their thoughts” (*Human, All Too Human*). I mention this because the editors asked me to attach this little note to a piece that likely appears a bit out of place in these pages. The genre of “theses”—a genre into which this piece is intended to fit—has something in common with the aphorism as employed by Nietzsche and the fragment as employed by the Romantics who preceded him. If we might dare to compare this genre to mathematics, it aims to show less work, not more. I wanted to try my hand at writing a series of “theses” around Jewish Studies, inspired by figures like Schlegel, Nietzsche, Scholem, Benjamin, and Adorno (among many others). I am grateful to Mira and Chaya for running with the idea.