

## **Modern Jewish Thought on Crisis**

# **Religiöse Positionierungen in Judentum, Christentum und Islam**



Edited by  
Christian Wiese and Nina Fischer

## **Volume 7**

# Modern Jewish Thought on Crisis



Interpretation, Heresy, and History

Edited by

Ghilad H. Shenhav, Cedric Cohen-Skalli, and Gilad Sharvit

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## Foreword to the Series

Religious-ideological diversity with its ambivalent – destructive as well as enriching – elements is more than ever part of the everyday experience of most contemporary societies. This is especially the case as a result of globalization, migration, and the forced flight of millions of people from different cultural contexts due to political crises and conflicts. Interreligious encounters, communication, and positioning are therefore not a mere option but rather an expression of a “dialogical imperative” (Christoph Schwöbel), on which the peaceful coexistence of religious communities in the respective societies or of entire neighboring cultures depends. The social, political, and cultural dynamics and explosiveness of this phenomenon can hardly be overestimated and are often accompanied by fears, prejudices, and conflicts. They explain why current research is intensively concerned with the challenges of multi-religious constellations. Several questions come to mind: How can we deal with the inescapable fact of the plurality of conflicting claims to meaning and truth, which, in conjunction with social and political upheavals, can often constitute a potentially explosive mixture? What are the causes of religious conflicts, fundamentalisms, and violence? In contrast, how viable are concepts such as multiculturalism, interreligiousness, or interculturality which, with different emphases, take a critical stance towards forms of religious exclusivity, aggression, or the uniformity of religious or religious-national *Leitkulturen*, or “dominant cultures”?

This book series assembles research results of an interdisciplinary and interreligious cooperative project of the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main and the Justus Liebig University Giessen, which has been funded by the Hessian Ministry of Science and Art in recent years. Under the title “Religious Positioning: Modalities and Constellations in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Contexts,” scholars in the fields of religious studies, Christian theology, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, ethnology, sociology, and pedagogy dealt with the phenomena of religious diversity and difference. These were analyzed as basic categories of interreligious and intercultural encounters from a historical-systematic and empirical-systematic perspective – with a focus on the three monotheistic religions. Strong attention was placed on the theoretically as well as socio-politically relevant core question regarding the possibilities, conditions, and limits of a qualified religious pluralism, i. e., a constructive, respectful handling of religious plurality and difference.

In contrast to concepts of interreligious dialogue which aim at a consensus-oriented, relativizing approach that aims to downplay the element of difference, the work of this research project is based on the premise that the existence of the Other or the Foreign in religiously diverse constellations necessitates *positioning* in the sense of a representation and affirmation of what is one’s own. This encoun-

ter and confrontation with different beliefs and claims to validity is constitutive for every interreligious contact and can initially be grasped with the category of *diversity*. Diversity as a perception of difference and otherness, or alterity, can be interpreted as enriching plurality. However, it is also often perceived as an irritating difference, incompatible with or even threatening to our own self-image. The respective experience and interpretation of diversity and difference can result in quite different options for dealing with it: the leveling relativization of one's own and others' claims to truth, the argumentative advocacy of one's own position, the pragmatic toleration of the existence of the Other, religious apologetics, polemics, and discrimination, all the way to the missionary subjugation of the difference or its violent suppression. Of course, forms of dialogical rapprochement are also possible, provided that the perception of positions contradicting one's own becomes the basis for mutual acknowledgement. In view of these possible alternative implications of experienced diversity, the question arises as to what potential but also what resistance Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as well as other religious traditions) harbor with respect to a constructive-dialogical approach to religious and/or ideological difference. This question refers both to diversity and difference within the respective religion, and to the encounter between competing religious and non-religious worldviews.

Whether religious positionings have a more destructive, integrative, or dialogical character obviously does not depend primarily on the content of the respective position held. Rather, the historical, political, and cultural constellations in which they take place, as well as on the modalities under which they are introduced into social discourses play a significant role. Thus, even beliefs conscious of differences can be capable of pluralism if they are committed to principles of epistemic humility and are able to recognize the legitimacy, dignity, and validity of other traditions when positioning themselves vis-à-vis them. The concept of the capability to deal with plurality in processes of religious positioning does not so much describe the ability to take a stand beyond one's own beliefs and values but rather a conscious affirmation of the right of the Other to recognition and an understanding of one's own position in the sense of a critically reflexive positionality in public discourse. One of the potential constructive modalities which were taken into consideration in the research network, can be grasped with the concept of *dialogism*, following the theories of linguistics and literary studies – especially in the work of Mikhail M. Bakhtin. This concept seems particularly suited to describe how argumentative positions, characterized by diversity and difference, can also be given voice as such, without the intention of reconciling them. As a theoretical approach that examines the philosophical, communication-theoretical, and historical-social as well as political conditions and implications of dialogical practice from a descriptive and normative perspective, it points to the possibility of a dialogical

rather than confrontational understanding of positioning. It programmatically presumes the legitimacy of a polyphony of plurality and difference that may remain irrevocable even in dialogical constellations. On this basis, a communicative practice could be substantiated that facilitates an affirmation of one's own point of view without a monological claim to absoluteness, i. e., the readiness to clearly express one's own position and to do so without overwhelming one's interlocutors or refusing to acknowledge their position.

However, the monographs and edited volumes resulting from the collaboration within the research hub do not intend to promote a uniform normative model of dealing with religious diversity or addressing a restricted spectrum of questions. Rather, they represent the polyphony of interdisciplinary discussions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and interpretations of religious, cultural, or political positioning in history and the present. The essays in this volume explore processes of positioning as reflected in the interpretation of crisis phenomena in modern and contemporary Jewish thought and contemplate the significance of the multi-layered historical findings for the self-understanding and responsibility of the discipline of 'Modern Jewish Thought' in the context of burning contemporary debates. Based on differentiated definitions of the concept of *crisis* and an understanding of modernity as a period of multiple crises, the authors investigate, among other things, the interrelations between modernity, crisis, and Jewish historical experiences in the face of emancipation, acculturation, and contemporary historical upheavals such as wars, persecutions, and an unprecedented genocide. The underlying thesis that the diasporic and exilic existence of the Jewish people constantly challenged Jewish intellectuals of the modern age to find answers to such experiences of crisis by drawing on Jewish religious and cultural traditions is developed in a perspective-rich manner as a compulsion to position themselves: What was required were responses to heretical religious concepts, to apocalyptic hopes and fears, to political and cultural upheavals, to the consequences of mass migration as well as to historical catastrophes and experiences of extreme violence. Positioning regarding inter- and multi-religious constellations, processes of secularization or the questioning of concepts of exile by modern Jewish nationalism and Zionism are of equally central importance. Finally, the volume also deals with the question of whether and how contemporary modern Jewish thought – beyond the historical reconstruction of positions of Jewish intellectuals in Europe, Israel and the USA – should and can position itself in the view of the crisis experiences of our time.

Frankfurt, November 06, 2023  
Christian Wiese and Nina Fischer





## Foreword of the editors in light of the events of October 7, 2023

On October 7, while we were completing the process of proofreading this book, hundreds of Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and brutally murdered more than 1,300 people, most of them citizens, and took hostage more than 200, among them babies, children, and elderly men and women. In the eyes of many, the inhuman attack presents the most radical crisis and rupture to the state of Israel and the Jewish people since the Holocaust. At the time we write these sentences, Israel is still in mourning, and the consequences of the horrible tragedy and crisis are far from being clear. Nevertheless, it is already evident that the events in the morning of Simchat Torah are leading and will lead to paradigmatic and unforeseeable changes in the way we think about Jewish existence in the land of Israel, the relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, and the ties between Israel and the Jewish diasporas.

The various chapters, which examine from different perspectives the question of crisis in Jewish thought, were written months before the attack. Therefore, they are grounded in a different reality, one that could not foresee the current crisis and its consequences. We can safely assume that if this book had been written today or after the war in Gaza/Israel, many of its chapters would have been written differently. Moreover, we are convinced that his book will be read differently now and hope it can offer philosophical, theological, and historical frameworks that might also be relevant for current days.

Although this book places the question of crisis in Jewish thought at its center, it is situated in an Israeli context: The conference from which the book emerges took place at the University of Haifa, an institution known for gathering both Jewish and Arab students from the Israeli north. In addition, many of the contributors to this volume are Israelis, while others have close ties to Israel, its people, and its academic community. We wish to devote this book to the October 7 victims. May the tragedy of their families and friends will not be in vain.

Ghilad H. Shenhav, Cedric Cohen-Skalli, and Gilad Sharvit, October 25, 2023



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Ghilad H. Shenhav, Gilad Sharvit, and Cedric Cohen-Skalli

## Introduction

This edited volume brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to explore the intersections between crisis, scholarship, and action. Through a series of interdisciplinary essays, we seek to examine how crises challenge our conventional methods of reading, writing, and thinking, and how scholars can respond to moments of upheaval with creativity, empathy, and resilience. From political upheavals to natural disasters, from pandemics to social movements, the essays in this volume offer a timely reflection on the role of scholarship in times of crisis.

Scholars and thinkers adopt different strategies to answer the call to engage with concrete and radical forms of crisis. Importantly, some embrace this challenge and, with all speed, articulate their reflections on their present-day reality. For example, in 1946, while the world had only begun to grasp the magnitude of the Holocaust, Margarete Susman was the first to offer an elaborated theological-philosophical account of this earthshaking crisis. In a time when humanity was led “to the brink of suicide,” Susman turned to the Book of Job to find answers for the future of the Jewish people and of humanity at large.<sup>1</sup> Almost 50 years later and under very different circumstances, Jacques Derrida quickly reacted to the fall of the Soviet Union. As the new world order was only starting to take its new shape, Derrida reflected on the future of Marxism and tried to redefine its messianic vision.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic led prominent thinkers like Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek to swiftly articulate their thoughts about the impacts of quarantines and the future of society.<sup>3</sup>

## What Is a Crisis?

Although scholars in the humanities often grapple with providing immediate reflections and answers to concrete forms of crisis, they still persistently try to define the term “crisis” from within historical, theological, and philosophical frameworks.

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1 Margarete Susman, *Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, Jüdischer Verlag, 2022), 23.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

3 Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022); Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York, NY: OR Books, 2020).

Reinhart Koselleck, for an important example, highlights the extensive use of the concept of crisis due to its ambivalence, allowing it to be adapted to different fields and circumstances. In ancient Greek culture, he argues, the term has “demarcated meanings in the spheres of law, medicine, and theology.” The concept emphasized the necessity of making profound decisions “between stark alternatives – right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death.”<sup>4</sup> Christianity associates the term with the notion of the apocalypse or the final judgment hovering as a crisis beyond our lives.<sup>5</sup> Another significant shift takes place in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the term “crisis” went through a process of secularization and was integrated into political language and thought, to the effect that in modernity there is no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through the concept of crisis: “the concept of crisis can generalize the modern experience to such an extent that ‘crisis’ becomes a permanent concept of ‘history.’”<sup>6</sup> To put it bluntly, modernity thus became the era of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, on the other hand, emphasizes and warns against the constant presence of the notion of crisis in the political and economic spheres. Like Koselleck, Agamben notes that in the medical tradition, the term “crisis” refers to the moment in which the doctor must decide if and how the patient will die or survive, and that in theology crisis is the Last Judgment at the end of times. The medical and theological traditions are profoundly different, but both are tied to a specific moment. However, Agamben argues that in our current era, the connection between a crisis and a specific event is abolished. He adds that “the crisis, the judgment is split from its temporal index and coincides now with the chronological course of time, so that, not only in economics and politics but in every aspect of social life, the crisis coincides with normality and becomes, in this way, just a tool of government.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, by constantly referring to the term “crisis,” regimes around the world can justify their radical actions. Janet Roitman adds that crisis is therefore “posited as an a-priori,” without examining and questioning the grounds for using the term.<sup>9</sup> The so-called inflation of crises demands that we will not take the term for granted and examine why and for

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4 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 No. 2 (2006): 358.

5 Koselleck, 359–60.

6 Koselleck, 371.

7 Koselleck adds that the modern political manifestation of crisis emphasizes that radical and final decisions should be taken not by God but by human beings throughout history.

8 Giorgio Agamben, “For a Theory of Destituent Power,” in *The City Between Freedom and Security*, eds. Deane Simpson, Vibeke Jensen, and Anders Rubing (De Gruyter, 2017), 38.

9 Janet L. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

which causes the “crisis terminology” is used. However, it is crucial to recognize that undermining or trivializing modern crises can be equally perilous and distressing. This was exemplified by Agamben’s numerous editorials during the Covid pandemic, where he denounced the gravity of the situation, inadvertently echoing right-wing conspiracy theories.

In the fields of modern Jewish history and thought, there have been several attempts to define the relations between modernity, crisis, and the Jewish experience. Most focus on the challenges and opportunities that arise from modern processes of assimilation and acculturation in the Jewish communities in Europe. For example, Michael A. Meyer argues that modernity presented for the Jews a great opportunity but also sentenced them into a state of crisis:

[Modernity posed] a crisis for the Jewish religion whose God was not ‘merely an illusory bill of exchange.’ Modernity, as the Jews of western and central Europe first encountered it in the eighteenth century, was seductive, for it seemed to offer liberation from political disabilities and from intellectual isolation. In their enthusiasm some Jews saw it not merely as the dawning of a new age but greeted it with something approaching messianic enthusiasm. That it would also severely call into question the viability of Judaism and undermine Jewish solidarity was an outcome that a few Jews welcomed, others resisted, and many greeted with deep-seated ambivalence.<sup>10</sup>

Michael L. Morgan adds that the twentieth century in particular is strongly affected by a “crisis of objectivity”; i. e., a crisis that provokes a “recurrent need to seek objective grounds for meaning and orientation and at the same time powerful reasons for doubting that the search could ever be fulfilled.”<sup>11</sup> Morgan claims that this crisis has had a particularly profound and significant impact on the Jewish people and Jewish life in the last century, as mirrored in the reactions of Jewish intellectuals to various processes and events, such as the dynamics of emancipation, the First World War, and the Holocaust.

## The Crisis of Humanities

Beyond the various definitions of the concept of crisis, another term that hovers over the work of the scholar is the “crisis of humanities.” This crisis is evident in the global trend of decreasing enrollment in academic programs in the humanities and is manifested most clearly in a declining market value of the humanities

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<sup>10</sup> Michael A. Meyer, “Modernity as a Crisis for the Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 9, No. 2 (1989): 151.

<sup>11</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Interim Judaism: Jewish Thought in a Century of Crisis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 4.

and their reduced influence on the public discourse. Indeed, while figures such as Derrida, Butler, Žižek, and Yuval Noah Harari have been able to produce timely responses to radical events or moments of crisis, most scholars in the humanities are constrained by the demands of the academic market and are unable to function as public intellectuals.

Richard Wolin explains that the decreasing value of humanistic studies emerges from broader changes in Western societies. He claims that technological changes accelerate our modes of communication and raise demands for expertise in specified fields. In other words, the Western approach to knowledge changes. The rapid transformations in what and how we learn jeopardize the humanistic studies that require time to produce significant achievements and create forms of knowledge that cannot be immediately monetized.<sup>12</sup> Scholars and policymakers are offering different strategies for addressing the crisis of the humanities: some of them suggest adjusting the humanities to economic changes.<sup>13</sup> This approach seeks to find ways to make the humanities more relevant and marketable in order to ensure their sustainability in a neoliberal environment. In contrast, others call for detaching the humanities from the demands and vocabulary of the market.<sup>14</sup> They argue for preserving the intrinsic value of humanistic studies and safeguarding their intellectual horizons from instrumentalization and market-oriented pressures.

The field of Jewish studies is not immune to the current-day illnesses from which the rest of the humanistic studies are suffering. However, if we spotlight the specific field of modern Jewish thought, we detect a different variant of crisis that asks for a specific remedy. This book takes as its presupposition that scholars in modern Jewish thought have an extended responsibility to engage in contemporary debates and maintain a certain contingent relevancy compared to their colleagues in Jewish studies. A scholar of the Cairo Genizah could argue that her scholarship reveals the unknown past of Jewish scriptures and helps to contextualize it in the framework of ancient Near Eastern culture and religion. One could argue that research that allows us to understand better ancient Judaism (or any other religion for that matter) is justified for itself, can be detached from the market considera-

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12 Richard Wolin, "Reflections on the Crisis in the Humanities," *Hedgehog Review* 13, No. 2 (Summer 2011): 11.

13 For example, in Israel officials in the Ministry of Finance have recently expressed the necessity of adjusting the humanistic fields to economic evaluation and to the market's demands. See: Or Kashti, "The Ministry of Finance: The Level of Research in Israel Is Low, and Keeps Deteriorating," *Haaretz*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/2022-11-27/ty-article/premium/00000184-b5a7-dd96-ad8c-ffaf5ef80000>.

14 Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalized Knowledge," *History of the Present* 1, No. 1 (2011): 124.



tions, and should be maintained even if the number of students in the field keeps decreasing.<sup>15</sup> The question that we should ask ourselves is if the scholarship on modern Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, or Joseph Soloveitchik should be guided and justified by the same principles as scholarship on ancient and medieval Judaism. In other words, can or should scholarship on modern Jewish thinkers be unbound from engaging with current forms of crises? We believe that the answer to both these questions is negative. In other words, even if the concrete forms of crisis are not the explicit subject matter of our scholarly work, they should inform and motivate our research and arguments.

## Experts in Crisis Management

This volume, written and edited by scholars of modern Jewish thought, offers a rather quick yet non-direct reaction to three concrete forms of crises that still take place on the global, European, and Israeli spheres: the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the juridical (some say, anti-democratic) revolution in Israel. To be more precise, the aim of this volume is to think about the “moment of crisis,” through the concepts, writings, and methodologies awarded to us by Jewish thinkers in modernity. The main thesis of the volume is that the diasporic and exilic experience of the Jewish people turned their philosophers and theologians into “experts in crisis management” who had to find resources within their own religion, culture, and traditions in order to react to, endure, and overcome short- and long-term historical crises. Jewish thinkers and thought have frequently had occasion to reflect on and respond to crises of various scales—crises of belief, of punctual and unpredictable violence, of drastic shifts in thought, of divisions within Jewry and in the definition of Jewishness, of exiles, and of prolonged genocidal campaigns. The underlining assumption of this book is that Jewish thought obtains resources for conceptualizing and reacting to the current forms of crisis in the global, European, and Israeli spheres. Additionally, we consider the concrete instances of crisis that we face today as platforms for thinking about the notion of crisis at large and its different manifestations in modern Jewish thought. That is, our aim is not only to think of crisis through modern Jewish thought, but to take this moment of crisis as an opportunity to think of the differ-

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<sup>15</sup> To clarify, we do not argue that every scholarly work on ancient or medieval Judaism is detached from current questions. Scholars like Daniel Boyarin, Elliot Wolfson, Yishai Rosen-Zvi, and many others speak exactly to the contrary.

ent ways the concept and experience of crisis informs, interferes, and transforms modern Jewish thought.

This book offers a broad gallery of accounts on the notion of crisis in Jewish modernity while emphasizing three terms: “interpretation,” “heresy and rupture,” and “history.”

The practice of interpreting traditional sources and concepts is essential for Jewish thinkers in moments of peace, but it receives different facets in moments of crisis. For example, the crisis of the Holocaust caused Jewish thinkers to reexamine the notion of theodicy and revisit canonical texts such as the Binding of Isaac and the Book of Job. In this volume, we wish to ask: Which texts do we read and interpret in turbulent moments? What kind of remedies or resources can be found in the Jewish library? How do moments of crisis bring us to reinterpret kernel religious, political, and philosophical concepts?

The ideas of heresy and rupture are crucial for our conversation because they exemplify one of the more radical, threatening, interesting, and constructive forms of crisis in Jewish tradition and thought. The heretic subjects or groups, whether Sabbatai Zvi or Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century or secular Zionists at the beginning of the twentieth century, shake the foundations of Jewish society and tradition, but they also inaugurate religious developments. Hence, we ask: Which forms of rupture are provoked by religious heresy, and how do these ruptures produce and reproduce necessary changes and shifts in Judaism? When does the moment of crisis demand to heretically undermine our truths and conventions? What kind of practical and conceptual opportunities emerge from the crisis of heresy and from moments of rupture?

The notion of history is essential for maintaining a critical perspective on how we think and define the concept of crisis in Jewish thought. By examining the evolvment of Jewish thought from a historical perspective, we learn about how crises are born and about the instability and fluidity in defining specific events as moments of crisis. For example, Zionist thinkers tend to describe the Jewish diasporic-exilic existence as a centuries-long crisis, while Jewish intellectuals in the Middle Ages usually refrained from using similar terms. Therefore, we wish to ask: How are crises defined at different points in Jewish history? And can the crisis function as an objective category, or is it always an outcome of subjective historical perspective?

## Chapter Outline

This book opens with the manner of interpretation and with the basic question of how we interpret the term “crisis.” In the first chapter, Galili Shahar takes us on a

literary-philosophical journey through the different interpretations of the term “crisis” in the Hebrew and European traditions. Shahar begins with Emmanuel Kant and the ties between crisis and critique, and concludes with the different gendered interpretations of the Hebrew (Mashber) in midrashic literature. Shahar argues through his reconstruction that thinking about crisis today should be associated with radical, transformative forms of subjectivity and include a process of rethinking the tensions, states of alienation, and modes of resonance and belonging that we might take as given. He asserts that the term “crisis” calls for an intervention in the form of comparing and coupling between different traditions.

In the second chapter, Ori Rotlevy adheres to Jürgen Habermas and Walter Benjamin to learn how the interpretation of religious texts and practices could serve as a remedy to the challenges standing before modern democracies. According to Habermas, the constellation of crisis encourages dialogue with religious traditions based on the translation of their contents to secular discourse. This constellation enables us to think beyond our current socio-political predicaments. In the case of Benjamin, tradition serves as a medium for critical reflection on modernity and presents the transformative potential embodied in the dialogue between the secular and the religious.

In the third chapter, Vivian Liska studies the ties between crisis and the potential to resolve it violently through decision-making. The anti-liberal political theorist Carl Schmitt offered a radical and problematic formation of the notion of decision-making in times of crisis. According to Schmitt, the sovereign has the power to decide “on the state of exception,” a decision that enables him to transcend the rule of law. As a possible answer to Schmitt’s notion of decision-making the chapter interprets a series of “thought figures” (*Denkbilder*) in the writings of Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem, and Walter Benjamin. Although Kafka’s, Scholem’s, and Benjamin’s accounts differ in genre, context, and form, they share a sense of the value of deferral. The emphasis on deferral (an idea coined with the messiah that always fails to come) testifies to their awareness of the violence inherent in the radical decision.

The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the question of crisis and the interpretation of texts. Annabel Herzog ties the notion of hospitality with the practice of textual interpretation in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Herzog shows how the accounts of these two thinkers on the question of hospitality offer a framework and tools to think about concrete forms of crisis around the world. Herzog’s chapter teaches us how Jewish texts from the Bible and primarily the Talmud enable the two thinkers to translate a conceptual discussion about hospitality and its limits to a concrete account of hospitality in worldly politics.

In her chapter, Karen Feldman couples the question of textual interpretation with the “crisis of the Jewish law,” and offers a comparative reading of Martin Lu-

ther next to the German-Jewish thinker Erich Auerbach. In the first part of her chapter, Feldman discusses Luther's reflection on the biblical character of Moses. Luther emphasizes how Moses maximizes the conditions for producing crisis among Jewish believers in his writings. According to Luther, the whole point of Jewish law is to evoke a crisis—specifically, a crisis regarding the inability to obey the laws of God. In the second part of her article, Feldman points to the affinities between Luther's understanding of the Jewish Bible and law and Auerbach's notion of the *Figura*. This key term fuels his biblical interpretations, and specifically his commentary on the Binding of Isaac.

In the sixth chapter, the book shifts to the manner of heresy and rupture: Shaul Magid examines the tension of Judaism in modernity by comparatively reading the accounts of Leo Strauss and rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar on the crisis raised by Zionism and progress. Magid shows how Teitelbaum's political theological attack on Zionism is founded on doubt, the doubt of progress that invariably produces heresy. For Teitelbaum, political Zionism is a form of progress that destroys Judaism and undermines its exilic structural foundation. Strauss supported political Zionism yet believed it does not answer the unsolvable clash of Judaism that cannot squarely fit into the framework of modern progress. According to Strauss, Zionism could solve the constant threat on the lives of Jewish people at the price of losing some of the essences of Judaism itself.

In his chapter, Yotam Yzraely studies the potential involved in prophetic prophecy in times of rupture. The prophet is often perceived as an extreme threat to the existing political and religious institutions, which rely on dogma. However, the prophetic is also a unique resource in moments of great political crisis, in which theological statements tend to lose their meaning and efficiency in proposing political guidelines. Drawing on Martin Buber's *The Prophetic Faith* and *The Eclipse of God*, the chapter shows how the prophetic offers a necessary resource for theological-political rejuvenation in those moments of rupture. The prophetic serves as a new mediator between the theological and the political, offering a fresh theoretical framework for reimagining contemporary political landscapes.

In the eighth chapter, Agata Bielik-Robson portrays the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, as a heretical "Marrano" who suffered from a profound experience of crisis that slipped into many of his writings. She explains that the Marrano crisis is an experience of feeling in a constant state of exile (*galut*) from the traditional forms of Judaism and an expectation for a new tradition to come. According to Bielik-Robson, Judaism, which Scholem wishes to renew as a Marrano, can never be stabilized; it must remain in the form of crisis and paradox. On the one hand, there is a demand to continue a certain chain of transmission in which tradition is moved from one generation to the other. On the other hand, a secret or a "hidden truth" at the heart of Judaism evades us.

Daniel H. Weiss turns in his chapter to Moses Mendelssohn to find a stream of thought that rejects seeing heresy as a crisis and objects to the tendency to “hunt” heretics for their beliefs. In many cases, if something is judged as “heresy,” it is treated as a dangerous threat that should be condemned. Weiss points out that Mendelssohn was willing to engage with “heretical” views and thinkers that supposedly undermined his own core beliefs. According to Mendelssohn, engaging with heretics or heretical thought allows us to gain a deeper and more critical understanding of our position rather than just affirming this position without facing counterarguments.

The final chapters of this book address in different forms the manner of history and crisis. Cedric Cohen Skalli presents an inter-regional and inter-religious discussion of the crisis of liberalism that challenges some of the common assumptions in the study of intellectual history. He begins by painting with a broad brush the migration of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European liberal transformations to the rapidly changing Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. In the second part, the essay focuses on Paris’s interwar intellectual scene, where this expansion of liberalism is reflected critically from the perspective of the European crisis of the 1930s. Moving from the East to the West, the chapter reconstructs step by step a growing convergence that established itself between the theopolitical question of the late Ottoman Empire and important intellectual trends in the interwar period in Paris. For this purpose, it uses as a guiding thread a Jewish intellectual episode: Leo Strauss’s rediscovery of a Jewish–Islamic philosophical model successfully developed during the Middle Ages. The reconstruction of this episode and its intellectual background in the 1930s illuminates an overlooked interconnection with similar questioning in the late and post-Ottoman Levant.

In the eleventh chapter, Elliot R. Wolfson explores the crisis of modernity in the thought of Edith Wyschogrod by emphasizing her accounts of the notion of “mass murders” in the Second World War. Wolfson shows how the crisis of what Wyschogrod calls the “death event” changes the core of how the finitude of human life is evaluated. Put simply, the “death event” transforms how we comprehend the “predictability of our unpredictability,” fundamentally transforming our understanding of the uncertainties inherent in human existence.

In her chapter, Ronny Miron addresses the crisis of describing the history of sacred concepts and events in the age of secularism. Miron examines this crisis by comparatively reading the accounts of the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the literary critic Baruch Kurzweil on three terms: “God,” “history,” and “meaning.” According to Miron, in the writings of both thinkers “God” marks an ontological element within Jewish existence, “history” signifies current Jewish secularism, and “meaning” concerns the subjective stance towards God in the secular era.

In the final chapter, Gilad Sharvit delves into applying the concept of crisis to the historical crisis of Jewish exile within modern Jewish thought and Zionism. The perception of Jewish exile as a crisis or traumatic experience is a relatively recent addition to the term. For centuries, exile was not traditionally viewed primarily as trauma but had diverse interpretations. By juxtaposing modern Jewish thought (specifically the writings of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig) and Zionism, a shared perspective emerges that challenges the assumption that these thinkers solely criticized Zionism. The chapter aims to illustrate how the evolving understanding of exile encompasses various interpretations and applications, highlighting a shift in its meaning and investigating its theoretical consequences.

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Part One: **Interpretation**



Galili Shahar

# ***Mashber*: Crisis, Birth, Hebrew Version**

## **1 Crisis, Critique**

The discussion of crisis in Western tradition is often associated with the concept of critique. The affinity of both terms, “critique and crisis,” is rooted in the Greek verb “*κρίνω*” (*krínō*), referring to separation, a split, a break, the rupture that is a condition of judgment and critical thought. Major streams in Western philosophy are anchored in transforming the experience of *krínō* into metaphysical construction of (self-)critique, in which not only the initial conditions of thinking are reflected, but also the epistemological state of the subject itself.<sup>1</sup> Western subjectivity is grounded in crisis. The rupture, the separation of subject and object, creates the condition of thinking about, reflecting, observing, looking at. Crisis makes critique possible (necessary?). In this context we recall the being of *cogito*, a philosophical subject that reflects its own being not only in doubt, but due to a radical separation from it-self, denying its own body. The association of crisis with critique can be traced in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and afterwards in the German schools of Idealism.<sup>2</sup> Its point of departure can be traced in Immanuel Kant’s critical enterprise, notably with the concept of *Kritik* itself. While representing a systematic attempt at conceptual analysis of the possibilities/abilities of reason (in its cognitive, ethical/practical, and aesthetic implications), it also reflects gaps, tensions, separations/divisions, antinomies—a series of crises.<sup>3</sup> The dual implication of critique and crisis finds an echo in Kant’s discussions of the term “*Urteil*” (judg-

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1 On the cause of critique in the formation of modern Western subjectivity, compare with Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of the Enlightenment, their analysis of reason as a substance of a new myth, based on the sacrifice of the body (physical strength and athletic capacities), as demonstrated in the case of Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens. The critique of the Enlightenment as an abstract, alienated form of life is associated in a supplement of the book to the question of modern anti-Semitism. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 12–34, 54–56, 177–217. The thesis provided by Horkheimer and Adorno is somewhat dubious and speculative. They do, however, provide a significant document for the discussion of “critique and crisis” as a theoretical paradigm associated with self-reflection.

2 Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), 1–9, 101–03.

3 Compare with Kant’s Introduction to his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Immanuel Kant, “Einleitung,” in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Stuttgart: Könenmann, 1995): 49–70.

ment).<sup>4</sup> The term, which later found a critical interpretation in the early writings of Friedrich Hölderlin, refers to the initial (original) separation (*Ur-teilung*) of being, the rupture between subject and object as a point of departure of the philosophical enterprise.<sup>5</sup> The association of crisis and critique in the metaphysical conception of *Urteil* requires, of course, a precise, differentiating discussion, dealing also with the historical contexts of these philosophical projects around 1800. The concepts of crisis in the German schools were associated with the events of the Revolution in Paris, the Age of Terror and the continental wars, the defeat at Jena, and Napoleon's occupations. German thought, as much as being critical, dialectic, or even "tragic"—to follow Peter Szondi<sup>6</sup>—is a thought of crisis. Nietzsche's early writings, his attempt of "self-critique" following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, may attest to this perception of a crisis as a condition of critical thought, as much as a rupture of existence and an experience of shock, solitude, and sickness.<sup>7</sup> In Martin Heidegger's writings, despite his efforts to overcome the metaphysical plan of Western philosophy,<sup>8</sup> and his attempts of a "step-back" into the forgotten layers of the Greek tradition,<sup>9</sup> reconstructing what *logos* is, beyond the "critical" frameworks of the German schools, as the "gathering," the "belonging-together," the "housing" of being,<sup>10</sup> one still finds the traces of crisis, split (*Riss*), and downfall (*Untergang*), associated (partly in silence, or in forms of "denial") with the historical events of the 1940s.<sup>11</sup>

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4 On the implications of the *Urteilkraft*, the power of judgment, in his "critical" philosophical enterprise and its functions in the conceptual realm of cognition and the emotional sphere of aesthetic experience, compare with Kant's introduction to his Third Critique. Immanuel Kant, "Einleitung," in *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2009): 486–519.

5 Compare with Hölderlin's sentence: "Urtheil ist im höchsten und strengsten Sinne die ursprüngliche Trennung des in der intellektuellen Anschauung innigst vereinigten Objects und Subjects, diejenige Trennung, wodurch erst Object und Subject möglich wird." Friedrich Hölderlin, "Seyn, Urtheil," in *Theoretische Schriften* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998): 7.

6 Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1961).

7 Compare with Nietzsche's late introduction of the "Birth of Tragedy," titled as an "Attempt of Self-Criticism," considering writing/thinking of crisis as attached to both biographical and historical moment. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Versuch einer Selbstkritik," in *Die Geburt der Tragödie (Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 1)* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999): 11–22.

8 Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1987).

9 Martin Heidegger, "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik," in *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske Verlag, 1986): 31–67.

10 Martin Heidegger, "Logos," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze, vol. 3* (Pfullingen: G. Neske), 196.

11 Compare with Heidegger's translation/interpretation of Sophocles' chorus poem in the tragedy *Antigone*, embedded in his critique of the metaphysical plan in Western philosophy. Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 112–26. Compare also with his "Comments" on Hölderlin's poetry, notably the poem *Der Ister*: Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, Band 53: Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister"*

The association of crisis and critique, while containing significant implications, notably for progressive thinking today, reflecting the challenges of climatic disasters, global pandemics, the collapse of social orders, wars, and political violence, is still bound up with certain secularist assumptions, gender/ethnic conventions, and orientalist perspectives. Thinking crisis today, however, recalls an association with radical, transformative forms of subjectivity and with queerness, while reflecting the tensions, states of alienation, and modes of resonance and belonging.<sup>12</sup> The term “crisis” calls for intervention, further engagement, negotiating, comparing with other different traditions of thought and of writing. When we ask, however, about “other, different traditions,” we first have to ask about the term “tradition” itself—which stands not only for a corpus of knowledge, habits, heritage, and legacies, but first and foremost for transmission, namely delivery (in Latin, *traditio*). Tradition is how things are handed over; in German, *Überlieferung*; in Hebrew, *masoret*; in Arabic (and New Persian), *taqlid*.<sup>13</sup> Tradition is giving—a “gift.”<sup>14</sup>

Traditions, however, are often associated in modern Western thought with “ancient” (or at least pre-modern), “religious,” “patriarchal” institutions, and are supposed themselves to suffer crisis, often being characterized by “downfall,” or affiliated with conservative worldviews and non-critical modes, with “beliefs” and “prejudices.” It is not rare to find these attitudes anchored in major trends of the European Enlightenment,<sup>15</sup> and in modernist and contemporary, mostly liberal schools of critical thought. Tradition is often understood as a non-critical institution, and associated with “doxa.”

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(Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1993). On Heidegger’s denial/acceptance of the Nazis’ project, compare his remarks on Judaism in his “Black Notebooks”: Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 96: *Schwarze Hefte 1939–1941* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014): 241–43, 256–57, 262–63. For further reading, see Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger und “die Juden”* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1988); Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014).

12 Compare with Hartmut Rosa’s reflection of crisis and modes of resonance. Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).

13 The term “tradition” has different implications in Arabic and Persian: *taqlid* refers not only to the corpus of theological knowledge but also to its learning. The theological corpus and the proper habitus in Islam is termed as *Sunnah*, an equivalent to the Hebrew *Halacha*.

14 Gift is a giving. What is being given, however, by the “name of the father” is not life alone, but death. Compare Jacques Derrida, “Whom to Give To,” in *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2008): 56–59, 79–81.

15 Compare with Kant’s essay on the meaning of Enlightenment as a school of critical thought, resisting and overcoming the traditional institutions, notably the Church. Immanuel Kant, “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung,” in *Werke, Vol. VI: Der Streit der Facultäten und kleine Abhandlungen* (Cologne: Könnemann, 1995).

In major Jewish/Hebrew enterprises of *Haskalah* and modern writing, the concept of critique was often associated with visions of crisis or with a break in tradition—primarily in its Halachic (Orthodox) manifestations.<sup>16</sup> Modern Jewish thought was often rooted in reflective modes of crisis, referring itself to acts of emancipation from religious forms of life. In these contexts tradition was understood as an obstacle, a fossil—a relic of a Jewish past, identified with rabbinical (masculine, conservative) authority. However, significant Jewish thinkers and writers, who partly followed the streams of Counter-Enlightenment, (Neo) Romanticism and Expressionism, engaged with traditions not only as an expression of past forms of Jewish life, but also as embodying radical, futuristic potential for renewal and restoration.<sup>17</sup> Franz Rosenzweig’s reenactment of Jewish liturgical traditions,<sup>18</sup> Martin Buber’s adoptions of the Chassidic tale, Gershom Scholem’s scholarly rehabilitation of Jewish Mysticism,<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin’s conception of Talmudic legends,<sup>20</sup> and Else Lasker-Schüler’s expressionistic revival of biblical figures<sup>21</sup> belong to this modernist framework. What they share is a critical (ironic, playful) and engaged (performative) mode of negotiating traditions in a state of crisis.

The questions emerging from philosophies, poetics, and performances of crisis in the Jewish world were not of course separate from the influences and affinities, the discourses, and the languages of the peoples with which the Jewish authors were associated. German-Jewish thought and literature was deeply anchored in major European trends, and its study thus demands a comparative approach or, better, interventions in major discourses of continental philosophy and modernist

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16 Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Cultural Disjunctions: Post-Traditional Jewish Identities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 1–9, 10–24, 103–104.

17 On the modernist engagement with tradition, mainly in the realm of works of art, compare with Adorno’s discussion. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), 9–11, 140–143. On the German-Jewish (modernist) turn to the realms of tradition, see Stéphane Mosès, *Der Engel der Geschichte: Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 1994).

18 Compare with Rosenzweig’s translation of and commentary on Yehuda Halevi’s liturgical poems. Franz Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi, Zweiundneunzig Hymen und Gedichte* (Berlin: Verlag, Lambert Schneider, 1927).

19 Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997).

20 Compare with Benjamin’s (mis)interpretations of the Talmudic Aggadah and its implications in his essay on Kafka. Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: Zur Wiederkehr seines Todestages,” in *Benjamin über Kafka. Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981): 9–38.

21 Else Lasker-Schüler, *Gedichte (1902–1943)* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1959); Else Lasker-Schüler, “Die Nächte der Tino von Bagdad,” in *Gesammelte Werke, Vol. II: Prosa und Schauspiele* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998): 61–113.

literature. There are different references, for instance, to how to associate German-Jewish “case studies” of crisis within the European (i. e., German) schools of thought—the *Pantheismusstreit*, notably, is one of these references.<sup>22</sup> The “competition” between Mendelsohn and Kant regarding the question “*Was ist Aufklärung*,” and Salomon Maimon’s *Lebensgeschichte* also count among the first references of modern Jewish writing interwoven with paths of *Aufklärung*. Franz Rosenzweig’s critique of the German legacies of *Bildung* and his turn to the realms of Jewish tradition in his *Stern der Erlösung*,<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin’s critical “conversations” with Bertolt Brecht and Gershom Scholem concerning the implications of crisis in Kafka’s literature and its vocation as a “prayer,” and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s critique of *Aufklärung* and its association with certain Jewish liturgical traditions<sup>24</sup> are among the significant case studies of German-Jewish writing, reflecting crisis, performing critique, and reclaiming tradition, while interfering in the worlds of German literature and thought. These cases provide us with evidence of the different paths in which German-Jewish authors engaged in states of crisis, interrupting major modes of writing in German, while establishing their own modes of (self-)critique. These authors left us with a rich *Nachlaß*—leftovers and reminders of tradition to come.<sup>25</sup>

Once we re-turn to discuss the matter of crisis in the Jewish worlds, we recall these historical contexts, cultural affiliations, forms of resistance and acts of intervention, modes of belonging and paths of escape, in which Jewish thought reflected

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22 Compare with Jacoby’s essay on Spinoza (1785), written in the form of letters to Mendelsohn, carrying accusations against rationalism, determinism/fatalism, and the denial of morals and faith, as consequences of Spinoza’s theory that affected German intellectuals such Goethe and Lessing. Friedrich Heinrich Jacoby, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2000), 5–59.

23 Compare with Rosenzweig’s comments on Goethe, Wagner, and the legacies of *Bildung*, alongside the liturgical turn to worlds of Hebrew prayer. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung. Der Mensch und sein Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976): 272, 306–19, 329–30, 372–75.

24 Horkheimer and Adorno, in the critique of the Enlightenment’s rational, abstract, alienated structure of thinking, associate Judaism in their discussion as a religion of anonymous entities that is based on prohibition against the pronunciation of God’s name, hinting at the costs of Jewish (self) sacrifice. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 29–30, 177–200.

25 We recall the case of the Jewish author Karl Emil Franzos interrupting the course of modern German drama by adapting in his edition a “false” interpretation of the final lines of Georg Büchner’s drama *Leonce und Lena*, arguing for the phrase “*kommende Religion*,” a religion to come, instead of “*kommode Religion*,” a religion of comfort. Franzos’s “philological failure” charged Büchner’s comedy with ironic (“false”) messianic power. For further reading of German-Jewish formations of tradition, see Alfred Bodenheimer, *Ungebrochen gebrochen. Über jüdische Narrative und Traditionsbildung* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012).

itself. The main concern of our current discussion, however, is providing another, minor version of crisis, based on the Hebrew term “*mashber*,” mainly according to Talmudic Midrash and biblical exegesis. The discussion of crisis is associated with a certain tradition—the hermeneutic one. “Crisis” here implies not only an ontological separation or an epistemic rupture, but also refers to gaps, fragmentations, contractions, and disputes among and between the rabbinical schools of Midrash. Crisis is an event of interpretation, an opening of tradition itself as a form of delivering. We thus take a “step aside” into the realm of tradition, but not, however, in search of an act of “original” Jewish thought. The Talmudic corpus itself was very much anchored in the Persianate surroundings,<sup>26</sup> as much as medieval Jewish philosophy, poetry, and Kabbalah were deeply rooted in the encounters with Muslim (Arabic) and Christian traditions.<sup>27</sup> The discussion of *mashber* as a “Hebrew version” of crisis does not, however, imply an argument for an exclusive Jewish conception. It should rather be understood as a “step,” an interference, providing a local resonance, a materialist/feminine expression of *krínō*.

Our major discussion offers a presentation of *mashber* in its Talmudic context<sup>28</sup> and deals mainly with the inner semantic tensions of this term—referring to the act of birth associated with disaster, failure, suffering, and pain, as well as with care and response—as modes of a feminine body.<sup>29</sup> In its Hebrew version, “crisis” is affiliated with giving, handing over, an act of delivery. Crisis, *mashber*, hints at the particular concept of *masoret*, tradition (transmission), based, however, on the offering of a maternal body. *Mashber* is an opening of language (the motherly lips, a “mother-tongue”). *Mashber* has a voice—yelling, the cry of sorrows, and the joy of birth. It is a sound for prayer and lament, a (pre-)liturgical one. In this sense the Hebrew version of *mashber* serves as an echo chamber of the metaphysical concept of *krínō* (crisis and critique), while offering a turning point, an inversion of its major terms. Our discussion thus offers to study the concept of crisis as an inner experience of tradition, involving opening, rupture, pain, and delivery. *Mashber*, following its Talmudic references, also implies a certain gender constellation, a feminization of its bodies.

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26 Shai Secunda, *The Talmud's Red Fence: Menstrual Impurity and Difference in Babylonian Judaism and Its Sasanian Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

27 On Jewish and Muslim formative encounters, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

28 Major references of *mashber* are found in Mishna *arakhin*, a, 4, and Talmud, *arakhin*, 7, a1–a2.

29 On the term “*mashber*” and its Talmudic and Kabbalistic implications, compare also Ruth Karavanov Kaniel, *Human Throes: Birth in Psychoanalysis and in the Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2018), 102–103, 135–38.



## 2 Mashber: An Opening

The word “*mashber*” has several references in the Hebrew Bible. For example, in the book of *Kings*:

יום־צָרָה וְתוֹכָחָה וּנְאֻצָּה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי בָאוּ בָנִים עַד־מִשְׁבֵּר וְכַח אֵין לָלֶדֶת

This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy; for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth. (*Kings*, II, 19:3)<sup>30</sup>

*Mashber* is translated into English as “birth,” the act of delivery, which itself is associated with a “day of trouble,” with a crisis, powerlessness, and fragility. *Mashber* is an edge, a point to where the newborn arrives at, the opening. This verse is recited in the Book of Isaiah, obtaining prophetic implications. Rab Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) in the twelfth century reads it as follows:

עת צרה הדומה לאשה היושבת על המשבר ואין כח לולד לצאת

A day of trouble similar to a woman who sits on the chair of delivery and the newborn has no strength to come out.

Rab David Kimkhi (Radak) of the thirteenth century reads the verse as follows:

המשיל הצרה לאישה אשר יאחזה חבליה, ובא הבן עד המשבר והוא הרחם, מקום יציאת הוולד, כי אז חבליה יותר קשים כשהוולד קרוב לצאת.

While Rashi follows the Talmud to read *mashber* as a chair, a seat for the women to sit while delivering, Radak chooses to interpret *mashber* as the opening of the womb, a cut in the body of the woman giving birth in pain. Eliezer Ben Yehuda follows these two interpretations in his Hebrew dictionary to read *mashber* as both the “mouth,” the opening of a womb (פי הרחם), and the chair of delivery.

The biblical verse refers to *mashber* as the site of birth associated with a day of trouble, carrying with it eschatological implications. *Mashber*, while referring to beginning, new life, also implies a disaster, a failure, suffering, and a prophecy of destruction. *Mashber* is a reference not only to the abstract state of crisis, but also to a physical rupture of a feminine body. *Mashber* is not only a concept but also a reference to a body, an organ, a feminine one. The Mishna says:

האשה שהיא יוצאה לרג אֵין ממתינן לה עד שתלד. יושבה על המשבר, ממתינן לה עד שתלד

<sup>30</sup> All English translations of the Hebrew Bible included in this chapter are from the King James Version.

In the case of a pregnant woman who is taken by the court to be executed, the court does not wait to execute her until she gives birth. Rather, she is killed immediately. But with regard to a woman taken to be executed who sat on the chair in the throes of labor, the court waits to execute her until she gives birth.<sup>31</sup>

The Mishna refers to a woman who sits on *mashber*, the chair of birth, yet in a certain Halachic context, discussing the case of a woman who was sentenced to death, it says that if the woman already sits on her chair, the *mashber*, namely that she is about to give birth, the performance of judgment should be postponed until the day of delivery.<sup>32</sup> *Mashber* is the foresight, the expectation of birth, the vision of new life, associated, however, with judgment and a death sentence. *Mashber* embodies a semantic contradiction, the ambiguities of being, represented by a female, a mother, giving birth, who herself has been sentenced to death. The (German) conception of judgment as rooted in crisis, in the preliminary cut (*Urtheil*) of subjectivity, obtains in the Talmudic version of *mashber* a radical material/maternal interpretation. The act of judgment, the sentence, carries with it the cut of/from the motherly body.

The Talmudic version (here, Mishna) of *mashber*, while referring to a feminine body of delivery being discussed in a certain Halachic context of judgment, provides us with insights regarding the body and gender of crisis, undermining its metaphysical, abstract, neutral/alienated conception. Thinking on the conditions of crisis in these Talmudic contexts recalls the realities, the persons and the bodies, and the singularities and textualities of this term.

The Midrash often refers to the double implications of *mashber*—as a message of birth and of death, a crisis/a brake, an opening, that is both of sorrow and of radical (messianic) hope. So we read in Midrash *Devarim Rabbah* (on the Book of Deuteronomy):

"יענך ה' ביום צרה" מהו ביום צרה, אמר ריש לקיש למה הדבר דומה לאשה שישבה על המשבר לילד והיתה מצטערת לילד אמרו מי שענה את אמך הוא יענה אותך [...] אמר משה לפני הקב"ה ריבוננו של עולם כשתהא רואה בניך בצער ואין מי שיבקש רחמים עליהם מיד ענה אותך, אמר לו הקב"ה משה חייך בכל שעה שיקראו אותי אני אענה אותם.<sup>33</sup>

The Midrash asks: "And God will answer you on the day of trouble. What is this day of trouble?" And it answers: it is like a woman sitting on *mashber*, the chair of delivery, in pain. The Midrash tells us further: "the one who answered the pray-

<sup>31</sup> Mishna, *arakhin*, a, 4 (the English translation follows the William Davidson Edition).

<sup>32</sup> Mishna, *arakhin*, a, 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Devarim Rabbah*, 2, 11.

er of your mother, he will answer your prayer too.” Such was God’s response to Moses, the Midrash relates, as Moses asked Him for mercy upon the children of Israel. God says: “I will answer their call at any hour.” It is a promise for a (divine) response, a promise for comfort, that the Midrash provides to his readers.

However, the word עָנָה (*‘aná*), implying in Hebrew an answer, a response, can also be read, as if written with a different diacritic, as עָנָה, an act of torture. This double reading (or is this an eccentric hearing?) of the word is not mentioned in the Midrash itself but does not seem to be at odds with its major hermeneutic approach and vocal sensibilities; the Midrash often “hears” the words and listens to voices and contradictions of meaning. There is a certain “masochistic” element in the stages of *mashber*, associated with waiting, dependence, torture, and prayer.<sup>34</sup>

Crisis is represented in the Hebrew/Aramaic Midrash by a woman giving birth in pain. According to a major line of interpretation, she also embodies the sorrows, the troubles of Israel. Her body, the womb, stands as a sign of a “collective body,” a corpus of a liturgical community. The female body of the Talmudic Midrash serves as an “allegory” (*mashal*), signifying, beyond its concrete, material being, “things to come.” *Mashber* is thus a “figura,” a prophecy.<sup>35</sup> At that same hour—“the day of trouble”—one should expect the prayer for salvation (or at least a wish for comfort, relief) to be answered. The opening/the cut of the feminine (motherly) body is also a mouth, a call/a prayer that carries with it messianic implications. May we say: *mashber*, the “mouth of the womb” (פִּי הַרְחֵם), is an origin of mercy (רַחֲמִים). Is this not another meaning to be related to the “mother-tongue”?

We are aware of the allegorical implications being related to the feminine body in Jewish traditions. It is part of a certain rabbinic (masculine, patriarchal) tradition in which the feminine is addressed as a divine manifestation (*Shechinah*) and as a collective organ of an exilic nation (*Knesset Israel*). *Mashber* can be understood in this context as a (masculine) reclaiming, a repossessing, of the feminine organ. Yet, it can also be understood as an act of feminization or, better, as a trans-gendered act of interpretation, playing, moving between the sexes. What *mashber* implies in its Talmudic context is a not only a “male taking over” the chair of a “feminine” delivery, transforming the motherly pains of birth into hermeneutic maneuver of a patriarchal corpus. Rather, *mashber* is an experience of an opening, separation, and joining, a transformative experience of gender itself.

<sup>34</sup> On masochism as a hermeneutic approach, see Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil and Aude Willm (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Compare with Erich Auerbach’s discussion of the Latin word “*Figura*,” in relation to its Greek sources, and its Christian reinterpretations, mostly as a name for the pre-figurations of Christ, and the prophecies of the messianic arrival. Erich Auerbach, “*Figura*,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern: Francke, 1967), 55–92.

We shall, however, reflect on this question once more: How does *mashber* provide (if at all) possibilities for inversions of gender differences?

In Midrash *Vayikrah Rabbah* (on the Book of Leviticus), we read that the bowel of a woman (מעֵי), the womb, is made of “spines and ropes,” and when the mother sits on her chair, the *mashber*, she does not throw out her baby all at once, but gradually.<sup>36</sup> The Talmudic subject of *mashber* is not a fall (falling-down), a being “thrown into the world” (*in die Welt geworfen*),<sup>37</sup> into states of alienation and solitude, but rather delivered gently. This Talmudic version of crisis resists the metaphysical plan of subjectivity anchored in conceptions of (violent, traumatic) separation. Not only pain and fear are associated with the act of delivery, but also bonding and care. Crisis (in its Talmudic interpretation) carries these ambiguities, signifying a separation from the motherly body, a cut, a wound, a source of anxiety,<sup>38</sup> as well as the gift of life and death. The same word, the same body bears the dialectic of being. Crisis, the opening of the womb, is interwoven with “ropes” (*chavalim*). This term implies suffering; the pain of birth is connected in the Hebrew tradition (the biblical, as much as the Talmudic and Kabbalistic) with the birth pangs of the Messiah (*chevlei mashiach*), as hinted in the biblical prophesies and in the Midrash.<sup>39</sup> So it says in the Book of Isaiah, referring to the days of salvation:

כְּמוֹ הָרֵהָ תִקְרִיב לְלֵדֹת תַּחֲלִיל תִּזְעַק בְּחַבְלֶיהָ כִּן הָיִינוּ מִפְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה

Like as a woman with child, that draweth near the time of her delivery, is in pain, and crieth out in her pangs; so have we been in thy sight, O Lord. (26:17)

*Mashber* carries with it painful vocal textures—the cry, the yelling, sounds of torture. These sounds of the motherly body serve as an initial call of a prayer. *Mashber* (we may argue) is the “mother-tongue” of liturgical tradition.

### 3 Voices

*Mashber*, the Hebrew/Aramaic version of crisis, is affiliated with voices—sounds of pain and of joy, sighs of lament. *Mashber* bears the voice, the cry of a prayer. It is

36 *Vayikrah Rabbah*, 14, 4.

37 Compare with Heidegger’s ontological analysis of *Verfall* (fall), and *Geworfenheit* (thrownness). Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993), 175–90.

38 Compare with Lacan’s remarks on the cut, the opening of language, associated with desire and anxieties, transformed from the (motherly) body into the realm of the signifiers. Jacques Lacan, *Die Angst* (Das Seminar, Buch X), trans. Hans-Dieter Gondek (Vienna: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2010), 287–96.

39 Notably in *Sanhedrin* 68, a2. Compare also Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, 366–70.

the voice of a woman giving birth—groaning, yelling—that serves as an initial vocal for the Hebrew prayer. Her voice echoes both the sounds of lamentation and the cry of hope. Both life and death are expressed in the moment of crisis. From the *Zohar* we recall the Midrash (itself of a Talmudic reference) on these voices that are not to be lost in the world.<sup>40</sup> It tells about the voices of Tora and the voices of prayer that rise to heaven, accepted by eternity. But among the voices that do not rise to heaven but are left on earth, yet do not perish, is the voice of a woman (*kol chaiah*; literally, the voice of a living creature/an animal) sitting on her chair (*mashber*). Her voice is heard alongside the voice of a man dying, as his soul leaves the body, and the voice of a snake while its skin is shed. These voices of sorrow wander in the air until they enter the ravines of dust, hidden under earth. And once a human utters a sound, these buried, hidden voices rise again in the air as an echo of that human voice. *Mashber*, the opening (the mouth) of the female body, is an origin of a foundational voice, a cry, a sound of human suffering, signifying the beginning and end of creaturely being (*chaiah*). Not yet a word, nor a proper name, but a cry, the yelling of a mother, an expression (before all words), a “polylogue”; this is the sound of *mashber*.<sup>41</sup> This voice becomes a resonance (earthly, material, responsive) and serves as an echo chamber of the human language. The voice of the female body at crisis (opening) is a mother-tongue of all that was created.

The sounds of *mashber* in their Talmudic (or Kabbalistic) contexts are vocals of prayers and of studying. These sounds are heard in assemblies of scholars, teachers, and disciples, as the chair of delivery is transformed into a site of learning, *Yeshiva*, the gathering of students. The vocal textures of the Midrash, to recall *Eichah Rabbah* (on Lamentations), are those of women weeping, sighing. Their voices—the sighs of *mashber* (אנחה) on the day of trouble—are now the voices of priests and of prayers, the voices of the readers, lamenting.<sup>42</sup> Rethinking crisis, in association with its Hebrew traditions of lament, may lead—as it did in the case of Gershom Scholem—to enterprises of translation and of studies, in which the voice of a woman, the cry of lamentation, serves as an initial condition for reflecting destruc-

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<sup>40</sup> *Zohar*, 3, 168b–169a.

<sup>41</sup> On voices, materialistic, feminine, not (only) governed by the Name-of-the-Father, founding the language (for literature), compare with Kristeva’s term “Polylogue.” Julia Kristeva, “Polylogue,” *Contemporary Literature* 19, no. 3 (1978): 336–50.

<sup>42</sup> On the association of lamentation, prayer and studying, compare Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Bodies Performing in Ruins: The Lamenting Mother in Ancient Hebrew Texts,” in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological and Literary Perspectives*, eds. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014): 33–63.

tion and (messianic) hope.<sup>43</sup> Yet may one listen to a different voice, a silent one (or rather quite loud), being interwoven with the vocals of *mashber*, the voice of *mis-birth*?

## 4 Gathering

The discussion of crisis, *mashber* in its Talmudic version, leads to several findings.

First, *mashber* is a rupture, a cut, a sign of a feminine body, the “mouth” of the maternal corpus, signifying a beginning, a delivery, the opening of tradition, its point of departure.

Second, tradition as such is not solely a “gift” given from Father to Son, namely the corpus (and practice) of studying and norms, *Mitzvoth* and *Halakhot*, but a delivery, which is given “before the law,” not in the “Name of the Father,”<sup>44</sup> but as an act of language, associated as a “mother-tongue.” In this respect the discussion of crisis as *mashber* leads to inversion (gender reversal) that carries the potential for transformation/interruption of the patriarchal order. The inversion takes place also in the hermeneutic performances of the Midrash, expressed also in its vocal textures.

Third, following the Talmudic version, *mashber*, the site of birth, a delivery in a moment of crisis, is associated with danger, trouble, suffering (torture), and the sentence/judgment of death. These are immanent to the hour of birth, as all things that come into the world are essentially broken. The separation from the mother’s body, however, is not only a rupture, a leap into a void, but also an entrance into a space of response.

Fourth, *mashber* is a source of a feminine voice, a cry, the sound of sorrow, a lament that serves as an echo for the states of human being in this world. It is an origin of vocal texture expressing the belonging-together of life and death, suffering and joy. The voice of crisis is an expression of responsibility, carrying with it the potential for response (an answer), and thus signifying the dialogical dimension of language towards its liturgical implications.

Fifth, *mashber*, while understood as a chair of delivery, or as the mouth of the womb, is associated with the divine message, prophecies, and the promises of redemption. Crisis is a theo-political event that includes the potential for messianic

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<sup>43</sup> Compare with Scholem’s translation of the Hebrew Lamentations and his interpretation of their poetical and metaphysical aspects. Gershom Scholem, “Über die Klage und das Klagelied,” in *Tagebücher, Vol. II: 1917–1923* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000): 128–33.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Die-Namen-Des-Vaters*, trans. Hans-Dieter Gondek (Vienna: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2006).

arrival. However, it not only provides an eschatological solution (*Din*, judgment; *Yeshua*, salvation), but invites discussion, acts of learning, reading, and listening. *Mashber* is a chair of studying.

The Hebrew version of crisis—gathered in the term “*mashber*,” as discussed in its Talmudic contexts—provides a critical view that includes the ambiguities of being (the dialectic of life and death, separation and response, suffering and salvation, gender differences). The Hebrew term may provide us with the potential of conceptual inversion, while associated with major terms of “critique and crisis,” performing an interruption in the metaphysical schema of *krínō*.

What, however, are the implications of these interpretations/interventions in the course of Western thought? The Talmudic versions of *mashber* do not suggest an “alternative” mode of thinking; they offer neither an “ethical turn” (or a moral, pedagogical example) nor an act of contra-tradition.<sup>45</sup> *Mashber* too, like *krínō*, is associated with rupture, separation, judgment, and death. The Talmudic version of crisis, however, is not only abstract and conceptual, but also material and maternal, resisting the metaphysical (phallogocentric) plan of modern philosophy, while affiliated with a feminine body.<sup>46</sup> Discussing crisis not without the Hebrew corpus may hint at operations of tradition and forms of delivery that are not consumed by patriarchal order, but rather confused by its genders.<sup>47</sup> *Mashber* implies transfigurations, and to a certain degree it signifies a trans-gendered body, a gathering of feminine and masculine figures (mothers, prophets, priests and scholars, newborns), and a collection of voices (cry, joy, prayer, lamentation). In its herme-

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45 Compare with Levinas’s significant enterprises, offering an ethical turn in the course of Western thought, reorienting the question of being toward alterity. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 33–81; compare also with the chapter “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992): 37–58. Levinas’s Talmudic readings are of course another source of these efforts of reorientation in the history of philosophy: Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

46 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wang (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

47 On the confusions of genders, the critique of masculinity, and analysis of counter-patriarchal orders in Jewish Talmudic traditions, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Daniel Boyarin, *The Talmud: A Personal Take – Selected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). On the gender implications in the discourses of Kabbalah, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); Daniel Abrams, “A Light of Her Own: Minor Kabbalistic Traditions on the Ontology of the Divine Feminine,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 15 (2006): 7–29; Jay Michaelson, “Kabbalah and Queer Theology,” *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2012): 42–59.

neutic performances *mashber* stands as a site for a dialogical (responsible) form of crisis. It invites us to reflect tradition in its “critical” moments, while connected with ambiguous textualities, semantic fragments, sensual expressions, and odd voices. The discussion of *mashber* implies attendance.

## 5 Inversion

The discussion of *mashber* in Hebrew/Aramaic texts refers to female embodiments. The biblical exegesis and the Talmudic Midrash, we argue, seem to “reclaim” the feminine body—the motherly corpus—transforming it into a limb of hermeneutic practice. The “mouth of a womb” turns in these contexts into a mouth of Talmudic conversations. The Midrash “takes over” the chair of delivery, while discussing Halacha and prophecies of the day of judgment. These acts of interpretation are, however, associated with gender confusions, unsolved tensions, connected to a feminized body of a cut, an opening (a wound). Following Hélène Cixous’s terms, *mashber* (the opening of the womb) carries with it the potential of a “medusa face,” affiliated with the feminine organs of horror and abjection.<sup>48</sup> While disrupting major conceptual schemes, invading the metaphysical plan of Western thought, these monstrous, bleeding organs infect the discourse of subjectivity with smells, stains, cries, and horrifying laughter.<sup>49</sup>

Our own discussion, while anchored in certain Talmudic traditions, is not free from hermeneutic performance tied to acts of over-interpretation and appropriation. *Mashber* offers us the potential of engagement, based on interventions in the major structure of critical theory, challenging its abstract formation, while dealing with sensual experience, with bodies and voices, embedded in the Talmudic textures of crisis. In these vocal textures of the Hebrew/Aramaic Midrash we may also attend, however, to moments of *misbirth*: the resistance, the denial, the failures of delivery. The failures of birth (infertility, miscarriage, abortion) may signify a radical interruption in the realm of tradition,<sup>50</sup> hinting perhaps at different forms of *mashber*, inverting the modes of delivery (contra-tradition?).

The discussion of *mashber* as an opening, a cut of a motherly body, signifies what we may call a “mother-tongue” of tradition. The delivery, however, the giving, which demands response, is also left as a foreign word in the realm of language.

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48 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93; Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (London: Routledge, 1993).

49 Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 32–40.

50 Compare with the Talmudic discussions of miscarriage, notably in *Yevamot*, 69b; *Menachot*, 99b.



Something is left unheard in this act of delivery. Also in its Talmudic contexts, something does not let itself be translated (between Aramaic, Hebrew and the Western languages), refusing to be consumed by interpretation, escaping conceptual efforts of domestication, resisting scholarship as well. *Mashber* is a voice—thin, an expression of fragility, not yet a word, a groan, not even a sign, but a sigh.

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Ori Rotlevy

# The Crisis of Democracy and the Turn to Tradition: Habermas and Benjamin

Jürgen Habermas has famously argued that the social integration of deliberative democracies faces a looming risk due to the uncontrolled colonization of the life-world by economic and administrative systems.<sup>1</sup> This development has jeopardized the achievements of this form of government, which provides, according to Habermas, favorable conditions for public rational discourse. The contemporary socio-cultural landscape, characterized as postsecular, which emerges from the presence of religious communities and traditions within public spheres of predominantly secularized countries, presents, Habermas continues to argue, an opportunity for resolving this crisis.

The crisis pertains especially for the case of the republican model of democracy, wherein social solidarity is based on a constitution rather than on a common cultural-religious background. It requires commitment from citizens, for they are not merely the addressees of the law but its authors. Motivation is also essential to maintaining this solidarity: The expectation from citizens is not merely that they do not disobey laws when they follow their personal interests, but that they realize their rights for participation and communication concerning the general good.

External threats pose dangers for this kind of solidarity: Modernization processes cause human beings to become isolated individuals driven primarily by their self-interest; the ascendancy of markets without sufficient political oversight in the global economy results in the erosion of regulatory functions; a de-politization of the citizen occurs with the decrease of hope that the global community will become an actual political force. Habermas points to these problems from within the context of globalization and bureaucratization in Germany and the European Union. But we might add as an example the crisis of solidarity and sense of participation around the world during the Covid quarantines; the January 2020 attack on the US Capitol; the similar attack on the Brazilian parliament in January 2023; and the ongoing crisis in Israeli democracy, due to the attempts at a judiciary overhaul, which deepen the disintegration of Israeli society.

One of Habermas's major responses in face of this crisis is the demand "not to exclude *a fortiori* that [it is possible to] discover, even in religious utterances, semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and intro-

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1 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

duced into a secular discourse.”<sup>2</sup> And he himself exemplifies this in his dialogue with religious traditions, as in the dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger, and in his latest book, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, which turns the relation between faith and knowledge to the axis of the history of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In all this he is being attentive to religious citizens and to the contents of their traditions. He recognizes within these traditions and their scripture significant sensitivities to the current state, attention to social pathologies and to individuals who do not succeed in advancing their lives to the ends they chose, and possibilities for ways out of this deep crisis in common life. The intention is not to propose that adopting religious beliefs will solve the crisis, but rather that the contents of religious traditions might assist in forming a solution to democracy’s crisis.

This dialogue stirred a debate regarding a shift in Habermas’ thought. Such books by Habermas as *Religion and Nationality*, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, *Dialectics of Secularization*, and his latest history of philosophy brought prominent interpreters such as Eduardo Mendieta to argue that this development expresses a major turn in the thought of a critical theorist that once championed secularization.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, other interpreters, such as Peter Gordon, highlight the continuity in Habermas’ thought.<sup>5</sup> Habermas responded to the question of whether or not his thought exhibits a shift in a recent interview:

I have been interested in religious motifs since my dissertation. Since the mid-1980s, I have merely given greater prominence to the reservation that there could still be *untapped semantic potentials of religious origin* from which the irreligious daughters and sons of modernity might still have something to learn in their own way.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I wish not to intervene in the debate about continuity or change in Habermas, but rather to think of crisis and the opportunity of critique it provides. Namely, I ask what is the critical potential that Habermas finds in the constellation

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2 Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (October 2008): 29, emphasis mine.

3 See Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006); Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019).

4 Eduardo Mendieta, “Religion,” in *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, eds. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 394–99.

5 Peter E. Gordon, “Is There an Asymmetry Problem in the Genealogy of Postmetaphysical Reason?” *Constellations* 28 (2021): 45–50.

6 Claudia Czingon, Aletta Diefenbach, and Victor Kempf, “Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life’s Work,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7–8 (December 2020): 18, emphasis mine.

of the crisis of deliberative democracies and the postsecular moment. More specifically, to what extent the dialogue this constellation encourages—the dialogue with religious traditions that is based on the translation of their contents to secular discourse—allows reflexivity on a new level, and enables pointing from within the current socio-political predicament towards its beyond. Against this background, I address the limitations of Habermas' dialogue by reading Walter Benjamin, who Habermas sees as a major example of such a translation.

Various criticisms have been leveled against Habermas' dialogue with religion. Peter Gordon, for instance, is concerned about the asymmetry of the dialogue, its unidirectional character, which is always from faith to knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Amy Allen argues that Habermas uses this dialogue to vindicate postsecular reason, rather than to problematize it.<sup>8</sup> Yet such criticisms do not focus on *the* central point of his model of critique in a postsecular age: the *potential* of religious *content*. This essay is dedicated to the potential of the dialogue Habermas begins, and the way he misses it due to his focus on a limited kind of content, and more generally on contents alone, disregarding the potential of the medium or form of tradition itself.

I begin with an analysis of two main aspects of the critical potential Habermas finds in religious content. The first is the meta-critical level he calls de-transcendentalization of critique, or, in non-technical terms, the humbling of critique. This process shows that critique advances through a form of non-coercive argument, within language, within history, by learning from its other, faith. The second more concrete critical potential of the dialogue with religion is that it points to a beyond from within a social crisis that threatens to annihilate the possibility of such transcendence. Then, I turn to Walter Benjamin. I argue that while Benjamin is interested in the contents of religious traditions, and specifically the Jewish one—his use of the story of Korah and its translation to the concept of divine violence is a clear example related to the 1920s crisis of parliamentary democracies—his interest is in transformative content rather than the legitimizing content Habermas is looking for. Moreover, Benjamin does not stop with this content but critically appropriates the *medium* of tradition. Drawing on parts of his discussion of transmissibility without teachings in Kafka and a passage from the *Arcades Project* contemplating the import of tradition as a medium to the critical reflection on modernity, I point to some of the limitations of Habermas' model, which does not consider the *transformative* potential of the dialogue between the secular and the religious.

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon, "Is There an Asymmetry?" 45–50.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Allen, "Having One's Cake and Eating It Too: Habermas's Genealogy of Postsecular Reason," in *Habermas and Religion*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013): 132–53.

# 1 The Dialogue with Tradition as De-Transcendentalizing Critique

In works such as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas, to a large extent, develops and transforms the Kantian critical project. Critique for him is not merely dissent (as in the opposition to the capitalist system in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*) but rather a potentially positive project of articulating conditions of possibility. While for Kant these are the conditions of possibility of cognition and morality, for Habermas they are the conditions of reaching mutual understanding through non-coercive argument, of communicative rationality, of discourse.

Habermas famously de-transcendentalizes Kantian critique by situating it within language and history.<sup>9</sup> The conditions of rational discourse have not merely developed historically through the development of conceptual capabilities, of grammatical forms, and of institutions such as newspapers, coffee shops, or deliberative democracies. Critique itself is rooted both in language and in history. It operates in the very form of discourse. With this, critique loses the legitimacy of claiming that it has exhausted the analysis of conditions of possibility. It cannot claim a transcendental perspective, from which one can absolutely determine boundaries and norms. It is based on an argumentative practice and has no certainties to fall back on.<sup>10</sup>

The model of postsecular critique, which involves learning from religious traditions through translation to a universal language, namely without relying on the particularity of faith and traditional authority, strengthens this process of de-transcendentalization. Critique learns and has reservoirs beyond the current content of discourse. Moreover, the very self-understanding of critique in a postsecular age exemplifies the manner in which critical thought can misunderstand itself. Namely, it expresses a paradigmatic shift from understanding critique as secularized in the sense of *excluding* religious content, to the understanding of secularization as a continuous learning process, namely as the *inclusion* of more and more religious contents. This shift exemplifies that critique has a historical learning curve: It has learned about its own misunderstandings, and might further learn about them in the future. While resembling a Hegelian process of learning, this is very far from the systematizing tendency of reason in German Idealism. It

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Müller-Doohm, "Critical Theory," in *The Cambridge Habermas Lexicon*, eds. Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendietta (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 83–89.



does not presume that religious translation has already been accomplished in full and situated within a system, but rather demands ongoing attention to the potentials of religious content.<sup>11</sup>

## 2 Postsecular Critique as Pointing to the Beyond from Within

Beyond this meta-critical level, namely beyond the potential to further de-transcendentalize critique, one of Habermas' main interests in religious contents is that they hold a potential for developing new secular concepts. In fact, he argues that the most important practical concepts of secular self-understanding are a result of the learning process from religious traditions. For example, the religious notion of the creation of man in the image of God was translated into the idea of equal respect for every human being and consequently to the concept of dignity so significant for liberal and Kantian thought.<sup>12</sup> A similar claim concerns "reasonable freedom, morality and justice, as well as the notions of free will and the unique individuality of responsibly acting persons – [all these] emerged from the philosophical appropriation of the Jewish and Christian heritage."<sup>13</sup>

Under what Habermas calls the postmetaphysical condition, namely the condition in which "philosophical thought can no longer adopt a transcendental point of view," it needs such normative concepts in order to cope with "the fear of the loss of any transcending perspective, of any perspective that sees beyond the totality of the objects we encounter in the world."<sup>14</sup> In other words, if critique

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11 See Jürgen Habermas, "A Postsecular World Society? On the Philosophical Significance of Postsecular Consciousness and the Multicultural World Society [Interview with Eduardo Mendietta]," *MRonline*, 21 March 2010, <https://mronline.org/2010/03/21/a-postsecular-world-society-on-the-philosophical-significance-of-postsecular-consciousness-and-the-multicultural-world-society/>.

12 Habermas and Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, 44–45.

13 Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf, "Moral Universalism," 16. In an earlier interview with Mendietta, Habermas refers to "concepts such as person, individuality, freedom and justice, solidarity and community, emancipation, history and crisis as all deriving from a translation process of religious terms." He adds: "We cannot know whether *this process of appropriating semantic potentials from a discourse that in its core remains inaccessible has exhausted itself, or if it can be continued*. The conceptual labor of religious writers and authors such as the young Bloch, Benjamin, Levinas, or Derrida speaks in favor of the continuing productivity of such a philosophical effort. And this suggests a change of attitude in favor of a dialogical relationship, open to learning, with all religious traditions, and a reflection on the position of postmetaphysical thinking between the sciences and religion," emphasis mine. See Habermas, "A Postsecular World Society?"

14 Czingon, Diefenbach, and Kempf, "Moral Universalism," 18.

has a normative claim, and if it wants to point to a beyond from within discourse and from within the current postsecular historical moment, it needs to draw on some such perspective.

This kind of learning process is important especially in a time in which there is a threat to the very continuation of discourse, and to the kind of state that enables approximation towards its ideal conditions. Namely, the crisis of deliberative democracy, of solidarity and integration, and the de-politization of citizens with which we began. As I mentioned, this stems from the growing control of global markets, from bureaucratization, and from what Habermas terms an untamed colonization of the lifeworld. It leads to a situation in which everything seems objectified, one-dimensional, simply given, without any “beyond” that can be developed within discourse and serve as a normative yardstick. Under these conditions, the demand not to exclude the possibility of discovering potentials in religious traditions becomes a normative demand, an imperative.

In the *Dialectics of Secularization* Habermas writes:

We find in sacred scriptures and *religious traditions* intuitions about error and redemption, about the salvific exodus from a life that is experienced as empty of salvation; these have been elaborated in a subtle manner over the course of millennia and *have been kept alive through a process of interpretation*. This is why something can remain intact in the communal life of the religious fellowships [...] *something that has been lost elsewhere and that cannot be restored by the professional knowledge of experts alone.*<sup>15</sup>

While Habermas provides a rich image of religious tradition here, with its intuitions, sensitivities, communal life, and expressive possibilities, his demand to be attentive to its semantic potentials suggests that he is not interested in the direct import of all this richness, but rather in the reservoir it provides for public discourse. The significance of religious communal life and interpretation is merely in retaining these potentials. Their realization lies in enriching public discourse, once translated to non-religious language.

According to Habermas, the contents of religion allow modern subjects and societies, through their translation, to resist “the pull that objectifies everything and saps the spontaneous power of *transcendence from within*.”<sup>16</sup> Thus Habermas does not address merely the formal demand to include everyone in the discussion. He addresses the unique kind of content that is required in the current state of crisis in order to defend the possibility of discourse, of an inclusive rational conversation. He further claims that the history of philosophy suggests that concepts of re-

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15 Habermas and Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization*, 43–44, emphasis mine.

16 Czington, Diefenbach, and Kempf, “Moral Universalism,” 18–19.

religious origin allow us not to accept the world as a given and to problematize it. Habermas' demand to be attentive to the semantic potentials in religious traditions means being open to the possibility that their contents, once filtered by the process of translation that rids them of traditional authority, might offer further ways to point to our beyond from within our socio-political structures, and a way out of the crisis of democracy.

### 3 The Limitations of Habermas' Model I: Benjamin's Transformative Content

Habermas mentions Walter Benjamin in various places in recent decades as an example of a translator of religious content to a secular language.<sup>17</sup> His import of Jewish elements to the discussion of history, "the redemptive recollection" he offers, is pertinent, argues Habermas. Even in his famous early essay on Benjamin, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Critique," he speaks of critique as drawing from tradition the missing contents to modern secular societies which "cannot interpret the world in terms of" their "own needs," or fulfill "the claim to happiness."<sup>18</sup>

However, I suggest that Benjamin's appropriation of tradition demonstrates the limitations of Habermas' understanding of the encounter of critique and tradition in the postsecular age. In this section, I show that while Benjamin is interested in redeeming contents from both religious and cultural traditions—saving them from the danger that "threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it"—his interest is in transformative content.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in the context of his own crisis of democracy, he is interested in contents not in order to save or improve the contemporary form of democracy, but rather in order to offer a path for transforming modern politics. In the next section, I find in Benjamin not only an interest in transformative content but an investment in the medium

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17 Jürgen Habermas, "A Reply," in *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* by Jürgen Habermas et al., trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2010): 80. See also Habermas, "A Postsecular World Society?"

18 Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 57.

19 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003): 391.

of tradition as transformative.<sup>20</sup> This allows us to further elaborate Habermas' limitations.

In "Towards a Critique of Violence" Benjamin describes the task of such a critique as the presentation of the relation of violence to law and justice.<sup>21</sup> This presentation is a critical project in the sense of drawing the boundaries in which modern politics and the discourse on violence seem to be confined: a circle of law-positing and law-maintaining violence; a circle of just ends that justify means and justified means that justify ends. Yet, as in Kant, critique does not end in drawing boundaries or pointing to the poles between which a certain field mitigates (metaphysics in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or legal discourse concerning violence in Benjamin's case). It continues in pointing to the possibility of piercing them, in showing the semblance of this confinement. In Habermas' terms, it points to the beyond from within. Benjamin's turn to the Bible, to the Jewish tradition, in the example of Korah and its translation to a concept of divine violence is aimed at pointing out this beyond.<sup>22</sup>

Significantly for our comparison with Habermas, Benjamin's discussion of violence in modernity contains a brief discussion of parliamentary democracy and its crisis. In the text, parliament serves as an example for institutions that seem to provide non-violent forms for resolution of conflicts between human interests, but are in fact entrenched in violence. For Benjamin, this illusion is also characteristic of the conception of legal contracts: "A legal contract, however peacefully the parties enter into it, leads ultimately to possible violence."<sup>23</sup> The contract contains within it both the possibility of law-maintaining violence, as a constant threat

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20 Benjamin might be thus considered as a "transformational postsecularist," albeit in a very different context from that to which Schewel referred while coining this term in his "Transformational Post-Secularism," namely that of axial age theories such as that of Karl Jaspers. Benjamin Schewel, "Transformational Post-Secularism: An Overlooked Strand of Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 4 (December 2019): 1085–1112.

21 Walter Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence," in *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, eds. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng, trans. Julia Ng (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021): 39.

22 The concept of divine violence has received significant scholarly attention in recent decades. See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002): 228–98; Werner Hamacher, "Affirmative, Strike: Benjamin's Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994): 110–138; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Judith Butler, "Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Violence," in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012): 69–98.

23 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 49.

upon both sides if they break it, and the traces of law-positing violence that guarantees its power (the very constitution of contract law by the state, the court that might enforce it as being part of the contract, etc.). Thus, in spite of the semblance of a non-violent resolution, contracts inherently point towards violence both in their origin and in their outcome. Similarly, violence is latent in parliaments. Once a parliament is unconscious of it, it “falls into decay.”<sup>24</sup> Only when it is aware of the law-positing violence in its origin can it reach genuine resolutions. When “the sense for the law-positing violence that is represented in them” is lacking and parliamentarism is considered as a non-violent form of dealing with human conflicts, it never reaches such resolutions. Benjamin understands the parliament of the Weimar Republic as being in such a state of decay. Quoting Unger, he claims that rather than deciding, it cultivates

through compromise a supposedly nonviolent manner of handling political affairs. Compromise remains, however, a “product situated within the mentality of violence, no matter how much it may disdain all open violence, because the effort toward compromise is motivated not internally but from outside, indeed by the opposing effort, for no compromise, however freely accepted, is conceivable without a compulsory character. ‘It would be better otherwise’ is the basic feeling belonging to every compromise.”<sup>25</sup>

A more advanced parliament would not solve the circle of violence mentioned above. It would rather be aware of its debt to revolutionary forces, namely to those forces that enabled its constitution by suspending a former legal order without legal legitimacy from within that order. Thus, it would realize that the discussions within it are not aimed at reaching the least bad solution, which merely suspends the eruption of further revolutions, but rather at constituting law with all the violence this entails. “[W]hat parliamentarianism achieves in vital affairs can only be those legal orders that are afflicted by violence in origin and outcome.”<sup>26</sup>

We might not necessarily agree with Benjamin’s verdict on parliamentary democracy.<sup>27</sup> Habermas clearly thinks of it, or of the advanced form of deliberative democracy, as an arena for reaching mutual understanding through communicative action. But this is not essential for our line of inquiry. The question is: What is the role of Benjamin’s turn to religious tradition in the later parts of his text in relation to his discussion of parliamentary democracy and the cycle of violence in which it participates according to his understanding? As a preliminary step we

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<sup>24</sup> “Critique of Violence,” 49.

<sup>25</sup> “Critique of Violence,” 49.

<sup>26</sup> “Critique of Violence,” 50.

<sup>27</sup> See Derrida, “Force of Law.”

note that in Benjamin's text the translation of the traditional religious content to a philosophical concept pertinent to modern times is not through a direct dialogue between modernity and religious tradition, as in Habermas. It is rather mediated through the constellation of ancient Greek tradition and the Jewish one. Greek myth offers a path for showing how law-positing begins a circle of violence, blood, and guilt that continues in the modern cycle of law-positing violence and law-maintaining violence in which parliamentary democracy is involved (the violence that determines a boundary and the one that guards from its transgression). The Jewish tradition, on the other hand, embodies the possibility of annihilating or suspending the law and the boundaries it constitutes all together. Only after considering this, the meaning of modern forms of violence, and specifically of revolutionary violence, as suspending or interrupting the order of law rather than constituting or positing a new legal order, can be grasped.

In the essay, the myth of Niobe serves as an example for how mythic violence, which appears merely as a manifestation of the power of the gods, is in fact, at the same time, the positing of a boundary between humans and the gods.<sup>28</sup> Niobe, who prides herself on her fertility, which is far greater than that of the goddess Leto, learns through the violence of Leto's son and daughter turned upon her children that by that act of hubris she transgressed an unwritten law. The bloody death of her children installs in her the feeling of guilt, in spite of this being her fate. Moreover, the punishment does not atone her act. Even as a stone she keeps on crying (when the snow melts), serving as a symbol of the boundary between humans and immortal gods. Benjamin thus argues that both in the case of myth and in modernity, law never establishes a realm free of violence. It establishes a boundary that must now be defended in the realm of the law. It begins a cycle of violence. "[T]he positing of law is the positing of power; and, in this respect, an act of an immediate manifestation of violence."<sup>29</sup>

This also ties the positing of law to the powerful. At the beginning it was the privilege of kings, but forever it will be the privilege of the powerful. "So it will remain, *mutatis mutandis*, as long as law continues to exist. For, from the viewpoint of violence, which alone can guarantee law, there is no equality, only at best equally sized magnitudes of violence."<sup>30</sup> Rather than establishing a sphere of equality (in front of the law), law maintains a sphere of inequality between those who, or institutions which, can posit law and those who cannot. Thus, if the order of law is so intimately bound with violence, the question of the critique

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28 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 55.

29 "Critique of Violence," 56.

30 "Critique of Violence," 56.

of violence, as pointing out the beyond of the cycle of legal violence, is not the question of non-violent resolution of conflict, but rather the question of suspending the legal order which manifests and instigates violence. This is the exact point in which Benjamin turns to religious tradition.

Far from opening up a purer sphere, the mythic manifestation of immediate violence reveals itself to be at the deepest level identical with all legal violence and transforms a vague intimation of its problematic character into a certainty concerning the perniciousness of its historical function, the annihilation of which thus becomes a task. Precisely this task introduces once again and for the last time the question of a pure, immediate form of violence that might be capable of putting a halt to mythic violence. Just as God is opposed to myth in all spheres, so divine violence runs counter to mythic violence. Indeed, divine violence designates in all respects an antithesis to mythic violence. If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates them; if mythic violence inculcates and expiates at the same time, divine violence de-expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal in a bloodless manner. The legend of Niobe may be contrasted by way of example with God's judgment on Korah's horde. The judgment strikes privileged ones, Levites; it strikes them unannounced, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation.<sup>31</sup>

Divine violence is understood as an antithesis to mythic violence, and, by proxy, to legal violence. Addressing divine violence is aimed at halting the circle of legal violence. Benjamin's turn to religious content serves to conceptually articulate the possibility of the beyond of the cycle, to which the politics of modernity including parliamentary democracy are bound. In the religious repertoire, Benjamin finds a kind of violence which annihilates boundaries without creating new ones, thus suspending legal violence. One of the points Benjamin stresses is that divine judgment strikes the privileged ones, the Levites. Korah and his horde think their power was significant enough so as to posit a new law, a new boundary between them and the rest of the people, by sharing leadership with Moses and Aaron. Thus, their annihilation does not draw a boundary but rather annihilates those who thought they could manifest their power in constituting a new boundary. As Peter Fenves indicates, the case of Korah's horde stands in contradiction to many other cases of divine violence in the Bible, which end with a clear sign; the rainbow at the end of the flood, for instance.<sup>32</sup> There is pure violence with no remnant, without establishing a new order or covenant, and without demand-

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<sup>31</sup> "Critique of Violence," 57.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Fenves, "Introduction," in *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, eds. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021): 33.

ing atonement. Religious content is thus addressed in order to suspend the cycle of violence through the annihilation of its origin, the positing of law.<sup>33</sup>

Following Habermas, we understand this as a process of translation. It does not end with the conception of divine violence, but with “carrying over” (*translatus*) the concept to Benjamin’s “present day world.”<sup>34</sup> At the end of the essay, Benjamin notes the affinity of revolutionary violence to divine violence. While he claims that only mythic violence can be certainly identified, he still presents revolutionary violence as a manifestation of pure violence akin to the divine one. The significance of turning to the Bible and to Korah’s example is in translating traditional content to philosophical language, to the language of critique. As opposed to Habermas, this translation is not aimed at legitimizing contemporary conditions, but rather at sharply criticizing them by making present the possibility of suspending the cycle that produces more and more violence. Benjamin does so not by naively adopting pacifism, but rather by making present a different possibility of violence, one that annihilates the legal order, even if temporarily. The translation of religious content does not open the possibility of legitimizing democracy, but rather of suspending the cycle of violence in which it takes part. His critique presents the problems in which democracy is entwined, and how it entangles us in circles of violence. His turn to tradition in this essay is aimed not at reforming this form of government but rather at opening up alternative horizons for politics in the present. The content in which he is interested is transformative.

Why does this exemplify the limitations of Habermas’ understanding of the encounter of critique and tradition and the dialogue between them in the postsecular age? One might argue that this merely expresses the difference between Habermas’ reformist politics and Benjamin’s revolutionary-messianic one. Yet, once we recall that Habermas’ intention was to hold a genuine dialogue with religious tradition as part of a learning process and as part of a de-transcendentalized form

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33 For critical remarks on Benjamin’s reading, see Fenves, “Introduction,” 33: “Benjamin identifies ‘Korah’s horde’ with a single trait: as Levites—like Aaron and Moses, who remain conspicuously unnamed—they are ‘privileged’ (*Bevorrechtete*), which indicates that they are willy-nilly exponents of law in accordance with the recently articulated theorem ‘[A]ll law [Recht] was the privilege [Vorrecht] of kings or grandees’ (56). Privilege equals law, even in the case of the grandee named Korah, who expresses the identity of one with the other, Recht with Vorrecht, through an appeal to the supposed sanctity of ‘the whole community’ (Num. 16:3). Benjamin makes nothing of the fact that ‘the children of Korah’ (Num. 26:11) survive the demise of their accursed ancestor, which would corroborate the argument advanced by Cohen in the very section of *Ethics of Pure Will* to which Benjamin draws attention (171–172). Nor does he follow Cohen and show how Abraham’s prayer for the innocent inhabitants of Sodom reverberates in Moses’ prayer for ‘the people over against Korah’s horde.’”

34 Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 58.



of critique, it is difficult to disregard the problem. One cannot hold a genuine dialogue if it is restricted merely to contents that serve the legitimation, resilience, and continuity of one side. Habermas is interested in the religious roots of liberal concepts such as dignity, but is not willing to translate concepts that might transform the very form of democratic politics. In this sense, the dialogue he is referring to seems instrumental and far from being fully critical. It serves the reform of democracy, without being attentive to the spectrum of possibilities opened by the dialogue with religion in the postsecular age at the moment of democracy's crisis. While Habermas' translation of religious content is part of what we might call, following Benjamin Schewel, a reformist postsecularism, in Benjamin we find a source for a transformational postsecularism, which is genuinely open to the critical dialogue with religion.<sup>35</sup> Inspection of Benjamin's attention to tradition as a medium of transmission and a form of relation to the past will elaborate this form of postsecular dialogue.

## 4 The Limitations of Habermas' Model II: Benjamin's Transformative Medium

Habermas acknowledges and values the role of religious tradition in maintaining contents, transmitting them, and retaining them as part of a living tradition. However, he is not interested in the *medium* of religious tradition, the very form that allows the transmission of its contents. This limitation becomes particularly noteworthy when considering Habermas' aim of pointing out the beyond from within and learning from religion. In his Benjamin interpretation and in his stance on the postsecular, it is only *contents* of tradition in which critique is interested. Benjamin, as noted above, is interested in redeeming contents from both religious and cultural traditions. Yet, when we further inspect Benjamin's approach to tradition, we find a clear interest in the medium or form of tradition as transformative. To give a famous example, Benjamin's emphasis on transmissibility in his renowned letter to Scholem on Kafka attests to an entirely different perspective on the potential of tradition from that of Habermas: "Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to trans-

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35 Benjamin Schewel aptly describes Habermas as aiming "to utilize the resources of religion to reform liberal-democratic politics." Schewel, "Transformational Post-Secularism," 1090.

missibility, to its aggadic element.”<sup>36</sup> Benjamin’s Kafka essay is considered by some scholars, such as Jennings and Eiland, as presenting a comic figure of the loss of tradition, one that might justify losing faith in tradition, to quote Arendt on Benjamin.<sup>37</sup> Yet, others, such as Vivian Liska and Galili Shahar, consider it, following Benjamin’s letters to Scholem, as emphasizing the clinging to transmissibility.<sup>38</sup> By using parables, which were once a way of teaching, of handing down lessons of experience from father to son, Kafka clings to the form of tradition. He still preserves the very structure of transmission in face of its crisis, even if there are no teachings, nothing to teach, no content to hand down, and no authoritative father from whom to learn.

I have shown elsewhere that this clinging to transmissibility is in fact a clinging to a space of freedom, which Benjamin associates in an early correspondence with Scholem to the Talmud.<sup>39</sup> Here I would like to stress the relation to critique, which is not emphasized in scholarship on the issue of transmissibility. An early passage from the *Arcades Project* is very telling in that respect, as it expresses the critical potential of tradition as a form of obligation, of being bound, and also as a medium.

Benjamin’s unorthodox materialist study of the nineteenth century was famously supposed to offer a “Copernican revolution” in historical perception, and to collectively awaken his contemporaries. While there are various places in which tradition is referred to in the project, here I limit myself to the first instance, which is somewhat neglected by scholarship.<sup>40</sup> In the following, Benjamin contemplates the potential of treating the nineteenth century as tradition:

What would the nineteenth century be to us if we were bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology? We have no tactile relation to it. That is, we are trained to view things, in the historical sphere, from a romantic distance. [...] Only the presentation of what relates to us, what conditions us, is important. The nineteenth century – to borrow the Sur-

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**36** Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1989), 225.

**37** Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 294.

**38** Vivian Liska, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 41–85; Galili Shahar, *Bodies and Names: Readings in New Jewish Literature* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016).

**39** See Ori Rotlevy, “The ‘Enormous Freedom of the Breaking Wave’: The Experience of Tradition in Benjamin between the Talmud and Kant,” *New German Critique* 140, no. 2 (August 2020): 191–216.

**40** For other references to tradition, see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), N2a,2 (461), N6a,3 (469), N8a,2 (472), N9,4 (473), N9a,5 (474), N10a,2 (475), and N19,1 (486).

realists' terms – is the set of noises that invades our dream, and which we interpret on awaking.<sup>41</sup>

This dense passage concerns the critical potential that being bound to the modern past as a tradition implies. Benjamin contemplates what might happen if we take tradition as a form and apply it to the past of modernity, an era which commonly conceived tradition as foreign to it. He does not speak of an invention of a continuous tradition (as Hobsbawm does),<sup>42</sup> but rather of a kind of thought experiment in treating the modern past as tradition.

The passage implies that the relation to the nineteenth century as tradition is opposed to Benjamin's contemporaries' habitual relation to the past, which is that of a distant gaze. Benjamin is alluding to the character of historicist studies which, through their presumption of objectivity, distance the past from the subject, turning it to something that does not "touch" it. But the use of the term "trained" also alludes to the fact that this relation was installed in everyday practices, even in the education of children, who are reprimanded if they *touch* the replicas of past works of art in bourgeois living rooms.<sup>43</sup> In other words, adopting tradition as a form of binding has the potential of transforming not just our knowledge of the past, but also our form of experiencing it. The experiment promises a turn from an optical experience of the past to a tactile one. In a different context, Benjamin refers to tactility and the optical when discussing architecture, the art form that structures our surroundings. Buildings are received, he explains, in a twofold manner, by use and by perception:

Or, better: tactilely and optically. Such reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveler before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation. Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means; that is, by way of contem-*

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41 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 831.

42 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 1–14.

43 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 2, Part 2: 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999): 734. On this treatment of the past, see also Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, E5,5–E5a,1 (132), N6,1 (468).

*plation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.*<sup>44</sup>

My suggestion is that treating the past as a tradition turns the past to a surrounding, or to a medium in which we move, which we are constantly “in touch” with, which we are bound to in the very way we exist in modernity. It opens up a relation that is not objective, contemplative, and aloof (the optical model). Through tradition the past is not merely experienced differently, it is rather opened to a different kind of reception, to a different kind of knowledge, that of the user rather than the detached observer. Think of the endless hermeneutical options discovered in scripture by those who were bound to treat it as tradition. Alternatively, think of Marx’s treatment of class struggle in the past, not as what is to be observed and interpreted, but rather as what is transmitted and used in order to change the world. According to the passage cited above from the *Arcades Project*, the experience of the past as tradition is supposed to have a twofold critical potential in presenting the conditions of a certain “we,” and of collective awakening. The distant relation to the past, to which Benjamin’s contemporaries are accustomed, hides something from them regarding their conditions, and sustains their collective illusions. The relation to the modern past as a tradition, as what they are bound to, tied to as a life environment, might reveal something that is hidden from them, such as the conditions of possibility of modernity, of their present. This early reflection, this thought experiment, is pertinent to the *Arcades Project* for it serves as an example of Benjamin’s attempt to change historical perception and to awaken his contemporaries. The entire project deals with the question of what would happen if one wrote a history that brought the reader to feel bound to the nineteenth century, rather than studying it as a remote object. Would that cause Benjamin’s contemporaries to recognize they are actually continuing the economic, religious, epistemic, and political patterns that characterize the nineteenth century, and not in their favor? Might this allow a collective liberation from these patterns? I do not intend to judge whether this philosophical-historical experiment would succeed if it were ever completed. Nevertheless, even without delving into the outcome, we see how this goes beyond what Habermas takes as the critical potential of tradition. Benjamin takes tradition as a form to criticize his own times. He does not wish to adopt it for good, but rather to take this form as a path for the awakening he envisions in his project.

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 3: 1936–1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002): 120.

To conclude, my point is not merely that Habermas disregards the genuine character of the Benjaminian option. But rather that Benjamin's critique suggests deep limitations in the process of learning Habermas offers for postsecular critique. Habermas' critique misses its transformative potential, its possibility to change our politics, our attitudes, and our forms of collective memory. In this sense, Habermas misses the potential of the crisis of democracy and its constellation with the postsecular age with which we began.

Why limit the learning process of critique from tradition to processes of translation, and realization of semantic potentials? Might we not learn from religious tradition forms of obligation and of experiencing the world and our past differently than commonly in secular minds? The challenge Benjamin opens up is to what extent postsecular critique should not be merely an ongoing learning process, but a *transformative* one.<sup>45</sup> The limitation to content and to reformative content in Habermas maintains the form of thought which he celebrates, that of the Enlightenment, and does not allow us to transform it, even if it might hide from us aspects of our past, and ways of pointing towards the beyond from within. The specific limited focus on contents promises that critique will not transform its form of thought, even when it is in dialogue with its other. But is this genuine dialogue at all?

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<sup>45</sup> For a contemporary example of what might also be considered as a transformative dialogue with religious tradition, pointing out the blind spots of feminist discourse, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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Vivian Liska

## Crisis, Decision, and Deferral: German-Jewish Thinkers vs. Carl Schmitt

The term “crisis” derives etymologically and conceptually from the Greek word “κρίνω,” meaning to discriminate, to separate or, most significantly in the present context, to decide. It is striking that at its origin the word designating the moment of an acute problem seems to simultaneously contain its solution. The paradoxical constitution of this word is perfectly kept in the French verb for deciding, “*trancher*,” which is used in a situation that cannot be resolved through reasoning. Etymologically affiliated with the English adjective “trenchant” and semantically with its synonym “incisive,” *trancher* (literally, “cutting”) evokes the slicing through of the proverbial Gordian knot, an act attributed to Alexander the Great as a sign of his impetuous sovereignty. What the French word and its English derivatives capture is a sense of vehemence and violence in the act of deciding, which distinguishes it starkly from a choice following a process of reflection and deliberation. The potential of a sudden and violent solution to a crisis executed by—or in the spirit of—a sovereign lies at the heart of “decisionism,” a term coined by Carl Schmitt, the anti-liberal political theorist and so-called crown jurist of Hitler who has gained renewed fame in recent years.

It is not least Schmitt’s decisionism that both—and often simultaneously—fascinated and repelled major German-Jewish early-twentieth-century intellectuals, among them Martin Buber, Karl Löwith, Leo Strauss, and, maybe most of all, Walter Benjamin, but also such later ones as Hans Blumenberg and Jacob Taubes.<sup>1</sup> All these thinkers in one way or another addressed the crisis of modernity as a “no longer” and “not yet,” a situation marked by an old world that had lost its credibility and the search for a new one that was not yet in place. This sense of living in an in-between corresponded to a dissatisfaction with the status quo and an atmosphere of uncertainty, disorientation, and doubt, that demanded resolutions for which the foundations were lacking. A central feature of the reflections about what they designated as a state of in-betweenness involves a tension between a temporality of suddenness and immediacy on the one hand, and, on the other,

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1 I turn here particularly to thinkers whom Stéphane Mosès, the pioneering French-Israeli scholar of German-Jewish thought, has associated with a “critical” (Benjamin, Kafka, Arendt, Paul Celan, and, to some extent, Scholem) rather than a “normative” Jewish modernity (Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas). Stéphane Mosès, “Le fil de la tradition est-il rompu?,” in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (April 2002): 102–114.

an emphasis on expanding time in waiting, deferral, and postponement. In what follows I propose to consider this tension against the background of—though not necessarily in response to—Schmitt’s decisionism. Rather than drawing on the actual Jewish reception of Schmitt, I will explore “thought-figures” (*Denkbilder*) in the writings of Franz Kafka, Gershom Scholem, and Walter Benjamin—none of them a liberal, the “natural” enemy of Schmitt—that configure the crisis of modernity in light of the Jewish tradition, and show how their respective approaches yield powerful critical responses to Schmitt’s decisionist imperative.

## Decision and Deferral

Schmitt describes his idea of decision in terms of a sovereign who, in Schmitt’s famous definition of this figure of power, “decides on the state of exception,” a decision that enables him to transcend the rule of law.<sup>2</sup> Schmitt defines this state of exception as a situation of crisis that presents a threat to the prevailing form of life of a group, community, or nation. Schmitt characterizes this gesture as “a pure, non-argued and not discussing, not self-justifying decision, thus an absolute one created out of nothing” (*eine reine, nicht rasonnierende und nicht diskutierende, sich nicht rechtfertigende, also aus dem Nichts geschaffene, absolute Entscheidung*).<sup>3</sup> In his *Political Theology* of 1924, Schmitt elaborates on the origin of the “purity” and “absoluteness” of this gesture: “The subject of the decision,” Schmitt writes, “has an independent meaning, apart from the question of content. What matters for the reality of legal life is who decides.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast with the “ongoing conversation” (“*ewiges Gespräch*”) or “endless discussion” (“*endlose Diskussion*”)<sup>5</sup> that, according to Schmitt, paralyzes parliamentary debates, the sovereign’s decision belongs to what he calls “a grand rhetoric,”<sup>6</sup> a performative expression that manifests authority and asserts power and determination. The gesture it describes is one of unwavering resoluteness and immediacy executed without hesitation and without accountability by a sovereign who, on the threshold of legality, suspends

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2 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 5.

3 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 66 (translation modified, VL).

4 *Political Theology*, 34.

5 Schmitt takes issue with these liberal notions repeatedly in *Political Romanticism* (trans. Guy Oaks, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), *Political Theology* (p. 63), and *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2017, 45–6, 58–61).

6 See Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G.L. Ulmen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 22.

the legal order. For Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who decides not only *in* a state of emergency, but *on* it: he is the one who declares this state. In a similar sense, already the designation of a situation as a crisis tends to imply an urgency that calls for a decision.

Schmitt developed his decisionism as a response to what he considered to be the weakness of the Weimar Republic's parliamentarism,<sup>7</sup> and, more generally, of modernity. His decisionism became a crucial element of his authoritarian political theory, which rests on a political theology. The hailing of a sovereign ruler endowed with the authority either structurally modeled on or derived from the divine power to create out of nothing, to suspend the laws of nature in the miracle, and to transcend all accountability lies at the core of Schmitt's idea of secularization. It involves an implicit divinization of the human that correlates with idolatry as well as a view of humanity as inexorably fallen and in need of such a sovereign, divinized leader. It also encompasses the idea of a necessity to purify the human realm from the messy plurality in which decisions, if they indeed are to be "pure" and "absolute," only come at the price of dictatorial power. This is a price Schmitt was more than willing to pay in the face of the impending chaos, which, in the context of the Weimar Republic, he regarded as a consequence of the crisis of modernity.

The thought-figures invoked by the German-Jewish thinkers to be discussed here similarly address modernity as a crisis, and decisionism is more often than not within the horizon of what they consider. Aware of the implications of this solution, however, they ward it off in the form of a deferral, be it as delay, hesitation, or procrastination. While often presenting the decision as either an impossibility to choose between various options or as a mere waiting for the right moment to implement it, these thinkers' textual enactments of delay can be regarded as structural inversions of Schmitt's sovereign decisionism: Like his idea of decision, their various enactments of deferral are largely independent of their contents and contexts. Instead, they turn it into a mode of apprehending a situation of crisis as such. In doing so they frequently invoke elements of the Jewish tradition.

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<sup>7</sup> See Conrad Burkhard, who speaks more generally of the 1920s as "a time which gave birth to concepts such as Carl Schmitt's 'decision.' This profile was very much influenced by particular kinds of theology, philosophy and political theory that *all drew from an interpretation of the historical 'situation' as being at a point of crisis and thereby decision.*" Conrad Burkhard, "Kierkegaard's Moment, Carl Schmitt and his Rhetorical Concept of Decision," in *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History* 12, no. 1 (2008): 145–71, here 155 (emphasis mine). The temporal structure of the leap into faith brackets ethics: deferral reintroduces it in terms of justice, mercy but possible even more.

## Kafka between End and Beginning

Franz Kafka's most famous formulation of the crisis of modernity in a Jewish context can be found in a letter to Max Brod where he describes the Jews as stuck in a situation of in-betweenness: their "hindlegs [were] still glued to their father's Jewishness while their little front legs found no new ground."<sup>8</sup> In a similar spirit, though even more succinctly, he writes in his notebook: "I am the end or the beginning."<sup>9</sup> Kafka's enigmatic statement signifies the space—or rather the non-space—between a *no longer* and a *not yet*, a *neither nor* or a *nothing* situated between the end of the old and the beginning of the new. It has been read as an emblem of the uncertain transitions of modernity, as an expression of bewildering discontinuity, and as a description of man's "transcendental homelessness" in history. The context of Kafka's statement—a reflection on his own distance from the solutions that Christianity and Judaism have to offer in modernity—no doubt invites such interpretations. As so often in Kafka's writing, however, the structure of the sentence goes further than its allegorical interpretations. As a parodic reversal of the New Testament's Revelation and its apodictic claim to truth and totality—"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13)—Kafka's dictum points toward both an inversion and an interruption pointing to an incisive rupture. Yet the reversal of beginning and end in Kafka's sentence is no simple negation, and the place at which it occurs is no empty space. Kafka's statement applies an *or*, the signifier of doubt, to all totalizing systems. But that *or* also serves a more general purpose: to insert an uncertainty that introduces doubt into the very heart of modernity and questions all absolutes, particularly the one applied to answers, solutions—and decisions.

Kafka's work can, to a large extent, be described both as a longing for an abrupt interruption and as an intricate exercise in deferral, postponement, and delay. From the stubborn perseverance of the man from the country stuck before the door he desires to enter in "Before the Law" to the endless staccato repetitions and ruminations of the animal in "The Burrow," Kafka's protagonists are called to perform or subjected to a decisive intervention even as they are waiting, procrast-

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<sup>8</sup> Franz Kafka, *Briefe 1902–1924*, edited by Max Brod (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1958), 337 (translation mine).

<sup>9</sup> Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II: Schriften. Tagebücher. Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe*, edited by Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), 98: "I have not, like Kierkegaard, been led into life by the albeit already heavily sinking hand of Christianity and have not, like the Zionists, caught the last corner of the Jewish prayer shawl as it flies away. I am the end or the beginning."

tinating, shying away from the pivotal gesture that would bring their situation to a resolution. This dynamic of offsetting a momentous event with deferral and procrastination manifests itself in a striking pattern throughout Kafka's oeuvre. It is paradigmatically enacted in Kafka's phantasmatic rewriting of the biblical scene of the "binding of Isaac."

In a letter to his friend and doctor Robert Klopstock from June 1921, Kafka imagines another Abraham, one who would not climb Mount Moriah to sacrifice his beloved son.<sup>10</sup> Like the biblical patriarch, Kafka's "other Abraham" is a pious man and would be ready to execute the order for his son's sacrifice "with the promptness of a waiter."<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the biblical Abraham, however, Kafka's Abraham "would still never be able to perform the sacrifice."<sup>12</sup> Kafka then describes several distinct scenes that enact Abraham's procrastination with respect to the violent divine order. In the first of these scenes, Abraham, in an imaginary reply to God, argues that "he cannot get away from home, he is indispensable; the household needs him, there is always one more thing that must be attended to, the house isn't finished."<sup>13</sup> Kafka then elaborates on Abraham's excuses for procrastinating rather than obeying God's command. His "other Abraham" eventually stands in the plural; he becomes a type, or even more so, an existential attitude. The "other Abrahams: They stand on their building sites and suddenly had to go up on Mount Moriah."<sup>14</sup> These Abrahams, as imagined by Kafka, are called by God while they are attending to their lives: The divine injunction reaches them when they are in the midst of their home, their house, and their world-building. As much as Kafka's "other Abrahams" would otherwise have been willing to oblige, they are too immersed in the care of their "building site" (*Bauplatz*) to heed the divine call.

Two years after writing this letter, Kafka penned the story "The Burrow" ["Der Bau"],<sup>15</sup> a long monologue by a mole-like animal obsessively attending to his burrow. The animal constantly makes observations and decisions and confirms facts, only to instantly dismiss these with a "but" or a "however" and turn to a variety of alternatives which soon suffer the same fate. The burrow can neither be repaired

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10 Franz Kafka, "Letter to Robert Klopstock, Matliary, June 1921," in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, NY: Schocken, 1977): 284–86 (translation considerably revised by me).

11 Kafka, "Klopstock," 285.

12 Kafka, "Klopstock," 285.

13 Kafka, "Klopstock," 285.

14 Kafka, "Klopstock," 285.

15 Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," in *Kafka's Selected Stories*, ed. and trans. Stanley Corngold (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007): 162–89.

nor completed, yet also neither abandoned nor truly inhabited. It is the perfect embodiment of Kafka's writing, which likewise continuously cancels itself. On the final pages of the story, the animal, both fearing and hoping for an interruption of its endless task, hears a noise. It imagines that "someone may be calling it to itself" with an "invitation [I] will not be able to resist."<sup>16</sup> The animal continues to go about its business, however, and the story, after sixteen closely written manuscript pages and yet another "but," breaks off in mid-sentence, suggesting that it could go on forever.

An excerpt from "The Burrow" shows Kafka's intense preoccupation with decisions. Considering the difficulties of descending into his burrow, the animal, at one point, considers the option of abandoning it altogether:

I am not very far from the *decision* to go into the distance, to resume my old, desolate life that lacked all security ... Such a *decision* would, admittedly be complete madness, the result only of having lived far too long in senseless freedom, the burrow still belongs to me, I need to take only a single step and I am safe. And so *I tear myself away from all doubts* and in broad daylight I run straight for the door, quite sure now about wanting to lift it up, but I can't do it.<sup>17</sup>

A little earlier, the animal had wondered: "Should I rebuild the sector for this reason? *I keep postponing the decision* and it will very likely remain as it is."<sup>18</sup> And after deciding to "change his methods," he declares that the certainty he could thereby gain, "will bring me either reassurance or despair, but as it will be, this or that; it will be undoubted and justified. This *decision* makes me feel better."<sup>19</sup>

The only decision that brings solace to the creature is the one to "postpone the decision." But even this decision and the good feeling it provides do not last. Two sentences later, the creature continues to ruminate about the conditions that would make the decision not to decide possible, only to find that these conditions are both contradictory and inscrutable. "The decisive moment," Kafka writes in an aphorism, "is ongoing (*immerwährend*)."<sup>20</sup> The deferral of the decision is thus both eternal and infinite.

The procrastination enacted by Kafka's mole in the face of a possible call from a unique and ominous "someone" inviting the creature to leave its quotidian endeavors echoes the final sentence of Kafka's first imagining of an "other Abraham." It provides both a parallel and an explanation for this situation: Referring to his "other Abrahams," who resist the divine "invitation" of the call to sacrifice because

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<sup>16</sup> Kafka, "The Burrow," 169.

<sup>17</sup> "The Burrow," 171.

<sup>18</sup> "The Burrow," 168 (emphasis mine).

<sup>19</sup> "The Burrow," 181 (emphasis mine).

<sup>20</sup> Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften*, 114.

they must attend to their houses, Kafka speculates: “All we can do is suspect that these men are *deliberately* not finishing their houses ... so as not to have to lift their eyes and see the mountain that stands in the distance.”<sup>21</sup> The mountain is Mount Moriah, where Abraham’s sacrifice of his son is to take place. In both stories, warding off the “decisive moment” comes down to an affirmation of caring for the building site or burrow—and ultimately for the world. It reveals both the attraction and the awareness of the danger of the decision. As manifest in the procrastination enacted in the text to the point of parody, the consciousness of the danger prevails. Importantly, in both cases, the procrastination does not come down to inaction—on the contrary: both Abraham’s building of his house that cannot tolerate an interruption and Kafka’s hyperactive mole who incessantly (and literally) runs through all the options are everything but passivity or renunciation of worldly matters for the sake of an indifferent serenity. What is performed in both stories is delay in action.

Kafka’s portrayal of Abraham obviously deviates from the biblical text, but it is not an arbitrary distortion. Abraham’s negotiations with God are already laid out in the Bible itself. The patriarch’s haggling with God—as in the context of the divine plan to destroy Sodom—prefigures other biblical figures, foremost among them Moses, as well as several prophets wrestling with divine authority, imploring him to delay the execution of his verdict. In attributing the attempt to delay God’s decree or command, to Abraham, the model of righteousness, the Bible applies to God what, in the *Mishna Sanhedrin* 5,<sup>22</sup> is said about capital punishment: If the accused is judged to be innocent, he must be liberated immediately. If he is judged to be guilty, the judges should “sit through the night” and the execution should only take place on the following day. Similarly, the execution should take place outside of the city. Maimonides comments that this change of location between verdict and execution creates a delay that should give time to reconsider the punishment and allow for someone to possibly speak on behalf of the person convicted. Delaying the violence of the execution thus intimates a protest against the sovereign in the face of a potential injustice.

## Scholem on Justice and Delay

An early text by Gershom Scholem, “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” focuses on this delay between verdict and execution and associates it directly with justice:

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, “Klopstock,” 285 (emphasis mine).

<sup>22</sup> אם מִצְאוֹ לֹ זְכוּת, פְּטוּרָהּ. וְאם לֹא, מַעֲבִירִין דֵּינֹו לְמִקְוֵה.

“Acting in deferral,” Scholem writes, “delivers from death” [*Im Aufschub handeln erttet vom Tod*].<sup>23</sup> Scholem illustrates his definition of justice with a verse from the Book of Jonah describing God’s renunciation to punishing the city of Ninveh: “And he [God] reflected upon the judgment that he announced he would execute upon them, and executed it not” (Jon 3:10). The deferral Scholem considers is by no means passive: “The deferral that has become action,” Scholem insists, “is justice as deed” (*Der zur Handlung gewordene Aufschub ist Gerechtigkeit als Tat*).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, yet even more explicitly than Kafka, Scholem associates deferral with action: Far from constituting a passive refusal to act, be it as indifference or *Gelassenheit*—a serene letting be—it is instead designated as a deed. Furthermore, it is regarded as an act of mercy, which, particularly but not only in the legal context, requires a mode and temporality opposed to sovereign decision. Scholem seems almost to prefigure Schmitt when he writes that justice never resides “in the unequivocal decision of the judge’s decision to the executive power.”<sup>25</sup> For Scholem, it is thus not sovereign decision that suspends the law but, on the contrary, sovereign deferral of the execution that annihilates the established “order of the law.” This idea of justice is certainly not derived from a liberal parliamentarism, but, undoubtedly, from an early expression of Scholem’s anarchic approach to the rule of law, inspired by Jewish thought.<sup>26</sup>

In his major essay of 1959, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” the tension between a sudden interruption and a time of deferral are palpable. Famously, yet ambivalently, Scholem characterizes Jewish existence in light of messianism, as “life lived in deferral.”<sup>27</sup> Whether this is meant as a critique of the Jews’ lack of active participation in history or an affirmation of their awareness of the unredeemed state of humanity is subject to controversy. In all likelihood the ambivalence of this statement is an expression of the tension between an attraction to a radical, apocalyptic event and its deflection in deferral. Rejecting the Neo-Kantian idea of history as “infinite task” and the idea of gradual progression toward a redeemed state, Scholem insists on the Jewish idea of the messiah as

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23 Gershom Scholem, “On Jonah and the Concept of Justice,” trans. Eric J. Schwab, *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 353–61, here 358.

24 Scholem, “On Jonah,” 358 (emphasis mine).

25 “On Jonah,” 357.

26 See Adam Y. Stern’s excellent article “On Zionism and the Concept of Deferral,” *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Political Theory*, 9536468 (21 Oct. 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-9536468>.

27 Gershom Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” trans. Michael A. Meyer, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995): 1–36.



a rupture coming from the outside: “In fact there can be no preparation for the Messiah. He comes suddenly, unannounced, and precisely when he is least expected or when hope has long been abandoned.”<sup>28</sup> Scholem concludes that messianism is “nowhere made dependent upon human activity,” because “everything is here attributed to God and it is just this that lends a special character to the contradiction between what is and what shall be.”<sup>29</sup>

In an intricate and radical argument, Scholem suggests that if justice is both deferral and messianic, it is not, as one could assume, because justice is “yet to come,” but because the enactment of justice in deferral is structurally correlated with the deferred coming of the messiah. Since justice is achieved when the execution of a punishment is delayed, deferral becomes the very temporality of justice and, by extension, the temporality of messianic time. Scholem thus defines messianic time less by its contents or effects than by the structure of a delay that off-sets the decision.

## Benjamin’s Moment of Danger and Its Dialectic

Scholem’s reflections on the Book of Jonah were developed in close dialogue with Walter Benjamin at the time they lived and thought together in Switzerland.<sup>30</sup> While Scholem never makes a reference to Schmitt, Benjamin had explicit contacts with the German jurist. Benjamin’s relationship to Schmitt—consisting mainly of several cross-references between the two and a very contentious, almost subser-vent letter from Benjamin to Schmitt—has become what one recent scholar

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<sup>28</sup> Scholem, “Toward an Understanding,” 11.

<sup>29</sup> “Toward an Understanding,” 14.

<sup>30</sup> On the theme of Benjamin’s and Scholem’s thoughts on activity, passivity and justice in the temporal horizon, see Ashraf Noor, “Walter Benjamin: Time and Justice,” *Naharaim. Zeitschrift für deutsch-jüdische Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte* 1, no. 1 (2007): 38–74; and Andrew Benjamin’s comments on Noor’s discussion, in *Working with Walter Benjamin: Recovering a Political Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 55. Willem Styfhals goes as far as saying that more than in any of (Scholem’s) earlier or later writings, Benjamin’s thinking is omnipresent here. Styfhals adds that Scholem’s early essay concerns a much more central topic from Jewish tradition than his later work on Jewish mysticism. The elements of the Jewish tradition in Scholem’s idea of deferral consist primarily of the distinction between the time of vengeance, which is the momentary decision, as opposed to the forgiving that requires time. Willem Styfhals, “Predicting the Present: Gershom Scholem on Prophecy,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 259–86.

calls “a standard debate,”<sup>31</sup> and a particularly controversial phenomenon that, in many ways, prefigures the current leftist Schmittianism.

In 1930, Walter Benjamin summed up a discussion he had with Bertolt Brecht about his relationship to Carl Schmitt: “Agreement. Hatred. Suspicion.”<sup>32</sup> Two insights—one affective, the other methodological—that will guide my reflections can be derived from this short comment. Benjamin’s approach to Schmitt is not only ambivalent but it is *radical and extreme in its polarity* and in its *dialectic*. The Hegelian motto above perfectly applies to this relationship: Benjamin indeed entered Schmitt’s realm deeply, and came close to his decisionism, but “stole” some of his weapons in order to defeat him and what he stood and stands for.

The most frequently discussed instance of an actual dialogue between Schmitt and Benjamin occurs in the cross-references between Schmitt’s *Political Theology* and Benjamin’s book on the Baroque mourning play. In his letter to Schmitt as well as in his book on the German *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin quotes Schmitt and expresses a debt to his notion of sovereignty. As others have pointed out, however, he is clearly distancing himself from him. For Schmitt, the sovereign is derived from, analogous to, or modeled on an omnipotent divinity, by endowing a human ruler with transposed (secularized) divine authority, and by granting that ruler the right and power to suspend the law at will, just as God can miraculously suspend the laws of nature. In Judaism, however, biblical miracles are never arbitrary but always part of the covenantal relationship. This latter approach is only implicit in Benjamin’s depiction of the sovereign in the Baroque mourning play. In contrast to Schmitt, Benjamin, in accordance with the Jewish tradition, does not endow the sovereign with divine powers. Similarly, Benjamin negates Schmitt’s definition of decision arising out of nothing other than the mere authority of the sovereign. The antithesis between the godlike power of the ruler and his human and therefore limited capacity to rule led Benjamin to emphasize the sovereign’s limitations. Because he is not godlike, “the prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost *incapable* of making a decision.”<sup>33</sup>

This is most striking in the present context—and so far barely discussed in the abundant literature on Benjamin and Schmitt—in an instance where Benjamin

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31 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52.

32 [“Schmitt / Einverständnis, Hass, Verdächtigung.”] Diary entry, 21 Apr. 1930. In Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2:3, eds. Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977): 1372.

33 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 71 (emphasis mine).

reads Kafka in light of the Jewish, more particularly the Talmudic, tradition. Benjamin states in his magisterial essay on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death that Kafka's prose resembles the Haggadah in what may "appear to the reader like obsessiveness" (*kann beim Leser den Eindruck der Verstocktheit hervorrufen*). Benjamin explains this comparison:

We may remind ourselves here of the form of the Haggadah, the name Jews have given to the rabbinical stories and anecdotes that serve to explicate and confirm the teachings—the Halachah. Like the Haggadic, the narrative parts of the Talmud, [Kafka's] books too, are stories; they are a Haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous *hope and fear* that it might encounter the Halachic order, the doctrine itself en route.<sup>34</sup>

Benjamin calls this ambivalence between hope and fear of encountering the law "deferral" or "postponement" (*Verzögerung*), a term that, with a slight shift, could perfectly apply to the waiting of the man at the door of the law in "Before the Law." As in these Haggadot, Benjamin continues, Kafka's parables "show the true workings of grace" (*das eigentliche Walten der Gnade*) in that in them "the law never finds expression as such—this and nothing else is the gracious dispensation of the fragment."<sup>35</sup> The Haggadah avoids becoming a Halachah, much as Kafka's parables—or rather anti-parables that yield neither doctrine nor moral—do. The procrastination thus becomes a structure that delays the decisive goal.

Divine justice as presented in Benjamin's controversial essay "Critique of Violence"—in its biblical example of Korach—is rooted in the Israelites' trust, and thus in the mutual covenantal bond. Whereas for Schmitt the sovereign is a kind of incarnation of God, Benjamin's sovereign remains creaturely and ultimately fails in the clash between his worldly power and his fallibility as a human. Furthermore, in "Critique of Violence" Benjamin's critique of law-instituting and law-sustaining state violence is offset by a legitimate "divine violence." While this notion and Benjamin's use of it has been heavily criticized by, among others, Jacques Derrida, Benjamin insists that humans cannot decide when a concrete situation requires or justifies "divine violence." It is thus impossible to use violence in the name of God:

But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed vio-

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<sup>34</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2: 1927–1930*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999): 495–500, here 496 (emphasis mine).

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, "Kafka," 497 (emphasis mine).

lence by man, is possible, and by what means. *Less possible*, and also less urgent for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men.<sup>36</sup>

Schmitt's political theology has attracted those who, like Benjamin, rejected the progressive linear process of rationalization of modernity described by Max Weber. There is a direct link between Benjamin's warning against deciding on "divine violence" and his relation to Schmitt's decisionism. Benjamin was undoubtedly attracted to Schmitt's temporality of decision: its suddenness that is not derived from reasoning (rather than slow, gradual reform or Kant's "infinite task")—but for Benjamin decision ought to come not from above but in a revolutionary movement, from below. In other words, it should be a movement generated not by the power of a sovereign but by those who are subjected to and oppressed by that power.

Benjamin's writings abound with images of abruptness—he speaks of the revolution as "pulling the emergency-brakes of history,"<sup>37</sup> the interruption of "empty, homogenous time" in a moment of standstill, of a shock of awakening, and an "abrupt departure from the time of normality."<sup>38</sup> Benjamin was thus undoubtedly tempted by a Schmittian decisive gesture. In his advice voiced in a letter to Scholem, Benjamin speaks of his desire "to take leave of the purely theoretical sphere ... through religious or political conduct."<sup>39</sup> Hewing close to Schmitt's decisionism, Benjamin (paradoxically) explains his hesitations about joining the Communist Party, writing that "the essential consideration is that every instance of action proceeds ruthlessly, and, in its own self-understanding, radically. Therefore, the task is plainly not to decide once and for all, but rather at every moment. But what is essential is to decide! ... My own conviction would be to proceed radically, never consistently, in the most important matters."<sup>40</sup> Even where Benjamin comes close to

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36 Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *On Violence: A Reader*, eds. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): 268–85, here 284–85.

37 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938–1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003): 401–11, here 402.

38 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938–1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003): 389–400, here 395–96.

39 Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem, May 29, 1926. In *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 300 (emphasis mine).

40 Benjamin, "Letter to Scholem," 300.

Schmitt's decision, however; he divests it of its finality and decisiveness, evoking the possibility—even the necessity—of what could be seen as the idea of a new beginning appropriate to each new circumstance.

In spite of this emphasis, Benjamin certainly does not embrace Schmitt's absolute decisionism: In invoking the Messiah, he admits to a force that must come from the *outside* as well as from interiorized, non-rational instinct that can be "trained." Ultimately, Benjamin transforms the decision into a semi-conscious, bodily presence of mind (*leibhaftige Geistesgegenwart*), which is, precisely, not fully willed, but instead calls for a lucidity and vigilance, an attentiveness to the danger of the concrete situation. It often seems that instances where Benjamin is close to succumbing to the temptations of decisionism are inspired more by a modernist aesthetics than an actual political impetus. The shock of modern art and its disruption of bourgeois complacency might be the model for Benjamin's revolutionary call for a destructive interruption of the "homogenous, empty time" of modernity. (It remains an open question whether this endows art with a political significance or whether it is a [dangerous] category-mistake where the extreme, the interruption, and the state of exception in art is identified—or at least correlated with—political equivalents.) More generally, Benjamin disjoins the decision and its temporality of interruption from sovereignty, linking his imperative of a "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*) with messianic delay, modifying agonistic abruptness into a furtive second of metaphysical insight and associating the decisive force with a "bodily presence of mind."

While the similarities and differences between Schmitt and Benjamin concerning sovereign decision have been widely discussed, a specific and daunting key formulation used by both can illuminate their relationship succinctly. It concerns the notion of the "moment of danger" defining the state of exception. For Schmitt, the godlike sovereign is above the law and, from this position, decides when the state of exception ought to be declared and what needs to be done in this situation. This expression, which becomes crucial for Benjamin in his "On Concept of History," written shortly before his death in 1940 and thus in the midst of the experience of Nazi terror, is generally attributed to him as first author.<sup>41</sup> It is, however, in all likelihood a direct response to Schmitt, who uses it in the most

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<sup>41</sup> In *Gefährliche Beziehungen: Walter Benjamin und Carl Schmitt* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996), a book about the commonalities and differences between Benjamin and Schmitt, Susanne Heil writes (page 10): "The two thinkers shared the critique of a liberalism lacking in seriousness, extremity and depth," a normative morality as an expression of the "seriousness of life," and she conceives of the latter—in proximity to and distance from Schmitt—as the "moment of danger" in the face of an exceptional situation, which Schmitt calls "Ernstfall" (the serious case).

problematic context. In an article titled “Der Führer schützt das Recht” (The Führer protects the Law), published on 1 August 1934 in the *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung*, Schmitt writes: “The Führer protects the law from the worst abuse when, *in the moment of danger*, he immediately establishes justice by virtue of his leadership as supreme judge.”<sup>42</sup> Benjamin quotes and radically inverts this expression in the sixth thesis of his “On the Concept of History”:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up *at a moment of danger*: Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history *at a moment of danger*.<sup>43</sup>

Where Schmitt hails the dictatorial gesture of Hitler as the sovereign Führer who empowers himself by placing himself above the law, Benjamin calls on the “subject of history” to grasp an “image of the past” that “flashes by,” in a desperate attempt to save it from the heap of rubble—the *Trümmerhaufen*—to which human history has become reduced, not least, I would add, by Schmitt and those who then and now succumbed to his seductions.

## Conclusion

Although the examples discussed here differ in genre, context, and form, they share a sense of the value of deferral, which, beyond the author’s purposes and goals, testifies to their awareness of the violence inherent in the decision. Similarly, their insistence on deferral points to the importance they attach to alternative options, to roads not taken: Against the inevitability of history or fate, they introduce a measure of contingency—and thus free will—into their view of history. Far from a Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* or an inflationary celebration of a crisis discourse as a deconstructive principle of indeterminacy, however, deferral is, in their vision, an active mode, sometimes even a highly intense if not hyperactive one that is illuminated against the background of Schmitt’s decisionism and the

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42 [“Der Führer schützt das Recht vor dem schlimmsten Missbrauch, wenn er *im Augenblick der Gefahr* kraft seines Führertums als oberster Gerichtsherr unmittelbar Recht schafft.”] Carl Schmitt, “Der Führer schützt das Recht,” *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung*, 1 Aug. 1934 (emphasis mine).

43 [“Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heißt nicht, es erkennen, wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist. Es heißt, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie *im Augenblick einer Gefahr* aufblitzt. Dem historischen Materialismus geht es darum, ein Bild der Vergangenheit festzuhalten, wie es sich *im Augenblick der Gefahr* dem historischen Subjekt unversehens einstellt.”] Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391 (with my modifications and emphasis).

political theology of which it is a crucial element. Beyond the lingering on multiple available options as a foundation of free will, the Jewish tradition is inherent in the texture of deferral in its resistance against the moment of decision where it intersects with Kierkegaard's decisive Moment of an either/or, which, as in the latter's interpretation of Abraham, leaps into faith beyond reasoning and above all in a moment that brackets ethical considerations.

"Crisis," so runs the first sentence of a recent article, "is undoubtedly a, if not the central concern in Carl Schmitt's political theory."<sup>44</sup> This article, which justifies Schmitt's importance for today from a Christian, post-secular perspective, situates Schmitt's decisionism in the context of modernity's difference from Schmitt's *katechon* that holds up the ultimate crisis—the Apocalypse and the End of Times, that serves to ensure order before the second coming. Often the *katechon* is the Jew. In the present examples, procrastination holds up the violence of decision. Schmitt's decision derived from Nothing is a structure, is contentless. Similarly, deferral in all the cases here is in itself contentless, a mere structure opposed to Schmitt's, but it interrupts and holds up the violence of history embedded in the violence of decisionism. Nowhere is this violence more explicit than in the end of Kafka's *The Trial*. The novel ends with the protagonist's murder: Josef K. is brutally executed by two anonymous men who, as the novel's penultimate sentence notes, look at the man they have just killed. What they see there has rarely been noticed:

But the hands of one of the men were placed on K.'s throat, whilst the other plunged the knife into his heart and turned it round twice. As his sight faded, K. saw the two men leaning cheek to cheek close to his face as they observed *the decision* (*Entscheidung*).<sup>45</sup>

This penultimate sentence of the novel sees "*mit brechenden Augen*"—literally, "with breaking eyes"—how the two men observe the result of their violent deed. What they see is the undoing of an original scission, a de-scission that is meant to return a world torn apart by modernity into a primordial totality: It is the ultimate, pure, absolute decision, which the "breaking eyes" of Joseph K.'s last glance resist in vain.

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<sup>44</sup> Hjalmar Falk, "The Apocalypse According to Carl Schmitt: the Principle of Katechontism," *Torch* 3 Jan. 2017. See: <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/article/the-apocalypse-according-to-carl-schmitt-the-principle-of-katechontism>.

<sup>45</sup> The English translation "last verdict" of the German *Entscheidung* does not convey this emphasis. ["Aber an K.s Gurgel legten sich die Hände des einen Herrn, während der andere das Messer ihm tief ins Herz stieß und zweimal dort drehte. Mit brechenden Augen sah noch K., wie die Herren, nahe vor seinem Gesicht, Wangen an Wangen aneinandergelehnt, die Entscheidung beobachteten."]. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123 (translation modified).

## Coda: Why Schmitt Today?

Carl Schmitt's current and increasing attractiveness to intellectuals on the right, left, and, more recently, also in the center is astounding. The leftists Chantal Mouffe, Giorgio Agamben, Susan Buck-Morss, and Slavoj Žižek, but also the centrist juridical scholar Paul Kahn, turn to Schmitt with a contemporary political agenda involving a sense of ubiquitous crisis, pressing urgency, and the call for extreme responses. Common to their diagnosis of the present is an attempt to awaken from what they perceive as a liberal lethargy, which Giorgio Agamben, in his discussion of Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's famous text "Before the Law," called a "paralyzed messianism." How is it that Schmitt, in spite of his obvious rightist leanings, attracts some of the most potent minds in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

I contend that Schmitt offers these intellectuals a radicalism that is no longer provided by other political sources after Marxism has lost its credibility and its appeal. In the 1980s, when the ban on Schmitt was lifted by a disappointed and disoriented left in search of new anti-liberal inspiration, those who revived his reputation did so apologetically. Two decades later, both the uneasiness and the provocation disappeared. Schmitt became our contemporary who has something relevant to propose rather than simply a controversial thinker of the past. This "taming" of Schmitt that turned him into a respectable source of insights occurred partly through an insistence on his proximity to widely acknowledged figures such as Benjamin, but also Taubes, Strauss, and even Arendt, at the price of entangling these with all that is problematic about Schmitt. His decisionism is one of the most fatal features of his thinking.

Some attribute the reasons for Schmitt's relevance to the ways democracies are today once again revealing their feebleness and their flaws. They argue that political liberalism is overly optimistic in its view of human nature and is thus vulnerable to Schmitt's critique directed at liberalism's blindness to the antagonistic nature of politics. For them, there can be no functioning legal order without a sovereign authority, and they regard the current weakness of parliamentary democracy with its endless and fruitless negotiations as proving this. For others, Schmitt can inspire an anarchist rebellion against dysfunctional legal systems and parliamentary governments altogether.

Intellectually, the current turn to Schmitt can also be explained in the light of what preceded it. Postmodernism's playful indeterminacies, the undermining of binary oppositions, the aporias, and aesthetic acrobatics of deconstruction may indeed have overstretched its critique of authority and *Entschlossenheit* (Resoluteness)—a term also frequently encountered in Martin Heidegger. Its celebration



of deferral and delayed action would be particularly salient. All this is clearly what Schmitt's decisionism opposes. The backlash against postmodernism and deconstruction manifests itself in a desire for political *Eigentlichkeit*, authenticity, intensity, heroic force, and political action against the undecidability of deconstruction. Given this consequence of the demise of deconstruction and, more importantly, in response to the post-post-Cold War world order that we are witnessing today, we need a renewed awareness of the necessity to confront the dangers of Schmitt's decisionism. The antidotes of the German-Jewish thinkers discussed here can provide inspiration deriving from the spirit of Judaism.

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# Derrida and Levinas on Political Hospitality

## 1 Introduction

In the last decade of his life, Jacques Derrida developed a strong interest in the concept of hospitality. This concept had a philosophic tradition deriving mainly from Kant, who in *Perpetual Peace* presented a defense of political hospitality in a cosmopolitan context.<sup>1</sup> Prior to Kant, however, few philosophers had dealt with the notion of hospitality, although it plays a prominent role in Greek poetry and in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Neither Plato nor Aristotle considered it an important category.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 93–130.

2 Hospitality is arguably the main topic of the *Odyssey*; it is the main topic of Aeschylus's *Suppliants*, and one of the main topics of Sophocles' Oedipus plays. It appears that the first philosopher to discuss the laws of hospitality was Francisco de Vitoria. See Francesco de Vitoria, "On the American Indians" and "On the Laws of War," in *Political Writings*, eds. Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 231–327. For a history of hospitality in international law before Kant, see Vincent Chetail, "Sovereignty and Migration in the Doctrine of the Law of Nations: An Intellectual History of Hospitality from Vittoria to Vattel," *European Journal of International Law* 27, no. 4 (2016): 901–22.

3 Raymond D. Boisvert, "Ethics is Hospitality," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 78 (2005): 291. One might point out that Plato's philosopher must account for the strangeness of his language, and therefore hospitality constitutes a basic feature of his philosophy *qua* philosophy. See Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3. See the *Apology of Socrates* 17d: "This is my first appearance in a court of law, at the age of seventy, and so I am a complete stranger to the language of this place. Now if I were really from another country, you would naturally excuse me." Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4. The relationship between host and guest is mentioned in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, but only as a sub-category of friendship. It is striking, therefore, that the "Aristotle" entry of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, first published in 1764 (thirty-one years before Kant's *Perpetual Peace*), notes that Aristotle "distinguishes friendship between equals, between relatives, between guests, and between lovers. Friendship springing from the rights of hospitality [*les droits de l'hospitalité*] is no longer known among us. That which, among the ancients, was the sacred bond of society [*le sacré lien de la société*] is, with us, nothing but an innkeeper's reckoning." Voltaire, "*Dictionnaire Philosophique*," in *Œuvres*, Vol. 27, ed. M. Beuchot (Paris: Werdet et Lequien Fils, Firmin Didot Frères, 1829): 32. Here Voltaire expresses a new interest in hospitality and an eighteenth-century concern for "rights." Note that Kant's *Perpetual Peace* starts with an anecdote about a Dutch innkeeper (*Gastwirt*) who "once put this satirical inscription ["The Perpetual Peace"] on his signboard, along with the picture of a graveyard." Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 93. On the emergence of a new

When Derrida turns to this topic, he considers it mostly as a Kantian territory, which he expands in his 1995–96 and 1996–97 seminars at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), and in several texts published during these years, such as: *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996), *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort* (1997), and, famously, “Le mot d'accueil,” a lecture given at a conference organized for the first anniversary of Levinas's death, in 1997. In his lecture, Derrida defines Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* as “an immense treatise of hospitality.”<sup>4</sup>

Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality as *aporetic*, and his understanding of Levinas's ethics as messianic hospitality, have engendered a vast scholarship that has turned hospitality into a major concept in ethical and political philosophy, Jewish thought, political theory, international law, and international relations. The philosophical engagement with hospitality encounters sociological, legal, and environmental concerns about the status of refugees, border crossings, economic migrations, and cultural exchanges. What appears, therefore, is that Derrida's account on the notion of hospitality is tied to the various forms of political crises.

In that context, I would like to reexamine Levinas's and Derrida's conceptions of hospitality and ask whether they are indeed relevant in real-life situations of precariousness, homelessness, statelessness, and voluntary or forced migrations. Clearly, the task of philosophy is not to give models of empirical behavior. Therefore, I am not wondering whether Derrida's and Levinas's conceptions of hospitality could be used as concrete solutions or remedies for crises such as those of the Syrian or Ukrainian refugees. On the contrary, I analyze the logical tensions inherent to their positions on hospitality and show that these tensions do not allow them to be relevant in real politics. I am, however, asking if it is possible to extract from their philosophies epistemic, political, or moral principles that would guide both our understanding of crises and our search of solutions.

In the first section of this chapter, I outline the main points in Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality and his understanding of Levinas's positions on that topic. In the second section I turn to one of Levinas's texts on hospitality discussed by Derrida and I offer a critical perspective on it. In the concluding section, I discuss the messianism of Derrida's and Levinas's understandings of hospitality and its possible relevance in the empirical world.

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discourse on hospitality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Lucien Nouis, *Politiques de l'hospitalité (1632–1796)* (France, Pierre Bayle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant), PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), 49; trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 21.

## 2 Hospitality According to Derrida

Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality elaborates on two points: the first is the hostile tension existing in all situations of hospitality; the second is the contradiction between hospitality as an unconditional ethical law and hospitality as a set of conditional political laws. Here, I discuss these two issues one after the other, although in Derrida's texts they are interwoven one with the other.

In the first session of his 1995–96 seminar, which, like an opera overture, introduces the themes of the entire seminar, Derrida challenges Kant's opposition between hospitality and hostility.<sup>5</sup> In the third article of *Perpetual Peace*, Kant defines hospitality as “the right [*Recht*] of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory.”<sup>6</sup> Glossing on Emile Benveniste's analyses of the Latin roots of hospitality in his work *Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Derrida emphasizes the three meanings unfolding from these roots: *host* and *enemy*, which both come from the Latin *hostis*, and *master/householder/sovereign*, which comes from the Latin *potis* (*-pes/-pets* in *hospes* and *hostipets*). Etymologically, hospitality comprises a tension between the act of welcoming the stranger and the fear of, or the threat presented by, the enemy. This tension is tempered by the theme of sovereignty—the power of the householder.<sup>7</sup>

In his seminar Derrida dwells on the extreme examples of the Biblical stories of Sodom (Genesis 19) and the Concubine at Gibeah (Judges 19), in which members of the host society seek to rape guests given shelter by one of their fellow citizens. In his book *Monolingualism of the Other*, he applies these analyses to colonialism, namely to the power relations between settlers and indigenous populations. The risk of conquest, he says, is present each time people settle in a territory which is not theirs, and bring in new ways of life into their new country of residence.

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5 Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité. Volume I. Séminaire (1995–1996)* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 23. The book has not yet been translated into English. The seminar's first session appeared as “Hostipitality,” trans. Barry Stocker with Forbes Morlok, *Angelaki* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3–16. Its fourth and fifth sessions appear in Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997); *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

6 That right comprises the entirety of cosmopolitan law: “Cosmopolitan law [*Weltbürgerrecht*] shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality”. Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” 105. My translation differs from Nisbet's. *Recht* (the German equivalent of the Latin *ius* and the French *droit*) should be translated sometimes as “right” and sometimes as “law.” See Martha C. Nussbaum, “Kant and Cosmopolitanism,” in *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant's Cosmopolitan Ideal*, eds. James Bohman and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997): 25–57.

7 Derrida, *Hospitalité*, 45; “Hostipitality,” 13.

Hostility, in the form of the risk of aggression against the hosting natives or against the foreign guests, is subjacent in all situations of hospitality.

Derrida sums up the relationship between hospitality and hostility as a confrontation between two languages: the foreigner's mother tongue, and the host's tongue, that is, the political or patriarchal *logos*, the language of the state.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, hospitality includes the danger of a violation of the foreigner's mother tongue by the dominant *logos*:

The foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc., are formulated. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This entity imposes on him translation into its own language, and that's the first act of violence.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, hospitality constitutes a danger for the dominant or patriarchal *logos*—in other words, for the state's order. The foreigner's language (that is, her culture, customs, needs, power) opens a breach in the dominant or patriarchal framework. To open one's door to a foreigner is equivalent to putting oneself into question or allowing oneself to be put into question—and eventually to be defeated, and even conquered. Strangers are a threat even when they behave in a peaceful manner, because they bring with them a heterogeneous order that challenges existing rules.<sup>10</sup> That threat is inherent to hospitality as much as is the host's threat to guests through the violent imposition of the dominant order on them.

Proficiency in a language, therefore, is an appropriation rather than a natural given. The core of Derrida's argument is that language is always a form of patriarchal hegemony that includes some kind of colonial oppression.<sup>11</sup> This violence is gendered and, as such, it consists of the violation of a mother tongue or culture. Through “the rape of a cultural usurpation ... always essentially colonial” the master imposes language as his own: “he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make other believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school or the army.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, proficiency in a lan-

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8 Derrida, *De l'hospitalité* 13, 17; *Of Hospitality*, 5, 11.

9 Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, 21; *Of Hospitality*, 15. Derrida's use of the masculine cannot be transformed in gender-neutral form because he specifically raises the question of the difference between a male and a female foreigner (see *De l'hospitalité*, 67; *Of Hospitality*, 73).

10 Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, 109–11; *Of Hospitality*, 121–25.

11 Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) 45; *Monolinguisism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23.

12 Derrida, *Monolinguisme*, 45; *Monolinguisism*, 23.

guage—language’s purity when it is spoken without foreign accent—is always the unacknowledged result of past policies of usurpation. Derrida remains prudent: he does not intend to dissolve the “specificity ... of situations of linguistic oppression or colonial expropriation,”<sup>13</sup> but to underline that all cultural claims are in essence colonial: “So much so that ‘colonialism’ and ‘colonization’ are only high points [*reliefs*], one traumatism over another, an increasing buildup of violence, the jealous rage of the essential *coloniality* ... of *culture*.”<sup>14</sup> Colonized and colonizers are part of the same process of *coloniality*, of the same effort to naturalize that which will never be natural.<sup>15</sup>

It is because of the risk of hostility that societies create laws that limit and condition the entrance of foreigners, and their behavior on the host territory. Hospitality consists therefore in concrete sets of rules and norms, which, while affirming the host’s welcoming duty, corroborate his power and property. The laws of hospitality reinforce the definition of what belongs to the host: his house, his land, his country. While the guests are invited “to feel at home,” they are required to feel at home *in the host’s home* and in his language.<sup>16</sup>

However, says Derrida, there is another meaning of hospitality, which, contrary to the previous one, is unlimited and surrenders all property and all power; an absolute hospitality made of extreme openness, endless welcoming of the other as other. According to this second level of hospitality, or, perhaps, this essence of hospitality, this pure hospitality, the host unconditionally opens his house to the stranger and becomes the guest of his guest or, to use Levinas’s vocabulary, his hostage. This pure hospitality, indeed, is that which Derrida explicitly extracts from Levinas’s ethics.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the second point that Derrida raises about hospitality is the contradiction between two levels or two meanings of hospitality, hospitality as a set of conditional laws and hospitality as unconditional law. These two versions, however, are of the *same thing*, hospitality; a fact that leads Derrida to define hospitality

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13 *Monolinguisme*, 44; *Monolinguisism*, 23.

14 *Monolinguisme*, 47; *Monolinguisism*, 24.

15 Derrida has in mind France’s language policy, reinforced during the French Revolution, which imposed the French language as sole administrative language on the French territory, replacing regional dialects. This process was later extended to the French colonial empire. His argument, however, underlines the fact that the oppressed dialects and languages had also replaced previous linguistic forms. In other words, none of them was “natural.” Derrida’s argument is relevant in other national contexts.

16 Derrida, *Hospitalité*, 45; “Hostipitality,” 14.

17 *Hospitalité*, 87.

as aporetic.<sup>18</sup> According to Derrida, hospitality has two dimensions, the political and the ethical, which negate each other:

Hospitality is good, necessary, it is a right, a duty, an obligation, a law, the greeting of the foreign other [*l'autre étranger*] as a friend but on the condition that the *host*, the *Wirt*, the one who receives, lodges or gives asylum remains the boss, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority in his own home, that he looks after himself and sees to and considers all that concerns him [*qu'il se garde et garde et regarde ce qui le regarde*] and thereby affirms the law of hospitality as the law of the household, *oikonomia*, the law of his household, the law of a place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.), the law of identity which delimits the *very* place of proffered hospitality and maintains authority over it, maintains the truth of authority, remains the place of this maintaining, which is to say, of truth, thus limiting the gift proffered and making of this limitation, namely, the being-oneself in one's own home, the condition of the gift and of hospitality. This is the principle of both the constitution and the implosion of the concept of hospitality, the effects of which – it is my hypothesis – we will only continue to confirm ... Hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct or protect itself from itself, auto-immunize itself in some way, which is to say, deconstruct itself – precisely – in being put into practice.<sup>19</sup>

In “A Word of Welcome” this conclusion leads to an analysis of the relationship between ethics and politics in Levinas. There, however, Derrida faces a difficulty: on the one hand, he follows the transformations of Levinas's formulations from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*, namely, from “the subject is a host” to “the subject is hostage.”<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, he argues that Levinas's ethics is synonymous with the unconditional law of hospitality.<sup>21</sup> In effect, the Levinassian move from the extreme idea that, in the ethical face-to-face, the subject welcomes the other without restriction,<sup>22</sup> to the idea that the subject welcomes the other even before being constituted as a subject (that is, sacrifices himself for the other),<sup>23</sup> is a radicalization almost *ad absurdum* of what Derrida calls the unconditional law of hospitality. As Levinas famously writes in *Otherwise than Being*: “Responsibility for the other is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes

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18 *De l'hospitalité*, 63; *Of Hospitality*, 65.

19 *Hospitalité*, 23–24; “Hostipitality,” 4–5.

20 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 102; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 55.

21 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 45, 94; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 19, 50.

22 That is, “beyond the capacity of the I.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), 43; *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.

23 See the chapter “Substitution,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990); *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).



essence in [the subject], has not waited for a freedom in which a commitment to the other would have been made.”<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, however, Derrida wonders whether “the ethics of hospitality that we try to analyze in Levinas’s thought would be able to found laws and politics.”<sup>25</sup> But why look for the conditional in the unconditional? How could Levinas’s unconditional hospitality be the foundation for conditional hospitality? While according to Derrida the concept of hospitality auto-immunizes itself because it has both ethical and political implications, Levinas’s ethics calls for, not hospitality in general, but what Derrida precisely defined as unconditional hospitality. Where will Derrida find the political dimension of hospitality in Levinas’s ethics?

Derrida acknowledges that there is no clear passage between Levinas’s philosophy of hospitality and a politics of hospitality. But then he accomplishes a gesture that I formulated as the main argument of my book, *Levinas’s Politics*. He turns to Levinas’s Talmudic readings to find the political elements of his philosophy. As I wrote, “the Talmudic readings manifest a political thinking that challenges the ethical analyses offered in Levinas’s phenomenological works ... My claim is that there is a distance between Levinas’s ‘ethics as first philosophy’ and the political thinking underlying the readings.”<sup>26</sup> Derrida does not argue as strongly as I do that there is a difference between Levinas’s ethics and his politics, but he mentions a “hiatus” between them.<sup>27</sup> Like me, however, yet without stating it explicitly, he looks for Levinas’s political laws in his Jewish writings, in particular “The Cities of Refuge,” “The State of David and the State of Caesar,” and “Politics After!” in *Beyond the Verse* and “The Nations and the Presence of Israel” in *In the Time of the Nations*.

### 3 Levinas and the Nations

I will not focus here on Levinas’s ethics of hospitality, which he formulated in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In particular, I will not dwell on Levinas’s conceptions of the house and of the feminine, detailed at length in *Totality and Infinity*. These issues relate to what Derrida calls the unconditional law of hospitality, and they are well known. What interests me in this chapter is the relation-

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24 Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 180; *Otherwise than Being*, 114.

25 Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 45; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 20. Translation modified.

26 Annabel Herzog, *Levinas’s Politics: Justice, Mercy, Universality* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 5.

27 Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 46; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 21.

ship between ethics and politics that is expressed in some of Levinas's Talmudic readings. Here I focus on the reading "The Nations and the Presence of Israel," also commented on by Derrida, and which is the basis of his understanding of Levinas's hospitality as messianic.<sup>28</sup>

"The Nations and the Presence of Israel" is a commentary on a fragment from *Tractate Pesahim* 118b which, according to Levinas, deals with the relation of non-Jewish nations to messianic times. In Levinas's terms, the Talmudic discussion scrutinizes the relation "of humanity to the election of Israel, and the meaning of that election, and the significance of Israel in the spirituality of the human."<sup>29</sup> Levinas explains that the spiritual significance of Israel consists in fraternity and hospitality, which echo the "word of God," and that "one belongs to the Messianic order when one has been able to admit others among one's own."<sup>30</sup> The message brought by Judaism to the world consists in the command to welcome the other, even when this other's alterity is a threat to or even a negation of the host.

According to Levinas, in the Talmudic discussion the non-Jewish world is divided into three categories, "Egypt," "Cush" (or Ethiopia), and "Rome," each of them being paradigmatic of historical and socio-political characteristics. As Levinas writes: "The three nations or states or societies mentioned – Egypt, Cush and Rome – represent a typology of national life, in which, through the forms of existence that are pure history, appears the inhuman or the human."<sup>31</sup> His words imply that Egypt, Cush, and Rome define the historical world in general, while Israel embodies the an-historical word of God. As we will see now, for Levinas the historical world is divided between those which include some ethics in their politics, namely Egypt; those which, under pretenses of fraternity, hypocritically destroy ethics, namely Rome; and those who are passively immersed in history, namely Cush.<sup>32</sup>

The first form of national life that Levinas mentions, Egypt, represents *political* hospitality and reveals the dangers inherent to this hospitality, later analyzed by Derrida. Egypt is both a shelter and a place of enslavement: it first welcomed the people that it later enslaved. Egypt does not embody the unconditional law of hospitality—namely the word of God, manifested in the Israelites—but it does embody real, historical hospitality, which includes violence and threats. In

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28 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 120; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 66.

29 Emmanuel Levinas, *A l'heure des nations* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988), 111; *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 96.

30 *A l'heure des nations*, 113; *In the Time of the Nations*, 98.

31 *A l'heure des nations*, 113; *In the Time of the Nations*, 97.

32 In the Talmudic text and, accordingly, in Levinas's reading, Rome is the third examined historical form and Cush is the second.

Levinas's commentary, the Messiah cannot forgive the ambiguities of historical hospitality, but God, who knows what real life is made of, interferes in favor of Egypt because despite being political Egypt's hospitality expresses a "memory" of the word of God.<sup>33</sup>

Another form of national life is Rome. In the Talmudic extract, Rome is called "criminal" because it has conquered and destroyed Israel. In the rabbinic tradition—rather than in history, despite Levinas's claim<sup>34</sup>—Rome is considered synonym of Edom, mentioned in the Bible as synonym of Esau, the brother of Jacob-Israel. For that reason, in the Talmudic text Rome claims "brotherhood" with Israel, a brotherhood that is also an antagonism. The Talmudic sentences are obscure, in particular because Rome, contrary to Egypt and Cush, is not explicitly mentioned in the psalm used by the rabbis in their discussion (Psalm 68), and their criticism of Rome is built on free association. Levinas understands well that the Talmudic text expresses a rabbinic obsession with the "Greco-Roman order"<sup>35</sup> that has conquered them, and he tries to match this obsession with his own obsession with "the Western world in its twentieth-century American realization"<sup>36</sup> and with anti-Semitic "totalitarian regimes, the temptation of the Occident."<sup>37</sup> Rome is the West which, however fraternal, must be rejected as imperialist, abusive, and violent.

It is because of Levinas's emphasis on European "bloody history, with its cult of heroism and military nobility, its nationalist exclusionism, its racial, social and economic injustice"<sup>38</sup> that his treatment of the third form of national life, Cush, "and all the nations or states resembling it"<sup>39</sup> will surprise and make us uncomfortable:

A country of black men with nothing to reproach itself for, nor anything to congratulate itself for. According to the Bible, at least, it is never the theatre of important events. A purely geographical reference ... In Holy history as well as in universal history—without an active role, a bit marginal. Neither friendly nor hostile to the message of Israel. A third or a fourth of mankind—is not its very silence and neutrality a natural goodwill of 'the noble savage'? But then also perhaps praise for the Eternal of Israel? Given the success of Egypt, who had enslaved Israel, Cush, whose hands remained clean, is welcome under the auspices of an *a*

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<sup>33</sup> Levinas, *A l'heure des nations*, 113; *In the Time of the Nations*, 97. On Levinas's conceptions of the Messiah, see David Brezis, "Messianisme et pensée sacrificielle: Sur la 'dérive christianisante' de Levinas," *Europe* 991/992 (2011): 242–68; and my *Levinas's Politics*, 108–25.

<sup>34</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 115; *In the Time of the Nations*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 122; *In the Time of the Nations*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 112; *In the Time of the Nations*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 120; *In the Time of the Nations*, 105.

<sup>38</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 119; *In the Time of the Nations*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 114, *In the Time of the Nations*, 99.

*fortiori* argument in which the peoples who do not have a complicated history are assigned with ease, within the corruption of the civilizations, a philosophy of history.<sup>40</sup>

While the topic of Levinas's racist and chauvinist formulations has been widely discussed,<sup>41</sup> one could argue that in this case he echoes the rabbis' prejudices.<sup>42</sup> It is indeed clear that Levinas's assertion that Cush does not play any active role in relation to Israel comes from the fact that the Talmud, which alludes to Egyptian hospitality and Roman crimes, adds no specific qualification to Cush. Levinas, however, gives free rein to his interpretation when he emphasizes the color of Cush's inhabitants and claims that they have no complicated history. He qualifies them as "black men," while neither the Bible nor the Talmud (at least here) focuses on skin color; he claims that they are passive bystanders both in Holy history and in universal history; and he asserts that they are indifferent to Israel's message. His words remind one more of Hegel's views on Africa than of the Talmudic ones.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Hegel's characterizations of Africa are not exactly identical to those of Levinas. For Hegel, history is the actualization of Spirit.<sup>44</sup> The four stages of this

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40 *A l'heure des nations*, 114; *In the Time of the Nations*, 99.

41 In particular, Levinas's statement "I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks ... All the rest—all the exotic—is dance." Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18. In Christoph von Wolzogen's interview "L'intention, l'événement et l'autre," published in *Emmanuel Levinas 100, Proceedings of the Centenary Conference Bucharest 2006*, ed. Cristian Ciocan (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2007), 36–37, Levinas repeats that sentence but adds that his words are not intended to be racist: "Je dis toujours —mais à mots couverts—que les seules choses humaines qui importent, ce sont les Grecs et la Bible; tout le reste est danse. Je trouve que c'est une évidence qui vaut pour le monde entier, il n'y a là-dedans aucun racisme" (36). For developed criticisms of Levinas's remarks, see John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

42 On that topic, see Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*, trans. Betty Sigler Rozen (London: Routledge, 2003).

43 The rabbinic discussion goes as follows: to explain Psalms 117, which mentions the "peoples of the universe," the rabbis turn to Psalms 68, which names two of these peoples, Egypt and Cush. Rome is not named in Psalms 68, but the rabbis interpret the "wild beast" described there as representing Rome. What clearly interests the rabbis is whether Rome should be included in the "peoples of the universe" of Psalms 117. In that context, Egypt is of interest because like Rome it behaved wrongly with Israel (and also, obviously, because the debate is initially about *Pesah*, namely the biblical exodus), but contrary to Rome it also helped Israel. Cush, also mentioned in Psalms 68, is a neutral example because it neither abused nor assisted Israel. In other words, contrary to what Levinas emphasizes, the Talmudic formulations do not reveal Cush's historical passivity and indifference to Israel, but the rabbis' indifference to Cush, which represents the nations with whom Israel had no conflictual history.

44 Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (New York, NY: Dover, 1956).

actualization, Oriental, Greek, Roman, and German, do not include Africa, which is not part of the development of Spirit and, hence, of history. However, Levinas, who is influenced by Franz Rosenzweig, describes a split in human existence between the categories of historical experiences and of transcendent and eternal values. Israel embodies the latter while the rest of the world is immersed in history, namely in political events. Therefore, if, for Hegel, Africa is part neither of history nor of Spirit (which are the same thing), for Levinas it is part of history but without playing any role in it, and it is indifferent to the Jewish spirit, or word of God. Despite the differences between their views, Hegel and Levinas share the notions that Africa's involvement in history is low, and that its spiritual consciousness is non-existent.

To conclude this section, I would like to emphasize three points: the first is that, for Levinas, the message brought to the world by Israel is a universal value expressed by a group of people about which, however, Levinas says nothing. The election of Israel or, even, Israel *tout court*, consists in the enunciation of the word of God for everyone. God, Israel, and humanity are steps of the same story—that of the unconditional welcoming of the other. Note that when Levinas mentions Israel or the Jewish election, it is a universal message, thus related to every human being. However, when he switches to the non-Jewish groups or identities, he speaks of different *nationalities*. The desire of non-Jewish nations to participate in messianic times means that they recognize the universal message formulated by Judaism, namely that they request a “participation in the history of Israel, which can be assessed by the degree to which their national solidarity is open to the other, the stranger.”<sup>45</sup> While the Jewish message is the expression of the universal word of God, the non-Jewish nations are treated as specific nations with a national solidarity. The nations are nationally determined while Israel is not.

My second point is that, for Levinas, welcoming the other is scary, dangerous, and even horrifying. On the one hand, hospitality can become enslavement, and, hence, guests are always in danger. On the other hand, hospitality means welcoming the other “despite the horror of a man for another who denies him in his alterity.”<sup>46</sup> The host loses himself in welcoming the other but, still, he welcomes him. The threat or even the horror exists also at the national level:

That a people should accept those who come and settle among them—even though they are foreigners with their different practices and outfits, with their way of speaking and their smell—that a people should give them an *akhsaniah* [lodgings], such as a place at the inn,

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<sup>45</sup> Levinas, *A l'heure des nations*, 112; *In the Time of the Nations*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 113; *In the Time of the Nations*, 97.

and the wherewithal to breathe and to live – is a song to the glory of the God of Israel. Simple tolerance? God alone knows how much love that tolerance demands.<sup>47</sup>

Love is demanded because the task is difficult. No one does it easily. In a manner reminiscent of Kant, who emphasized that hospitality is not a question of philanthropy,<sup>48</sup> Levinas makes it clear that hospitality should not be seen as the result of sentimental empathy, but as the realization of a transcendent command that puts into question the host's comfort, welfare, and security.

As a third point I argue here that Levinas's categorization of the historical world illustrates the political—and, in effect, non-ethical—aspect of his Talmudic commentaries. For Levinas, indeed, ethics is the opening of the not-yet-defined ego to pure undetermined otherness. Politics, on the other hand, means comparison and competition between defined identities. Politics' thematization is opposed to ethics' color-blindness. Therefore, when Levinas asserts that Cush's inhabitants are "black men" he is very far from his claim that "the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes."<sup>49</sup> In parallel to noticing Levinas's prejudice, one can identify two levels of analyses that coexist and contradict each other in Levinas's work, the political and the ethical.

## 4 Messianism and Democracy

Let us come back to the three points just mentioned: Israel is a universal idea while the world consists of nations specifically determined; hospitality includes discomfort and danger; Levinas's gaze on nations is political, not ethical; as such it sees "colors" and compares them; in Levinas's language it "thematizes" them. These points lead us to the conclusion that the risk of racism and xenophobia exists in all instances of political hospitality, as it exists in all political practices and in all political considerations. Racism and xenophobia are political because politics is about categories, calculation, and comparison, which involve choices, preferences, rejections, eliminations. Ethics, on the other hand, is so devoid of all specificity (both of the ego and of the other) that it escapes the risk of racism.

A politics with no risk of racism, therefore, will be a politics entirely reworked by ethics. However, says Derrida, the price that ethics must pay for being devoid of the risk of racism is its abstraction and immateriality. The host's and the guest's

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<sup>47</sup> *A l'heure des nations*, 113–14; *In the Time of the Nations*, 98.

<sup>48</sup> Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 105.

<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992), 79; *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85.

absolute nakedness—their absence of determinations or predicates, of “empirical visibility”<sup>50</sup>—makes them similar to ghosts. As Derrida puts it, there is “no hospitality without the chance of spectrality.”<sup>51</sup> Reworked by spectral ethics, therefore, politics becomes eschatological. Such a messianic hospitality is not hospitality “as it is understood in law and in politics.”<sup>52</sup> It is *more* than the offer of a refuge, but it is also *less* than that because it cannot take place in the real world. It is postponed to messianic times.

For Derrida, the spectrality or spirituality of Levinas’s ethics has a deconstructive role, because it puts into question the empirical visibility and the risk of racism that comes with it, and it endlessly defers the realization of hospitality. This deconstructive messianism, however, does not help us imagine a better empirical politics: “To put this in the terms of a classical philosophical discourse, silence is kept concerning the rules or schemas ... that would provide us with the ‘best’ or less bad mediations: between ethics or the holiness of messianic hospitality on the one hand and the ‘peace process,’ the process of political peace, on the other.”<sup>53</sup>

Ironically, Derrida’s reticence about Levinas’s hospitality can be reformulated as a criticism of Derrida’s own messianic politics, namely of his concept of the “democracy to come.” In his book *Rogues*, Derrida indicates that democracy is a re-enactment of the aporia of hospitality at the level of conditional hospitality, namely at the political level. In other words, not only does hospitality auto-immunize itself in the contradiction between its unconditional and conditional versions, but it also auto-immunizes itself at the level of its conditional laws. This second auto-immunization is called democracy:

In its constitutive autoimmunity, in its vocation for hospitality ... democracy has always wanted by turns and at the same time two incompatible things: it has wanted, on the one hand, to welcome only men, and on the condition that they be citizens, brothers, and compeers ... excluding all the others, in particular bad citizens, rogues, noncitizens, and all sorts of unlike and unrecognizable others, and, on the other hand, at the same time or by turns, it has wanted to open itself up, to offer hospitality, to all those excluded. In both cases, let us recall ... hospitality remains limited and conditional.<sup>54</sup>

This contradiction, however, is transcended by the “democracy to come,” a “democracy” detached from autochthony and eugenics, detached, even, from the concepts

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50 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 192; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 111.

51 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 193; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 111–12.

52 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 183; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 106.

53 *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, 197; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, 114. Translation modified.

54 Jacques Derrida, *Voyous* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 95; *Rogues*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 63.

of country, nation, state, or citizen.<sup>55</sup> By “democracy to come” Derrida means another way to talk about democracy, the use of a word (“democracy”) to point to something different from what is usually understood by this word, and, in so doing, to challenge this usual signification.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, democracy to come is not a form of regime that will be implemented in the future. Counterintuitively, democracy to come means the *inheritance* of something “forgotten, repressed, misunderstood, or unthought in the ‘old’ concept and throughout its history.”<sup>57</sup> This thing is hospitality and its aporetic character.<sup>58</sup>

Derrida’s democracy to come deconstructs democracy like Levinas’s ideal Jerusalem—the Jerusalem that embodies Israel’s universal message of unconditional hospitality—deconstructs hospitality and, in messianic times, welcomes everyone without racism or xenophobia.<sup>59</sup> But neither Derrida’s democracy, nor Levinas’s hospitality, can be materialized now, in the empirical world, and neither do they let us imagine a better empirical world. Thus, can we use them in empirical times? Can they help us find an answer to the crises of our time?

My answer, and, hence, my conclusion, will be ambiguous. On the one hand it seems that they are not of great use. If Levinas’s and Derrida’s understandings of hospitality can be materialized neither now nor in the future, if their messianism means an endless deconstruction or contradiction that does not even let us imagine better times, they can hardly guide us in empirical situations. On the other hand, however, the impossibility of empirical materialization and of imagination does not necessarily mean non-effectiveness. Hospitality as an idea—as a contradictory injunction or as a deconstructive process—functions, says Derrida, as the *khôra* of politics, as the matrix of empirical determinations. It is not politics per se

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55 Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 126–27; *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), 104.

56 As Jacques Rancière indicates, Derrida means “democracy as democracy to come.” Jacques Rancière, “Should Democracy Come? Ethics and Politics in Derrida,” in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009): 275.

57 Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié*, 127; *The Politics of Friendship*, 104. Ghilad H. Shenhav explains that Derrida’s concept of “inheritance” constitutes “an active and selective intervention in the traditional material,” which often “desertifies” tradition in stripping it of its historical content to discover a structure that “embraces absolute openness and leaves space for any event to happen.” Ghilad H. Shenhav, “Jacques Derrida and the ‘Desertification’ of the Messianic,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 27 (2020): 99.

58 Rancière rightly notes that in Derrida’s democracy the host replaces the *demos*. Rancière, “Should Democracy Come?” 281.

59 Emmanuel Levinas, “Les villes-refuges,” in *L’au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1982): 70; “Cities of Refuge,” in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994): 52.



but it creates the conditions for critique, for destabilization, for a thinking of the event that opens a public space, namely a political one.<sup>60</sup> I am not sure that it is enough. On the other hand, making room for critique is maybe the best that philosophy can do.

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<sup>60</sup> Derrida, *Voyous*, 126–33; *Rogues*, 86–92.

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Karen S. Feldman

# On the Crisis of Jewish Law: Auerbach, Luther, and Realism

## Introduction

For Martin Luther, the so-called “Old Testament” is an exquisite document of crisis.<sup>1</sup> Certainly it *narrates* crisis, from the stories in Genesis of the expulsion of Adam and Eve, of God’s wrath, and fraternal conflicts, to the suffering of the Hebrew slaves whom Moses shepherds out of Egypt as they flee and wander. What is more, Luther’s translation and treatment of the Old and New Testaments were crucial to the crisis he created in the Roman Catholic Church, insofar as he condemned the Church’s elaborate interpretive schemata and mediated relationship to Scripture, along with its institutional structure and sacramental requirements, among other things—for which reasons Luther was designated a heretic. For Luther, however, the Hebrew Bible itself was an occasion for crisis, a producer of crisis, and an instigation to conversion. Indeed, the lawgiving contained therein constituted the most significant possible crisis, one that operated as a thoroughly positive possibility in Luther’s theological framework. Specifically, the Hebrew Bible, in its profusion of commandments, was for Luther perfectly crafted and situated to provoke crisis among Jews, insofar as Luther considered it patently impossible to fulfill all of the biblical commandments. He foresaw a desperate yearning that such failure to fulfill the commandments would in turn evoke, thereby opening the hearts of the Jews to God’s grace and Christ’s annulment of the law in favor of love. For Luther, the crisis brought on by the failure to fulfill the many commandments of the Old Testament was its whole point: the *success* of the Old Testament would thus emerge out of the crisis evoked by the *failure* to adhere to its laws. Moses as the presumed compositor of the Old Testament was therefore a hero to Luther, as I will explore in more detail below.

Luther’s virulent and ruinously influential anti-Semitism makes him a poor fit with other authors discussed in this volume, including Levinas, Derrida, Benjamin, Scholem, and Arendt. The significance, however, of Luther and his approach to the Hebrew Scriptures is crucial for much of the German-Jewish thought that is de-

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**Note:** My thanks go to Gilad Sharvit and Cedric Cohen Skalli for their helpful suggestions on this article.

<sup>1</sup> This article will use Luther’s obviously Christian nomenclature to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

scribed in the other chapters of the present volume. German-Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century shared an ingrained reception of Luther and Protestantism; hence, as David Myers notes, “In 1924 Rosenzweig observed [...] that ‘all modern Jews, and German Jews more than any others, are Protestants.’”<sup>2</sup> This seemingly heretical, ingrained reception of Luther came also by way of Kant’s Pietism, Hegel’s philosophy of religion, Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals, Weber’s sociology, Bultmann’s theology in Marburg, and Schmitt’s political theology. Luther’s covert significance for twentieth-century German-Jewish thought is even emblemized in a recent discovery by Israeli artist Rebecca Quaytman. Quaytman found that Paul Klee had mounted his *Angelus Novus* (1920), famously owned by Walter Benjamin, on top of a portrait of Martin Luther from 1838, which itself was a copy of a sixteenth-century portrait by Lucas Cranach the Elder. This article, however, does not deal with Benjamin. Instead, as indicated in the title, it will treat Luther in connection with Erich Auerbach—in particular with respect to realism, both in Luther’s praise of Moses as a writer and with respect to Auerbach in the wake of Luther. The examination of Moses’s “realism,” as seen by Luther the Catholic heretic, is relevant to debates around whether Auerbach is best understood in Protestant Christian or Jewish terms.<sup>3</sup> I will suggest below that Auerbach’s discussion of *fig-*

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2 See Franz Rosenzweig’s introduction to *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1 (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), xxviii; quoted in David N. Myers, “Hermann Cohen and the Quest for Protestant Judaism,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 46 (Jan. 2001): 195–214, here 199.

3 The scholarship on this topic is extensive. John David Dawson, “The Figure in the Fulfillment: Erich Auerbach,” in *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001): 83–113, in effect ascribes to Auerbach an approach to figural reading that is thoroughly indebted to particular strands of Christian theology. Avihu Zakai and David Weinstein, “Erich Auerbach and His ‘Figura’: An Apology for the Old Testament in an Age of Aryan Philology,” *Religions* 3, no. 2 (2012): 320–338, read Auerbach as affirming a “Judeo-Christian” origin of Western civilization. Matthias Bormuth, “Meaning in History: A Comparison Between the Works of Karl Löwith and Erich Auerbach,” *Religions* 2012, no. 3: 151–62, describes Auerbach as entirely conforming to Christian thought and tradition, with little influence from or interest in Jewish thought (157–58). Malachi Haim Hacohen, “Typology and the Holocaust: Erich Auerbach and Judeo-Christian Europe,” *Religions* 3, no. 3 (2012): 600–645, argues that Auerbach’s thought was thoroughly Christian. Ortwin de Graef and Pieter Vermeulen, “Virgilian Incarnation: Hartman and the Issue of Auerbach’s Jewishness,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 2 (2013): 141–48, see themselves as defending Auerbach against what they see as Geoffrey Hartman’s wishful reclamation of Auerbach as a Jewish-influenced thinker. Galili Shahar, “Auerbach’s Scars: Judaism and the Question of Literature,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 604–30, argues that “Auerbach’s Mimesis, his concept of literature, and his understanding of realistic representation should not be separated from his views on Jewish monotheism and from his modernist negotiation with its heritage” (605). James I. Porter, “Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 115–147, declares, “[I]t is here [in *Mimesis*] that Auerbach’s Jewishness spectac-

*ura* is very useful in this regard, insofar as it explores a range of interpretations of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments; and also Auerbach's emphasis on the mix of high and low style, which has some corollary in Luther's emphasis on the mix of everyday and most important commandments in the Old Testament. Ultimately I will argue, adding to James I. Porter's analysis, that Auerbach's treatment of *figura* in early and medieval Christian writings belies its roots in his account of the Old Testament's ambiguous and "withholding" style.

Auerbach was a premier German-Jewish philologist and scholar of Romance literature until he fled Nazi Germany for Turkey and eventually the United States. His monumental monograph published in 1946, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*,<sup>4</sup> contains a well-known opening chapter that compares the style of Genesis 22 (the *Akedah*) to that of the *Odyssey*'s book 19, in which the old nurse Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus by his scar. Auerbach argues that the Hebrew Scripture's terse style, fraught with background, which leaves so much unsaid, reflects a different style of representation of reality than the fully externalized, all-foreground, detail-packed style of Homeric epic. Auerbach's comparison of Homer and Genesis 22 is well known; the goal in these pages, however, is to investigate how Auerbach's understanding of biblical realism may be seen—perhaps somewhat heretically with respect to Auerbach scholarship—in light of Luther's own appreciation for what we might call the literary realism in the Hebrew Scriptures.

My goal is to therefore focus on aesthetic and literary issues rather than on theology, although of course they are inseparable in Luther.<sup>5</sup> I want first to focus on Luther as an inadvertent literary critic. For Luther produces what amount to aesthetic defenses of Moses as lawgiver and as compositor of the Old Testament, with its exquisite crisis-producing potential. To be clear, the issues around claims for Mosaic authorship—whether it was a matter of divine inspiration, dictation, repetition, composition, or revision—are highly contested and sub-

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ularly emerges, or rather, it is here that he discovers himself (or manifests himself) in his philology as a Jew" (116).

4 Originally published as *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Berlin: A. Francke Verlag, 1946); English version, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

5 Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948), provides a thorough catalogue of Luther's poetic elements in his translation of the Old Testament. Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 121–35, attempts an application of metaphor theory to Luther. Risto Saarinen, "Metapher und biblische Redefiguren als Elemente der Sprachphilosophie Luthers," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 30, no. 1 (1988): 18–39, discusses Luther's relationship to the classical rhetorical tradition.

ject to accusations of heresy, for which reason Spinoza was “excommunicated.”<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this article, I am interested in how Luther praises Moses as an author, and in particular in one surprising aesthetic observation in his “Preface to the Old Testament” that, I will show, pertains directly to Auerbach and realism. Specifically, I argue that what might anachronistically be called “realist aesthetics” are already at issue in Luther’s discussion of the effectiveness of the Hebrew Scriptures in producing crisis. In Luther’s discussion of the crisis evoked by the Hebrew Scriptures, the intersections of literal reading, historical reading, and a proleptic appreciation of realism appear in ways that later play out in Auerbach. Even more surprising, as I will show, those same intersections are *perceived* by Luther himself, both latently and patently, in his praise of Moses and the Hebrew Scriptures.

If Auerbach’s understanding of biblical realism owes something to Luther’s implicit aesthetic appreciation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which themselves heretically reject the figural interpretations of the Roman Catholic Church, this throws into a new light the debate about whether Auerbach’s approach is Protestant or Jewish. Given the context of Auerbach’s life and career until his flight from National Socialism, he stands within a Protestant tradition. Regarding the question of whether Auerbach’s approach is Jewish or Protestant, however, I will suggest that Luther was indebted to the Hebrew Bible’s own aesthetics and realist style, and thus Luther is already involved in the same “Jewish” realism that Auerbach explores in the famous first chapter of *Mimesis*. In other words, if Auerbach follows Luther in certain respects in his understanding of realism and of *figura*—an understanding that heretically rejects the multiple interpretive layers imputed to Scripture by the Catholic Church—then Luther is himself deploying or dependent on an implicit realist aesthetics that is not unequivocally Christian but might also be ascribed to a Jewish provenance. In that case, then, the difference between calling Auerbach’s reading Protestant or Jewish is more complicated than it may appear.

## Luther’s Praise of Moses

Luther opens his “Preface to the Old Testament” with citations from the New Testament that he takes to commend the Old Testament as required reading by Chris-

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Edwin Curley, “Spinoza’s Biblical Scholarship,” in *Spinoza: Theologisch-Politische Traktat*, ed. Otfried Höffe (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013): 109–26; and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

tians. Against others in the ancient vein of Marcion, and some of Luther's own contemporaries as well, who would discard the Hebrew Scriptures entirely, Luther extols its flawlessness and value.<sup>7</sup> Luther's "Preface to the Old Testament" is thus replete with acclaim for Moses and the Hebrew Scriptures, characterizing Moses as the perfect lawgiver. With respect to Moses's perfection Luther emphasizes how Moses maximizes the conditions for producing crisis among Jewish believers. Indeed, for Luther, as part of the legacy of Paul, the whole point of Jewish law is to evoke a crisis—specifically, a crisis regarding the inability to obey the laws of God. What Luther sees as the crisis of the ancient Israelites, namely their repeated failures fully to accept and follow the law laid out by Moses, constitutes for Luther the paradoxical proof of Moses's success. As Luther describes in his earlier writings, it is a success insofar as those failures, and what Luther sees as the persistence of those failures among all subsequent generations of Jews, should evoke a sense of crisis that would cause Jews to convert to Christianity en masse. The failure perfectly to fulfill the laws laid out by Moses thus should result in the "success" of Christianity, which relieves people of their obligations to the laws of the Hebrew Bible. Luther thus praises Moses for the amount and specificity, and even for the burdensomeness, of the laws he imposes, as in his "How Christians Should Regard Moses," where he writes, "[Moses gave the law] to them [...] to compel, burden, and press the Jews [*zwingen, fassen und eintreiben*]."<sup>8</sup> Luther also extols as heroic Moses's dogged and repeated attempts to communicate the law and persuade the Israelites to comply:

That Moses is so insistent and often repeats the same thing shows also the nature of his office. For one who is to rule a people-with-laws [*Gesetzvolk*] must constantly admonish, constantly drive, and knock himself out struggling with the people as [he would] with asses.<sup>9</sup>

For Luther, Moses's piling on of laws, and his emphatic attempts at persuasion, are precisely intended to provoke the crisis and sense of failure that in turn should produce a yearning for grace and a recognition of the ineffectiveness of law in justifying us before God. Luther's description is even amusing in hinting at the patience that Moses must have possessed, as Luther catalogues wearily how Moses gives the law, expands on the law, organizes the people, increases the law, repeats

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, "Preface to the Old Testament," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989): 118–34.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989): 135–48, here 137. Original is "Unterrichten, wie sich die Christen in Mose sollen schicken," WA 16:363–93, here 369.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, "Preface," 124.

the law, explains it again, and reestablishes it.<sup>10</sup> Luther is a minister, among sometimes-reluctant audiences, as Moses is a minister to a resistant audience, and the sympathy Luther has for Moses is obvious.

Directly before the passage I will focus on, Luther explains that Moses, as perfect lawgiver, lays out different kinds of laws. Luther insists on differentiating temporal laws—that is, everyday prohibitions, intended to deter wicked behavior—from laws about how to worship, and from the always most important laws of love and faith in God.<sup>11</sup> The latter, as Luther preaches in his sermons, are the only laws that genuinely matter and to which all other laws are subordinated.<sup>12</sup> In the context of identifying the three types of Old Testament laws—temporal laws, laws of worship, and the law of love and faith—Luther anticipates an objection to his effusive praise of Moses. The anticipated objection presumes what Luther presumes, namely that there are such different types of laws in the Old Testament, and the commandments of love and faith are the ones that truly matter. The anticipated objection is this: If the commandments of love and faith are the essential commandments, to which all others are subordinated, why are the different kinds of commandments jumbled together throughout the Hebrew Scriptures? Why does Moses intermingle the supreme laws of love and faith with all kinds of other specific laws about tabernacles, food, and the like, throughout the Hebrew Bible? As Luther imagines it, in an instance of the rhetorical figure of *sermocinatio* or *dialogismus*, the anticipated objection could sound like this: “But why does Moses mix up his laws in such a disordered way? Why does he not put the temporal laws together in one group and the spiritual laws in another and the laws of faith and love in still another?”<sup>13</sup> Why, in other words, does Moses not lay out the classification of laws as clearly as does Luther himself? For Luther’s preface clearly sets out three types of laws that he claims comprise all the laws declared in the Hebrew Bible, of which the laws of faith and love are the most important, and yet why is Moses so praiseworthy if he did not do the same and instead mixes the laws throughout?

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10 “Preface,” 121.

11 “Preface,” 122–23.

12 Luther believes that this subordination of all other laws is already exhibited in the Hebrew Bible; he points to narratives that he reads as showing that love and faith supersede and in effect govern all other laws, specifically citing David sparing Joab (1 Kings 2:5–6) and eating bread consecrated to the priests (1 Samuel 21[:6]), 123.

13 “Preface,” 124. “Was ist aber, das Mose die Gesetze so unordig unternander wirfft? Warum setzt er nicht die Weltlichen auff einen hauffen, die Geistlichen auch auff einen hauffen, und den Glauben und Liebe auch auff einen?” (WA DB 8:19).



Luther's answer to this imagined objection is an answer that I argue is worthy of Auerbach; it is an aesthetic answer, a literary answer, and it concerns realism.<sup>14</sup> Luther defends Moses by declaring that the Hebrew Bible is *truer to life* in the way it is written, that the composition of the Hebrew Bible is *better* for intermingling the different types of laws. Luther proclaims that the mixed-up composition even exemplifies how Moses was, for Luther, the "perfect lawgiver." This is because, Luther affirms, our days *are* a jumble of events, involving various kinds of activities, together with the need to have love and faith in God, at all different moments. To be clear, Luther is thus *praising* the intermingling of the most important or highest laws with less important or lower laws. This will be an important bridge to Auerbach, as I will show, insofar as Auerbach also focuses in his analyses of realism on a mix of high and low—high and low style, characters, and situations. This mix of high and low, an element crucial to Auerbachian realism, is precisely what Luther praises about Moses in tacitly aesthetic terms. As Luther puts it,

The answer [to the objection] is that Moses writes as the situation demands [*wie sichs treibt*, or "how things go on"], so that his book is a picture and illustration of governing and of living. For this is the way it happens in a dynamic situation [*wenn es im Schwang gehet*]: now this work has to be done and now that. No man can so arrange his life (if he is to act in a godly way) that on this day he uses only spiritual laws, and on that day only temporal. Rather God governs all the laws mixed together—like the stars in the heavens and the flowers in the fields—in such a way that at every hour a man must be ready for anything, and do whatever the situation requires. In like manner the writing of Moses represents a heterogeneous mixture [is mixed up this way].<sup>15</sup>

It does not contravene Luther's theological convictions to point out that he sees the Old Testament as composed according to principles of what Auerbach will call realism. Precisely because life itself is a jumble, the Old Testament jumbles up the different kinds of commandments, rather than stating or directly presenting—as Luther does in his preaching—that love and faith are the supreme commandments and the others are subordinate. From Luther's perspective, the Old Testament thus illustrates *how it is* with governing and living. For Luther, Moses's composition of the Old Testament, such that it would be realistic and true to the jumble that is real life, is one piece of evidence for Moses's excellence as a lawgiver. Luther thus provides an apologia for what we would call the *realism* of Moses's mixed presenta-

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<sup>14</sup> See James I. Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, eds. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018): 187–224, which argues that Auerbach's notion of realism has little to do with the conventions of literary genre (190).

<sup>15</sup> Luther, "Preface," 124.

tion, commending what might otherwise be seen, from the Christian perspective he includes in the imagined dialogue, as a flaw in the Old Testament. Astonishingly, Luther praises Moses as a writer, and even seeks to defend Moses against a conjured *Christian* accusation that the Old Testament was written in an unnecessarily and counterproductively jumbled way.

Luther's stated reason for making this apologia, I am arguing, is an *aesthetic* one. Moses's supposed true-to-life jumble of the different kinds of laws does not, according to Luther, properly represent the hierarchy of laws. It is likewise not praised by Luther as being *persuasive*. The jumble is not rhetorically effective, as an argument would be; for what would be the added argumentative value of presenting the laws in a mixed-up way that mimics mixed-up life? Its representative and rhetorical functions are not under consideration by Luther. Instead, the mixed-up presentation is seen, in terms we import, as aesthetically "appropriate" or poetic. Hence Luther writes, as we have seen, "The answer is that Moses writes as the situation demands, so that his book is a picture and illustration of governing and living."<sup>16</sup> The book of Moses illustrates—already an aesthetic operation—governing and living as they truly are, as intermingled.<sup>17</sup>

Luther does ascribe to Moses's style a pedagogical benefit, namely that the mixed-up presentation of laws teaches us how to deal with a mixed-up everyday life and renders us ready for all situations. More than this pedagogical yield, however, I argue that Luther values the literary artfulness of the Hebrew Scriptures, as demonstrated by his own artful praise of what I am calling its realism. First, Luther's own formulation makes use of poetic technique. He writes "Mose schreibt, wie sichs treibt." Even the rhyme *schreibt/treibt* produces an aural "matching" of the writing and the way things are in the world. The next sentence exhibits a similar repetition when Luther writes, "Denn also gehet es zu, wenn es im Schwang gehet," which I roughly translate as: "so it happens, when things are a-happening." In like manner, Luther repeats "*jtzt*" or "now" in his line "das jtzt dis werck / jtzt jenes gethan sein mus" ("now this work, now that must be done"). Each of these formulations deploys literary devices when connecting their two clauses; that is, rhyme and the repetition of words. This is also how Luther writes and preaches; his artful composition and his poetic acumen are conspicuous throughout his sermons.

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<sup>16</sup> "Preface," 124.

<sup>17</sup> Raphael Magarik, "Free Indirect Revelation: Luther's Moses and the Narration of Genesis," *Reformation* 24, no. 1 (2019): 3–23, provides an excellent analysis of Luther's narratological sophistication and of the meaning of "literal" in Luther's literary context.

Second, Luther notes that logically, one cannot follow one type of law on some days and another type on other days; that logic is borne out in the poetic composition that jumbles them together. In addition, Luther follows his justification of the jumble with an aesthetic flourish in the passage quoted above: “Rather God governs all the laws mixed together [Gott regirt also alle Gesetze unternander, wie die Stern am himel, und die Blumen auff dem Felde stehen]—like the stars in the heavens and the flowers in the fields.”<sup>18</sup> God governs, or orders, his laws the way he orders the stars in the sky and the flowers in the field. They appear to us merely scattered about, with no apparent ordering principle. We nonetheless find them beautiful; and ultimately their arrangement, as the order of the universe, occurs according to God’s will. The starry sky and fields of flowers are classic examples of beauty in the Western tradition. Luther’s comparison of God’s seemingly scattered laws in the Old Testament to stars and flowers thus is an aesthetic one, seemingly connecting the laws of the Old Testament to nature, but in fact to the beauty of a well-wrought work, a governed whole rendered beautiful.<sup>19</sup>

This brings me to another point about Luther, poetics, and aesthetics. Luther praises Moses’s work as well wrought, even hinting at a comparison to God’s own work that produces the beautiful arrangements of stars and flowers. Luther’s own work is likewise well wrought, as we have briefly indicated regarding the devices of rhyme and repetition. Luther’s influence on the development of German literature is well known. His translation of the Old and New Testaments into the vernacular standardized and even produced what would become modern German. In these passages, however, we observe a Lutheran poetics and aesthetics in his very own representations of Moses’s own aesthetics and poetics.

## Auerbach and Figural Realism

I turn now to the relationship between realism, figural reading, and what Auerbach defines as the truth of the Old Testament. Auerbach’s famous comparison of Homer and the Old Testament in “The Scar of Odysseus,” his first chapter of *Mimesis*, finds the Old Testament’s realism more complex than Homer’s.<sup>20</sup> The biblical characters are multidimensional, nuanced, and truer to life than Homer’s rel-

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, “Preface,” 124.

<sup>19</sup> We see here a precursor to Kant’s connection of his wonder at the stars above to his wonder at the moral law within, as described at the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Vassilis Lambropoulos, “The Hebraic and Hellenic Models in the Western Literary Canon: The Case of Erich Auerbach,” in *Edebiyât* NS 4: 63–86; Gerrie Snyman, “African and Western Hermeneutics,” *Old Testament Essays* 25, no. 3 (2012): 657–84.

atively monolithic characters; and very importantly for Auerbach, the Old Testament mixes the styles of high and low, as already mentioned. That mix of high and low, as Auerbach describes across the chapters of *Mimesis*, constitutes a significant component of its continuity with later literary representations of reality—a mix of high and low characters, emotions, and of epic and everyday elements. Homer’s tales focus narrowly on heroes and gods; the Old Testament includes characters from all stations of life, and even includes episodes in which patriarchs appear foolish or ill-intentioned. The very language of the Old Testament (as Robert Alter has described extensively) exhibits a range of registers, in contrast with the consistently high register of Homeric epic. This issue of mixing high and low provides a significant bridge from Luther to Auerbach, as we have seen in the earlier discussion of Luther’s praise of the intermingling of laws in the Old Testament. The jumbling of laws in Luther’s rendition of the Old Testament mixes the highest law with the lowest law. Luther’s appreciation for the mix of laws, for the realism of that mix, precisely acknowledges the mix of high and low at the level of biblical style that turns out to be central to Auerbach’s argument for the complexity of the Old Testament.

Apart, however, from the emphasis on the mix of high and low in the Old Testament, Auerbach argues that there is a further difference between the Old Testament and the *Odyssey*, namely that the Hebrew Bible claims to be truth in a way that Homer’s *Odyssey* does not. The *Odyssey* does not demand belief; it operates just as well as legend and entertainment, and the poet even “may be a liar,” as described by Plato. Auerbach describes the Old Testament, in contrast, as “tyrannical.”<sup>21</sup> It imposes itself as *the* truth, not as legend and not as entertainment. This is a different kind of realism than what Auerbach has described as Homer’s realism, because it is a realism that insists on truth.<sup>22</sup> The Old Testament, Auerbach explains, claims for itself a truth, as the true universal history into which we all fit.<sup>23</sup> We are a part of its truth, rather than it being an object for us. Its story is

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21 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

22 Arthur Krystal, “The Book of Books: Erich Auerbach and the Making of ‘Mimesis,’” *New Yorker* (1 Dec. 2013), points out that “The eminent medievalist Charles Muscatine chided Auerbach for blurring ‘half a dozen medieval realisms,’ and [René] Wellek wondered whether his notion of realism was fully consistent.”

23 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1974), argues, using Auerbach, that until the eighteenth century, a so-called “precritical” understanding of the Bible (for Frei, as a Protestant theologian, biblical hermeneutics includes Hebrew Bible and New Testament) took the Bible as a true world history into which we all fit. Only in the wake of British empiricism and historicism, according to Frei, does the Bible become something that is instead to be studied either in order to determine its historical accuracy, or in order to draw myths and lessons from it. Scripture thus became

our story—in obvious contrast to Luther’s treatment of the Old Testament as a document in service of crisis.

The claim to truth of the Old Testament as described in *Mimesis*, as well as its relationship to the New Testament, are historicized in Auerbach’s long essay “Figura,” published in *Archivum Romanicum* in 1938, which traces the historical senses of figural reading in Western literature.<sup>24</sup> Auerbach defines the typological, pre-figural, prophetic, and allegorical readings that in early Christianity and the Middle Ages accounted in a range of ways for the connection between the Old and New Testaments. There are numerous variations and ambiguities in Auerbach’s “conceptual history” or *Begriffsgeschichte* of *figura*, revolving around what “figure” and “fulfillment” are taken to mean: Do “figure” and “fulfillment” mean that real historical events recorded in the Old Testament presage real historical events of the New Testament? Do they mean that fictional or mythological Old Testament stories metaphorically foretell real events recounted in the New Testament? Do they mean that the real events of the New Testament “fulfill” the Old Testament, insofar as the latter is interpreted as phenomenal prophesy rather than as historical truth? Do the stories of the Old Testament provide a carnal, material presentation of what is spiritually promised in the New Testament? Or does *figura* mean that the New Testament itself occupies a middle position, fulfilling the Old Testament’s prophecy while in turn further prophesying the Last Judgment? The “Figura” essay spends most of section one, entitled “Figura as Historically Real Prophecy in the Texts of the Church Fathers,” criticizing Tertullian’s rejection of Marcion’s rejection of the Old Testament (later significant for Luther). Marcion had argued that it was no longer of any significance with the arrival of the New Testament. If Marcion is wrong, and the Old Testament remains valuable and significant, is it because it is subordinately related to the New Testament? Is its subordination in symbolizing something that comes to happen in the New Testament? Is it that something prefigured in the Old Testament is actualized or fulfilled in the New Testament? Symbolizing and prefiguring can also be seen as related to a prophetic approach: what is prophesied in the Old Testament comes to happen in the New Testament. This range of possibilities for understanding *figura* informs a further

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an object for us, rather than a narrative into which we fit ourselves and which defined universal history; that is, rather than reality (although Cornel West argues that Frei gets Auerbach all wrong; see Cornel West, “On Frei’s *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 37, no. 4 (1983): 299–302.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014): 65–113, here 78–93. [Originally published in German as “Figura,” *Archivum Romanicum* 22 (1938): 436–89.]

range of Christian views about the value and truth of the Old Testament, related to the possibilities of metaphor, historical narrative, prophesy, and the ambiguity around meaning of “fulfillment” when it comes to stories, historical events, and the role of God in bringing these about.

In *Mimesis*, Auerbach describes the role that figural reading plays in very early missionizing among the Gentiles; specifically in adapting the Old Testament to the missionizing purpose:

The Old Testament was played down as popular history and as the code of the Jewish people and assumed the appearance of a series of ‘figures,’ that is of prophetic announcements and anticipations of the coming of Jesus and the concomitant events.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, the sensory and material elements of the Old Testament are repurposed to “mean” something from the New Testament figurally, such that “[A]ll one’s interest is directed toward the context of meaning.”<sup>26</sup> Thus among the early Church Fathers, “[W]e almost always find an interpretation of the Old Testament, whose episodes are interpreted as figures or phenomenal prophecies of the events of the New Testament.”<sup>27</sup> By “phenomenal prophecies” Auerbach is referring to the presumption of the historical truth of the events of the Old Testament, which, while being themselves real, also serve as prophecy of the coming of Christ and the real events of the New Testament. The Old Testament events, in this phenomenal-prophetic version, “truly happened”; it is not merely a story that prophecies the New Testament in an allegorical or metaphorical way. In “Figura,” Auerbach emphasizes the “phenomenal prophecy” that *figura* is for Tertullian; that is, the “real and historical” event that figures another “real and historical” event.<sup>28</sup> Our understanding *recognizes* the figural relationship between the two moments, but the figure (in the Old Testament) and its fulfillment (in the New Testament) are themselves equally real and historical. Tertullian is thus a “realist,” someone who believes in the reality of each element of a figure, rather than in a spiritualized truth.<sup>29</sup>

This “figural realism” of Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine, as Auerbach explains in a chapter of *Mimesis* on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, stands in contrast to a symbolic and allegorical notion of figuration, in which one or both components

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25 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 48.

26 *Mimesis*, 49.

27 *Mimesis*, 73.

28 Auerbach, “Figura,” 29.

29 “Figura,” 28.

are not taken to be “real.”<sup>30</sup> *Figura* is opposed to allegory, because “[a]n event taken as a figure [and not as an allegory] preserves its literal and historical meaning. It remains an event, does not become a mere sign.”<sup>31</sup> In contemporary literary studies, we may be inclined to think of “figure” in terms of signs. Auerbach, however, is highlighting how one object or event may figure another without becoming a *mere* sign; it remains what it is, in its own reality, and yet points to the other object or event of which it is a figure. It does so, however, not as an allegory, symbol, or metaphor. This is “figural realism,” a figurality in which the reality of each component perdures.

The historical reality of the Old Testament is thus presumed in “figural realist” strands of treating *figura*, in contrast to allegorical understandings of *figura*. Nonetheless Auerbach describes in *Mimesis* how even in such figural realism, where the “reality” of the Old Testament is presumed, the *historical* significance of the Old Testament is still downgraded; that is, when it is seen to be true. The figural connection between events of the Old and New Testaments—as in the binding of Isaac that figures the “sacrifice” of Christ—is interpreted in the Christian tradition neither as causal nor temporal, and it is also not a connection made only in our minds or by reason.<sup>32</sup> Instead

[The connection between the two events] can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding.<sup>33</sup>

Auerbach suggests here that even where the events of the Old Testament are granted historical reality, in the context of figural reading their relevance to the course of history is minimized. They are in a certain respect not seen as part of the flow of history, but instead as individual moments of God’s plan. In this context “earthly relations of place, time, and cause had ceased to matter, as soon as a vertical connection, ascending from all that happens, converging in God, alone became significant.”<sup>34</sup>

Hence in his chapter of *Mimesis* on *figura* in medieval literature and Chateaubriand, Auerbach emphasizes the medieval de-narrativization of the events described in the Hebrew Bible; that is, their isolation from narrative flow:

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<sup>30</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 195.

<sup>31</sup> *Mimesis*, 195–96.

<sup>32</sup> *Mimesis*, 73–74.

<sup>33</sup> *Mimesis*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> *Mimesis*, 74.

The parceling of the events of the Old Testament, which are interpreted figurally in isolation from their historic context, has become a formula. The figures ... are placed side by side paratactically. They no longer have any reality, they have only signification.<sup>35</sup>

Here *figura* refers to how the Old Testament elements are seen as signifying New Testament elements, but precisely as unconnected elements. This sort of figural meaning excludes what Auerbach has described in his analysis of Genesis 22, namely the universal history of which all its readers are a part. Auerbach also refers to his book on Dante and describes a somewhat different model of figuration there. Dante's characters are figural in having both earthly and otherworldly appearances, such that the former is figure and the latter fulfillment. In this, however, "a figural schema permits both its poles—the figure and its fulfillment—to retain the characteristics of concrete historical reality."<sup>36</sup> In Dante, in other words, the elements and characters are not isolated from the historical narrative in which they appear. For Luther, in further contrast, the historical narrative is secondary; characters of the Old Testament serve as exemplars of faith.

Auerbach's painstaking *Begriffsgeschichte* of *figura* begins in late antiquity with Terence and even Aristotle before him.<sup>37</sup> The bulk of the essay, however, treats the Church Fathers and medieval Christian texts, in which the precise nature of the relationship between Old and New Testaments was at issue, and thus its "figural realism," again in contrast to what I have called the realism of Luther's inadvertent realist-aesthetic appraisal of the Old Testament. As James I. Porter explains, Auerbach's account of *figura* reflects its conflicted character from its very origins—namely, is its truth and reality allegorical or is it this-worldly?<sup>38</sup> Auerbach seems to provide a clear taxonomy, but upon further examination the lines become blurry. Porter argues that Auerbach's *Begriffsgeschichte* of *figura* is so elastic in its valences that allegorical, real, symbolic, typological, prophetic, and literal all make appearances. In view of its serpentine provenance, *figura* "is uncertain whether it wants to locate reality in history or outside of history in a spiritual beyond."<sup>39</sup> Why, however, is *figura* so multivalent? This conflicted nature of *figura* is the result precisely of the fraught and shadowy background of the Hebrew Scripture itself:

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35 *Mimesis*, 116.

36 *Mimesis*, 195.

37 Auerbach, "Figura," 65, 68.

38 James I. Porter lays out detailed arguments about *figura* in Auerbach in "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of Figura," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 80–113; and "Erich Auerbach's Earthly (Counter-)Philology," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 243–65.

39 Porter, "Disfigurations," 99.



Doctrine and promise are incarnate in [the stories of the Hebrew Bible] and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with “background” and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning. [...]

[The stories] require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the physical side of the narrative.<sup>40</sup>

When we look at this passage, it becomes clear that the multifarious interpretive possibilities of *figura* do not first arise in the relationship of Old and New Testaments. Rather, the source of the manifold interpretive axes and their confusion is already there in the Hebrew Bible. As Porter writes, “[F]igura and the conflicted desires that it embodies [...] fall[s] into a trap that was sprung, so to speak, by the Jewish Bible itself.”<sup>41</sup> The fraught-background style described by Auerbach in *Mimesis*, in its withholding of so much detail and context, is itself the source of the shifts and ambiguities in Christian deployments of *figura*; that is, as allegorical, concrete, historical, and effectual. It is the intensity of the sensual in the Hebrew Scripture, combined with its unplumbed recesses that demand plumbing and interpreting (*deutungsbedürftig*, as Porter notes<sup>42</sup>), that make for the figural tradition of Christianity.<sup>43</sup> The tension in the Christian tradition of *figura* is already there in

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<sup>40</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Porter, “Disfigurations,” 99.

<sup>42</sup> “Disfigurations,” 99.

<sup>43</sup> For Hans Frei, in contrast and in a Lutheran vein, figural reading is thus not in contrast to or in tension with that literal reading. The reason for this is a consummately Christian one: the figural-typological readings render the Bible a unity, connecting Old and New Testaments, at least until the rise of historical biblical criticism after 1800. The Old and New Testaments needed to constitute a unity if the Bible was to be experienced and read as the literal, real, and true history into which we fit, and thus Frei quotes Auerbach on how “[W]e are to fit our own life into [the Old Testament’s] world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history” (quoted in Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 3). Let me note that Frei departs from Auerbach in a crucial Protestant respect: For Frei, figural/topological reading is key to making the biblical canon, both Old and New Testaments, a unity—which for Frei *it is*. The literal reading that he extends to include the figural reading is “literal” because it represents one history, and the New Testament is part of that biblical history: “[F]iguration or typology was a natural extension of literal interpretation. [...] Figuration was at once a literary and a historical procedure, an interpretation of stories and their meanings by weaving them together into a common narrative referring to a single history” (Frei, 2). Cornel West’s review criticizes Frei’s understanding of Auerbachian realism, suggesting that Frei interprets “realism” in Auerbach as referring to the “depict[ion of] human actions and intentions in history-like fashion” (West, 301). West speculates that “Frei ... wishes the Biblical texts were more Homeric (that is, with little hidden meaning)” (301).

the Hebrew Bible.<sup>44</sup> It is not something invented by the Christian tradition and imposed onto Hebrew Scripture; rather, precisely the fraught background of the Hebrew Bible that Auerbach emphasizes in *Mimesis* evokes the indeterminacy of the roles of allegory, history, and figure in the Christian tradition.

I lean heavily on Porter's reading in pointing out that the span of allegory, typology, literal, prophetic, and so on, constitutes the whole issue of *figura*: Understood as "real" or "historical," *figura* is not allegorical; and yet it is also allegory, while still being itself as a real thing or event. In other words, all the ambiguities around whether *figura* is the same as, or compatible with, or totally different from, metaphorical or allegorical readings, and around whether *figura* reduces the reality of the Hebrew Bible to a set of figures rather than retaining its status as a real and significant universal history, are already present in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures that gives rise to *figura* to begin with. As Porter explains, "Figural readings do not 'recover' meaning from the Hebrew Bible; they foist meaning on what was never meant to be grasped."<sup>45</sup>

The prior, insuperable ambiguity and ungraspability of the Hebrew Bible constitutes a common root of the conflicting claims that Auerbach is a Protestant hermeneut or on the other hand a Jewish philologist. It is not, however, a Christian or Protestant issue; it is already the case that the Hebrew Scripture is readable in the multifarious and elastic forms of *figura* even without reference to the New Testament. Hence the Hebrew Scripture is so readable in the *figura* in its variety of historical senses, precisely insofar as that Scripture is fraught with background. The Hebrew Bible's events, characters, and situations are realistic *and* they beg for interpretation, because—and here I use Heideggerian language—the Hebrew Bible withholds as well as discloses. The narrative of the *Akedah* that is at the center of the *Mimesis* chapter is so sparse, so "withholding," that it allows for and beckons toward, or even begs for, the disclosure of a larger meaning, a connection to another meaning, all the qualities that make figural reading of the Old and New Testaments possible.

I close by expanding Porter's point that the fraught background of the Hebrew Bible is the source of Christian figural reading, in order to conclude—inspired by Luther's praise of Moses's mixed-up presentation of laws—that the fraught and *fig-*

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<sup>44</sup> Porter writes, "it is this very obscurity that sets *figura* off in search of its own mission and that drives its operations at their core" ("Disfigurations," 99). This would put Porter into opposition with Frei, who emphasizes figural reading as an extension of literal reading that successfully unifies the Bible (albeit at the cost of subordinating the Old Testament). Frei builds on Auerbach's concession of the unifying outcome of figural reading, but for Auerbach and for what Porter considers Jewish philology, that unifying outcome is not a success, but rather an eclipse of the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>45</sup> "Disfigurations," 104.

*ura*-prone realism that Auerbach finds in the Hebrew Scripture is *also* the fraught and interpretation-demanding ambiguous reality of our lives. In our real lives, crucial elements appear to us, while other elements recede; but in other lights or in view of future events, our reality can also be interpreted differently—for example, as a portent, as a completion, as a repetition. Are these also forms of *figura*? Actual life, and not just text, is fraught with background; actual life lends itself to hermeneutics, to understandings that may be figural, allegorical, prophetic, conspiratorial, existential, or nihilistic. Reality does not appear as it is portrayed in Homer (in Auerbach's description); it is not all illuminated at once to us in our finitude. As Luther acknowledges Moses for his realist mix of laws that illustrates everyday life, I acknowledge Auerbach's realist account of how people, events, and situations inherently lend themselves to interpretation because there is *always* a fraught background, always more that remains undisclosed. To remain with a Heideggerian terminology, in reality disclosure and concealment are wrapped up with one another. Elements stand out, elements recede, and there are nuances, and gaps, and thus reality is infinitely subject to—and even only livable under the conditions of—interpretation. No wonder, then, that the realism of the Hebrew Scripture is one with its hermeneutic appeal, with the possibility of rendering it a figure of the New Testament; for our real living in the world is likewise a matter of fraught background and hermeneutic beckoning.

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## Part Two: **Heresy and Rupture**



Shaul Magid

# The Theologico-Political Predicament, Zionism, and the Crisis of Heresy: Leo Strauss and Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar

The Third Temple is not in the messianic future,  
it is not on the Temple Mount, it is not at the  
Kotel ... The Third Temple is the Declaration of  
Independence of the state of Israel.  
Yael Dayan, Rabin Square, Tel Aviv, July 22, 2018

In his largely autobiographical and widely read Preface to the English translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, published in 1965, Leo Strauss famously describes himself as in “the grip of a theologico-political predicament.”<sup>1</sup> The reference may have been to Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* that he is about to examine in detail, but the turn of phrase was not new for Strauss, and has much deeper and broader implications. As Strauss articulates it, this predicament is the very crux, one might say the unresolvable crisis, of Jewish modernity for anyone who takes both Judaism and modernity seriously within the purview of their incompatibility. It is a predicament not of tradition and change but of tradition and heresy. Strauss often substitutes terms like “Orthodoxy” or “revelation” for “tradition,” and “atheism” for “heresy.” In an earlier 1952 essay, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” he frames his discussion as one of progress into the heretical predicament of modernity, or return to rationality founded on revelation, which he believed was best represented in Judaism by Maimonides.<sup>2</sup>

As has been noted by Strauss scholars, for Strauss this “predicament,” or crisis, has no resolution within the confines of modernity; both progress and return fail either because in the form of progress it abandons revelation, and thus religion, or in the form of return it denies politics.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, any proposed resolution fails if it denies heresy (the very cornerstone of modernity) and it fails if it embraces heresy (the antithesis of Orthodoxy).<sup>4</sup> For Strauss, modern rationality

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1 Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1965), 1–3.

2 See Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” reprinted in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY, 1997): 87–136.

3 Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*,” 6.

4 Heresy is one of the main things that drew Spinoza to Strauss. See Willi Goetschel, “Spinoza, Heresy, and the Discourse of Modernity,” in *Canonization and Alterity: Heresy in Jewish History*,

can never disprove Orthodoxy, whose beliefs are not founded on reason in his view, and Orthodoxy cannot disprove rationality, since to some degree Orthodoxy is founded on revelation that is not rational.<sup>5</sup> The liberal synthesis, either in cultural Zionism or reform, fails to salvage revelation precisely because it offers a secular, or fully human, rendering of it. Secularized religion, for Strauss, is not religion, largely because it abandons any substantive belief in revelation. For Strauss progress and return remain in irreconcilable and corrosive tension, not a healthy one.

Below I explore this conundrum, this Strausian predicament, through the prism of political Zionism as he understood it, in conversation with a thinker who tacitly acknowledged the theologico-political predicament without ever naming it: Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar (1887–1979). Both Strauss and Teitelbaum understood the crisis of modernity in oddly similar ways although they offered different solutions. Why focus on political Zionism? Strauss, who certainly supported Zionism, at least early in his career, viewed political Zionism as a kind of necessary evil of sorts, the partial solution to the pressing crisis of the survival of Jewish bodies at the expense of what he called “revelation.”<sup>6</sup> Political Zionism was not heresy per se for Strauss, but it contributed to the broader phenomenon he called the “pure politics” of modernity unmoored from a divine, or revelatory, anchor. It solved an acute physical problem for the Jews at the expense of a significant spiritual one; that is, political Zionism undermines Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

Strauss was not making this claim as a traditionalist or an apologist, but as an atheist, one who was fully absorbed in modernity but was aware of its price. As a traditionalist, Teitelbaum, even as an ardent anti-Zionist, could not deny that political Zionism created conditions for the survival of Jewish bodies. But for him Zionism theologically constituted the quintessence of anti-messianism, what he called *geulah shel sheker*,<sup>8</sup> because it is founded on the rejection of divine depend-

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*Thought, and Literature*, eds. Gilad Sharvit and Willi Goetschel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 209–27. Cf. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16–41.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Strauss rejects the modern attempt to wed reason with religion from Mendelssohn and Kant and all those that follow them. This is because for Strauss Mendelssohn and Kant have already abandoned the first principles of religion in order to construct their modern synthesis.

<sup>6</sup> See Strauss, “The Zionism of Nordau,” in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921–1932)*, ed. M. Zank (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2002): 83–89.

<sup>7</sup> For another perspective along these lines, see Joyce Dalsheim, *Israel Has a Jewish Problem: Self-Determination as Self-Elimination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Yaacov Yagdar, *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, Judaism* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, “Essay on the Three Oaths,” in *Vayael Moshe, #175* (Brooklyn, NY: Joseph Dov Ashkenazi Books, 1960).



ency and the ascendance and affirmation of the human rebellion against God which Strauss, from a different perspective, also acknowledged.

From very different points on the theologico-political spectrum, Strauss and Teitelbaum offered their own ways to confront the breakdown of revelation and the dangers of progress, or the secularization of revelation and the inevitability of heresy. The crisis for Strauss comes about not because of the inevitability of progress in the face of the loss of revelation through some kind of enlightened positivism, but because of the doubt in progress, the signpost of modernity, resulting in the barbarism it produced. Of course, Strauss is referring to the barbarism of Nazism and Stalinist totalitarianism which, following Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, were as much products of the Enlightenment as rebellions against it. Put otherwise, for Strauss, progress fails in its aspirations, or as Nietzsche put it, the Enlightenment failed to recognize that if you abandon biblical faith, you must also abandon biblical morality; you cannot have the latter without the former.<sup>9</sup> For Strauss, the secular pays a price that liberalism cannot resolve in any form of modern religion. And for Nietzsche, the morality that replaces the biblical morality that expired with the erasure of biblical faith is power, with everything that implies. Strauss knew that, perhaps even agreed with it, even though he could not embrace it. He spent his life looking for another answer, although he never believed he would find a solution to his problem.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Gerhard Kruger, Strauss writes, "Our difference has its ground in this – that I cannot believe, that I must search for a possibility where I can *live* without belief."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere he states quite explicitly, "There is no solution to the Jewish problem."<sup>12</sup>

For Strauss, the erasure of biblical morality and the barbarism modernity produced put everything about modernity in doubt. In the introduction to *Philosophy and Law* Strauss puts it this way: "doubts about the success of civilization soon became doubts about the possibility of civilization."<sup>13</sup> And the anxiety of that very possibility is enhanced by the fact that the bridge to return had already been burned; that return (*teshuva*) was no longer possible for the atheist, which for Strauss makes progress structurally anti-Jewish.

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9 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2014).

10 See Simon W. Taylor, "Between Philosophy and Judaism: Leo Strauss' Skeptical Engagement with Zionism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78, no. 1 (January 2017): 115.

11 The letter was written in 1932. Cited in Jeffrey Bernstein, *Leo Strauss: On the Borders of Judaism, Philosophy, and History* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2015), 18.

12 Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 317.

13 Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1995), 13.

Teitelbaum's political theological attack on Zionism in both *Vayoel Moshe* and *'Al Ha-Geulah ve al Ha-Temurah* is presented as a closed theologico-political system, but it is, in fact, also founded on doubt, the doubt of progress that invariably produces heresy because, and here I explain Teitelbaum in Strausseean nomenclature, for Teitelbaum political Zionism destroys Judaism in that it undermines Judaism's exilic structural foundation.<sup>14</sup> It substitutes sovereignty for exile and thus destroys and does not fulfill messianism, certainly according to Teitelbaum. Teitelbaum's political theology is founded on exile as the condition for redemption, and any attempt to end exile before its time would be a blasphemous act of the Jews' infidelity to the exilic covenant. In some way this supports Strauss's notion that political Zionism is antithetical to Judaism. Strauss supported political Zionism yet also viewed it critically. He writes, "political Zionism was an attempt to restore the inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable. Political Zionism is problematic for obvious reasons. But I can never forget what it achieved in an era of complete dissolution."<sup>15</sup> However, regarding its relationship to Judaism, Strauss is quite unambiguous. He supports political Zionism "...in spite of the undeniable fact that political Zionism, pure and simple, is based on a radical break with the principles of the Jewish tradition." As Daniel May recently argued, "Strauss insisted that Zionism was both a necessity for Jewish survival and fundamentally contrary to Judaism."<sup>16</sup> Leora Batnitzky offers a succinct rendering of Strauss's position on political Zionism. "The early Strauss believed political Zionism could offer a solution to the Jewish problem and that conterminously the solution it would offer would be a rejection of core aspects of the Jewish past. The mature Strauss would deny the first part of the proposition in large part because he strongly questioned the desirability of the second."<sup>17</sup> I think the term "Jewish problem" as opposed to "the Jewish Question" is significant here. Strauss did think political Zionism could solve the Jewish problem of Jewish bodies in peril. But I do not think he ever thought Zionism could solve "the Jewish Question," which he believed was an irresolvable problem em-

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14 See Teitelbaum, *Vayoel Moshe*, and *'Al Ha-Geulah ve al Ha-Temurah* (Brooklyn, NY: Jerusalem Books, 1968), both in Hebrew. For a brief introduction to Teitelbaum's views on Zionism, see my "The Satmar Are Anti-Zionists. Should We Care," *Tablet Magazine* (May 21, 2020) at <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/satmar-anti-zionist>.

15 Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 143.

16 Daniel May, unpublished manuscript. I thank Dr. May for sharing his unpublished work with me.

17 Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141.

bedded in the theological-political predicament of modernity. As we will see, for Strauss the price of political Zionism was Judaism itself.

Teitelbaum, of course, could never cede Strauss's point of political Zionism's solution at the expense of Judaism, as he understands Judaism as the very bulwark against the foundations of political Zionism, not only in "forcing the end" but more broadly in its political project founded on atheism and anti-Diasporism ("Negation of the Diaspora") while loosely integrating biblical motifs in a secularized form. For Teitelbaum "the Jewish Question" (a term I have never seen him use) is endemic to the "exilic decree" that is the present state of the covenant. It is only solved via divine fiat. Teitelbaum also viewed modernity differently than Strauss by claiming that heresy is a necessary stage in the redemptive process, serving as an anti-Christ that needs to be resisted. Ceding Judaism to secularism, or to politics, is the very antithesis of messianism for Teitelbaum. Zionism for him is thus the quintessence of anti-messianism because it substitutes political sovereignty for the messianic idea, founded on the necessity of exile (*galut*) as the context and condition of the messianic promise.<sup>18</sup> That is, Zionism ostensibly discards exile, even to the point of negating it (*Shlilat ha-Golah*—the Negation of Exile/Diaspora—becomes its moniker). By ostensibly ending exile through human initiative, political Zionism made messianism superfluous. Perhaps this was most brazenly articulated by Yael Dayan, daughter of celebrated Zionist military leader Moshe Dayan, when she stated at a rally in July 2018 at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, "The Third Temple is not in the messianic future, it is not on the Temple Mount, it is not at the Kotel ... The Third Temple is the Declaration of Independence of the state of Israel." Therein lies the true danger for Teitelbaum: human sovereignty as the expression of redemption whereby the messiah becomes irrelevant. To retain the messianic idea and messianic hope, one needs the continued existence of exile. I will illustrate this below in Teitelbaum's reading of Bar Kokhba as a false messianic figure.

Teitelbaum, like Strauss, viewed political Zionism as void of any moral content.<sup>19</sup> For both, in a Schmittean sense, political Zionism is pure politics. In his

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<sup>18</sup> On this see my forthcoming book, *The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance* (New York, NY: Ayin Press, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Here Teitelbaum is not alone. Zionists such as Gershom Scholem felt similarly about political Zionism. In a diary entry in 1904 after Herzl's untimely death, the youthful Scholem wrote, "If Herzl had not died, we would have had to kill him." In a letter to his friend Werner Kraft written in about 1924 Scholem writes about political Zionism, "Zionism will survive its catastrophe. The hour has come when hearts must decide whether Zionism – whose meaning is preparation of the eternal – will succumb to the Zionism of the Jewish state – which is a catastrophe." Cited in Noam Zadoff, *Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*, trans. Jeffrey Green (Walham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 45.

1923 essay on Max Nordau, Strauss writes, “In Zionist matters, theology has no say; Zionism is purely political.” But what Strauss calls political Zionism’s “empty shell” cannot be sustained without content. Zionists had to fill it with moral import, which they did with cultural Zionism. But for Strauss this is no solution. The project of secularizing religion that is the backbone of cultural Zionism as a liberal project offers political Zionism moral content, but in doing so destroys the religion it draws from. And as we will see, religious Zionism, which Strauss believed inevitably replaces the failed cultural Zionist project, destroys Zionism. Sadly, we may be seeing Strauss’s thesis coming to fruition.

Because Strauss does not reject heresy, or atheism (Hannah Arendt once referred to him as a “convinced orthodox atheist”),<sup>20</sup> or at least he accepts it as the working reality of modernity—what Yehuda Mirsky calls, in reference to Rav Kook, the “theodicy of modernity” in which political Zionism functions—Strauss can agree with the value of political Zionism without resisting it the way Teitelbaum does, even as Strauss seems to agree with Teitelbaum’s thesis of the irreconcilability of religion and Zionism, or religion and politics more generally.<sup>21</sup> While Strauss does maintain that modernity cannot dissolve Orthodoxy, he also maintains, unlike Teitelbaum, that Orthodoxy cannot refute modernity. Strauss writes in his essay on Freud, “The claim that God exists may remain unrefuted; as to judging its scientific value, it is nothing but one hypothesis among many others.”<sup>22</sup> God as an unprovable yet irrefutable hypothesis removes any hegemony religion may have had in the past. God survives only in the plethora of possibilities. Orthodoxy may survive, but its authority has been usurped. And one wonders, if Orthodoxy is without authority, as Strauss suggests, does it essentially become an “empty shell.”<sup>23</sup>

Strauss thus supports political Zionism as a project of Jewish survival even as he acknowledges it does not solve his theologico-political predicament, nor the “Jewish Question” more generally. Rather than solve it, in many ways political Zionism simply internalizes the Jewish Question. And Zionism can never normal-

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20 Strauss wrote to Gerhard Kruger in 1932, “Our difference has its ground in this – that I cannot believe, that I must search for a possibility where I can *live* without belief.” Cited in Bernstein, *Leo Strauss*, 18.

21 On the “theodicy of modernity” see Yehuda Mirsky, *Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865–1904* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 279.

22 Leo Strauss, “Sigmund Freud: *The Future of Illusion* (1928),” in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 205.

23 For a series of insightful Orthodox responses to Strauss, see Jeffrey Bloom, Alec Goldstein, and Gil Student (eds.), *Strauss, Spinoza, and Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2022).

ize the Jews, in part because political Zionism can never quite disentangle itself from its often-veiled theological claims, whereby Zionism implicitly retains its exceptional status.<sup>24</sup> For Strauss, political Zionism assures Jewish survival at the expense of undermining Judaism in part through such secularization. Or, when revelation returns in the form of politics (as it does in religious Zionism), it destroys Zionism. Political Zionism offers Jews solace and even security at the price of abandoning revelation. Thus, for Strauss, instead of countering the de-Judaizing of assimilation, Zionism actually contributes to it.<sup>25</sup> Instead of assimilating into someone else's nationalism, it assimilates into its own. Strauss wrote, "Herzl imagined [the Jewish] state as being exactly like a European state."<sup>26</sup> But still, for Strauss, religion and political Zionism constitute "a real antagonism." I do not think it is a reach to say that for Strauss, political Zionism's program is counter-Judaism, both in its tactics and its goals. For Strauss some Jews abandon Judaism through assimilation (Reform) and others reject Judaism through Zionism.<sup>27</sup>

The abnormality of political Zionism as secular nationalism is that, even against its will, it remains rooted in the biblical covenant as the cornerstone of its right to exist at all. Strauss writes, "The basic idea underlying purely political Zionism was not Zionism at all. It could have been satisfied by a Jewish state anywhere on earth. Political Zionism was already a concession to the Jewish tradition."<sup>28</sup> Even political Zionism, he suggests, depends on a "divine promise," albeit severed from its revelatory context. By contrast, he claims, "no one claims the faith

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24 On the messianic pretensions of even secular Zionism, see David Ohana, *Messianism and Mam-lachtiut: Ben Gurion and the Intellectuals between Political Vision and Political Theology* (Be'er Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2003) [in Hebrew]; Anita Shapira, "Ben Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of a Historical Narrative?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 4 (1997), 645–74; and Michael Brenner, "A State Like Any Other or a Light Unto the Nations?" *Israel Studies* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 3–10.

25 Strauss, *Early Writings*, 87.

26 See Taylor, "Between Philosophy and Judaism," 105, and Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews," 326.

27 On a similar note, see Joyce Dalsheim: "Establishing the modern state was seen as an *alternative* to assimilation in other countries where assimilation would mean the destruction of Jewishness or the Jewish people ... But to think of such cultural changes as being akin to the forces of assimilation that Jews were (are) subjected to in Europe as positive and liberation should not only be surprising. One might consider it offensive, if not down-right antisemitic, as it aims to eliminate particular ways of being Jewish. And yet, objections to Zionism raised by devout Jews have precisely concerned with its antisemitic nature" (*Israel Has a Jewish Problem*, 12). Strauss too notes the way in which political Zionism is a form of self-assimilation, in his case to a national entity that in some way erases the religious content of one's Jewish identity. For Dalsheim this assimilation puts into question the category of Jewishness; for Strauss, it puts into question that category of Judaism.

28 "Progress or Return," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 92.

in America and the hope of America is based on explicit divine promises.”<sup>29</sup> As Daniel May argues, according to Strauss, “Political Zionists were wrong to think that Judaism could simply be transformed into a nation like any other, and cultural Zionists were wrong to think that Zionism could transform Judaism into a culture like any other.”<sup>30</sup> Neither could sufficiently free itself from religion enough to do so. But each rejected religion enough that it believed that it could. And as a result, they both ultimately do not achieve their intended goals, although they do achieve a viable nation-state. The tension of religion and the secular, Strauss surmised, could not be maintained even though, or precisely because, secularization attempted to dull religion’s theological edges. Cultural Zionism will seek to normalize political Zionism’s nullification of Judaism, but as we will see for Strauss this did not work. What it will produce is religious Zionism, which for Strauss is Zionism’s undoing.

Strauss claimed political Zionism infused with cultural Zionism would eventually lead to religious Zionism where the theological foundations would bubble to the surface and overtly de-secularize the cultural project. He writes,

Cultural Zionism believed it had found a middle ground between politics and divine revelation, between the sub-cultural and the supra-cultural, but it lacked the sternness of these two extremes. When cultural Zionism understands itself, it becomes religious Zionism. But when religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first-place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism. It must regard as blasphemous the notion of a human solution to the Jewish problem.<sup>31</sup>

When Zionism becomes religion, on Strauss’s reading, when it becomes religious Zionism, it is no longer Zionism, it is only religion under the guise of Zionism. It has already eliminated the political project upon which political Zionism was founded. We can see this in some in the radical religious Zionist camp today who have eschewed the label of Zionism altogether. They have become *erez yisrealists* and not Zionists. By making their religion nationalism, religion has effaced their nationalism. Religion and Zionism cannot maintain their inherent tensions for Strauss since they work at cross purposes. In time, one must prevail. For Strauss two options become possible. Either religion itself becomes nationalism, whereby it is no longer Judaism. Or religion transcends nationalism, whereby it is no longer Zionism.

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29 “Progress or Return,” 92. Of course Strauss misses James O’Sullivan’s mid-nineteenth century “Manifest Destiny” doctrine, which certainly advocates a position of America being the divine gift to the white Christian.

30 Daniel May, unpublished essay.

31 Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” 6; and “Why We Remain Jews,” 320.

One final point before turning to Teitelbaum. In my view, we should separate Strauss's assessment of political Zionism from his support of it. Strauss supported political Zionism, at least initially, because he believed it solved a critical problem in his time; the physical survival of the Jews. But he never thought it solved his theologico-political predicament of his youth, nor the Jewish Question, nor for that matter exile, as he wrote, "in the religious sense, and perhaps not only in the religious sense, the state of Israel is part of the Galut."<sup>32</sup> The problem for Strauss is that political Zionism and religion remain antagonistic. Cultural Zionism does not resolve that antagonism, nor does religious Zionism. Thus the predicament remains intact.

Teitelbaum is on the one hand an easier nut to crack than Strauss and, on the other hand, more difficult. He is easier because his theological-political program is laid out in elaborate detail without the ambivalences that are scattered throughout Strauss's Zionist writings. Teitelbaum is a polemicist and utterly convinced of his view. Strauss, on the other hand, is not a polemicist; he is a diagnostician. Teitelbaum is harder to crack because his program is embedded in the arcane language of the *beit midrash* with no theorizing or self-reflection. The reader must do all the work to lift the contours of the theologico-political program from the myriad sources, tangential digressions, and halakhic analysis in which it is embedded. Below I offer a brief attempt to draw out a few points worth considering in relation to Strauss's assessment I described above.

Yoel Teitelbaum was born and raised in the Maramoros region in Hungary, also called Transylvania.<sup>33</sup> The ultra-Orthodox world in which he rose to prominence as a rabbinic leader and halakhic decisor was vehemently opposed to Zionism and religious compromise. Like many of his world, in the 1930s he dissuaded his constituents from emigrating to Palestine, thinking Hitler would not invade Hungary. After the Nazi invasion in 1944, Hungarian Jews scrambled desperately to find refuge. Teitelbaum, because of his stature in the community, was saved by the Zionist Katzner transport, which reached safety in Switzerland.<sup>34</sup> Surviving the Nazi onslaught, he chose to emigrate to Palestine rather than America, where he remained for a few years. After losing the election to lead the Edah Haredit, the political and legislative arm of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, Teitelbaum travelled to America to raise money for his fledgling yeshiva and decided to stay there

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<sup>32</sup> Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Menachem Keren-Kratz, "Maramoros, Hungary: The Cradle of Extreme Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 35, no. 2 (May 2015): 147–74.

<sup>34</sup> In detail, see Menachem Keren-Kratz, *Ha-Kana'i: Ha-Rebbe M'Satmar, R. Yoel Teitelbaum* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2019) [in Hebrew].

and rebuild his devastated community in the US. Over the course of three decades, he re-constituted what was to become the largest Hasidic sect in the world.<sup>35</sup>

Teitelbaum had written numerous articles against Zionism in the Yiddish press but in the late 1950s he decided to write a full-blown political theology against Zionism that was published in 1959–60 as *Vayoel Moshe*, comprising three extensive essays, “Essay on the Three Oaths,” “Essay on Dwelling in the Land,” and “Essay on the Holy Language.” *Vayoel Moshe* quickly became the definitive study of ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionism.<sup>36</sup> Already compromised by a stroke, after the Six-Day War in 1967 he put together transcriptions of oral talks with his own introduction that was published as *‘Al Ha-Geulah ve al Ha-Temurah*, a more theological attack on the destructive forces of Zionism. It seems quite certain that Teitelbaum was not aware of Strauss, and as far as I know, Strauss had not read *Vayoel Moshe*. Both came from very different places, Strauss as a non-believing Jew from Germany and then the US, Teitelbaum a deeply believing Jew from Hungary, Palestine, and then the US. Yet I argue that both held onto what Strauss called the “theological-political predicament” as the very crisis of Judaism and modernity.

Both Strauss and Teitelbaum agreed on several things. They agreed with the atheistic and heretical nature of modernity. They agreed that political Zionism does not offer a solution to the Jewish Question.<sup>37</sup> They agree that secularizing religion through culture does not create a middle ground between revelation and reason but serves as the demise of religion through the usurpation of revelation and the sovereignty of God. Strauss wrote, “Judaism cannot be understood as a culture ... The substance is not culture but divine revelation.”<sup>38</sup> While Strauss’s rendering of culture here needs some explanation, Teitelbaum would have certainly agreed that without belief in, and fidelity to, the divine as the operating center of Judaism, it simply collapses. And they agree that progress is precarious and there is no return to the past on modernity’s terms. They differ in part because of their positionality. Teitelbaum stands inside the tradition and thus writes as a partisan. Strauss largely stands outside the tradition and thus writes as a critic. Put otherwise, Strauss was a citizen of “Athens,” albeit one who recognized the significance of “Jerusalem.” Teitelbaum was a citizen of “Jerusalem” who did not give

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35 See Menachem Keren-Kratz, “Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum – the Satmar Rebbe – and the Rise of Anti-Zionism in American Orthodoxy,” *Contemporary Judaism* 37 (2017): 457–79.

36 His reasons for writing *Vayoel Moshe* are not clear. See, for example, Keren Kratz, *Ha-Kana'i*, 267–70.

37 Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 38.

38 Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” 319–20.



any significance to “Athens.”<sup>39</sup> In some way Teitelbaum is more optimistic than Strauss that tradition can win the day if only it is used to resist the seduction of modernity’s trap; what he might call the secular, or Zionism, and what Strauss might call liberalism.

While the notion that progress is precarious is obvious for Teitelbaum, what about the impossibility of return? Unlike how many read him, I do not think Teitelbaum’s ultra-traditionalism is an attempt to return to some pristine past. It is, rather, an attempt to stop progress by freezing a moment in time before the theologico-political predicament fully presented itself. This is more than return to Torah and mitzvot. Rather it is what he calls *Israel saba*, which I translate as fidelity to ancestral norms.<sup>40</sup> This is not formally halakha per se but includes dress, language, customs, aesthetics, manners. It is a religio-cultural project to maintain the “before times,” slowing the process of heresy by resisting it as a messianic posture. It is not a passive resistance to change but an activist protest *against* change in order to enable the messianic unfolding to continue unabated. It is a quintessential case of Jewish premillennialism. “Premillennialism” is a term referring to Christian groups who believe that the proper way to procure the second coming of Christ is to remain detached from society and its modern vices, remain in enclavist communities, and prepare for being the saving remnant that will survive the pre-messianic wars.<sup>41</sup>

There is no doubt Teitelbaum thought he was living in the end-time; he deploys the term “*ikvata d’meshika*” often in describing his generation.<sup>42</sup> And like Rav Kook, he too viewed Zionism as playing a central role in this final phase of exile. Unlike Kook, who acknowledged Zionism was heretical yet necessary and thus worthy of embracing it to transform it (a kind of *averah lishma*), Teitelbaum also viewed Zionism as heresy, even necessary, but as a final test that required resistance. Teitelbaum’s claim throughout his work that Zionism was a radical revision of Judaism, even its rejection, is not so far-fetched if we recognize that his views on Zionism largely were drawn from its early period when he was in Eu-

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39 See, for example, Bernstein, *Leo Strauss*, 15. The Athens–Jerusalem dichotomy begins with Tertullian, who famously wrote regarding Christianity, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem.” See Tertullian, “The Prescription against Heretics,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Cox (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 9.

40 For an example in *Vayoel Moshe*, see “Essay on Dwelling in the Land,” #133.

41 On Teitelbaum as a premillennialist see my “Is There an American Jewish Fundamentalism Part II: Satmar,” in *Fundamentalism: Perspectives on a Contested History*, eds. David Watt and Simon Wood (Charleston, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2014): 92–107.

42 Teitelbaum uses this term many times in *Vayoel Moshe*, including twice in the Introduction to the book in reference to the post-Holocaust period.

rope, when radical Zionists indeed viewed Zionism as the substitution and overcoming of Judaism. Thinkers such as Yosef Micha Berdichevsky and Yosef Hayyim Brenner indeed made such rash statements about Zionism as the *aufheben* (overcoming) of Judaism, sometimes adopting the Nietzschean dictum of the “transvaluation of all values.” And even Herzl, who Teitelbaum refers to obliquely, viewed Zionism fully outside any redemptive history.<sup>43</sup> For Teitelbaum, Zionism served as the anti-Christ before redemption, the movement that looked like the end-time but was actually its opposite.<sup>44</sup>

Below I will offer an example of how this plays out in Teitelbaum’s understanding of Bar Kokhba, the first-century Jewish general who attempted unsuccessfully to re-capture Jerusalem from Roman conquest, evoking a retaliation that resulted in a Jewish massacre in the city of Betar.<sup>45</sup> I choose this example in part because, as Yael Zerubavel argues in her book *Recovered Roots*, the transformation of Bar Kokhba from a false messiah to a national hero is an example of how Zionism inverts tradition as a solution to the problem of exile.<sup>46</sup>

Bar Kokhba was a military leader who led a rebellion against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem in 132 CE, called by the Romans the “Jewish Expedition.” After some initial victories, Bar Kokhba was appointed *nasi* (prince) of Judea. His last stand at Betar resulted in mass death and destruction for Jews, and ultimately ended any pretense of recapturing Jerusalem. In the rabbinic imagination centuries later his image toggles between a military hero and a false messiah. The Talmud mentions him numerous times, the midrash a bit more, especially Lamentations Raba (see, for example, Lam. Raba 2.5), changing his name from the more messianic-inflicted Bar Kokhba (“son of a star,” from the messianic prediction that *a star will rise from Jacob*, Num 24:17) to Bar Koziba, “son of a deceiver,” because even though he ostensibly said, “I am the messiah” (b.T. Sanhedrim 93b), he turned out to be a false messiah and responsible for the deaths of many thousands of Jews. There is little commemoration of Bar Kokhba’s insurrection in normative Ju-

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43 For a likely reference to Herzl, see “Essay on Dwelling in the Land,” in *Vayael Moshe*, #139, p. 352. “And this well-known defiled person wrote in his defiled diary that hatred from the gentiles will help us in our idea [of Zionism].”

44 This comes through most provocatively in his *‘Al Ha-Geulah ve al Ha-Temurah*. On this in great detail, see my forthcoming book, *Zionism as Anti-Messianism: The Political Theology of Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar*.

45 On rabbinic depictions of Betar, see j. Talmud Ta’anit 4.8, Lam. Raba 2.5, and b’ Talmud Gittin 58a.

46 See Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 48–59, 96–113. See also Richard G. Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba in Traditional Jewish Literature* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

daism and what does exist was folded into Tisha b'Av (hence his appearance in Lamentations Raba). While rabbinic literature is of two minds on Bar Kokhba, Teitelbaum focuses on his negative depiction, which was arguably dominant: a false messiah responsible for Jewish tragedy and the prolonged decree of exile.

With this in mind, it is worth asking why Bar Kokhba was so important for Teitelbaum in his attack on Zionism. In fact, as is widely known, the Zionist revision of Jewish history revives Bar Kokhba, not as a failed messiah depicted in rabbinic literature, but as the quintessence of Jewish heroism against the powers of persecution. On this Yael Zerubavel notes,

The transformation of Bar Kokhba from a dubious leader of a failed revolt to a prominent heroic figure from Antiquity is an important feature of the Zionist reshaping of the past ... The Zionist commemorative narrative thus shifts its focus from the outcome of the revolt to the act of revolting; it emphasizes the initial success that brought about the liberation of Judea rather than the defeat that led to exile.<sup>47</sup>

Bar Kokhba valorizes war, which any nation-state must incorporate into its self-fashioning.

Teitelbaum's interest in Bar Kokhba focuses on the notion that Rabbi Akiva, the quintessential rabbinic hero, apparently acceded to Bar Kokhba's messianic claim.<sup>48</sup> The link connecting Bar Kokhba to Zionism is that both exercised their messianic claim by attempting to return to the land "before its time." In the case of Bar Kokhba, it was approximately seventy years after the destruction of Jerusalem and in the case of Zionism returning to the land without any clear indication of a messianic figure.<sup>49</sup>

A question that haunts the tradition and serves as the point of Teitelbaum analysis is, who killed Bar Kokhba? The passage in Sanhedrin 93b does not specify who killed him yet some midrashim claim he was killed by the Jews. Maimonides in "Laws of Kings" 11:3 simply cites the Talmudic passage and leaves his death ambiguous. In Lamentations Raba 2:4 it appears that the gentiles killed him and not the Jews. Don Isaac Abravanel in his *Yeshuot Meshikho*, printed in 1497 (chapter 4), and David ben Zimra both suggest that even if the Jews did not kill Bar Kokhba, they sentenced (*danu 'oto*) him to death.<sup>50</sup> This striking locution gestures to New Testament references about the rabbinic attitude toward Jesus (they wanted him

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<sup>47</sup> Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> See "Essay on the Three Oaths," in *Vayoel Moshe*, #52. Cf. b.T. Sandehrin, 93b.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the discussion in "Essay on the Three Oaths," #39.

<sup>50</sup> "Essay on the Three Oaths," #39. Teitelbaum mentions Ben Zimra in "Essay on the Three Oaths," #139, but does not provide a source..

dead but had no jurisdiction to kill him).<sup>51</sup> In any event, Teitelbaum uses all this to make a somewhat shocking claim that thinly veils his view of Zionism as a case of false messianism likened to Bar Kokhba. In a sense Teitelbaum is taking Zionism on its own terms by linking itself to Bar Kokhba, whom Zionism has largely adopted and revised as a hero, and then inverting it as the basis of his critique.

Teitelbaum suggests, following the narrative suggested by Abravanel, that we know very little about Bar Kokhba from Jewish texts, while there is much more in Roman chronicles and medieval anti-Jewish Christian polemics that tell of his great military prowess, including sojourns to Alexandria, Rome, and Babylonia, where he subjected the population to violent retribution.<sup>52</sup> Thus “he served as a great support for the Jews, saving them from their enemies.”<sup>53</sup> When Bar Kokhba was killed, by either the Jews or the Romans, the opposite occurred. In retribution, the midrash relates, the enemies of the Jews killed many more Jews than even perished in the destruction of Jerusalem (the reference here is to Betar). The death of Bar Kokhba was thus a time of extreme danger for the Jews.

Since that was the case, Teitelbaum asks, “it is hard to understand why the sages killed him? They must have known with *ruah ha-kodesh*, that since Bar Kokhba was such a successful warrior, the enemies of the Jews would take revenge [once he was gone] and thus his death would present a grave danger, as indeed occurred, according to our sins.”<sup>54</sup> The sages, Teitelbaum claims, were presented with a dilemma; put otherwise, a theologico-political predicament. They were confronted with a false messiah who was saving Jews, who indeed acted very much like a savior even as he did not fit the requisite messianic criteria, even as Maimonides understood those criteria in his “Laws of Kings” in *Mishneh Torah*. If the sages killed him—and as a false messiah he should indeed be killed, as Maimonides makes clear—they knew that they would suffer from the revenge of their enemies. And if they did not kill him and allowed him to continue his expedition, redemption would not, could not, come because they would have supported a false messiah. And supporting a false messiah is precisely that which prevents the arrival of the true one. Responding to this predicament, Teitelbaum writes:

Therefore, after they saw that he was *not* the messiah, and thus his political project had come too early, it created a grave danger to the Jews. Who knows what more could occur had they allowed his political quest to continue? Thus, the sages chose the lesser of two evils and they

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> See Abravanel, *Yeshuat Mesikho*, 30b–31 a. For a discussion of Bar Kokhba in Roman and Christian writings, see Marks, *The Image of Bar Kokhba*, 209–14.

<sup>53</sup> Marks, 209–14.

<sup>54</sup> “Essay on the Three Oaths,” in *Vayael Moshe*, #139.

killed him, destroying his political aspirations with him. They viewed this as a small salvation. One who thinks carefully about this can see where this has all come with a political reality before messiah, for it is indeed terrible.<sup>55</sup>

Bar Kokhba is depicted as a false messiah who acts as a savior. But in that position as an initially successful false messiah, he poses a grave danger to the Jews. Thus, the sages are forced to choose the “lesser of two evils” in this theologico-political crisis, knowing that removing Bar Kokhba’s protective shield may result in imminent danger to the Jews, but what will remain intact is a firm belief in the promise of redemption. In short, as Teitelbaum reads the situation, a false messiah that protects Jews from physical harm is worse than no messiah that does not, because only the latter truly can protect the belief in the messianic promise that is required for the end-time to be fulfilled. For Teitelbaum, believing in a false messiah erases the belief in the true messiah, and in doing so prevents the true messiah in the future because the Jews have already ceased believing in him.

Teitelbaum was fully aware of the saving nature of the state of Israel after the trauma of the Nazi genocide. He himself was saved by it. And thus, I think he would perhaps cede to Strauss’s notion that political Zionism solves a proximate problem of the physical danger of the Jews. But for him, and I think for Strauss as well in a different register, the saving qualities of Zionism hide a much more ominous danger, the erasure of belief in the promise of redemption or, as Strauss might have it, the erasure in the belief in the sovereignty of God (revelation).<sup>56</sup> Thus, for both Teitelbaum and Strauss Zionism stands in opposition to Judaism. The Talmud tells us the sin of Bar Kokhba’s generation was “not sufficiently mourning the Temple.” Or, as Teitelbaum puts it elsewhere, citing a Talmudic locution, “washing one’s hands from the Temple” (*pashtu yadeyhem m’zevul*).<sup>57</sup> The saving, as well as destructive, power of Bar Kokhba’s prowess was the belief

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55 “Essay on the Three Oaths,” #139.

56 See Menachem Keren-Kratz, “Is the Jewish State the Ultimate Evil or a Golden Opportunity? Ideology vs. Politics in the Teachings and Actions of R. Yoel Teitelbaum – The Satmar Rebbe,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 29, no. 1–2 (2018): 5–26.

57 “Introduction,” in *Vayoel Moshe*, p. 9. This is based on b.T., Rosh Ha-Shana 17a, “Heretics and apostates who disbelieve the Torah and resurrection descend to Gehenna and are judged there for generations. Gehenna will end but their punishment will not end. Why is this so? Because they washed their hands of Zevul [the Temple].” Rashi asks, “What is the meaning of ‘washed their hands of Zevul’? It means the Temple was destroyed because of their sins.” Maimonides brings in “Laws of Teshuva” (chapter 3) that it can be added “they no longer believed in the coming of messiah.” For Teitelbaum this was the consequence of Bar Kokhba, and why he had to be destroyed.

that redemption is in human hands. This, for Teitelbaum and Strauss, is built into political Zionism, even if in a secularized version.

For Teitelbaum, believing in a false messiah, even if he stands in service of the Jews' physical safety, is worse than no messiah at all, even if the Jews find themselves in danger. This is because any salvation under those false conditions would be temporary by definition, precisely because it is not messianic, but anti-messianic. With a deep sense of both irony and tragedy, Teitelbaum's view is that if we do not have a state we are in danger. And if we do have a state built on the foundations of a false messiah or false messianic premises, we are in a more perilous danger. This is the very nature of the "exilic covenant." God will save the Jews, but only if they continue to believe in God's promise. But before that moment, Israel will experience the perils of human power and history, all under the promise of divine protection from annihilation. The first state of danger results from the efficacy of human agency through abandoning dependence on the divine. The second state of danger, however, while it may put Jewish bodies in harm's way, maintains the requisite belief in redemption (*emunah b'geulah*) that comes through waiting for divine intervention and a messianic figure who meets the necessary criteria for that vocation.

For Teitelbaum, what conceals false messianism, but what is its most compelling promise, is pure survivalism.<sup>58</sup> It is the understandable consequence of the prowess of human agency. Or, in Strauss's language, "pure politics." The grace of true messianism is faith, or as Strauss might put it, a return to revelation. I think this largely coheres with Strauss's review of Max Nordau's Zionism. Strauss notes, "Zionism retains the separation, effected by assimilation, between Zionism and messianism, between national world ends and spiritual means – but it abandons messianism."<sup>59</sup> The great tragedy of false messianism is not the fallacy per se; that is, attributing messiahship to the wrong person. Rather, a deeper kind of false messianism is the erasure of the belief in the messianic idea altogether. For Teitelbaum this is one of the lasting tragedies of political Zionism, specifically as a result of its success. If you are a sovereign state without messiah, who needs messiah? Certainly, for those who have already abandoned the messianic idea because they have abandoned revelation and also the exilic state of the covenant. That is, political Zionism according to Strauss. For this reason, on Teitelbaum's reading, the sages had to kill Bar Kokhba even as they knew it would put Jews in proximate danger. Teitelbaum claims they made the right choice.

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58 See my "From *Kiruv* to Continuity: Survivalism and Renewal as Competing Categories in Judaism," in *Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age*, eds. Rachel Werczberger and Daniel Monterescu (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2022), 43–64.

59 Strauss, "The Zionism of Nordau," in *Early Writings*, 86.

Therein, in my view, lies the crisis of modernity for both Strauss and Teitelbaum. The heresy of modernity and the Enlightenment largely put humanity's fate in human hands; what Kant would call the maturation of the human by rejecting the heteronomous authority of revelation toward a "Religion of Reason."<sup>60</sup> In the case of the Enlightenment, if the results would have been immediately disastrous, no crisis would have ensued. And perhaps *teshuvah* may have even been possible. But that was not the case. In fact, quite the opposite. The barbarity of modernity and the Enlightenment would take some time to unfold, after much of society had been convinced of its efficacy. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno showed us why the shock was misplaced.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the evil of Nazism was not a *necessary* consequence of the Enlightenment, but it was certainly a real possibility. By that time, as Strauss has it, there was no return.

As Strauss notes explicitly regarding political Zionism, its success regarding Jewish bodies cannot be denied. But the theological problems it introduces, its overt rejection of revelation on the one hand and tacit adaptation of biblical motifs on the other (secularized revelation), would serve to undermine Judaism in two ways. First, political Zionism could never normalize and certainly not fully secularize the Jews. Its project of national revival that can only happen in the Jewish theological homeland, the land of Israel (remember, the Zionists largely rejected the Territorialist option of a sovereign Jewish enclave elsewhere), was too entangled in theological suppositions to make Israel simply "like all the nations."<sup>62</sup> Regarding Zionism's premises, true normalization was never really in the mix, even as many would have preferred that. And second, those tacit biblical motifs that are secularized through cultural Zionism through the mechanisms of liberalism will invariably bubble to the surface in religious Zionism and become prominent enough that Zionism will succumb to religion and, as Daniel May argues, like the Ouroboros, political Zionism will consume itself. It is the amalgam of political Zionism and cultural Zionism that according to Strauss will give birth to religious Zionism which undermines both nationalism/Zionism (by making it a religion) and religion (by making it political).

For Teitelbaum, the crisis, or his theologico-political predicament, is embedded in the seduction of progress whereby Jews were led to believe that religion can survive as an integral part of modernity, in his case, through the political proj-

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<sup>60</sup> See Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), in *What Is Enlightenment?*, trans. James Schmidt (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 58–64.

<sup>61</sup> Here see Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), which makes a similar claim from a different set of arguments.

<sup>62</sup> On Territorialism and the debates about it, see Adam Rover, *In the Shadow Of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

ect of Zionism, without the continued *belief* in a messiah either because they disbelieve in the idea, or because they claim it has already begun. The temptation of Zionism is precisely that it seems to solve the problem of survival when, in fact, for him, it does so at the expense of the covenant. Here Teitelbaum and Strauss agree, each from the opposite side of the Athens–Jerusalem divide. But as we saw in Teitelbaum’s reading of Bar Kokhba, this is not a uniquely modern predicament, but one deeply rooted in Jewish civilization historically. Zionism for him is simply its latest iteration. The ancestral *mesorah*, or *yisrael saba*, pledging fidelity to ancestral norms in an exilic frame, is what can resist this proximate and final test; that is, it can slow progress by freezing a moment in time. For him it was necessary as a response to progress whose road, as Teitelbaum reads it, leads to perdition, a path away from, and not toward, redemption.

Teitelbaum functions in a full-bodied premillennial mindset, providing a model for the survival of the remnant to be redeemed in the future. Strauss takes another path by returning to the medieval philosophers to a rationality not yet severed from revelation in an attempt to construct a solution to a predicament produced by modernity, but one modernity cannot solve. The only hope for Strauss was to step outside the parameters of modern thought. Through fidelity to ancestral norms (*yisrael saba*) or through an alternative intellectual project (for Strauss, a return to Maimonides), Teitelbaum and Strauss struggle to come to terms with the theologico-political predicament that each see as threatening the survival of Judaism, even as that predicament may, for the time being, procure the survival of the Jews.

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Yotam Yzraely

# Prophetic Politics: Back to Theology

From the moment when a national disaster appears inevitable, and especially after it has become a reality, it can, like every great torment, become a productive force from the religious point of view: it begins to suggest new questions and to stress old ones. Dogmatized conceptions are pondered afresh in the light of the events, and the faith relationship that has to stand the test of an utterly changed situation is renewed in a modified form. But the new acting force is nothing less than the force of extreme despair, a despair so elemental that it can have but one of two results: the sapping of the last will of life, or the renewal of the soul.  
(Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*)

## Introduction

In one of his essays on Hassidism,<sup>1</sup> Buber begins with an account of the Jewish “situation” on the eve of the Baal Shem Tov’s birth. One after the other, the deaths of Spinoza and Sabbatai Zevi leave behind them a broken and utterly changed world. Although unrelated and unacquainted, Buber points out two similarities. Both left the Jewish religion: one by ex-communication, one by conversion. And both changed Jewish history: Spinoza outwards, Sabbatai Zevi inwards. The former destabilized the idea of transcendence. The latter destabilized the notion of messianism. Buber sees this as historical closure to a cycle that had begun with the rise of Christianity, which wedded these principles together, namely the Israeli transcendent faith in its universal form and messianism as its organizing element. The Baal Shem Tov will begin a new idea—Hassidism—which will remedy the theological crises Spinoza and Sabbateanism inevitably lead to.<sup>2</sup> In a post Sabbatian–Spinozian world, Hassidism introduces new theological structures that reorient the ideas of redemption<sup>3</sup> and man’s relationship with God.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Martin Buber, “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi and the Baal Shem Tov,” in *Be-Paredes Ha-Hassidut* (Tel Aviv: Bialik Institute, 1945): 9–21.

2 Buber, “Spinoza,” 9.

3 “Spinoza,” 18–20.

Buber's account of the birth of Hassidism is not the subject of this essay. However, I mention it initially because it provides insight into the evolutionary nature of theological structures throughout history, particularly during moments of crises. Furthermore, when these novel theological structures subsequently lead to a calibration of the political—i.e., public affairs and the reflection thereof, when they become not only new concepts to enrich our political vocabulary, but the very grammar by which the political itself can now be morally thought and spoken anew, they come to form what I propose to call a “prophetic politics.” The following is a preliminary attempt to elaborate this.

In the first part of this essay, I will argue for a return from the prevalent phenomenological understanding of the prophetic within the academic discourse thereof, to a structural theological viewpoint, by which we can situate the prophetic within a larger framework as a type of political theology that responds to crisis. This, to my understanding, is a more responsible critical approach in times of surging religious nationalism and political populism, wherein phenomenological traits attributed to the prophetic can equally be attributed to political charlatans, given the absence of a qualitative principle by which to differentiate them. The structural theological approach provides, to my understanding, a more feasible qualitative measure for distinguishing one from the other. After laying the groundwork for this argument and supporting it with an example from biblical narrative (Exod. 3:13–14; 6:1–2), I will attempt to show, in the second part of this essay, how this viewpoint is exemplified in the biblical commentaries of Martin Buber, mainly in his *Torat ha-Nevi'im (The Prophetic Faith)* published in 1942, and in his historical account of philosophy and religion in *Eclipse of God*, published ten years later.

In the former, Buber lays down a prophetic critique of messianism which elucidates the theological structure of the prophetic in times of crisis; in the latter he recontextualizes the modern crisis through an intriguing Jewish critique of Western metaphysics' relation to religion. Collectively, these works illustrate a profound understanding of the prophetic, providing additional insight regarding its political-theological structure and function. Furthermore, in doing so, Buber's work exemplifies a compelling case of prophetic politics in its own right, as he not only rejuvenates the meaning of various theological concepts but utilizes them to point to a reorientation of the political in his time.

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4 “Spinoza,” 14.

## From Phenomenology to Theology

Within the current revival of academic discourse on “the prophetic,” which aims to locate and denote instances of prophetic voice in modern culture, and more specifically in modern political thought, the focal point of discussion often revolves around a phenomenological understanding of prophecy. We tend to relate to the prophetic in terms such as religious rhetoric, charisma, ascetism, anti-institutional sentiment, or revolutionary power in the prophetic message. I would like to offer a different approach, one in which we revisit the prophetic as a political-theological response to crisis. According to this view, the prophetic acts as a calibration of the political according to a preceding theologically reconfigured superstructure, after the previous theological superstructure has either collapsed or become eclipsed. The reconfiguration of the theological, in these moments, is the fundamental shift without which the political cannot be coherently viewed or even logically approached to begin with. Ultimately, the prophetic is that which, in times of political and theological disharmony, aims to reharmonize them, by means of reforming and recodifying both spheres in the process; it is that which logically mediates theology with politics as such.

The term “prophetic politics” has appeared with various meanings and in various disciplines since the 1980s, especially in the United States.<sup>5</sup> It often denotes a religious socialism in the American left, or a secularized scripture-based humanist

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, from a political science perspective, Neal Riemer, *The Future of the Democratic Revolution: Toward a More Prophetic Politics* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1984), 93–254. For a sociological historical study, see David S. Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). Discussions for a wider readership can be found in Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2005), 72–84; and in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2015), 244–47; see also Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952), 253, to which Sacks refers. For a theoretical critique, see Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1985), as well as “The Prophet as Social Critic,” in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987): 67–94. For a continental phenomenological approach, see Philip J. Harold, *Prophetic Politics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Sanctification of Suffering* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009). For a recent study on prophetic politics as religious socialism in twentieth-century Jewish and Christian thought, see David Barak-Gorodetsky, *Judah Magnes: The Prophetic Politics of a Religious Binationalist* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

politics.<sup>6</sup> Lately it has been revisited anew and applied further to a wider historical and multi-cultural scale, as part of a theological critique of the global crisis of liberal democracies. In 2020, *Political Theology* dedicated a special issue to “prophetic politics,” in which editors Nitzan Lebovic and Daniel Weidner define it as “the proclamation of a radical change expressed in religious language at a time of deep existential and political crisis.”<sup>7</sup>

Activating biblical semantics of the prophetic as a rebuke of political authority is a common feature of twentieth-century culture, far beyond the fields of academia. An offspring of the romantic hero, the prophetic persona draws its identity from several phenomenological similarities that tie him to his biblical prototype. Entire chapters in the history of modern culture are impressed with political activists, revolutionaries, thinkers, and artists who have understood their role through the semantics of biblical prophecy or have been defined as such by their contemporaries. A case in point is Bob Dylan, or the prophetic ethos to which rock culture aspired by and large.<sup>8</sup> One could argue that both ancient and modern prophets share a wide range of characteristics such as—in addition to the aforementioned religious rhetoric, charisma, and revolutionary sentiment—a zealous commitment to a traditional canon or code of law (religious or humanist), poetic inspiration, martyrism, and more.

The prophetic type in Jewish modern thought has also received academic attention. Ron Margolin portrays Moses Hess as the prophet of spiritual Zionism, who, following Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal), lay down the elements for the humanistic messianism of the nineteenth century, of which Buber is its successor in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Grunfeld denotes prophetic characteristics in such German Jewish intellectuals as Kafka, Benjamin, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ernst Toller, and many more,<sup>10</sup> as does Michael Löwy in *Redemption and Utopia*.<sup>11</sup> Shvaid displayed a panoramic view of the prophetic type when discussing central Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century, who have, according to him, expressed innovative spiritual

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6 See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); Philip S. Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

7 Nitzan Lebovic and Daniel Weidner, “Introduction,” *Political Theology* 21, no. 1–2 (2020): 1.

8 See Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 91–113.

9 Ron Margolin, “Moses Hess as a Prophet of Spiritual Zionism: The Origins of Messianic Jewish Humanism,” *Modern Judaism* 38, no. 1 (2018): 75–95.

10 Frederic V. Grunfeld, *Prophets without Honour: A Background to Freud, Kafka, Einstein, and Their World* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979).

11 Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

leadership of biblical caliber.<sup>12</sup> These scholarly achievements are but a few of those that have contributed to understanding the phenomenology of the prophetic mode in Jewish modern thought.

The adoption of the phenomenological approach serves the purpose of juxtaposing modern prophecy with biblical prophecy and encompassing a range of instances that involve radical political critique across different times and places.<sup>13</sup> The use of the phenomenological approach offers a twofold benefit. From a critical theory perspective, this approach aids in situating the current critique within the political context and allows us to gain a better understanding of its cultural, social, and psychological function. From a political perspective, it delegates authority to the powerless prophetic persona, who lacks institutional office or power.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it aids in differentiating, from a phenomenological angle, the prophet from other types of religious agencies such as the priest, the shaman, or various practitioners of divination, which tend to focus on myth and ritual rather than the social and political orientation affiliated with prophecy. Phenomenology, therefore, is clearly an important component in facilitating a critical theory of the prophetic.

It is not, however, free of problems which pertain to current pressing political challenges, and therefore it does not, and should not, suffice in rendering a politics prophetic. I will note here two relevant challenges.

First, the phenomenological view does not allow us a qualitative distinction between prophetic politics and charlatanism, which utilizes charisma and radical rhetoric for its own ends; often an end towards which the prophetic critique is originally aimed. With surging religious nationalism and political populism, both of which activate a rhetoric of crisis, how do we differentiate—besides using our gut feeling or our educated ear—between a prophetic politics and an alluring demagogy? And if we do differentiate, how is this knowledge conveyed onwards? Another way to express this, drawing from biblical terminology, is that the phenomenological approach faces a challenge when attempting to distinguish a

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12 Eli'ezer Shvaid, *Prophets for Their People and Humanity: Prophecy and Prophets in 20th Century Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999).

13 As Lebovic and Weidner put it, "from Jeremiah's symbolic breaking of the vessels [...] to Muhammad's open critique of the elites in Mecca, from the prophetic tone adopted by Martin Buber and A.Y. Heschel in their struggle against nationalism and nihilism during the 1920's, to Malcom X's and James Baldwin's critique of racism and imperialism in the 1960s. The historical trajectory of prophetic politics shows the prophetic word to be a rhetorical form that crosses boundaries of time and space, hierarchies, and identity." Lebovic and Weidner, "Introduction", 1–2.

14 Samuel Hayim Brody, "Prophecy and Powerlessness," *Political Theology* 21, no. 1–2 (2020): 43–55, 44f.

“true” prophetic stance from a “false” one; nor is it able to lay down the theoretical principles according to which such a distinction can even be valid. This is a well-known ancient theological problem rooted in the very traits of charisma and rhetoric, and is documented in biblical legal code, historical narrative, and prophetic prose.<sup>15</sup> In scripture, it is worth noting that the question of validity is swiftly resolved as the answer originates directly from God or the narrator. This theological advantage is not readily available to us, as we cannot simply rely on divine or authoritative confirmation in the same manner. A better theoretical tool that can aid in differentiating prophetic politics from political demagoguery is therefore needed, all the more so in times of prophetic “inflation.”

Second, while focusing solely on its phenomenological traits, prophetic politics—by the same logic above—is not clearly discerned from other agencies of political critique, such as the messianic, the activist, the monk, or the literary or social critic, who may share similar features. As mentioned, it does allow a qualitative distinction between various *religious* agencies, allowing us to separate the prophet from the priest or the shaman, but less so when it comes to agencies of *political* criticism. Shifting the focus from the phenomenological aspects of prophecy to the theological ones serves an important purpose in gaining a deeper understanding of what truly makes these voices “prophetic” and sets them apart from other forms of political critique or self-serving demagoguery. The theological aspects are sometimes harder to trace, but once discovered, we are able to grasp the essence that imbues these voices with prophetic qualities.

To illustrate, in the above taxonomy of political critiques, each one implies a preceding sense of crisis and urgency, which in turn—depending on how these are interpreted, and on the subjectivity of the one doing the interpretation—gives rise to various types of political action and agency. The activist and the monk, to take one example, are two different reactions to the same political reality, which they interpret and understand differently, thus leading the former to participate in political action while leading the latter to retire and renounce it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Deut. 13:2–6; 18:18–22; 1 Kings 22:2–40; Jer. 28; cf. Num. 12:6–8; Ezek. 14:9–10; Mic. 2:11; 3:5–12.

<sup>16</sup> The fourth-century Church fathers who refrained from participating in “this” world acknowledged that the political reality was beyond the possibility of human change and declined from partaking in it any more than needed. See Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion, 2004). For a countering Jewish stance, see Alick Isaacs, *A Prophetic Peace: Judaism, Religion, and Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4–7. Isaacs relies on the Mishnaic saying by Rabbi Tarfon, “The work is not ours to complete, neither are we free to shrink away from it,” according to which an absolute resolution is never possible, but a constant joint effort of refinement across the generations is.



On the other hand, the prophetic, I would like to argue, is the type of critique which recognizes the crisis as a *political-theological* one; as a state of events where the theological and the political are conflicted, or at the very least unsynchronized, thus manifesting a deep political perplexity, and which then proceeds to recalibrate them. My argument draws here on Carl Schmitt, who famously pointed at the deep structural correlations between any society's metaphysical image and the form of its political organization.<sup>17</sup> My claim is that a political-theological crisis occurs when the theological constituents of such a society lose their meaning and efficiency from which one can extricate political guidelines; or, alternatively, in the midst of a political crisis, the magnitude of which often overshadows theological considerations, and disrupts the logical correlation between the preceding theology and the political reality. The prophetic, in these moments, is precisely that which recognizes the problem and gives itself over to the challenge of serving as a new mediator between the theological and the political. This is done by re-organizing the theological, which then projects on the political, endowing it a new vision and sending it on a new trajectory. The outcome of this process, in theory, is a new theology and a reformed politics, which are reciprocally correlated to one another anew, as well as to the given historical moment. The prophet, hence, is always perceived as an extreme threat to the existing political and religious institutions, who rely on state or Church dogma to repudiate him.

Understood as such, prophetic politics can be seen as a specific manifestation of political theology. Political theology, as a discourse, acknowledges the fundamental interconnectedness between the political realm and a preceding theological context that gives it its significance. Prophetic politics, I would like to argue, within the realm of political theology, takes this concept further by suggesting that the theological structures themselves undergo reconfiguration. It involves a transformative process wherein the theological foundations are examined, challenged, and reconstructed in order to morally recalibrate the political sphere. Figures (1), (2), and (3) simplify this point.

No matter the organizing principle of the political—whether a republic, a kingdom, a clan, a commune, a tribal federation, an ideology, or even a political theory—none of these can be understood, from the perspective of political theology, without a preceding, logically transcending, theological or metaphysical framework, from which it draws its meaning and logical validation. In Figure 1, this is emphasized by the theological transcending the political; it is the context and the logical grammar by virtue of which the political makes any sense.

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<sup>17</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 46.

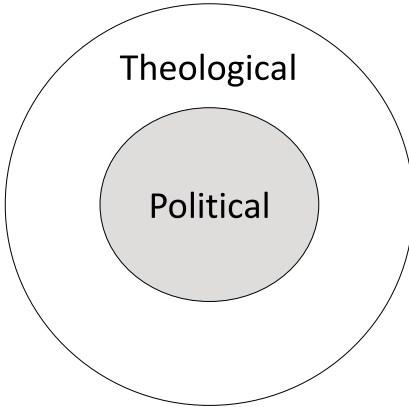


Fig. 1: Political Theology

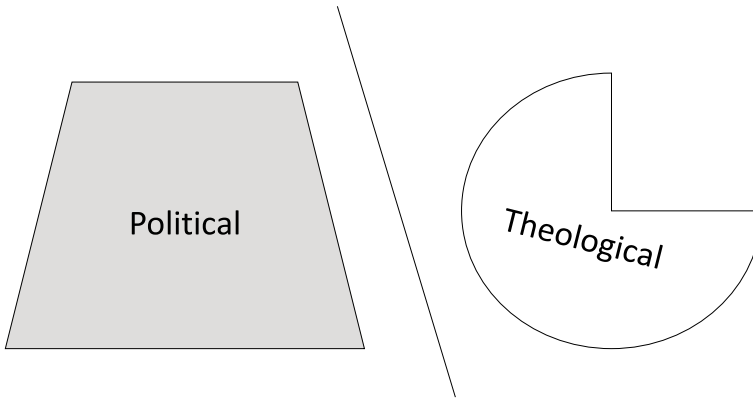


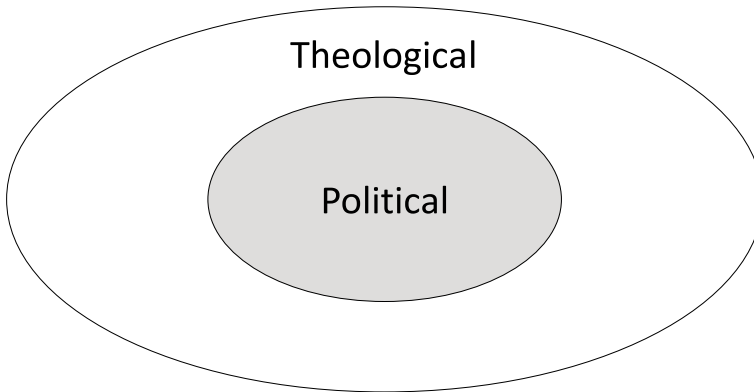
Fig. 2: Political-Theological Crisis

A political-theological crisis (Figure 2) happens when the correlation between the two is lost, due to dramatic changes in either one of them. In this scenario, when standing within the realm of the polity, the *theological* structures do not make any *political* sense, and are deemed awkward, un-relevant, or in Nietzsche's words, dead. The same applies vice versa: When standing within the realm of the theology, the *political* structures do not make any *theological* sense and are deemed idolatrous. Leo Strauss coined the term "politico-theological predicament"<sup>18</sup> to describe

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<sup>18</sup> Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997). See opening remarks in the author's introduction.

such a crisis that arises when the traditional connection between politics and theology is challenged. According to Strauss, this predicament is the root cause of the crisis faced by modern liberalism. *It is this political-theological crisis to which the prophetic is attuned.* In action, the prophetic *reconfigures* the theology in a way that deems the political possible and thinkable once again (Figure 3). It should be stressed, however, that this is done not to bestow theological legitimacy to an already existing political order, nor to reform the political according to an already existing theology. In other words, prophetic politics belongs neither to the king's court nor to the Church. Rather, it resides in the realm of future possibilities that emerge through the reformed and recodified structure, which seeks to bring about transformation in both spheres.



**Fig. 3:** Prophetic Politics

In religious terms, we would say the prophet introduces or reveals new divine names, new codes of law, new covenants or testaments by which God can be called upon and by which the religious community can reorient itself in a way that can lead to political and spiritual liberation within a changing world. In theoretical terms, the prophetic introduces new theological structures, a new grammar by which politics can be thought of and spoken anew, by which the very political is metaphysically correlated and hence validated.

When we approach the defining feature of the prophetic structure as a theological reconfiguration—i. e., the “bringing down” or “revelation” of new laws or names; introducing a new (or newly understood) theological grammar—in order to enable a new politics, it is important to stress this nuanced yet crucial point: The focus of the prophetic shifts from employing a certain kind of political religious rhetoric or aesthetic—which is the concern of the phenomenological ap-

proach—to employing *the very possibility of political speech as such*. Let us view an example of how this plays out in scripture.

## From El Shaddai to YHWH

This viewpoint can be ascertained in the Exodus accounts of Moses standing in front of the burning bush, and his subsequent encounter with Pharaoh.<sup>19</sup> In these encounters, Moses receives the revelation of two new divine names. The first, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, appears only in this verse.<sup>20</sup> The second, *YHWH*, has already appeared as text (as early as Gen. 2:4), but is only now being revealed in narrative, the crux of the matter being that it was never revealed to the patriarchs.<sup>21</sup>

It is my suggestion that when God reveals a new name, one by which He had never been known before, we need to understand this as a new theological structure that aims to reorient the political reality in times of crisis, in this case—the reality of the slave-based imperial polity of Egypt, to which *YHWH* is the theological solution. This is not merely an operative technical solution for plaguing Egypt so that *YHWH* can deliver His people from slavery into freedom, but a structural solution within the evolving political-theological grammar, by virtue of which the operative solution can make any sense to begin with. In other words, a new theological grammar by which the new political—i. e., a something called “a free people”—can come into syntax.

At first, during the time of the patriarchs, the theological structures—known and revealed in that historical moment as *El Shaddai*—were the correlating theological structures for a body-politique of a nomadic clan of shepherds (Figure 1).<sup>22</sup>

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19 The following ideas are based on Menachem Lorberbaum’s theological treatise *I Seek Thy Face* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Shalom Hartman Institute/Bar-Ilan University, 2018), 126–29, and even more so from a conversation we once had in Menachem’s office about this segment. I thank him for this mind-opening perspective.

20 Exod. 3:13–14.

21 Exod. 6:2–9. “God spoke to Moses and said to him, I am *YHWH*. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name *YHWH*.” Exod. 6:2–3.

22 For Buber, the theological structure of *El Shaddai* was in and of itself a shift in the earlier history of religion. This structure of a nomadic patron deity was substantially different from its contemporary pagan ones. While other deities were solely protectors of the way, *El Shaddai* was a protector *and* a leader who oversaw the destination. A minor yet crucial difference in the theological structure, this shift brought about a reformation in the identity structure between Terach’s clan and Abraham’s clan, turning the former’s economic nomadism into the latter’s nomadism of

But now, after this historical political reality had shifted, living under the yoke of imperialism and slavery, there is a political-theological crisis (Figure 2), or in Menachem Lorberbaum's words a "suffering which demands a new vision of faith."<sup>23</sup> In other words, *El Shaddai*, a name revealing God's might and leadership, is not the suitable theological structure for the deliverance of Israel out of slavehood. *YHWH*, promulgating eternity, is more suitable. This is the role of Moses, who introduces this new theological structure, which in turn gives the political reality a new theological trajectory: liberation. Indeed, this is what renders Moses a prophet. This is the political-theological structure of the prophetic (Figure 3).

We can now shift our focus to a contemporary example and examine the manifestation of prophetic politics within the present political-theological crisis. Building upon Buber's biblical commentary and history of philosophy will assist us. In doing so, we will also see how Buber, in his own right, engages in a prophetic politics by reconstructing fundamental notions such as history, prophecy, messianism, and more as a means for recalibrating the very logic through which the political can be envisioned.

## A Quivering Magnet Needle: Buber's Reconfiguration of History and Prophecy

Buber famously discusses similar theological shifts as key turning points in the history of religion, a history that progresses along what he calls a "theopolitical" dynamics.<sup>24</sup> Many of these turning points stem out of political, economic, or military crises that invite suitable reconfigurations of the theological structures, which in return aim to preserve God's decree and enable it to continue being heard in the polity. Samuel's reform of the Shiloh priesthood,<sup>25</sup> Isaiah's messianic songs,<sup>26</sup> and Jeremiah's new covenant of the heart<sup>27</sup> are but a few moments of theological reconfiguration for the purpose of political calibration in times of crisis. In these theopolitical hours, the prophet is like a "quivering magnet needle, pointing the way to God." According to Buber, the prophet becomes so because he is "altogether

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faith. See Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 41–43; fn. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Lorberbaum, *I Seek Thy Face*, 126.

<sup>24</sup> Buber, *Prophetic Faith*, 83, 167–68.

<sup>25</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 75–86.

<sup>26</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 156–91.

<sup>27</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 203–16.

bound by this “time.”<sup>28</sup> In choosing the metaphor of a compass needle, Buber both indicates the prophet’s extreme sensitivity to the political-theological vectors and stresses the sensation of a society at loss, having no map nor stars by which to navigate out of crisis, save a “quivering” prophet.

In this context, the revelation to Moses on the eve of deliverance is key for Buber. His reading of it, however, emphasizes an entirely different shift within the theological grammar from the one I have emphasized above. For Buber it is not the political crisis of slavehood that calls for a revelation of a new name; rather it is the entrance *into* history as a people that ignites the theological structure shift.

When we pass from the atmosphere of the patriarchal tradition [...] and enter the atmosphere of the Exodus tradition, we are confronted at the first glance with something new. But it is quickly manifest that this does not mean a change in the deity, but a change in men. [...] The new thing from the human side is that here we have ‘people’ [...] this collection of men is no more a company assembled around the recipients of revelation and their kinsmen [...], but a something that is called ‘Israel’ and which the deity can acknowledge as ‘His people.’ [...] The change which we think we perceive in Him as we now advance in time is nothing but *the transformation of the situation into a historical one*, and the greatness of Moses consists in the fact that he accepts the situation and exhausts its possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

In Buber’s reading of this account, we should note, not only the political realm but the entire temporal reality conjoins with the theological structures to affect one another reciprocally, in what he later describes as an ongoing dialogue between God and man, the manifestation of which *is* history.<sup>30</sup> We can therefore conclude that for Buber, since this is the moment in which this dialogue *enters* history, as Israel is now “a people,” the prior suitable theological structure of a protector patron deity—*El Shaddai*—must shift. Since *El Shaddai* is still “of this world” in the sense that he is a participator *within* history, and since history *is* the manifestation of His dialogue with Israel, the structure now shifts to transcending historic time

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<sup>28</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 218. Earlier, Buber attributes the notion of historical “time” in the prophetic to the very concept of revelation, in opposition to the notions of myth and cosmology, i. e., non-historical time, which he attributes to the theology of the priesthood, mainly within their concept of the temple. The priesthood theological superstructure, emphasizing myth and cosmos, tends to be preferred by the political authorities as it delegates validation for a naturalistic exercise of power-politics, instead of the historically-aware politics confined by the restrictions of revelation. See 107–18. Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 3–26. For example, “The prophet’s concern is not with nature but with history” (6).

<sup>29</sup> Buber, *Prophetic Faith*, 53–55, emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 107–18.

altogether. Hence the new name, which for Buber means “He who is present [...] not merely some time and some where but in every now and in every here.”<sup>31</sup>

For Buber, this dialogue—between the Eternal Thou and His liberated people—is not a predestined dialectic teleology, neither of spirit (contra Hegel) nor of material (contra Marx), but an ongoing open *dialogical* history which does not cease to demand man’s political presence and response-ability.

Regarding the aforementioned taxonomy of political agencies, it becomes evident that Buber draws a clear distinction between the prophetic and the messianic. The former is concerned with immediate decisions and actions in the present, while the latter forfeits the potential in the present moment by moving the idea of a righteous polity to the end days.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the political theology of the messianic is closer, in this regard, to that of the monk, both rooted in a despair leading to bypass history with rite, prayer, and mystical yearning. In its secularized form, the messianic appears as the deep existential despair of a Kafka, who “prays” through art, literature, or critical theory.

Buber insists, however, that the original theological structure of the Messiah was neither mystical nor apocalyptic, as some of his Weimar contemporaries would have it. Instead, he argues, it was prophetic, namely an assertive realist stance espoused by Isaiah within the political framework. Amidst the geopolitical upheavals afflicting the Kingdom of Judah in the mid-eighth century BCE, Isaiah upheld the imperative of demanding nothing short of a virtuous monarch and a righteous polity—not in the end days, but in *his* days. The messianic kingship

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31 Buber, “The Burning Bush,” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000): 60. The essay was originally published as a chapter in Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East & West Library, 1946): 39–54. It is noteworthy to acknowledge Buber’s critical stance towards the philosophical methodology by which *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, and subsequently the Tetragrammaton, are associated with metaphysical principles concerning omnipresence (a viewpoint upheld by Philo, Maimonides, Mendelson, and Cohen, albeit with differing emphases). Buber concurs with the notion that the names communicate the quality of eternal presence but emphasizes that this quality pertains to an intimate engagement with an eternal Thou, as opposed to a detached conceptualization of the boundless. See Buber, “The Burning Bush,” 44–62.

32 See Brody, “Prophecy and Powerlessness.” Especially 48: “the more the eventual advent of the good king came to seem like an otherworldly hope – something that could only occur by direct divine intervention, rather than by human effort [...] the concept of the righteous moshiah became almost completely mythicized, severed from its mundane historical origins, and separated from its real-political context. For Buber, then, the cosmic, world-transforming messianic hope is the result of an originally local, historical, and political hope being disappointed, then passing through a filter of despair.” For an elaborated discussion on Buber’s restraint from the secular messianism in the Weimar period, Brody refers to his *Martin Buber’s Theopolitics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 151–74.

was a vision of real political kingship “endowed with political power to the scope of the political realization of God’s will for people and peoples.”<sup>33</sup> It was not a vision that belonged “to the margin of history where it vanishes into the realms of the timeless,” but rather “to the center, the ever-changing center, that is to say it belongs to the experienced hour and its possibility.”<sup>34</sup> For Buber, this active posture of “theopolitical realism” remained relevant and worth pursuing in our contemporary times. “The future is not something already fixed in this present hour,” he asserts at the outset of his study, “it is dependent upon the real decision, that is to say the decision in which man takes part in this hour.”<sup>35</sup> During these crucial moments, the prophet assumes a significant role by mediating and embodying the question at hand, thereby shaping its decisive nature. “To be a nabi means to set the audience to whom the words are addressed, before the choice and decision, directly or indirectly.”<sup>36</sup>

To summarize this point, Buber’s dialogical aspect of history embodies humanity’s ability to respond and accept accountability in making pivotal decisions “in this hour” when confronted with the pressing questions that demand their attention; questions articulated and posed with austere clarity by a “quivering” prophet who is deeply attuned and fully engaged and bound “to this hour.” Within the framework of prophetic politics, we could therefore say, this entails the act of presenting the audience with the urgent questions that have now become coherent anew through the prophet’s reconfigured theological structures, with the aim of forging a new political future in which the divine word can be attentively acknowledged and appropriately addressed.

Against the backdrop of World War II and the imminent establishment of the state of Israel, Buber undertook the task of addressing his own audience and advocating for a renewed engagement with scripture, promoting what he termed a “biblical humanism.” Embracing a form of “prophetic politics” in his own praxis, within the prevailing political-theological crisis of his own era, Buber actively sought to reconfigure the traditional theological structures of “history,” “prophecy,” and, one could add, the “adherence to scripture” (*talmud torah*); his objective being nothing short of disseminating a fresh *torah*—i.e., teaching and guidance—for navigating through the crisis and forging a new path forward.

In order to gain a deeper comprehension of Buber’s approach in leading his “audience” out of this crisis, it is essential to explore the underlying nature of the crisis itself. This brings us to the modern example.

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<sup>33</sup> Buber, *Prophetic Faith*, 174.

<sup>34</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 176. For the entire analysis of Isaiah’s messianic oracles, see 156–91.

<sup>35</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Prophetic Faith*, 3.



## Erased Horizons: The Metaphysical Crisis of Modernity

Starting with Spinoza's critique of religion in the seventeenth century, which set the trajectory for the separation of philosophy and religion in Western metaphysics, our current political-theological crisis was most famously articulated in Nietzsche's profession about the death of God,<sup>37</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century, roughly 220 years later. Although popularized as an anti-theological statement signifying the end of religion, Nietzsche's profession is nothing of the like. In fact, it is incredibly theological, signifying the reality of crisis, meaning that the structures by which Western culture had perceived and understood God and its relationship with the world and humanity have collapsed. "God is dead" is not an argument about the existence of God or the absence thereof, but rather about the death of the structures that have shaped our discourse on God for two millennia, and the profound metaphysical implications that arise from their demise. "God is dead" is not an *ontological* statement; it is a *linguistic* one.<sup>38</sup>

To explain this shift, remember that Heidegger sees Nietzsche's profession as marking the end of Western metaphysics since Plato. God, in this regard, is not merely the Christian God, but also and mainly the metaphysical realm of the ideal, by which *this world* orients itself, towards which it aspires, and on which Christian dogma was structured. "If God – as the supersensory ground and as the goal of everything that is real – is dead, if the supersensory world of ideas is bereft of its binding and above all its inspiring and constructive power, then there is nothing left which man can rely on and by which he can orient himself."<sup>39</sup> According to Heidegger, Nietzsche played a crucial role in purging Western thought from post-Socratic structures of thinking, enabling a fresh metaphysics, namely

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37 Nietzsche proclaims this in *The Gay Science* (ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York, NY: Vintage, 1974; originally published 1882]), sections 108, 125, 343; and in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Redditch: Read Books, 2015; originally published 1887), at the end of section 2 of the prologue.

38 Nietzsche was not the first nor the most severe in proclaiming "God's death." Heine, in 1835, described Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as "putting the whole heavenly garrison to the sword," leaving "the sovereign of the world swimming unproved in his own blood." Hegel, in 1802, writes about the "feeling on which the religion of the modern age rests – the feeling that God himself is dead." See Heinrich Heine, "Concerning the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany," in *The Romantic School and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1985): 211–12; G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), 190.

39 Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word 'God is Dead,'" in *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002): 163.

one that would be honest about its intrinsic nihilism; a metaphysics acknowledging that “with everything in every respect, the nothing is going on.”<sup>40</sup> “As long as we grasp ‘God is Dead’ only as the formula of unbelief,” Heidegger concludes, “we are thinking in terms of theological apologetics and are eschewing what matters to Nietzsche, namely reflection that thinks about what has already happened with the truth of the supersensory world and with its relation to man’s essence.”<sup>41</sup>

Heidegger takes that to be the essence of Nietzsche’s famous portrayal of the madman running into the market looking for God in section 125 of the *Gay Science*: “Where did he go?”, he cried, ‘I’ll tell you where. *We’ve killed him* – you and I.”<sup>42</sup> Immediately following this he asks the bewildered crowd a series of questions: “But how have we done this? How were we able to drink the sea dry? Who gave us the sponge to wipe the entire horizon away? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?”<sup>43</sup> Heidegger observes that Nietzsche employs the imagery of sea, horizon, and sun as a means of elucidating the significance behind the event wherein a “death of God” occurs:

The sun forms and delimits the field of vision in which beings show themselves as beings. The ‘horizon’ means the supersensory world as the one that truly is. This is at the same time the entirety that embraces and includes everything in itself like the sea. The earth as the residence of man is unchained from its sun. The realm of the supersensory which has its being in itself [*an sich seienden*] is no longer the normative light above man. The whole field of vision has been wiped away.<sup>44</sup>

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40 Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 195. Heidegger distinguishes nihilism as *ideology* from nihilism as thinking about “the nothing,” without having the latter needing to lead to the former. The purpose of his lecture on Nietzsche is to explore the new possibilities now opened for this branch of thought of which Nietzsche, for him, was the precursor (Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 157). Karl Löwith criticized Heidegger for imposing his own thoughts on Nietzsche while “thinking through him.” See Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 96–127. Cf. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 15–19, 59–65; cf. Eric Von Der Luft, “Sources of Nietzsche’s ‘God Is Dead!’ And Its Meaning for Heidegger,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 2 (1984): 263–76.

41 Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 164.

42 Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 161; Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Section 125. Italics original.

43 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Section 125.

44 Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 195. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 44: “If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the *question of Being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since.”

Nevertheless, the void left by the now deceased God beckons to be filled:

In the face of the faltering domination of the former values, something else can be tried. Even if God in the sense of the Christian God has vanished from his place in the supersensory world, still the place itself is preserved, although it has become empty. One can still hold fast to the evacuated realm of the supersensory and ideal world. The empty place even invites its own re-occupation and calls for the God who disappeared from it to be replaced by another.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, Heidegger contends, alternative theological structures were called for. Revelations of new “names,” by which God and Man could be called, were required. Even Heidegger’s nihilism, purporting to redefine metaphysics according to his reading of Nietzsche’s legacy, should be seen as drawn to fill this metaphysical void by theorizing it. In fact, Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* inherently presents an alternative paradigm in itself. One could convincingly argue that the proclamation of God’s death serves as a means to usher in what could be termed, somewhat paradoxically, a “theology of individualism”: Within the context of a cosmological framework characterized by the driving force of “the will to power,” there exists a gravitational pull towards an eschatology centered around the concept of the superman, wherein the individual attains the opportunity to ultimately “reveal” their genuine self, and “redeem” not only the self but the world from the false enslaving concepts of good and evil. In Zarathustra’s words: “Dead are all the Gods: now do we desire the Superman to live.”<sup>46</sup>

These alternate frameworks, encompassing nihilism and individualism, not to mention nationalism, or romanticism, utilitarianism, and socialism—which to Nietzsche were distinct manifestations of a “latent Christianity” he deemed equally deserving of condemnation<sup>47</sup>—were left with an “erased horizon” and were considered non-metaphysical. But the claim to have solved the crisis was paradoxical. After ridding the world of God, man, who was now both sovereign *and* subject, still needed to be freed from his self-afflicting oppressions. Ultimately, the metaphysical horizon once attributed to “God” was essentially substituted with an artificial human-centric counterpart. Enter modern ideologies that assist man in restraining and regulating his own self-sovereignty; ideologies over which he goes to war and sacrifices life for the purportedly “greater” cause; a cause which from the outset sought to liberate him by rejecting the fundamental principle of transcending human subjectivity.

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<sup>45</sup> Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Word,” 168.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage: 1967), no. 1021. Heidegger’s reference.

Reflecting on this tragic irony, Buber was reluctant to embrace secular ideologies as qualifying frameworks if these were to disregard the need for a calibrating horizon. He perceived the three major runners of modern politics—liberalism, fascism, and communism—as inadequate for meeting the call of history. For him these were merely conservative reproductions of the same old theological and political structures (Figure 2).

From a theopolitical standpoint, Buber regarded these ideologies as insufficient in “setting the audience” for the purpose of making choices and decisions. This inadequacy stemmed from the absence of a horizon that would allow for a comprehensive understanding of the questions at hand and the absence of a new theological grammatical framework that would enable the political sphere to be expressed in a coherent manner. Identifying the individual, the nation, or the state with God was no new “revelation”; on the contrary, it was a form of idolatry, leading not to political and spiritual liberation, but to individual narcissism or chauvinist patriotism. And merely replacing national or state politics with economic class struggle was similarly insignificant. Ultimately, for Buber these structures were not *responding* to crisis. They were symptomatic of what was generating crisis in the first place: the disappearance of dialogue. History, as the embodiment of dialogue between humanity and God, was diminished to a solitary monologue of human beings with themselves.

To fully grasp this argument, it becomes necessary to delve into another theological concept Buber was reconfiguring, namely that of *hester panim*.

## God Is Not Dead—He Is Quiet

In his 1952 *Eclipse of God* Buber recontextualizes the modern crisis, reframing it not as a result of deicide or death, but rather as a consequence of the dialogue that has ceased, and suggests that by actively seeking to revive it, there is hope for its rekindling. He agrees with Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche but refutes Nietzsche’s reading of reality. While the *theological structures* of Western metaphysics have collapsed, this does not imply the death of the *relationship* with God. In fact, identifying God with the structures through which he is understood, even metaphorically, is from Buber’s viewpoint a massive philosophical misunderstanding, derivative of Western philosophy’s tendency to grasp God as an idea as opposed to a subject, or in Buber’s dialogical terms, as an “Eternal It” as opposed

to an “Eternal Thou”;<sup>48</sup> indeed, a derivative of the trajectory Western philosophy has followed since the advent of religious critique initiated by Spinoza. In addition, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the underlying Christian structure of Nietzsche’s model to which Buber is replying, namely the predominant cycle of death, resurrection, and “second-coming”; not to mention the irony of having this model promulgated by a self-acclaimed “antichrist.”

To further comprehend Buber’s argument, we need to grasp the distinction he makes regarding the disparity between philosophy and religion. Buber delineates philosophy as an inquiry concerned with the metaphysical exploration of essence, distinct from the religious pursuit of salvation.<sup>49</sup> Philosophy thinks about God as a concept, an “It,” and is therefore by definition not engaged in a relationship with a presence; while religion speaks to God as a subject, a “Thou,” and is therefore by definition not engaged in an investigation of an idea. For Buber, having lost the tools through which the *investigation* of the object was held can to a degree affect how the *relationship* with the subject is communicated, but it cannot eliminate nor even send it off course.

Buber, therefore, uses the metaphor of eclipse to stress a different type of crisis through which our world is passing. God is not dead—he is quiet. In response to Nietzsche’s assertion that we have “unchained this earth from its sun,” Buber counters by asserting that the sun is still present, only in concealment. The concept of concealment, known from biblical scripture as *hester panim*, serves as another theological framework utilized by Buber to elucidate the metaphysical crisis in Western thought. Buber mitigates the notion of God’s death, predominantly rooted in Christian theology (and in pagan mythology beforehand) by substituting it with the Jewish understanding of God concealing His face in secrecy. Just as God is a deity that reveals Himself in history, so does He conceal Himself in history, and the current modern crisis represents an era characterized by the profound concealment of His face and name; i. e., by the absence of suitable theological structures without which a justful politics cannot come into syntax.

Although Buber does not refer to it in this context, this state of concealment is exemplified in the biblical account of affairs on the eve of Samuel’s reformation of the Shiloh hierocracy, in 1 Samuel 3:1, on which Rashi remarks “*leit nevua galia*” (prophecy was not revealed).<sup>50</sup> In this case, God’s concealment was connected to

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<sup>48</sup> This is the distinction Buber draws between the philosophical interpretation of the name *YHWH* and his dialogical understanding of it. See 31 above.

<sup>49</sup> Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> “And the word of *YHWH* was precious those days, there was no widespread vision.” Rashi: Precious (*Yakar*)—was withheld (*haya manua*); no widespread vision (*ein hazon nifratz*)—prophecy was not revealed (*leit nevua galia*).

the obscene corruption of the priesthood, due to which it was reformed. But why was this eclipse happening in contemporary times?

In many of the biblical accounts of *hester panim*,<sup>51</sup> God conceals His face due to Israel's neglect of the covenant. Similarly, Buber concludes that the modern concealment is contingent to man's "neglect" of his dialogical relation with God, thereby implying that dialogue is a reconfigured theological structure for "covenant."

According to Buber, contemporary thinking exhibits a dual tendency. On one hand, there is a desire to uphold the notion of God as either a metaphysical or psychological concept.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, there is a simultaneous inclination to dismantle the actuality of God, thereby eroding the authentic relationship with Him.<sup>53</sup> In Buberian terms, as implied above, this amounts to keeping God within the boundaries of an "I-It" relation wherein He is reduced to a concept about which we think and philosophize as an instrumental device to fulfill our intellectual desires, at the price of having the mutual "I-Thou" relationship eclipsed.

Buber suggests that the "first phase" of this eclipse commenced with Spinoza's endeavor to purify "true" religion, which in Spinoza's perspective pertains solely to metaphysical truth, and to separate it from "false" mythic-cultic religion which obscures the essence of "true" religion and contaminates it with superstition and anthropomorphic depictions.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, Buber acknowledges that in contrast to the prevailing "I-It" relation to God in our current state, Spinoza's critique of religion was initially motivated by a deep "intellectual love of God" (*amor Dei intellectualis*), which compelled him to promote a more profound understanding of the divine by giving greater stringency to the biblical prohibition on the worship of idols. According to Buber, in other words, Spinoza aimed to deepen the relationship between man and God, not abolish it. He failed to do so, however, because "he recognized only the supreme aspect of the relation, but not its core."<sup>55</sup> The core being the everyday dialogue—"the divine voice speaking in what befalls man, and man answering in what he does or forbears to do."<sup>56</sup> In another section Buber says: "It is not necessary to know something about God in order really to believe in Him: Many true

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51 See, for example, Duet. 31:17–18; 32:20; Isa. 8:17; 45:15; 57:17; 59:2.

52 He discusses Sartre, Heidegger, and Jung as three different leading examples of this tendency in the twentieth century. See 53–82.

53 Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 12.

54 Spinoza, Benedictus de. *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See author's preface as well as chapters 12–15.

55 Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 12.

56 *Eclipse of God*, 12.

believers know how to talk to God but not about Him.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, Buber contends that Spinoza taught Western metaphysics how to talk *about* God, so that we would stop talking *to* Him.

Deducting the “I–Thou” relation from religion, he argues, set in motion a transformative trajectory in which the “I–It” relation moved to the foreground as the “subject” of religious life, ultimately reducing not only God but the whole idea of faith into a pragmatic question of self-interest.<sup>58</sup> Buber attributes the prevalent “I–It” dominance in all aspects of modern culture, which he famously discussed in “I and Thou,” published in 1923, to this very process in Western philosophy wherein the dialogue with God turned into a monologue of man with himself. This deduction has profound ramifications on the political realm as well, constituting what Buber called a “small politics.”<sup>59</sup>

The metaphor of eclipse implies, of course, that there is still hope for restoring the dialogue, if only what is blocking it were to move—i. e., if the “I” of the “I–It,” a type of subjectivity motivated by self-interest, were to recede and make way for the “I” of the “I–Thou,” a type of subjectivity yearning for mutuality, to come to the fore of human activity. Buber asserts, however, that this restoration is not solely dependent on human choice, because confining the dialogue to human subjectivity would once again limit the encounter with God and reduce Him to an object of natural mechanism. Individuals can foster and sustain hope for the return of the dialogue, but they cannot exert control over its reviving. Buber thus rejects the philosophical stance developed by Heidegger according to which it is solely the lack of compatible intellectual structures which denies this world the “reappearance of the Gods” and sees Heidegger’s approach as perpetuating the problem instead of resolving it. For Buber, man’s choice to re-enter dialogue would still amount to nothing more than a human monologue. God too, for reasons beyond our comprehension, may choose to conceal His face,<sup>60</sup> and failure to understand this point may itself deepen the state of eclipse. “An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself,” he contends.

When, as in this instance, something is taking place between heaven and earth, one misses everything when one insists on discovering within earthly thought the power that unveils the mystery. He who refuses to submit himself to the effective reality of the transcendence as such – our *vis-à-vis* – contributes to the human responsibility for the eclipse.<sup>61</sup>

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57 *Eclipse of God*, 21.

58 *Eclipse of God*, 109.

59 Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 170–71. “Small politics is a monologue of man; great politics is a discourse with the God Who ‘keeps still.’”

60 See, for example, Job. 23:16–17; 34:29. Ps. 13:2; 27:8–9.

61 Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 18.

The tendency of philosophical investigation to unveil the mystery and search for this-worldly solutions in order to overcome it contradicts religion's willingness to submit to the mystery. And conditioning the reappearance of God solely on our spiritual faculties, once again, confines God to man's subjectivity. For Buber neither pertain to a living dialogue with God, and if man wishes to re-ignite the dialogue, he needs to first surrender his tendency to control it; to submit the powers he has rallied in the wake of God's allegedly acclaimed death. Then, and only if God wills it, could there be a new revelation; or in the terms we have employed here, a reunion with God through new theological structures by which the political questions and choices of "this time" will come into grammatical coherence.

In the same way Buber uses biblical hermeneutics to extricate the structure of the prophetic and update it as part of a wider theopolitical dynamic, he also updates the structure of *hester panim* and employs it as a guide for the metaphysically perplexed. His critique of Western metaphysics in *Eclipse of God* thus complements his critique of messianism in *The Prophetic Faith*, collectively representing a compelling illustration of prophetic politics within the context of our current political-theological crisis.

## Conclusions

For Buber, dialogue was not a liberating political paradigm. It was much more than that. It was an encompassing framework for the question on the very essence of the human condition, which Buber sought to apply to all of aspects of life: religion, politics, ethics, aesthetics, education, psychology, and more. It is the "first" philosophy on which all others rely, the anthropological philosophy which seeks to answer the question "What is Man?" in order to resolve humanity's unbearable sense of cosmic homelessness.<sup>62</sup> For our purposes, dialogue should therefore be understood as the reconfigured theological superstructure by virtue of which a coherent political language can be spoken anew. Buber's political ideas on Zionism, bi-nationalism, and anarchism are beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say that the dialogical framework informed a communal politics, a congregation weaved of "I-Thou" relations forming a "We" which in itself engages in a collective dialogue with the Eternal Thou, a dialogue which in itself serves as the sole legitimate beginning point of any politics as such.

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<sup>62</sup> See Buber's incisive history of this question in "What Is Man? (Was ist der Mensch? 1938)," in *Between Man and Man* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002): 140–244.



In his endeavor Buber reconfigured the theological structures of history, prophecy, revelation, concealment, community, and covenant, as well as the praxis of adherence to scripture; being its addressee subject, its “Thou,” and in return reading it not merely as text, but as living *torah*, albeit not in the traditional sense. By undertaking these transformative reinterpretations, he sought to shed new light on the essence of these concepts and their significance in the context of contemporary challenges. As Michael Fishbane observed, Buber was “serving the human spirit in inhuman times” with a biblical hermeneutics that was a “veritable revelation of Revelation.”<sup>63</sup>

Prophetic politics, however, as argued here, is not merely a theoretical reconfiguration of concepts, but also a means for the possibility of a new morally justified and valid political language. If Buber were only to reconfigure these concepts for the sake of solving a philosophical problem this would have been a remarkable achievement in its own right. What makes his project prophetic, however, is that it not only aims to reconfigure the discourse but does so in order to instill Man with the responsibility to actively answer his hour’s call. Buber thus helps us understand the theological structure of prophetic politics, by employing it in his own theological and political activity. He himself was not a prophet, even-though he did cultivate some of the phenomenological traits aforementioned. Nevertheless, he engaged in a prophetic politics; and by doing so contributed to our understanding of how it is structured and how it functions in times of crisis.

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63 Michael Fishbane, “Religious Authenticity and Spiritual Resistance: Martin Buber and Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Martin Buber: His Intellectual and Scholarly Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 227.

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Agata Bielik-Robson

## Between Betrayal and Innovation: Scholem on the Marrano Crisis of Tradition

On the day, the 3rd of August 1657, the four of us  
heard a grand voice clamoring from heaven:

*Hayim! Hayim!*

The testimony of the Polish Frankists<sup>1</sup>

There are domains of [tradition] that are hidden  
under the debris of centuries and lie there  
waiting to be discovered and turned to good use

[...] There is such a thing as a treasure hunt  
within tradition, which creates a living  
relationship to tradition and to which much of  
what is best in current Jewish consciousness is  
indebted, even where it was—and is—expressed  
outside of the framework of orthodoxy.

Gershom Scholem, "Israel and the Diaspora"<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I want to sketch a portrait of Gershom Scholem as a Young Marrano, deeply interested in the theology of the *conversos* as a still living formula of Jewish revelation, which he, in the famous letter to Benjamin from 1935, described as *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*: a "validity without content."<sup>3</sup> I will attempt to show that the Marrano crisis of tradition constitutes a leitmotif of Scholem's whole intellectual career, from his earliest diaries (*Lamentations of Youth*), through his own theological declarations (*Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah*), up to his latest essays and interviews (*Jews and Judaism in Crisis*). In my interpretation, Scholem the Marrano hides behind a mask of the Jewish historian, a mask which during his career in the Hebrew University at Jerusalem and other prominent Israeli cultural institutions became so powerfully dominant that it almost repressed his hidden self, but never extinguished it completely. Despite the deceptive appearances, the secret kernel of his doctrine remained *not* historical: his continuous insistence on the ongoing vitality of the "hidden truth" of the tradition (*Wahrheit*) as opposed

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1 Jacob Frank, *Rozmaite adnotacja, przypadki, czynności i anekdoty pańskie (Various Annotations, Cases, Deeds, and Anecdotes of the Lord)*, ed. Jan Doktor (Płońsk: Tikun, 1992), 55.

2 Quoted in David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 8.

3 *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*, ed. and trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York, NY: Schocken Books 1989), Letter nr 63, 135.

to the overt articulation of the traditional religious form of life (*Tradierbarkeit*) reveals a strong theological agenda that governs—and at the same time subverts—the works of Scholem the Historian from within. As a result of Scholem’s not purely historical approach to the Marrano theology, the Marrano crisis of tradition—seemingly an affair of the past—comes to the fore as an actual phenomenon and raises the issue of the “hidden faith” as the sole “authentic” form of Judaic religiosity, which not only does not betray Jewish tradition, but paradoxically touches its very core. What, therefore, David Biale rightly calls Scholem’s “counter-history” can be regarded as a hybridical outcome of the inner tension between his “treasure hunt,” tracing the gems of the “hidden truth,” and the historicist respect for the continuity of the tradition which could not have survived without “the framework of orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, as I will try to show, this respect for Jewish survival

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4 In his interpretation of Scholem’s historical approach to tradition, David Biale insists on its non-conservative nature, which he derives from Scholem’s early rebellious attitude towards both the culture of the assimilated German Jewry and the ossified nineteenth-century Judaism that lost any appeal to a secular Jew: “Scholem’s counter-history is based on a new understanding of tradition, *quite different from the normal idea that tradition means conservatism* [...] As a rebel against the German-Jewish world in which he was born, he sought a return to the Jewish tradition buried by the rationalist thinkers of the nineteenth century. But unwilling to adopt orthodoxy, he believes that he has found sources within the tradition which could speak even to a secular Jew. We shall find in Scholem’s historiography a persistent quest for a link between the secular world and its religious past. In Scholem’s biography, this quest began in Germany in the early years of the twentieth century.” Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 8 (emphasis added). In her appreciation of Richard Popkin, the great scholar of the birth of modern skepticism out of the Marrano crisis of tradition, Allison Coudert draws a comparison between him and young Scholem by emphasizing a subversive affinity: “Somewhat ironically, skepticism came to his rescue by allowing him (Richard Popkin) to connect with an element from the Jewish past that had been marginalized and denigrated, namely the Marranos [...] Scholem had a similar penchant for delving into uncharted regions. He was convinced that one had to excavate traditional history to get to the truth hidden below the surface, and he discovered the sources of this hidden truth well beyond the borders of orthodoxy [...] Scholem had followed a similar path a generation earlier. He too revolted against both the irreligion of his parents and traditional Judaism, *but instead of being drawn to Marranos, he was attracted to Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah*, or to what the distinguished historian Heinrich Graetz had dismissed as ‘gibberish’ and a ‘book of lies.’ While Popkin described himself as an ‘intellectual anarchist,’ Scholem called himself a ‘religious anarchist,’ but both sought an authentic encounter with Jewish tradition in non-canonical Jewish sources. Through his scholarship, Scholem encountered a new kind of authentic Judaism. He was able to show that what had once been viewed as embarrassing aberrations of Jewish culture, namely mysticism and messianism, were potent elements in shaping Jewish history. In his view Zionism brought an end to apologetics. Those aspects of Judaism once denigrated had to be reevaluated.” Allison P. Coudert, “À Rebours: Richard Popkin’s Contributions to Intellectual History,” in *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin*, eds. Richard A. Watson and James Force (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1988): 18, 21 (emphasis added). While completely agreeing with Coudert, I will none-

throughout history is also a deeply Marrano feature, however paradoxical it may seem: the choice of life (*u-baharta ba-hayim*) as the overruling imperative, trumping the martyrological choice of glorious death, plays a crucial part in the *conversion* theology of living through the times of crisis.<sup>5</sup>

According to Abraham Miguel Cardoso, the Marrano theologian of the Sabbatian movement, the true faith can only be concealed—and Scholem repeats this esoteric truth a few centuries later in 1958's *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah* with the same powerful conviction: "The authentic tradition remains hidden." Scholem expresses the Marrano intuition that the spectral "truth of the tradition" may lie deeper and even at odds with the "chain of the tradition," transmitted from generation to generation through the overt Teaching, by playing on the ambivalence of the Latin verb "*tradere*" (meaning "to pass on," but also "to betray") and thus insisting on the difference between *Tradition* in its "truth" and *Tradierbarkeit* as that which can be transmitted (*tradendum*):

The kabbalist claims that there is a tradition (*Tradition*) of truth which can be handed over (*tradierbar*). This is a very ironic claim since the truth, of which it speaks, is anything but capable of being handed over (*tradierbar*). The truth can become known but not passed on, *for precisely in what can be passed on, the truth is no longer*. The authentic tradition remains hidden; the falling tradition stumbles upon an object and shows its greatness only in the fact that it falls.<sup>6</sup>

This is not as heterodox as it might seem *prima facie*. The potential contrast between the tradition as transmissibility and the tradition as the hidden truth comes to the fore already in the opening sentence of *Pirke Avoth*, the wisdom of the founding fathers of Talmud:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great

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theless claim that the affinity is even deeper than she claims: Scholem, just like Popkin, is also "drawn to Marranos," to which his early work on the Kabbalah well attests.

5 On this see my "God of Montaigne, Spinoza, and Derrida: The Marrano (Crypto)Theology of Survival," *Religions* 14, No. 421 (2023): 1–19.

6 "Der Kabbalist behauptet, es gäbe eine Tradition über die Wahrheit, die tradierbar sei. Eine ironische Behauptung, da ja die Wahrheit, um die es hier geht, alles andere als tradierbar. Sie kann erkannt werden, aber nicht überliefert werden, und gerade das in ihr, was überlieferbar wird, enthält sie nicht mehr. Echte Tradition bleibt verborgen; erst die verfallende Tradition verfällt auf einen Gegenstand und wird im Verfall erst in ihrer Größe sichtbar." Gershom Scholem, "Zehn Unhistorische Sätze über Kabbalah," in *Judaica 3. Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973): 264 (emphasis added).

Assembly. They said three things: *Be deliberate in judgment, raise many students, and make a protective fence for the Torah.*

Scholem makes this contrast explicit, by charging the chain of tradition, conceived as *Tradierbarkeit*-transmissibility, with the role of building a “shell” that would guard the “kernel” as *die Wahrheit* of the tradition and simultaneously guard its disciples from the overexposure to the hidden truth. “The truth can become known but not passed on,” because it cannot be communicated. The revelation establishes a unique, each-time-singular relation between the radical divine transcendence and the equally radical inwardness of the self, which mirrors the former’s mystery in a sort of a concave *tselem*/likeness—and, as such, cannot be translated into the horizontal message handed over by the “chain of tradition” (*shalshelet ha-kabbalah*) in which every singular *tselem* becomes merely a ring sustaining the strength of cultural identity. Yet, at the same time, one cannot rest for ever in the eternal “elsewhere” of the revelatory relation which bypasses the world and endangers the self with mystical annihilation: even if *Tradierbarkeit* distorts the singular truth, one is not allowed to desist from the dialectical work of lessening the betrayal, nonetheless always present in the very act of *tradere*.<sup>7</sup> The truth is most precious, but it is also most dangerous, like an open fire—this is a necessary double bind of every “authentic tradition.” The tradition shows its greatness precisely when it falls; that is, reveals its inner aporia, which means a blocking of the way: it stumbles upon the fiery “object” which is the hidden truth and in this manner shows that it exists precisely as limping, hindered by the kabbalistic antinomian “kernel” that cannot be fully assimilated by the “shell” of the Teaching-*tradendum*. The word “object” (*das Gegenstand*), seemingly strange in the context of the mystical singular encounter between the unique *Ehad* and its equally unique *tselem*, is, in fact, well chosen. The Scholemian “object” stands here for the mysterious “inhabitant of the crypt” which Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok—the psychoanalyst Jewish-Hungarian couple, also using the Zoharic metaphor of the shell and the kernel—will soon discover as the cause of the condition called by them *cryptophoria*: the secret spark surrounded by the shards of the worldly discourse which can never capture the elusive “Thing.”<sup>8</sup> The resisting

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<sup>7</sup> *L'ailleurs* or *elsewhere* is the term by which Michel de Certeau calls the nowhereland of the sixteenth-century Marrano mystics: John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One – The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22. Here I will claim that de Certeau’s description fits also Scholem’s mystical approach to Judaism conceived by him as “Jewish Gnosis.”

<sup>8</sup> See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). On the relation between the Marrano form of Ju-



“counter-object” (*Gegen-stand*) as *das Ding*, which defies symbolic articulation, is thus borne by the tradition which then inevitably betrays its “object,” on which it discursively focuses: the radiant excess of the truth—*das strenge Licht des Kanonischen*, which emanates from the crypt in which “the Thing” resides—evades all failing attempts to represent it. Thus, already Judaism is cryptophoric—and *marranism*, the condition of the doubly hidden truth, which is carried over in secrecy, even more so: the hidden secret can be never fully articulated by the overt teaching.

## Argumentum ex Silentio

But if the authentic tradition must remain hidden, then the only way to keep it that way is *silence*. Not any “uncharacteristic silence,” as Harold Bloom perceptively notices in his essay on Scholem the Non-Historian, but a very specific one which has only one equivalent-precursor: the Marrano *silenzio*.<sup>9</sup> Scholem’s silence is indeed anything but “uncharacteristic”: for him, it is a *via negativa* through which tradition must pass in order to renew itself. The silence, which points to the “hidden truth,” designates a crisis in the Höderlinian antinomian understanding of the term; that is, the point of risky intersection between *das Gefährlichste* and *das Rettende*, the “highest danger,” in which the tradition “falls,” by approaching destruction in a total oblivion, and the “chance of salvation” when it raises again as a phoenix from the ashes: a “fine line between religion and nihilism.”<sup>10</sup> Himself a

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daim and cryptophoria, see my “Derrida’s Elsewhere: The Cryptic Life of the Marrano Self,” in *The Marrano Way: Between Betrayal and Innovation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021): 231–63.

<sup>9</sup> According to Bloom, “Gershom Scholem, masking truly as a historical scholar, was the hidden theologian of Jewish Gnosis for our time, even as Freud unknowingly was its speculative psychologist and Kafka its poet.” Harold Bloom, “Scholem: Unhistorical or Jewish Gnosticism,” in *The Strong Light of the Canonical: Kafka, Freud and Scholem as Revisionists of Jewish Culture and Thought* (New York, NY: City College Papers, No. 20, 1987): 55. On this, compare Scholem himself: “Gnosis, one of the last great manifestations of myth in religious thinking, conceived at least in part as a reaction against the Jewish conquerors of myth, gave the Jewish mystics their language [...] the old God whom Kabbalistic gnosis opposed to the God of the philosophers proves, when experienced in all His living richness, to be an even older and archaic one.” Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 98, 119. For Scholem, the most powerful expression of such return is “the Lurianic gnosis” (*On the Kabbalah*, 114), which combined the most archaic vision of the Jewish deity with the most modern experience of universal displacement, exile and the redemptive stake of history.

<sup>10</sup> Scholem, “Zehn Unhistorische Sätze,” 271.

“product of the purgatory of assimilation and secularization,”<sup>11</sup> Scholem attempts to purge and thus renew the tradition by putting it to the same ordeal: he will try to find the “hidden truth,” which silently resists the transmission chain of “what can be handed over,” in the near-death experience of the disappearing *tradendum* of traditional Judaism. For, if the relation between the truth and the transmission is as aporetic as he suggests in his kabbalistic thesis, then the “sickening of the tradition” conceived as *Tradierbarkeit* makes it possible to reveal “what cannot be passed on,” but what this tradition still contains as its non-transmittable kernel.<sup>12</sup>

But already in his diaries from 1918, when he is only 21, Scholem obliquely refers to the “Marrano experience” in which he himself participates as a member of the half-assimilated “tormented Jewry.” He is well aware that the condition of the

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11 As Paul Mendes-Flohr aptly characterizes both Scholem and Benjamin in “The Spiritual Quest of the Philologist,” in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 14. In his late memoirs, Scholem describes his childhood in a manner that could just as well form a portrait of the life of the Iberian conversos after the age of Inquisition, when the pressure to hide eased and gave way to a mixture of rituals, often with an ironic twist—as in this pretty hilarious anecdote: “In many ways the life-style of the assimilated Jews with whom I grew up was a confused jumble. For example, the picture of Theodor Herzl that hung in my room in Berlin and München for many years came into my possession in a strange way. Since the days of my grandparents, when this confusion had started, Christmas was celebrated in our family—with roast goose or hare, a decorated Christmas tree which my mother bought at the market by Saint Peter’s Church, and the big distribution of presents from servants, relatives, and friends [...] An aunt who played the piano treated our cook and servant girl with ‘Silent Night, Holy Night.’ Naturally, as a child that made sense to me, and the last time I participated in it was in 1911, when I had just begun to study Hebrew. Under the Christmas tree there was the Herzl picture in a black frame, and my mother said: ‘We selected this picture for you because you are so interested in Zionism.’ From then on I left the house at Christmastime.” Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1988), 28. Scholem’s peculiar mystical Zionism was thus indeed born in a “strange way”: in a vacuum created by the typically Marrano “confused jumble” of two religions, Judaism and Christianity, both “sickened” and no longer able to speak to a youngster who, as he himself admits, had to emigrate internally, into his own *elsewhere*, in order to find a fresh spiritual energy.

12 The secret hope for the renewal of the Jewish tradition *ex nihilo* of its “sickened” exilic form, harbored by young Scholem, was also noticed by Amir Engel, who, while commenting on Scholem’s diary entries dating as early as 1914, writes that he “yearned for the transformation of exilic culture into a source from which social harmony, spiritual renewal, and political autonomy might spring.” Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 54. The term “sickened tradition” derives from Benjamin’s interpretation of Franz Kafka, as well as the division between the truth and the *tradendum*/doctrine: “Kafka’s work represents a sickening of tradition.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 326. But while Benjamin locates the possibility of the renewal in the haggadic element of pure transmissibility, Scholem insists on sticking to the truth of the tradition at the cost of its transmission.

Iberian *conversos* is not exactly the same as in the case of the German Jews who were not forced to adopt the elements of the German Protestant culture under extreme duress. Yet, he senses a deep affinity between their *semitismo atormentado*<sup>13</sup> and his own disorientation of living in a “confused jumble” of two religions, Judaism and Christianity, in which they both became reduced to empty shells. While sketching an imaginary portrait of an ideal adept of the Jewish tradition as the Zionist youth “who could be silent in Hebrew,” *wer Hebräisch schweigen kann*, he writes:

Hebrew must be the superlative of the Teaching’s silence. The person able to be silent in Hebrew surely partakes in the quiet life of youth. There is no one among us who can do this. We cannot use our existence as an argument precisely because silence, or more accurately stillness (*die Stille*), is the step in which *a life can become an argument*.<sup>14</sup>

If one were to interpret this fragment as a Marrano allusion, the silence and the stillness would refer here to the famous *silenzio* of the Iberian *conversos*, which designates the Marrano secret crypto-Judaism, but also an *amidah*: a silent prayer preserved and transformed in the new-Christian context as “being silent in Hebrew” that contemplates the divine mysteries without the mediation of treacherous words that belong to the alien symbolic forms imposed by force—precisely as in the case of the Marrano mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.<sup>15</sup> This heavy eloquent silence wandered also into the teachings of the Polish Frankists who spoke about the “burden of silence” (*m’as duma*). But what makes Scholem’s remark truly intriguing is the link between *silenzio* and *life*: a mysterious

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<sup>13</sup> See Americo Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History*, trans. E.L. King (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 565.

<sup>14</sup> Entry from 1 April 1918 in Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 219. For the original, see Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923. 2 Halbband 1917–1923* (Frankfurt: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000), 164 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> According to Matt Goldish, “the silent inner prayer of the *Alumbrados dexados* reflected a common attitude among crypto-Jewish *conversos*. In Judaism the *Amidah* prayer is of precisely this silent, contemplative type; but silence had more special meanings for *conversos*. Once Jews converted, they no longer had the freedom to express out loud Jewish views they might still have held.” Matt D. Goldish, “Patterns in Converso Messianism,” in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture: Jewish Messianism in the Early Modern World*, eds. Matt D. Goldish and Richard H. Popkin (The Hague: Kluwer Academic, 2001): 51. In terms of Leo Strauss: the meaningful silence would be one of the strategies of articulation undertaken in the context of persecution. Traditionally, however, silence is an apophatic means of approaching an ineffable God, as in Psalm 65: “Unto Thee, silence alone is fitting praise.” In Scholem, these two silences combine and permeate one another.

connection in which “life can become an argument.” This line is a polemical cry-to-quote from Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*, where he says: “That lies should be necessary to life is part and parcel of the terrible and questionable character of life [...] Life is no argument.”<sup>16</sup> According to Nietzsche, the fact that we live and want to live on does not magically transform all the lies we applied to make the world livable into a truth. But, really—does it not? On Scholem’s account, the Zionist youngster, who embraces Zionism as the only movement capable to renew Judaism, should be able to do precisely that: turn life into an argument which would speak for the *verification* of all the ruses used by life in order to secure a further survival. Life made into argument would thus be a positive result of an implication which has a power to *verify*—literally, make true—even the falsest of premises: whatever cunning, evasion, or ruse life resorts to would become true if it results in the “blessing of more life.” Would it be far-fetched to treat it as an oblique hint to the Marrano condition of someone forced to lie, perjure, and betray in order to survive? Perhaps not at all. Perhaps young Scholem, who very early on senses the affinity between the seventeenth-century *converso* experience of the Iberian Peninsula and the nineteenth-century assimilation of German Jewry, secretly identifies with a metaphorical Marrano: he lives, he had survived, he had broken with the tradition which he preserves only in *silenzio*, “being silent in Hebrew,” yet he refuses to feel guilty and tormented about it, even if he also cautiously admits that no one he knows is actually capable of such a daring act of liberation. In his dream, his own life becomes an argument—and this “step” inaugurates an *inversion*: from the tragic predicament of the victims of coercion to the messianic hope of the “rejected stones,” promising a radical and innovative reversal of perspective. Perhaps Scholem suggests here that the Marranos, for whom life as such indeed became a serious argument, broke with the overt tradition in order to survive—yet did not break with the “truth of the tradition” and its promise of more life, which can only stay “hidden,” *verborgen*, and thus kept in silence. “Life can become an argument” chimes here with the divine imperative, *u-baharta ba-hayim*—“Choose life!” (Deut 30:18)—the only open articulation of the Teaching that would allude to the secret truth and thus trump *every* possible choice of death, including also the glorious martyrological death which tradition affirmed

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<sup>16</sup> See the aphorism no. 121 of *Gay Science*, titled “Life no Argument,” where Nietzsche dismisses the livable arrangement of the world as nothing but a necessary vital lie: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 180.

as the right and privileged form of faithfulness. *Silenzio*, therefore, marks the break with tradition as *Tradierbarkeit*, which would encourage *kiddush ha-Shem*, but keeps nonetheless faithful to the tradition as its hidden truth, *Wahrheit*, which came to the fore only once, in God's powerful commandment to choose life. Marranos, choosing to live on, would merely break free from the "chain of tradition" (*shalsholet ha-kabbalah*), unfetter themselves from the obligation to transmit the Teaching overtly in the form of the halakhic law—but would not break with the secret core of this Teaching, which they in fact continued in "the superlative of the Teaching's silence." Against Nietzsche's debunking of life as a web of lies, Scholem would thus claim that *the authentic hidden Jewish tradition chooses life as the strongest possible argument*: stronger than death, either inflicted or honorable. Life as survival, finding expression in the *auf Hebräisch Schweigen*—a silent prayer worshipping God in the desert of exile<sup>17</sup>—would be the secret treasure as well as the kernel of Judaism, the secret of its messianic revelation. And yet, Scholem insists that "there is no one among us who can do this": the tragic sense of guilt prevails (as indeed was the case with most of the Spanish Marranos and their *semitismo atormentado*), and with it a mythic "net of guilt," in which all life is made a priori guilty, as Benjamin will soon reveal in his 1922 essay *Critique of Violence*, where it is precisely *Schuldzusammenhang* that prevents life from becoming an argument and disables the messianic inversion. Yet, despite all Scholem's doubts and fears, it is the "quiet life of the youth" which has not yet fallen under the yoke of the "net of guilt," as it takes life for granted and does not feel guilty about being alive, that constitutes the only chance for the tradition to renew itself in the repeated revelation of its hidden truth.

In the background of Scholem's remarks of the "quiet life of the youth," there lurks another essay of Walter Benjamin, "Life of the Students," published in 1915 in *Die Neue Merkur*, to which Benjamin's younger colleague adds a theological Zionist gloss.<sup>18</sup> Benjamin too intends to turn life into an argument in a manner that would

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17 Compare Exodus 7:16: "Then say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.'" "

18 In fact, the very concept of the silent youth derives from an even earlier text of Benjamin, "Youth Was Silent" ("Die Jugend Schwieg"), which was published under the pseudonym "Ardor" in *Die Aktion*, on 18 October 1913 on the occasion of the Youth Congress: "This Youth Congress proves it: only a few understand the meaning of the word 'youth.' *That from youth alone radiates new spirit, the spirit* [...] Here everything was still to be done. And here should be revealed what is youthful: indignation at the parental home that dulls the mind, indignation at the school that punishes the spirit. Youth was silent.—It has not yet had the intuition before which the great age-complex breaks down. That mighty ideology: experience-maturity-reason-the good will of adults—it was not perceived at the Youth Congress and was not overthrown [...] This youth has not yet found the enemy, the born enemy it must hate." Walter Benjamin, *Early Writings 1910–1917*,

allow the bright young ones to follow their vitalistic instinct without falling into the snares of the fascist *Wandervögel*, all too eager to capture and economize the energy of the German youth. Composed in 1914, when Benjamin was still a president of the radical group called *Freie Studentenschaft*, this essay contains in a nutshell the antinomian doctrine of life which rebels against repressive distortion and presses towards the future, when it will be able to emerge in an “undistorted form” at last. According to the antinomian logic, however, this undistorted form appears here and now, in the condition of life distortion assumed as a norm, as twisted and perverse: as “the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas and products of the creative mind.”<sup>19</sup> Only the youth can carry such laughable doctrine and eventually “succeed in liberating the future from the deformed existence in the womb of the present” (ibid., 46). The living tradition, however, does not suppress the challenge raised by the youth, but allows it as a test of its “spiritual value”:

There is a very simple and reliable criterion by which to test the spiritual value of a community. It is to ask: Does it allow all of an individual’s efforts to be expressed? Is the whole human being committed to it an indispensable to it? (ibid., 39)

In his 1918 entry, Scholem extrapolates the issues raised by Benjamin on the life of the Zionist youth confronted with the “sickened” Jewish tradition. For Benjamin, life is “a total commitment or nothing at all” (ibid., 40), but within the university (for Scholem, within what he experiences as Judaism of his day) “the most important thing of all—the life that would be willing to dedicate itself to reconstruction—is excluded” (ibid., 41). Benjamin’s goal, therefore, is to enable the German students “to step forward as the champions of life at its best” (ibid., 41), where this “life at its best” is also “a life more deeply conceived” (ibid., 43), including the “creative life of the mind” (ibid., 42), setting itself wholeheartedly to the task of regeneration. The life of the students either serves the goal of a total renewal—of the teaching, learning, and the tradition for the sake of life—or gets completely wasted, and then dies in the “vocational training” (ibid., 38) or what Scholem later on will call in one of his letters, a “professorial death” (*der Tod in der Professur*).<sup>20</sup>

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trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 136 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>20</sup> See Scholem’s letter to Salman Schocken, from 27 October 1937, explaining his devotion to the historical study of the Kabbalah: “The mountain itself—the things themselves—do not need a key at all: it is the misty wall of history (*Historie*) that surrounds it and must be penetrated. To penetrate it—that is the task I have set for myself. Would I remain stuck in the mist, suffering a professorial

Although Scholem (as well as Benjamin) will eventually get disillusioned with the Youth Movement, mostly because of its enthusiastic embracement of the First World War, in 1918 he still partakes in the main tenets of his older friend's "metaphysics of youth." Benjamin's essay from 1913, bearing that very title, is a visionary text offering a metaphysical backing for his apology of the silently subversive "life of the students." As Yotam Hotam convincingly shows in his beautiful analysis of the youth motif in early Benjamin, *Jugend* stands for him as a universal cure for the crisis of the Western tradition: rooted in the immortal pure life, youth resists joining the culture based on the compromise with the status quo. Free from the "disgrace of adaptation" (as later on Adorno will call the symbolic arrangement of traditions complying with the reality principle<sup>21</sup>), the youth stands opposed to all doctrines which it perceives as stifling and mortifying. Full of energy, yet mute, youth confronts the tradition, full of words, yet drained and "sickened." At this early moment of his thought, Benjamin cannot yet see the dialectical way out of this dualism (which, as we shall see in a moment, will be Scholem's solution). Silent pure life of the young, resisting the process of initiation, can only defy the symbolic structure of the tradition and thus make visible the chronic crisis of the latter—without, however, changing and renewing it from within. Positioning himself as a "young genius" who cannot immerse himself in any symbolic heritage to carry on their work, Benjamin takes a step back into the endless stream of life "without form or vessel": "In despair, he thus recalls his childhood. In those

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death, so to speak?" Quoted in Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 32. This doubt seems to have overshadowed the whole of Scholem's career, coupled with his ever deepening disenchantment with Zionism and a sense of failure in bringing about a living truth of Judaism out of the deadened shell of the doctrine. Here, however, I do not focus on Scholem's disillusionment and its consequences in his changing attitude towards Zionism and the adoption of a more traditionalist view of Judaism: my aim is to analyze his early "great expectations" that eventually led to his equally great disenchantment and the haunting suspicion that he indeed sustained a "professorial death." The theme of the disenchantment so deep that it often takes suicidal tones reverberates through all Scholem's poems, most of all the 1943 piece called "Vae Victis—Or, Death in the Professoriate" and dedicated to Hans Jonas, a "gnostic colleague," which warns him of "leaping into the abyss," because the kabbalistic "fullness of time [...] remains foreign, beyond our scope": "Time transformed casts us a fearsome glance,/For it is unwilling to turn back again./Gone, the vision of salvation through pain,/What remains, the luck we tossed away." Gershom Scholem, *Greetings from Angelus: Poems*, ed. Steven M. Wasserstrom, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York, NY: Archipelago Books, 2017), 146. Similar despair comes to the fore in his 1947 "Media In Vita," a bitter testimony of the lost youthful dreams in the sobering middle of life: "I have lost the faith that brought me to this place/And in the wake of this forsaking, night is my surrounding space" (*Greetings from Angelus*, 98).

21 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 111.

days there was time without end and an 'I' without death."<sup>22</sup> A few years later, in "Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*," he will extoll the virtue of this time of life without death as immortal and unforgettable: a new unconditional of late modern metaphysics as well as "new religion."<sup>23</sup>

Immortal life is unforgettable; that is the sign by which we recognize it. It is the life that is not to be forgotten, even though it has no monument or memorial, or perhaps even any testimony. It simply cannot be forgotten. Such life remains unforgettable even though without form or vessel [...] The pure word for life in its immortality is 'youth.'<sup>24</sup>

The ultimate purpose of the confrontation is the shattering of the symbolic forms of tradition, always threatening to repress the living energy of the youth. According to Hotam, the scheme of such creative destruction is delivered to Benjamin by Meister Eckhart, whose mystical writings were widely read at that time thanks to Büttner's and Landauer's translations: the eternally young part of the soul, called the Son, is simultaneously the spirit and the spark of the highest life of Jesus Christ, which defies the tradition of the Father. Eckhart thus comments on the episode from the gospels in which Jesus awakens the dead youngster, by saying: "Young man, I tell you, stand up!" (*Adolescens, tibi dico: surge!* Luke 7:14):

Why did he say 'young man'? [...] 'Young man': *All the powers that belong to the soul do not age* [...] Therefore, 'Young Man.' The masters call 'young' that which is close to its beginning. In the intellect man is ever young [...] [...] Now he says, 'Young man, arise.' What does it mean 'arise'? 'Arise' from the work, and let the soul 'arise' in herself!<sup>25</sup>

"Arise from the work" is an injunction to sever the ties with the external world and the tasks set by the tradition, and let the soul fortify herself in silence and separation: "For Eckhart, the being mute (*ohne Laut*) [...] characterizes the 'original experience' (*ursprüngliche Erfahrung*) beyond understanding."<sup>26</sup> It is precisely this *Stille*, signaling the eternally young Sonship versus the aging and "sickening" traditions of the Fathers, which will reverberate in the "quiet life of students" and in the Scholemian highest art of *auf Hebräisch Schweigen*, adopting the Eckhartian-Benjaminian scheme for the purposes of mystical Zionism. According to Hotam, Benjamin's "metaphysics of youth" modernizes the Eckhartian Christian Gnosis,

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22 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 11.

23 *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 133.

24 *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 80.

25 Yotam Hotam, "Eternal, Transcendent, and Divine: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Youth," *Sophia* 58 (2019), 183.

26 Hotam, 187.



by embarking on “the mission of the ‘new religion,’ in which ‘the spirit of youth will awaken in all,’ and as the mystical opening up of ‘a spiritual reality’”<sup>27</sup>—and something similar occurs in Scholem’s appropriation of this motif, which, in a typically Marrano manner, utilizes this heterodox Christian trope for the sake of the rejuvenation of Judaism: he too embarks on the mission of creating a new religion out of the sources of Judaism, which he will then, oblivious to numerous critiques, stubbornly call a “Jewish Gnosis.” And although later on, in his *Story of a Friendship*, devoted to Walter Benjamin, he will offer a dismissive hindsight about Benjamin’s early writings—“Nor did Benjamin’s own essays from those years appeal to me”<sup>28</sup>—the 1918 entry from his diary brings a different testimony.

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27 Hotam, 188.

28 “It was normal enough that the sons of assimilated families should dedicate themselves to the German Free Students’ Association, the Youth Movement, and literary ambitions. But that such a son should devote himself passionately to the study of the Talmud even though he did not come from an Orthodox family, and should seek a way to Jewish substance and its historical development, was very unusual even among the Zionists, whose numbers in those years were anything but small. When Benjamin was devoting himself to the Youth Movement, I already had begun these studies. The first time I visited him, I had decided that week to edit a journal called *Die blaue Brille* together with my childhood friend Erich Brauer, who was a graphic artist at the time. This journal, of which three issues appeared, was to represent the opposition of radical Zionist youth to the war and to the Zionist circles that had fallen prey to the psychosis of war. On my first visit Benjamin had given me the first nine issues of *Der Anfang*. I had seen some of them in 1914 at a fellow student’s place; now I read them through carefully, but I was not impressed. *Nor did Benjamin’s own essays from those years appeal to me.*” Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 10 (emphasis added). This, however, may be a retrospective distortion resulting from Scholem’s utter disappointment not only with the enthusiasts of the war, but also with Zionism, which abandoned its mystical quest and became a simple political movement. In his introduction to the later edition of Scholem’s book, Lee Sigel quotes an excerpt from his 1931 letter to Benjamin where Scholem bitterly complains: “Zionism disregarded the night and shifted the procreation that ought to have meant everything to it to a world market where there was too much sunlight and the covetousness of the living degenerated into a prostitution of the last remnants of our youth.” Lee Sigel, “Introduction,” in *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY: New York Review Classics, 2003): xii. And then Sigel comments: “The last remnants of our youth”; ‘the productivity of one who is going down and knows it’—including this 1931 letter in his 1975 memoir, Scholem has finally assimilated the beleaguered Benjamin to the struggling Zionism that he sees as the embodiment of all their youthful ideals. He has fused ‘the religious-mystical quest for a regeneration of Judaism’ that he sought in Eretz Israel with the quest to redeem his obsessively secretive friend from history’s black hole, and from posterity’s sunny deformations. If he can regenerate his friend by recovering, through memory, his friend’s religious longings, then he can *revive the living truth of Judaism*” (“Introduction,” emphasis added). It is also worth noticing that “cowardice of the living,” chiming closely with Scholem’s “covetousness of the living,”

But the later dismissal may also signal an important difference between Benjamin's and Scholem's use of the motif of the youth: while in Benjamin the idea of spiritual rejuvenation is based on the Gnostic-dualistic antagonism between eternal life "without vessels" and the symbolic forms of the tradition, for Scholem it will be based on the dialectical tension between the two. Scholem is not interested in a "new religion" of the inner spark of life; he wants to *renew* what already exists: the tradition of Judaism. Yet, in order to renew Judaism thoroughly, he must take a dialectical position which will be simultaneously internal—the one who "devoted himself passionately to the study of the Talmud even though he did not come from an Orthodox family"—and external, capable of confronting and defying the "Jewish substance" from the outside: the one who is alive, here and now, and can turn his life into a winning argument. On the one hand, therefore, the argument from life comes to him from Benjamin's modern revision of Eckhart's notion of the eternal youth as "a pure, uncontaminated, not-of-this world, original, creating being [...] a being truly transcendent to the extent that it contains no substance that could be captured by form, or by any articulation [...] eternal only in being non-temporal; existing in its non-existence."<sup>29</sup> On the other, however, it also comes to him from the Marrano *argumentum ex silentio*: the persistent survival of those both included in and banned from the Judaic tradition, whose life also remains "without form or vessel." According to our portrait of Scholem as a Young Marrano, the power of renewal—his mad hubristic claim to be able to rejuvenate the sickened "Jewish substance"—would come from these two sources, seemingly very different, yet united in their focus on the importance of *being and staying alive*. In the Eckhartian-Benjaminian "metaphysics of youth," it is the most extraordinary "immortal life" that exists only in its non-existence. In the Marrano *silenzio*, it is the most ordinary life as survival which can also be said to exist in its non-existence, because it fell out of the grip of all traditions. But whether arriving from above as the eternal spark of *pneuma* or from below as the Marrano enigma of survival without the traditional form, whether ineffable or simply mute, they share the same ambivalent inside/outside position towards the symbolic systems of articulation, which Scholem will soon assume in his dialectical quest for the revival of Judaism.<sup>30</sup>

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is the term Benjamin uses in his "Metaphysics of Youth" in a similar context. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Hotam, "Eternal, Transcendent, and Divine," 189.

<sup>30</sup> The quiet life of youth is also a secret force of Harold Bloom's poetic agon: this association is, in fact, less loose than one may think, since Bloom knew Scholem and often dwelled on his peculiar psychology. Akin to Scholem's dialectical concept of Jewish Gnosis, it translates its main tension—the confrontation between the silent life of a young ephebe and the "sea of words" created by the

In his essay on lament, composed in a similar time, Scholem touches on this ambivalence while discussing the oscillation between silence and muteness: the two stages of inarticulation into which *kinah* falls after it disintegrates language. The subject of lamentation—in this particular case, Job—explodes the symbolic system from within, by turning words into cries of pain, and when he eventually falls silent, he finds himself in the state without any means of linguistic expression. It may be just a pained muteness in which the subject regressed the language—via the Hegelian path—back to the “cry of the dying animal.”<sup>31</sup> But it also may be a silence vibrant and pregnant with an intimation of *another* language—and *another* revelation, growing from below out of the suffering of living creatures, unknown to the Creator himself. It is the latter silence, hidden in the folds of muteness (*Verstummen*) which Scholem calls *unfallen*, in an oblique reference to the Eckhartian-Benjaminian pneumatic spark *ohne Laut*. Following Benjamin’s praise of the silent prayer in *Metaphysics of Youth*—“The speaking spirit is more silent than the listener, just as the praying man is more silent than God”<sup>32</sup>—Scholem also insists on the Benjaminian “greatness of the eternal silence” (*ibid.*, 7) as free of sin:

So long as the inviolability of silence is not threatened, men and things will continue to lament, and precisely this constitutes the grounds of our hope for the restitution of language, of reconciliation: for, indeed, it was language that suffered the fall into sin, not silence.<sup>33</sup>

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powerful precursors of the tradition—into a universal idiom of literary inheritance. The six ratios of the agon depict the stages of the complex dialectics between two opposed forces—the living adept’s *argumentum ex silentio* (his mute “I am alive”) versus the dead textual *corpus* of the tradition—the result of which is an acquisition of a new *voice*: a living spoken word that will once again be able to enliven and animate the deadened (or “sickened”) body of the symbolic vessels. Also, in “Metaphysics of Youth,” Benjamin speaks about “the voice of the spirit” as the dialectical outcome of the *Auseinandersetzung* between youth’s silence and the repressive symbolic forms of the tradition. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 4. On the Jewish dimension of Bloom’s theory of poetry as a dialectics of life and tradition, see my *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Hegel’s famous quote from his Jena writings, recently popularized by Giorgio Agamben: “Language is born out of the cry of the dying animal.” Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 88.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 8.

<sup>33</sup> “Solange die Unantastbarkeit des Schweigens nicht gefährdet ist, so lange werden Menschen und Dinge klagen, denn eben dies macht ja den Grund unserer Hoffnung auf Restitution des Sprache, auf Versöhnung aus: dass zwar die Sprache den Sündenfall erlitten hat, das Schweigen aber nicht.” Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 133.

The silence, therefore, may be the mute sign of reduction to the most oppressive condition of material existence, “lower than dust” and unworthy of symbolic articulation: the most despised sheer survival of the suffering creature that had survived its own death. But it may also be the matrix of defiance in which the silence will attack the hitherto existing symbolic system in order to renew it:

And so it is answered by a revelation which is not canonical, for its form is the form of the question. But this is the revelation that saves.<sup>34</sup>

Oscillating between defeat and defiance, *die Stille* locates itself at the “zero point of tradition” and the “nothingness of revelation” which keeps its validity (*Geltung*), but loses all meaning and content (*Bedeutung*): it marks its crisis, but also points to a chance of its renewal. This is what, in his diaries, Scholem calls *die Revolution des Schweigens*, the revolution of silence.<sup>35</sup> It is precisely in connection with his essay on the “Hebrew *kinah*” that Scholem notes in the diary on 24 March 1918, adding a yet another gloss to his concept of “being silent in Hebrew”:

The Zionist life must be very silent. It has to be guided by a power that, metaphysically speaking, gives the Zionist a quiet language [...] The highest task of the metaphysics of language is to recognize two polarities as identical: silence as a source of language, and Revelation as the source of language.<sup>36</sup>

The manner in which Scholem locates revelation in silence—in the wordless resonance of *das Erscheinende*—once again brings into mind the Marrano theme. While analyzing Hayim Vital’s discussion on the *conversos*, Shaul Magid draws an astounding conclusion: “They [*conversos*] were like the *erev rav* who only

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<sup>34</sup> “So entspricht dem eine Offenbarung, die nicht kanonisch ist, deren Setzung der Frage ist. Und diese Offenbarung ist heilend.” *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 378.

<sup>35</sup> *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, 128. Scholem sent his essay on *kinah/Klage* to his friend to review and impatiently awaited the reply which eventually came, but not directly. His thesis about the unfallen character of silence soon found a resonance in Benjamin’s investment in the tragic *Schweigen*, which for him resounds with clearer messianic overtones than any explicit messianic prophecy. In Benjamin, “the speechless contest of the agon” constitutes the true element of the first anti-mythic messianic struggle, “the decisive confrontation with the demonic world-order.” More so than prophetic speeches, tragic silence harbors in itself a pure, still, non-intentional potentiality of a future messianic word, absolutely singular, sublime, and spectral in its uncontaminated non-actuality, in its vibrant and pregnant *noch-nicht*: “Tragic silence, far more than tragic pathos, became the storehouse of an experience of the sublimity of linguistic expression.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 107, 109.

<sup>36</sup> Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth*, 216–17.

heard God's voice but not his words."<sup>37</sup> This is probably the best approximation of the enigmatic phrase *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, with which Scholem describes his own experience of the "nothingness of revelation." Young Gershom—a "stranger" and a "convert" at once—indeed champions what Magid calls "another kind of faith,"<sup>38</sup> which insists on the apophatic *Stille* of the kernel that reveals itself without words. When the "proper" Israelites hear *devarim*/commands, the *erev rav* sees the voice without hearing anything: pure *das Erscheinende* as thunderous "silence in Hebrew" or the "superlative of the Teaching." Scholem's *Nichts der Offenbarung*, therefore, is not privative, deficient, or empty in comparison to the supposed fullness of revelation. His position has nothing in common with Vital's forgiving apology of the *conversos* who, mercifully likened to *erev rav*—the mixed multitude which nonetheless was lucky to witness revelation—are potentially welcome back to the folds of Judaism. What Scholem has in mind at the heights of his vertiginous hubris—oscillating between rare moments of euphoria and more often suicidal despair, his constant "lamentation of youth"—is a total messianic reversal where it is precisely *another kind of faith* that proposes itself as more faithful to the original revelation and which Scholem will soon call "Jewish Gnosis": a very special kind of *da'at* whose gematric value happens to be the same as *erev rav*—400. His new name—*Gershom Scholem*—does not mean for him a meek "greet and welcome me as a returning Jew," but rather: take me as a *ger* with my *strange* vision of revelation which is not yours, because you only heard the voice uttering laws, whereas I saw it: I saw its sublime depths, its unfathomable silent life and its "quiet language." If I, the descendent of *erev rav*, heard anything, it was not the law, but always only and primarily: *choose life!* Hence, it is the only commandment of my other faith, its highest argument. And if *sholem* means a "peace" and "wholeness"—or, in theological terms, *restitutio in integrum*—it also means an activity of setting things right, healing, rejuvenating. I, the universal stranger, belonging neither here nor there, return from my mystical exile into *elsewhere* to disrupt the false wholeness of Judaism as *Lebensform* and make things whole again on my

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37 Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 103. As Paweł Maciejko demonstrates in his magisterial work devoted to the history of the Polish Frankists—just like the Spanish *conversos*, Jewish converts to Catholicism—the doctrine of *erev rav* was officially adopted by the Sabbatians who saw themselves as the mixed multitude living at the outskirts and in the *shadow* of the proper *am Israel*: "the Sabbatians were descendants of the *erev rav*: they were ostensibly Jewish but, in fact, did not belong to the people of Israel." Paweł Maciejko, *Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755–1816* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2011), 61.

38 Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash*, 103.

own terms, by renewing the language of revelation. What, therefore, Agamben calls “the zero point of tradition”—the meaningless nadir of modernity in which the non-symbolic animal life (*zoe*) substitutes for the cultured life formed by the symbolic means of traditions (*bios*)<sup>39</sup>—is not at all a *zero* for Scholem: if anything, it is rather an *infinity*, equally apophatic, but for completely different reasons. It is, in Benjamin’s formulation, a reserve of infinite energy which is needed to fulfil the project of mystical Zionism.

According to Yotam Hotam, the scheme of such renewal “is not exclusive to Benjamin” (and thus, a fortiori, to Scholem):

Adolf von Harnack’s Marcion makes, for example, an analogous case. For Harnack, Marcion was the true disciple of Paul in that he introduced a type of radical dualism that breaks with the Pauline tradition. Here, *a specific break with a theological tradition represents a pure theological formulation of that tradition* [...] Doing so, however, denotes a performance of consistency with this tradition’s original message (that of a break with a tradition) [...] *the going to the limits of a religious message, which takes an original doctrine so seriously as to break with it altogether*.<sup>40</sup>

As we have seen, Scholem copies this antinomian maneuver in his *Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah*, but with a significant modification which replaces Gnostic dualism with dialectics: to be faithful to the truth of the tradition requires a break with the tradition as *tradendum*—precisely in response to the crisis of the latter. Just as Marcion responds to the crisis of the Pauline doctrine, ambivalently suspended between acknowledgment and rejection of the Jewish contribution to the formation of Christianity, by severing the link with the Hebrew Bible; and just as Harnack responds to the crisis of the Protestant-Hegelian doctrine, marred by the compromises with the material world, by demanding a radical liberation of the Christian Spirit, so does Sabbatai Sevi respond to the crisis of the halakhic Judaism, by turning Jewish faith into an antinomian messianic anticipation of the life free from the yoke of law. And so does Scholem, a few centuries later, repeat this gesture, by attempting to renew the Judaic tradition, too old and too tired to go on, by reinventing it as an esoteric *torat hayim*, the teaching of life as the highest *da’at*. Yet, this is a very different response to the neo-Gnostic spirit of Harnack’s Marcionism than in Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, or Hans Jonas, for whom Judaism could only be defended as an anti-Gnostic religion, based on the univocal

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<sup>39</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>40</sup> Hotam, “Eternal, Transcendent, and Divine,” 190 (emphasis added).

praise of the God of Creation.<sup>41</sup> For Scholem, Judaism is Gnostic to a tee, especially in its suppressed mythic dimension, but this “Jewish Gnosis,” which for him took its most mature form in the Lurianic kabbalah, is not dualistic or acosmic, as in Marcion (or, for that matter, in Benjamin): it is *dialectical*, constantly reconciling the crisis of the antithesis between the sparks of “pure life” and the shards of material existence, the mystical kernel of infinite energies and the outward shell of the worldly status quo—or, between the truth, which cannot be expressed, and the teaching of the tradition, which attempts to articulate its hidden “object” and thus offers a continuity of Judaism as a religious form. Yet, despite this important difference, the Harnackian-Marcionite break with the tradition for the sake of the truth of the tradition could indeed have inspired Scholem’s own forays into his favorite domain of messianic antinomianism—perhaps even tinging it a bit with Christian leanings, unsurprising for a Young Marrano, but understandably controversial to the more pronounced “insiders” of the Judaic tradition.<sup>42</sup> In his 1939 speech on the anarchic attitude of the youth of his generation, Scholem will once again confirm that he does not have “an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Orthodox. We are no less legitimate than our forefathers,”<sup>43</sup> and reach for the Benjaminian “endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas,” which, no longer to be entertained in mystical silence, now raise against “the framework of orthodoxy” in a dialectical challenge:

Forces whose value was once denigrated will appear in a different light. Forces which were not considered important enough for serious scholars to research will now be raised from the depths of concealment. Perhaps what was once called degeneracy will now be regarded as a

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<sup>41</sup> See Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Gnostic Anxieties: Jewish Intellectuals and Weimar Neo-Marcionism,” *Modern Theology* 35, no. 1 (January 2019), 76.

<sup>42</sup> The analogies with Christianity, especially Christian antinomianism, abound particularly in *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*: “There was a core of potential antinomianism in the legacy which Sabbatai bequeathed to later Sabbatian doctrine as elaborated by Nathan. *In the history of the Sabbatian movement, Nathan’s writings played a role similar to that of Paul’s letters in the development of Christian doctrine.* However cautious Nathan’s formulation of certain radical ideas, it encouraged the more violently antinomian tendencies of some Sabbatian circles. Similarities in the historical situations of Christianity and Sabbatianism, and the inner logic of their respective doctrinal notions, led to similar results. Each considered the appearance of its respective messiah as the beginning of a new era and as the foundation of a new reality.” Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 797–98; emphasis added. On Idel’s critique of Scholem as influenced by the Christian theology of the Weimar era as well as Christian Kabbalah (most of all Reuchlin and Molitor), see Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 110.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Mendes-Flohr, *Gershom Scholem* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1994), 17.

revelation, and what seemed to them [the apologetic scholars of the nineteenth century] to be an impotent hallucination will be revealed as a great vibrant myth.<sup>44</sup>

This is how Scholem's "counter-history" is born: spawned within the matrix of dualistic Gnosis of the Benjaminian "metaphysics of youth," it exits the womb of silence as a dialectical synthesis of his early religious anarchism and the desire to return to the Judaic tradition and challenge it from the inside.

## The Hidden Message: Into Life!

But what exactly is this hidden message which Scholem discovers in his "silent Hebrew"? And why do I insist on its Marrano connotations? Because already in his diaries, the Marrano condition, at that time merely vaguely sensed, represents the most intimate—or rather, in Lacanian terminology, *extimate*—truth of the diasporic Jew: the Marrano experience is the one of a bare life forever exiled from the *Lebensform* of traditional Judaism and left hanging in the symbolic vacuum, waiting for a *new* tradition to come. It is thus the experience of *galut* at its absolute extreme as simultaneously the greatest danger and the chance of salvation as *Genesung*, the healing of the "sickened" *tradendum*. Now, in 1918, the Marrano is still nothing but a distorted seed of a future possibility contained in "the womb of the present" in the form "of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed idea"<sup>45</sup> which "no one among us" yet dares to turn into a serious argument. But one of the tasks Scholem sets to himself, while committing his life fully to it, is precisely this daring *denouement*. Just as the Spanish Marranos refused to die for the sake of the Jewish tradition and chose to live, even if exiled from Orthodox Judaism, so does young Scholem refuse to die in the adherence to the "sickened" Judaism as he knows it in its present form and chooses to live, even at the risk of turning the whole tradition on its head—in which he, in fact, succeeded (despite his own suspicion of failure and "professorial death"), by giving us a new vision of Judaism from the perspective of the Marrano: the one who breaks with the chain of tradition and then returns to it on his own terms (Bloom calls this kind of return *apophrades*, the last and victorious stage of the agon with the powerful precursors), inserting his own crisis into the middle of the tradition, no longer to be perceived as an unbreakable chain. Survival, understood by all traditional symbolic systems as nothing but a sheer self-preservation, would simply go without saying,

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<sup>44</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Gershom Scholem*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 37.



being nothing but a “stupid self-contained life-rhythm” that beats on in physiological muteness.<sup>46</sup> But Scholem begs to differ, by turning life’s *Stille* precisely into a powerful *argumentum ex silentio*. While for the symbolic systems life’s silence testifies to its “imbecility”—the essential incapability to raise itself to the level of spirit—for Scholem it becomes an argument per se: a silent objection to the spiritual *tradendum* and its lofty conceptuality. The youth, described by Benjamin as disillusioned with and exiled from all the traditions, seemingly falling to the animal level of just living on, has nonetheless something to say—precisely in its silence, which signals its refusal to participate in the “transmission” of the “sickened” doctrines. “*This life is its virtue.*”<sup>47</sup>

In Scholem’s later elaboration, *galut* indeed becomes a cosmic universal condition of all things subsisting in exile, God included. Already in the 1940s Scholem begins to think of the Lurianic *tsimtsum* as symbol of a radical break/cut and because of that an emblem of exilic being, a single ring separated from the chain:

One is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of Exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *Tsimtsum* is the deepest symbol of Exile that could be thought of.<sup>48</sup>

And when presenting the series of catastrophes that befall creation from the foundational act of *tsimtsum*, he describes the “breaking of the vessels” as the moment of disintegration of the Neoplatonic chain of emanations, due to which the condition of exile afflicts all beings:

This ‘breaking’ introduces a dramatic aspect into the process of Creation, and it can explain the *Galut* [...] In other words, all being is in *Galut* [...] Here we have a cosmic picture of *Galut*, not the *Galut* of the people of Israel alone, but the *Galut* of the *Shekhinah* at the very incep-

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<sup>46</sup> “Every authentic revolutionary has to assume this attitude of thoroughly abstracting from, despising even, the imbecilic particularity of one’s immediate existence.” Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: Robespierre, or the ‘Divine Violence’ of Terror,” in *Maximilien Robespierre, Virtue and Terror* (London: Verso, 2007): xviii.

<sup>47</sup> This is how Benjamin describes “The Religious Position of the New Youth” in the 1914 text from *Die Tat*: “*The youth that professes faith in itself signifies religion, which does not yet exist. Surrounded by the chaos of things and persons, none of whom are sanctified, none tabooed, it calls out for choice. And it will not be able to choose with utmost seriousness until by some grace the holy and unholy have been newly created [...] But meanwhile it lives a scarcely comprehensible life, full of devotion and mistrust, admiration and skepticism, self-sacrifice and self-interest. This life is its virtue [...] And yet its boundless skepticism (which is nothing other than boundless trust) compels it to love the struggle. God can arise in struggle, too. To struggle is not to condemn the enemy. But the struggles of youth are judgments of God.*” Benjamin, *Early Writings*, 169–70 (emphasis added).

<sup>48</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 261.

tion of its being. All that befalls in the world is only an expression of this primal and fundamental *Galut*. All existence, including ‘as it were,’ God, subsists in *Galut*. Such is the state of creation after the breaking of the vessels [...] In all the expanse of creation there is imperfection, flaw, *Galut*.<sup>49</sup>

But who would incarnate better this “subsistence in *Galut*”—the precarious, fragile, disoriented mode of being of the broken universe—than the Marrano? Is not the Marrano a “broken vessel” himself? If God indeed wanted his people to go and worship Him in the desert, one cannot think about a desert harsher than the one of the Marrano exile. According to Yirmiyahu Yovel, the Marrano exilic experience should be taken to the third power: “Consequently they [the *conversos*] lived a triple exile: as purported Jews, they were exiled from Zion; as *Conversos*, they were cut off from the mainstream of Jewish life; and as Judaizers, they lived in exile from their host society.”<sup>50</sup> The Lacanian term—“the extimate truth”—is very fitting here, because it refers to the secret core of the psyche, which the subject cannot fully integrate during the process of its symbolic formation: as a result, the most intimate part becomes rejected as a *parte maudite*, cursed and projected outside. The Marranos would thus be such *homines sacri*—the cursed part of Judaism—as the extimate projection of the most intimate *Warheit der Tradition*: the *ecce homo* of Jewishness as the truth almost impossible to bear and witness, from which the whole *Tradierbarkeit* reverts in an apotropaic gesture. Like destitute Oedipus in Colonna for the Greeks, like Jesus suffering on the cross for the Christians, and like *der Muselmann*, the Agambenian embodiment of “bare life” for the inhabitants of late modernity, so is Marrano for the Jews: a moment of terrifying recognition of an exilic fate common to them all. If, therefore, according to Abraham Cardoso, all Jews should become Marranos, it is only because all Jews already *are* Marranos in the depth of their unconscious selves: the eternal outsiders, constantly being alienated also from the womb of their own tradition as the chain of the overt *Tradierbarkeit*. They are always already expelled from every womb in the ceaseless *lekh lekha*: from the Paradise, from their land of origin, from their sacred places, even from *their* God. The Marrano condition merely reveals the impossibility of ever returning to and re-finding the lost home: by exacerbating the universal exile and homelessness, it shows the Jewish truth in its absolute and uncanny nakedness. Precisely as in Maurice Blanchot’s description of Judaism’s nocturnal hidden truth:

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49 Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 45.

50 Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos – Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 85.

*The Hebrew himself will not remain Hebrew.* The relation, through migration and march, with the Unknown that one can know only by way of distance, becomes, with the filing out of Jabok and in the night of Penuel, enigmatic contact: the struggle about which one knows nothing since what is at stake is *the truth of the night*, that which is not to be retained when day breaks.<sup>51</sup>

It is, therefore, in the Hebrew's nature not to have nature; it belongs to the Hebrew's identity not to have identity; it is according to the Hebrew's tradition to go against tradition; it pertains to the Hebrew's mode of fidelity to betray and live in a constant crisis; it is part of the Hebrew's life to choose life, even at the expense of all stable forms of life. The spectral intangible Unknown whom the Hebrew worships in the desert of the night destabilizes any attempt to reach secure identity: whatever the "law of the day" puts in order, the "law of the night" unbinds and turns infinitely enigmatic, liquid, unnamable. Jacob portrayed by Blanchot (but also by Bloom) is a notorious trickster and a restless wanderer, crossing every possible Penuel and every possible Rubicon in order to realize the "blessing of more life": any frontier of natural belonging, refusing to take place among "natural kinds," which all know their "right measure" and place under the sun. And while wrestling with the Divine Angel, Jacob also wrestles with the Tradition which he will survive even if "without form or vessel." As such, he joins the pantheon of the Marrano "saints," together with Joseph and Esther, the other determined survivors.

Scholem's entry from his diary suggests that if there indeed were "among us" a young hero akin to Jacob—that is, able to look this negativity, which the Marrano condition represents, straight in its Gorgon eye—the Tradition would have rediscovered its hidden truth and come out of this agon rejuvenated. For the Nietzschean sentence "What does not kill you makes you stronger" applies not only to the subject, but to the tradition too. Nietzsche's agonistic wisdom pervades this little fragment, even if partly polemically. Here, the youth challenges the "sickening tradition," which, a few decades later, in the correspondence over the works of Franz Kafka, Scholem and Benjamin will see as best represented by the Kafkan sovereignty (*das Behörde*) from *The Castle*: the deadened self-absorbed elders-angels who lost touch with the life in the village, spent at the foot of the castle hill. In Scholem's Marrano elaboration, it is this very life which rises from its Joban "dust and ashes" and, in Jacob's manner, confronts the Angel of *Tradierbarkeit* in silence and stillness, insisting solely on itself as the most valid argument. I saw God face to face, fought him, and prevailed, says Jacob, and young Scholem hopes he will be

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51 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 126 (emphasis added).

the one to say it again, to “recollect forward” the distant antinomian origin of Jewish faith. His Marrano moment locates him in the Hölderlinian point of the greatest danger of the complete collapse of Judaism and the hope of salvation in the risky renewal of its hidden truth.

Yet, all these Marrano allusions in Scholem’s diaries are merely *avant la lettre*. Scholem’s true adventure with the Marrano theology begins only in 1923, when he incidentally discovers Abraham Miguel Cardoso’s treatises dealing with what he would interpret as *die Theologie des Hasards*, the risky messianic theology walking a “thin line between religion and nihilism”; as David Biale suggests, this will trigger his lifelong interest in the Sabbatian movement.<sup>52</sup> It is indeed in the Marrano-kab-

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52 In Biale’s opinion, young Scholem begins working on Sabbatianism in 1923, when he finds in the Oxford library a manuscript of Cardoso’s authorship. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Master of Kabbalah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 78. The Cardoso trigger is far from accidental. While Scholem had read about Sabbatai Sevi before, it was only Abraham Cardoso who awakened in him a sense of historical analogy between the mass conversion of first the Iberian, and then Turkish Jews to their respective hegemonic religions, Catholicism and Islam, and the situation of assimilated German Jewry: “the new inner-outer dichotomy led to the splitting of identity into the private and public compartments characteristic of modern Judaism.” Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 84. Scholem himself confirms this analogy while commenting on Cardoso’s “hazard theology” (*Theologie des Hasards*), which openly plays with the risks caused by the crisis of tradition: “Before the powers of the world history led to the massive uprooting of Judaism in the 19th century, its reality became questioned from the inside before. Already at the time of the Sabbatians, the whole ‘reality of the Hebrews’ was threatened to become an illusion.” Gershom Scholem, “Die Theologie des Sabbatianismus im Lichte Abraham Cardosos,” in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 142. According to Biale, the Marrano cataclysmic experience, the consequences of which he saw for the first time in Cardoso’s system, influenced Scholem’s thinking about the whole *kitvei Ari*: “The Lurianic Kabbalah taught that the cosmos started with the self-expulsion of God; the world could only be created in the empty space from which God was absent. Luria’s myth of creation thus involved a catastrophe of divine exile. God not only reveals himself; he also hides himself. This paradoxical theology could not have arisen, in Scholem’s view, without the catastrophe of 1492.” Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 114. Again, it was Benjamin with whom Scholem shared his new invigorating experience, while meeting him in Paris in 1923: “Benjamin was the first person I told about a very surprising discovery I had made: Sabbatian theology—that is, a messianic antinomianism that had developed within Judaism in strictly Jewish concepts. This discovery, which I made in the manuscripts of the British Museum and the Bodleian Library at Oxford, later led to very extensive research on my part [...] In Abraham Miguel Cardoso’s writings in defense of the Sabbatian heresy, which I talked about on the basis of my Oxford studies, smoldered a flame that leaped from me to my first audience. *The perennial question as to what Judaism was all about*—a question that had been given an entirely new turn in my studies, at least for me [...] *Was Judaism still alive as a heritage or an experience, even as something constantly evolving, or did it exist only as an object of cognition?* This was the question that thrust itself upon me at that time in the confrontation of those two figures, for which I expected a solution only from my new life in Eretz Yisrael; it was the question I grappled with, under varying emphases, for years. It was a memorable evening,

balistic-Sabbatian syncretism of Cardoso that Scholem will have found the confirmation of his choice “to keep silent in Hebrew”: only what is concealed can be an authentic faith; what becomes positively revealed is nothing but an official religion of “what can merely be handed over.” Hence, the real faith needs to protect its subversive-antinomian core by avoiding open pronouncement and articulation. Cardoso, having already experienced the Marrano apostasy, is far from being shocked when it is committed by Sabbatai Sevi, who, under duress, converts to Islam. He is already prepared to interpret the Messiah’s apostasy as an act of free will, demonstrating that only a “hidden faith” can be genuine: inner, unconcerned, and unhindered by official norms and religious institutions which can be exchanged like garments, with no concern for the secret kernel of the messianic faith. Scholem writes: “For Cardoso the apostasy of the Messiah represented a kind of highest justification of the apostasy of the Spanish Marranos in 1391 and 1492”<sup>53</sup>—but also vice versa: the Marrano theology had grown “in silence” for the two centuries in order to deliver the scheme of the antinomian reversal according to which only a *converso* could become a true Messiah.

According to Cardoso, Marranos are the true chosen people—“the band of survivors” constituting “the righteous remnant of the true Israel” (Isaiah 37:32)—destined to save the world and spread the divine message of *u-baharta ba-hayim* through all the nations, by subverting their pagan institutions from within. Sabbatai, therefore, not only followed the way of those self-reflexive Marranos, but also justified it and showed its deeper spiritual meaning; now, to convert to Christianity or Islam meant to be able to expand the messianic practice of “lifting the sparks” from the realm of *kelipot*, the “broken vessels,” and to penetrate the darkest regions of the created world (such as Islam or the Roman Catholic “Edom,” as will be the case with the Polish Frankists<sup>54</sup>). To choose faith in a hidden way meant

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and Benjamin later adverted to it on a number of occasions as a high point of our encounter.” Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 136 (emphasis added). Note the connection: it is precisely the study of Marrano theology at the peak of its messianic intensity that once again triggers in Scholem the “perennial question *as to what Judaism was all about.*” It is not Talmud or Maimonides: it is the multiple heretic Cardoso!

53 Gershom Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 64.

54 The belief that conversion is the right choice confirmed by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible appears very strongly in the so-called *Red Letter* which was issued to his followers by Jacob Frank: “But none of the wicked will understand, only those of real understanding will know that anyone who has a spark of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must enter into the holy faith of Edom, and whoever will accept this creed with love will be saved from all of them [the persecutions] and will merit all of the consolations promised in Isaiah and in all the Prophets.” Jacob Frank, “The Red Letter,” in *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the*

a deliberate effort to keep the antinomian impulse—the fiery kernel of pure free life—opposed to all the oppressive laws of this world, both secular and religious, from contamination with the unredeemed reality. It is precisely here, in Cardoso's Marrano theology, that the “hidden tradition” undergoes a messianic inversion: it loses persecutory and negative aspects of deficiency and becomes a new mode of living, believing, and thinking, a hope for a true renewal.

Two years ago it was revealed to me that the king messiah is destined to dress in the clothes of a converso [*anus*], and because of them the Jews will not recognize him; in short, he is destined to be a converso like me [...] God inflicted on him the sins of us all, because we were all required to become converts [...] This is similar to what occurred to Esther.<sup>55</sup>

Just as Esther/*Hastara*, whose name means “I will hide myself,” conceals her Jewishness for the sake of the survival of herself and her people, so will the *converso* Messiah, a great survivor, bring redemption to the Jews and all other nations plunged into the condition of universal exile. By referring to Esther—the Hebrew heroine, but also the favorite Marrano “saint”—Cardoso articulates the foundations of the Sabbatian doctrine of the “redemption through sin” or the “mitsva in reverse” (*mitsva ha'ba'averah*): while *avoda zara* (the idol cult) still remains a transgression, not only is it not condemned, but it is paradoxically *commanded* by the Torah whose Teaching secretly insists on its own betrayal. The hidden Torah, therefore, contradicts the overt Torah. Hence the Marrano paradox: if the tradition is to continue in its hidden messianic truth, fostering the promise of “more life,” it must be constantly betrayed on the level of its overt articulation.

The psychology of the “radical” Sabbatians was utterly paradoxical and “Marranic.” Essentially its guiding principle was: Whoever is as he appears to be cannot be a true “believer.” In practice this means the following: The “true faith” cannot be a faith which men publicly profess. On the contrary, the “true faith” must always be concealed. In fact, it is one's duty to deny it outwardly, for it is like a seed that has been planted in the bed of the soul and it cannot grow unless it is first covered over. *For this reason every Jew is obliged to become a Marrano.*<sup>56</sup>

In this essay, characteristically titled “Redemption through Sin,” Scholem the Historian demonstrates the link between Cardoso's Marrano theology and the later radical development of the Sabbatian movement in which “messianism was trans-

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*Origins of Jewish Modernity*, ed. Paweł Maciejko (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017): 162.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Goldish, “Patterns of Converso Messianism,” 48.

<sup>56</sup> Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 109 (emphasis added).

formed into nihilism”<sup>57</sup>—but this is not a damning comment. We saw that in his *Theses*, not written from the perspective of the historian, he tends to identify with those who daringly walk “the fine line between religion and nihilism” in order to reinvigorate—breath in a new life, or simply, *life*—into the “sickening tradition.” If life is indeed the highest argument, and the Marranos chose life instead of honorable death, then the final imperative—that every Jew should become a Marrano—follows from the syllogism as an inevitable conclusion.<sup>58</sup> To what extent, therefore, does he identify with Abraham Cardoso and his “shield” (*magen*) protecting the hidden truth of the messianic good news? After all, we know that in his private jokes on the kabbalistic theory of the transmigration of souls (*gilgul*), he imagined himself as the incarnation of Johannes Reuchlin, the seventeenth-century Christian kabbalist, who created a Judeo-Christian amalgam analogous to the ones produced by the Marrano theologians (while his older friend Walter Benjamin was supposed to proudly host the soul of Isaac Luria himself).<sup>59</sup>

The subtitle of this section—*into life!*—contains a reference to the famous concluding line of Franz Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*: “*ins Leben!*” Yet, these two lives—the one desired by Scholem and the other chosen by Rosenzweig—could not be any more different. For Rosenzweig, it is an immortal life of Judaism as a *Lebensform*, a perfect form-of-life set in stone for eternity. Young Franz finds it at precisely the moment when he withdraws from his planned conversion to Christianity, on the memorable Yom Kippur night in Berlin 1913, when he decided not to follow his cousin Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who had already become a Christian,

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57 *Messianic Idea*, 109.

58 Scholem’s effort to reveal the logic of the apparent Marrano “madness” proved indeed quite successful. In the conversation with Sylvie Anne Goldberg, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi admits that “[Scholem’s work] enabled me to understand that the Sabbatians, even after Shabbatai Sevi’s conversion, and later the Frankists were neither mad nor decadent. *They were simply Jews*, and it was even possible to reconstruct their views without endorsing them. It made me realize that one could broach even the most extreme Frankist beliefs intelligently.” Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *Transmettre l’histoire juive: Entretiens avec Sylvie Anne Goldberg* (Paris, 2012), 22 (emphasis added); quoted in Marina Rustov, “Yerushalmi and the Conversos,” *Jewish History* 28, No. 1, Special Issue: “From History to Memory: The Scholarly Legacy of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi” (2014), 17.

59 According to Moshe Idel, the significance of Reuchlin’s influence on Scholem goes far beyond the private joke for it is responsible for the latter’s symbolic—rather than mystical and theurgic—interpretation of the whole kabbalistic lore, which appears more characteristic of the Schellingian *erzählende Philosophie* than of the original intention of the kabbalists: “He once remarked that if he believed in metempsychosis, he would perhaps see Reuchlin’s soul as having transmigrated into himself. Certainly, Reuchlin’s influence is conspicuous in Scholem’s and his followers’ overemphasis on the paramount importance of symbolic language and thought as representative of and essential of the entire Kabbalah.” Idel, *Old Worlds*, 87.

and to renew his covenant with the Jewish God instead. It was precisely the decision not to convert that made him a *baal tshuva*: the one returning to the life form of his ancestors to resume it as a self-sufficient and autotelic spiritual exercise. Nothing can be of greater contrast with Scholem, for whom life promised is a stake and purpose of his conscious conversion to Judaism, never to be conceived as a self-enclosed and self-serving *Lebensform*. Just as Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and his cousin Franz needed a reason to embrace Christianity—a reason the latter did not find convincing enough—so did Scholem need a reason to embrace Judaism: a reason that would reveal the hidden core and truth of the tradition which he wanted to join and explore. Scholem, therefore, acts as a Marrano in reverse: a *ger* coming from a distant land of assimilatory, willy-nilly Christianizing experience, who wishes to become a convert and tries to figure out “what Judaism is all about.”<sup>60</sup> And the last thing he wants to find in it is Judaism as *Lebensform*.

Scholem’s reluctance towards Judaism as *Lebensform* comes to the fore most visibly in his review of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*, where he complains that “the power of redemption seems to be built into the clockwork of life lived in the light of revelation [...] in a mode of thought deeply concerned for order.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in the third part of *The Star*, devoted to redemption, Rosenzweig compares Judaism to an eternal and integral form of life:

Custom and law, having become non-augmentable and unchangeable, flow into the one basin of that which is valid now and forever; a unique form of life that unites custom and law fills the moment and makes it eternal. But in this way the moment is certainly released from the river of time, and since life is kept holy, *it is no longer alive*.<sup>62</sup>

According to Sanford Drob, who follows Rosenzweig’s intuition of Jewish religion as the perfect and paradigmatic *Lebensform*:

Judaism, particularly halakhic Judaism, is a language-activity, religious form of life *par excellence* [...] The Halakhic participant in a religious form of life lives in a sacred universe, world filled with spiritual acts and objects [...] One cannot achieve the spiritual and ethical ends of Judaism without immersing oneself completely in and strictly adhering to the Jewish (halakh-

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<sup>60</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 323.

<sup>62</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 322–23. For the original: “Sitte und Gesetz rinnen, unvermehrbar und unabänderlich geworden, in das eine Sammelbecken des so gegenwärtig als ewig Gültigen; eine einzige, Sitte und Gesetz in eins schließende Lebensform erfüllt den Augenblick und macht ihn ewig. Aber so wird der Augenblick freilich dem Strom der Zeit enthoben, und indem das Leben geheiligt wird, ist es nicht mehr lebendig.” Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann Verlag, 1921), 382.



ic) way of life [...] True Jewish creativity must emerge from within the tradition, not by altering the tradition to conform to changes in the outside world.<sup>63</sup>

Scholem begs to differ on all fronts of this diagnosis. He wants a living Judaism, not a *Lebensform* that seemed to promise life yet “is no longer alive”; and he wants it to be a dynamic religion, capable of receiving impulses from the outside world in the ongoing exchange with secular history. For *Gershom*, a *ger* looking for a reason to convert, there was only one question which, as he admits, he “grappled with, under varying emphases, for years”: Was Judaism still alive as a heritage or an experience, even as something constantly evolving, or did it exist only as an object of cognition?<sup>64</sup> If the latter were the case, even if presented in such anesthetized form as in Rosenzweig’s *oeuvre*, Scholem would not see it as a living hypothesis: a continuously glowing *das Erscheinende* which can still harbor a mystery of a new life. The revelatory treasure comes to him from the heterodox sources. While commenting on the Frankist cult of the messianic “*Hayim! Hayim!*” as the kernel of the “Jewish Gnosis,” Scholem once again reminds us of his stakes: “Life for [Frank] is not a harmonious order of nature and an adherence to its laws [...] *Life is freedom from bonds and laws.*”<sup>65</sup> It is life uncaptured by either the halakhic order or the symbolic form; life silent, eternally young, subversive towards and surviving any form of a fixed identity; life simultaneously most holy, as in Benjamin’s appropriation of Eckhart, and most cursed, as in the case of the universally banned and triple-exiled Marranos.

## In Conclusion

For Scholem the Marrano, crisis is inscribed in the very essence of the Judaic tradition as always already “sickened” and “falling”; that is, failing to *live up* (literally) as the “chain of transmission” to the “hidden truth” of revelation constituting the “blessing of more life.” Jacob’s blessing destabilizes every tradition as such, by holding to the imperative of “choose to live” as always excessive towards any symbolic form and because of that capable of manifesting itself only in silence: either the Marrano *silenzio* of those who chose to survive, or in the “quiet life of youth” of those who chose not to die together with the “sickened” traditional form of life.

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<sup>63</sup> Sanford L. Drob, “Judaism as a Form of Life,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 23, No. 4 (Summer 1988), 80–81, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 136.

<sup>65</sup> Scholem, “Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen,” in *Judaica 4* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984): 178 (emphasis added).

This permanent agonistic crisis cannot be overcome; it should be recognized and acknowledged as what gives the Jewish tradition its dialectical intensity. The Judaism, which Scholem wishes to renew as a Marrano *gershom*, determined to drag his own experience of the crisis into the midst of the Judaic tradition, can never regain a harmonious integrity of a religious *Lebensform*. If Judaism is to be a living tradition, open to innovation and renewal, it must constantly go through and survive the crisis caused by the clash between the two aporetic elements that constitute it: the kernel of the “hidden truth” on the one hand, and the “chain of transmission” on the other.

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Daniel H. Weiss

# Talking with Heretics: Tracing a Theme in Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Classical Rabbinic Literature

This essay aims to trace a stream in Jewish thought that resists tendencies towards “heresy hunting,” with a focus on Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* (1783), as well as on relevant passages from the Babylonian Talmud. In typical usage, if something is judged as “heresy,” this usually means that it is treated as dangerous, and is simply to be condemned rather than being discussed or debated. By contrast, I will trace an attitude that focuses on treating a wider range of views as worthy of discussion and examination, even (or especially) when one does not agree with them. This tendency in Jewish-rabbinic thought (which may have distinctively different features from treatments of heresy in dominant Christian understandings) can provide an alternative conceptual framework for engaging with debate and disagreement in present-day contexts, in which one often finds tendencies among various groups to functionally treat their opponent’s position as “secular heresy,” such that even discussion and debate is treated as dangerous and thus as something to be unilaterally rejected. Such attitudes can lead to polarization and breakdown of discourse, whereas an alternative stance to “heresy” (whether “secular” or “religious”) may provide space for a more fruitful orientation to disagreement.

## Heretics as a Social and Conversational Danger

Before looking at Mendelssohn’s approach, let us first consider a different attitude towards heresy that will serve as a point of contrast. We will take Thomas Aquinas’s articulation as our example, both because his account puts forth relevant dynamics in a clear manner, and because Aquinas’s basic approach became a classic reference point for subsequent Christian thinkers, down to the Lutheran context of Mendelssohn’s own era. Its basic dynamics are thus useful for understanding a key stream of thought that formed the background for the German cultural context in which Mendelssohn sought to intervene.<sup>1</sup> Aquinas asserts bluntly, “We should not

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<sup>1</sup> For background on approaches to excommunication of dissidents and heretics in the eighteenth century, see Alexander Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Excommunication: The Ecclesiastical Law Background,” in *Studies in the History of Jewish Society in the Middle Ages and the Modern Period*, eds. Immanuel Etkes and Yosef Salmon (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1980): 41–61. Regarding con-

consort with heretics.”<sup>2</sup> Among the reasons that he gives is “the danger that conversation with them will corrupt us.”<sup>3</sup> So, this type of conversation is linked to the category of danger. He goes on to further indicate that such conversation, even if it does not corrupt the direct participant, could give others the wrong impression and thus lead them to error. He then approvingly cites a gloss on 2 John 10–11 that asserts, “The apostles and disciples showed such caution about religion that they would not even allow verbal communication with any people who had deviated from the truth.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Aquinas gives further indication about what such “deviation from the truth” consists of. He states that “those who believe things contrary to the determination of the Church’s councils are judged heretics.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, he states that “after [any matters of faith] have been defined by the authority of the universal Church, one who obstinately resisted the ruling would be counted a heretic.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the prohibited conversations are specifically linked to matters that have been defined and determined through authoritative pronouncements

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tinuity between earlier Catholic ecclesiastical law and Protestant ecclesiastical law, Altmann notes that “all Protestant jurists from the Reformation to Benedikt Carpzov insisted in principle on the unbroken continuity of Canon Law and Protestant Law and did so, surprisingly, even in such areas as excommunication” (48). Altmann also notes there that Luther and Calvin, as well as subsequent Lutheran church authorities, upheld the “ban”; i. e., excommunication (48). For a detailed discussion of the way in which excommunication for doctrinal dissent in the context of Lutheranism played out in the case of Johannes Kepler, see Aviva Rothman, *The Pursuit of Harmony: Kepler on Cosmos, Confession, and Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 70–108. Rothman notes (72–73) that despite certain conceptual differences between them, Luther (by the later stages of his career) was in basic accord with Aquinas concerning the need to silence heretics, citing Luther’s statement that “though it seems cruel to punish [heretics] with the sword, it is more cruel that they damn the ministry of the Word, have no certain teaching, and suppress the true, and thus upset society.” As we will see below, by the eighteenth century, questioning of certain forms of excommunication had begun to be more widespread among various Lutheran thinkers, but the basic notion of the importance of silencing and excommunicating heretics still formed the dominant theological background to these debates.

2 Aquinas, *Thomas Aquinas’s Quodlibetal Questions*, trans. Turner Nevitt and Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 153 (Quodlibet X, Question 7, Article 1).

3 Aquinas, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 153.

4 Aquinas, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 153–54.

5 Aquinas, *Quodlibetal Questions*, 125–26 (Quodlibet IX, Q 8, A 1).

6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Thomas Gilby et al. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964–80), 87 (II-II, Q 11, A 3). Note that in that same passage Aquinas does not have a negative view in cases of disagreement on matters of faith that have not yet been authoritatively “defined” by the Church: “So it is that some of the fathers of the Church seem to have disagreed, either on points of no consequence to the faith, this way or that, or on points not yet defined by the Church.” That is, the problematic factor is not disagreement per se, but disagreement in relation to institutional-authoritative pronouncements.

of the Church, such that deviation on those matters constitutes a dangerous “deviation from the truth.”

In this framework, the presence of a person with a deviant belief on such matters constitutes an occasion of crisis, due to the fact that the heretic’s words can potentially “infect” and cause harm to others. Those in positions of authority must thus act decisively in order to prevent such harms from occurring. Furthermore, the presence of a heretic also marks a conversational crisis: in contrast to modes of back-and-forth conversation on other types of issues, in which two people consider one another’s point of view, one here needs to take active efforts to make sure that one is *not* exposed to the thought processes and opinions of the other person. Such exposure could contaminate the social sphere in a fatal way, and so must be prevented. One should not weigh or consider the person’s claims as statements in the way that one would in the context of normal conversation. The issue is not a matter of whether the other person’s arguments are persuasive—indeed, they may well sound persuasive, but this simply increases the danger that they pose. The heretic’s arguments constitute a deviation from the truth *by definition* because they deviate from that which has been authoritatively defined and determined as the truth by the properly accredited authorities.

## Mendelssohn and the Importance of Conversational Engagement

With this framework in mind for contrast, let us now examine ways in which Mendelssohn takes a very different view towards conversation with others whose ideas appear to deviate from one’s own views.<sup>7</sup> Where the other framework holds devi-

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously, by Mendelssohn’s time various other thinkers had also put forth more tolerant approaches to dissent and treatment of “heretics,” and such developments played a role in shaping Mendelssohn’s views. However, ideas of excommunication still continued to play a significant role in intellectual and cultural discourse. To take one notable example, even John Locke, who championed a strong position on religious tolerance in the political sphere, nevertheless affirmed that it was appropriate for a church to engage in acts of excommunication, whereas Mendelssohn viewed such forms of exclusion as inappropriate even (or rather especially) for religious institutions. See Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Excommunication,” 43–46, 60–61. See also Altmann’s commentary in Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), 197–98. On the development of greater practical tolerance of heretics in Lutheran theological thought in particular leading up to Mendelssohn’s time, see, for example, Ian Hunter, “Thomasius on the Toleration of Heresy,” in *Heresy in Transition: Transforming Ideas of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ian Hunter, John Christian Laursen, and Cary J. Nederman (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005): 155–67; Michael Printy,

ation from truth in matters of faith to be a reason for not engaging in conversation, Mendelssohn asserts that apparent deviation from one's own views on religious matters is, to the contrary, a strong reason *for* engaging in sustained and intense conversation and interaction.

With my best friend, whom I believed to be ever so much in accord with me, I very often failed to come to terms about certain truths of philosophy and religion. After a long dispute [or: debate; *Streit*] and altercation [or: back-and-forth exchange of words; *Wortwechsel*], it would sometimes emerge that we had each connected different ideas with the same words. Not infrequently, we thought alike, yet expressed ourselves differently; but just as often we believed ourselves to be in agreement when we were still very far apart in our thoughts. And yet neither of us was unpracticed in thinking; we were both used to dealing with abstract ideas, and it seemed to both of us that we were earnestly seeking the truth for its own sake rather than for the sake of scoring a point. Nevertheless, our ideas had to rub against each other for a long time before they could be made to fit themselves to one another; and before we could say with any assurance: Here we agree! Oh! I should not like to have for a friend anyone who has had this experience in his lifetime, and can still be intolerant, and can still hate his neighbor because he does not think or express himself on religious matters in the same way as he does; for he has divested himself of all humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Mendelssohn here casts close conversational inquiry as a crucial and necessary element of the pursuit of truth. The need for such conversation derives particularly from Mendelssohn's experience of both apparent agreement and apparent disagreement on religious matters being transformed as a result of back-and-forth conversation. For Mendelssohn, when seeking to pursue understanding of religious matters, each person's attempt to formulate thoughts on the basis of their observation and reasoning is a challenging task, with plenty of room for two intelligent and well-intended people to arrive at different conceptions even when looking at the same starting data. In addition to this, the attempt to translate thoughts into verbal formulations creates additional scope for divergence between two different people: Two people may often have very similar thoughts, but formulate them in ways that make it seem like they are in disagreement with one another.

For these reasons, Mendelssohn asserts the need for conversational friction, of letting one's ideas "rub against" the other person's ideas in extended dialogue, ask-

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"Heresy and the Protestant Enlightenment: Johann Lorenz von Mosheim's *History of Michael Servetus*," in *Archeologies of Confession: Writing the German Reformation, 1517–2017*, ed. Carina L. Johnson, David M. Luebke, Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, and Jesse Spohnholz (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2017): 173–92; Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Excommunication," 48–60.

<sup>8</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 67; original German in Moses Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften, Jubiläumsausgabe [JubA]* (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1971–), bd. 8, 134–35. Hereafter cited in-text as *J*, with the format *J* 67/134–35.



ing one another things like: Can you say more about what you meant by this formulation? What is it that led you to put things in this way? Do you mean something closer to this, or to this? What implications would you derive from this statement? By engaging in such conversation, both parties can gain a clearer sense of the other person's thought processes and how they understand their ideas.

Importantly, with regard to religious matters that go beyond sense perceptions, Mendelssohn does not seem to assign value to seeking to formulate one's ideas in fully clear and distinct terms, since he does not view fixed linguistic formulations as capable of capturing ideas without vagueness coming into the process of formulation. He asserts, "[H]ow much confusion and indistinctness are bound to remain in the signification of words" (*J* 66/134), and characterizes words and written characters as vessels "into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them" (*J* 102/168; see also 137/202). Instead of focusing on the perfect static formulation that can be impartially understood by everyone, Mendelssohn seems to think that a better approach is to make a basic attempt of formulating one's ideas in words, without worrying about perfect clarity in the initial formulation, and then engaging in back-and-forth conversation with another person, which will allow dynamic clarification as each person asks the other specific questions corresponding to elements that they find unclear. In this context, the initial formulation is simply a heuristic attempt that marks the jumping-off point for dialogue.

Furthermore, in addition to the vagueness that necessarily enters into the formulation of ideas in words, so that it is to be expected that different people would frequently end up using different forms of expression, Mendelssohn also assumes that, particularly in relation to non-empirical matters, a similar vagueness will enter into the attempt to formulate thoughts about a matter on the basis of the data that one observes or considers. Thus, he holds that one should not condemn another simply because the other person "does not think or express himself on religious matters in the same way as he does." The element of "expressing oneself" differently corresponds to the vagueness in the transfer from ideas to words, while the element of "thinking" differently corresponds to the vagueness in the construction of one's thoughts themselves.<sup>9</sup> As such, Mendelssohn seems to treat it as natural and unsurprising that two different people, both doing their best to reflect

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<sup>9</sup> See also Mendelssohn's assertion that perceptions of "internal sense" (i.e., matters that go beyond simple empirical observation) are more unstable, and are subject to change and harder to pin down. In this sphere, "Many things for which I would suffer martyrdom today may appear problematic to me tomorrow. If, in addition, I must also put these internal perceptions into words and signs, or swear to words and signs which other men lay before me, the uncertainty will be still greater" (*J* 66/134).

sincerely on a certain subject, and examine similar data points, could end up with somewhat different thought-constructions in their attempt to concretize their reflections. To be sure, the expectation of *some* vagueness in thought-constructions does not mean an expectation of *complete* vagueness. Thus, one need not expect that two people will arrive at *completely* different thought-constructions when reflecting on a given matter, but simply that we should not be surprised when non-identity and difference arise. For this reason, the back-and-forth dialogue is important not only for clarifying expression, but for gaining different relevant perspectives on the shared subject matter of the discussion. Each person, even if they have engaged in responsible reflection, is likely to have arrived at a perspective that accounts for only part of a fuller picture, and the joint engagement and mutual critique can help each person to recognize the limitations of their initial perspective, and to gain a fuller conception by consideration of the other person's reasoning and perspective.

In other words, with regard to the pursuit of truth regarding "religious matters" that go beyond sense-perception, Mendelssohn encourages each person to refrain from viewing his or her own perspective as simply corresponding to the truth *tout court*, and instead, by engaging with the other person, to ask: *In what ways* does my initial understanding capture something of the truth, and *in what ways* does the other person's understanding capture something of the truth? In what contexts and in what ways would my understanding have justification, and in what contexts and in what ways would the other person's understanding have justification? If one assumes that, due to the way in which human thoughts and words function, any conception will, by necessity, only capture the truth of the matter partially, then there is always greater truth-value to be gained by engaging with the other person's different perspective. Mendelssohn reiterates the importance of such engagement in statements such as "In fact, the most essential purpose of religious society is *mutual edification*" (J 74/141, italics in the original), and "Men were created for each other. Instruct your neighbor, or tolerate him!" (J 78/146).

Because he thinks that truth is something that can be most fully made-present only by live conversation between individuals, and does not see truth as something that can be statically captured in fixed verbal formulations, Mendelssohn would strongly reject the basic premises expressed in the framework of heresy discussed earlier, according to which one should not engage in conversation with heretics. That idea assumes that "the truth" about religious matters can be authoritatively pronounced by institutional authorities, and in verbal formulations no less, so that those who diverge from such defined pronouncements are diverging from "the truth" and are therefore carriers of dangerous falsehoods. By contrast, for Mendelssohn, no verbal formulation, and no one person's thought-construction, can

properly “capture” the truth in full, and therefore, for every statement from an exceedingly wise person, no matter how carefully thought-out, we should not be surprised to find that another equally wise person will assert a different formulation that will also capture other important aspects of truth in relation to the matter under consideration. The goal is not to determine which statement is “the right one,” since each one captures part of the truth but also has limitations, and one should instead focus on engaging both statements, and assessing the specific ways and contexts in which each statement has a justified application.

One key applied example of Mendelssohn’s approach can be seen in his treatment of Spinoza. In his *Philosophical Dialogues*, his first published work in German—itsself presented in the form of dialogues—Mendelssohn criticizes what he sees as various serious errors in Spinoza’s thinking, while also emphasizing important key insights of Spinoza’s that helped contribute in positive ways to Leibniz’s and Woolf’s thought.<sup>10</sup> Rather than straightforwardly accepting or rejecting Spinoza’s statements, Mendelssohn shows that by engaging with them closely, one can draw out true insights from them in a fruitful way, even if those same statements would prove harmful if accepted in an uncritical manner. Towards the end of his career, Mendelssohn returned to the treatment of Spinoza in order to defend his friend Lessing from attacks by Jacobi. Mendelssohn again emphasized the importance of not treating Spinoza’s thought as either to be straightforwardly affirmed or rejected, as straightforwardly “true” or “false” (which he views Jacobi as wrongly doing), but as able to contribute to the pursuit of truth if approached in a critical, and thus “conversational,” manner—which, Mendelssohn asserts, is what Lessing, as a good philosopher, had fruitfully done.<sup>11</sup> In addition to enabling a more nuanced engagement with different thinkers and dialogue partners, a framework like Mendelssohn’s that does not seek to rigidly confine truth to a single fixed formulation may also be less likely to view the presence of an alternative perspective as constituting a crisis.<sup>12</sup> Rather than having to treat an alternative statement

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion in Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn’s Theological-Political Thought* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–30.

<sup>11</sup> See Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza’s Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 12–16, 170–80; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 101–106.

<sup>12</sup> The specific shape of the institutional structure in which a given tradition operates may also be a key material factor in relation to these issues. For example, the fact that Aquinas operated in a tradition with a centralized authority structure was undoubtedly influential on his stance toward heresy, and the fact that the rabbinic tradition out of which Mendelssohn came did not possess the same type of centralized authority structure would likewise have impacted the orientation that he develops. Furthermore, even to the extent that certain types of institutional authority (even if not centralized) did exist in rabbinic contexts in Mendelssohn’s time, Mendelssohn himself was not in

as something that one must silence and must avoid engaging, out of fears that it would destabilize the statement that has been deemed authoritative, one can incorporate the other perspective into one's engagement and discourse, without it needing to represent a societal or communal danger that requires force and violence to suppress.

Indeed, given Mendelssohn's account of the vagueness of human thought and language vis-à-vis truth, the very idea of "heresy" (in the sense exemplified by Aquinas's account) simply dissolves as having no substantive application. If one does not seek to establish certain verbal formulations as authoritative determinations of "the truth," then no one would be condemned for diverging from such positive verbal formulations. As such, there would be no role for the notion of "assertions which one should silence and reject without engaging"—instead, when one encounters an idea that appears to differ from what you would say, the proper response is always to engage it more fully and to see what elements of it are more persuasive, and which are less persuasive. There could be various ideas that, after engaging them openly and conscientiously, turn out in one's considered assessment to have relatively less persuasiveness than others, but this will always be a matter of after-the-fact evaluation rather than a priori rejection.

In other writings, Mendelssohn also consistently upholds continued intellectual engagement with supposed "heretics." In a 1774 letter, Mendelssohn recommends that, as part of a course of training in philosophy, it can also be useful to read philosophers who put forth more problematic or controversial positions (he gives the writings of Spinoza and d'Holbach as examples), as part of exercises "for the training of the mind": "Sound philosophy having been firmly engrained, nothing is to be feared from the specious arguments of these teachers of heretical

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a position of institutional authority in this sense, and so his thought was accordingly also shaped by this positionality.

Likewise, one's attitudes toward heresy or the presence of alternative perspectives may also be related to attitudes toward salvation and soteriology. A tradition that holds that salvation is dependent on affirmation of specific institutions or institutionally particular doctrines might be more likely to treat theological diversity as threatening. In Mendelssohn's case, while he does affirm the idea of "eternal truths that are indispensable to salvation" (*ewiger Wahrheiten, die zur Seligkeit unentbehrlich sind*) and "eternal doctrines of salvation" (*ewigen Heilslehren*) (J 97/164), he asserts that these are both limited (comprising affirmation of an eternal deity who rules the universe and recompenses human beings for their actions in a future life) and that they are accessible to all people through natural reason. As such, he remains committed to engaging through the processes of reasoning and conversation, whereas someone who affirmed that certain "saving truths" were accessible only through a certain historically specific revealed tradition, and not accessible merely via human reason, might find critical conversation on such topics more threatening.

doctrine [*Irrlehrer*]. On the contrary, they can serve to confirm in the mind the true principles of reason and of natural religion.”<sup>13</sup> That is to say, even in the case of thinkers who diverge from core principles that Mendelssohn himself would affirm, he nevertheless promotes close engagement with their “heretical” thinking, through which one can gain a deeper and more critical understanding of one’s own positions, rather than simply affirm them without engaging with counterarguments. Far from condemning other positions as “heretical” in order not to engage with them, he expresses a negative view of those who seek to apply this label to others, writing to a friend, “May the Lord protect you, and me also, in the future against all quarrels with heresy-hunters.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in expressing opposition to the practice of excommunication, he holds that a key purpose of religious communities is one of edification, and that even the expression of views considered by others to be “heresy” is not proper grounds for the exclusion of such a person. He writes, “With what kind of heart can we deny to a dissident, heretic, or nonconformist the right to participate in this edification?”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Mendelssohn’s more open approach contains neither authoritative verbal formulations of “orthodoxy” that one must uncritically accept, on the basis of trust in authority, nor the opposite category of “heretical” utterances that one should uncritically reject.

In addition, for Mendelssohn, granting every other person’s ideas a sincere engagement constitutes an ethical act that affirms the oneness of humanity and combats tendencies to reject others simply because they outwardly appear different from us. This emphasis on the oneness of humanity, alongside having a basis in various elements of Jewish tradition, also places Mendelssohn in accord with prominent streams of Enlightenment-era intellectual discourse. Earlier, we saw that he said that one who rejects others simply because they think or express themselves differently on religious matters “has divested himself of all humanity” (*J* 67/135). He applies a similar warning to those who make too-hasty judgments in inter-cultural contexts:

In judging the religious ideas of a nation that is otherwise still unknown, one must, for the same reason, take care not to regard everything from one’s own *parochial* point of view, lest one should call idolatry what, in reality, is perhaps only *script* ... Our own travelers may very often make similar mistakes when they report to us on the religion of distant peoples. They

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<sup>13</sup> Mendelssohn, *JubA* 3.1: 306–307; translation from Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Oxford: Littman, 2011), 285.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 395.

<sup>15</sup> Mendelssohn, Preface to Menasseh ben Israel’s *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, *JubA* 8:21; translation from Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 472; Mendelssohn’s original has four terms (“*einem Dissidenten, Andersdenkenden, Irrdenkenden oder Abweichenden*”) while Altmann renders only three.

must acquaint themselves very intimately with the thoughts and opinions of a nation before they can say with certainty whether its images still have the character of script, or whether they have already degenerated into idolatry. (*J* 113–14/179–80, italics in the original)

The “parochial” stance that Mendelssohn condemns is undoubtedly something that applies not only to overseas expeditions, but also something that he himself encountered from many of his Christian interlocutors, in the prejudicial notions of Judaism applied to Mendelssohn as a representative of a Jewish minority that was “different” in both visible appearance and forms of religious expression.<sup>16</sup> As with Mendelssohn’s description of conversations with his “best friend,” here he emphasizes that in such inter-cultural contexts, one must take the time and effort to “acquaint [oneself] very intimately” with the other group’s “thoughts and opinions,” since the judgments one makes without first doing so are likely to contain much distortion and misrepresentation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, ethical relation to other human beings, and the valuing of truthfulness that avoids false representation of others, reinforces the need for one to engage divergent ideas rather than dismiss or demonize them.

## Dialectical Engagement and Rabbinic Literature

In making the case for this attitude, Mendelssohn also maintains that it is no mere personal idiosyncrasy on his part, but rather constitutes a prominent element of Jewish-rabbinic religious tradition, in contrast to what he sees as dominant streams of Christian religious orientation. In other words, he casts his approach

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**16** On Mendelssohn’s caution against condemning other people or groups as idolaters, see Jeremy Fogel, “A Polynesian, a Jew and a Hindu Walk into *Jerusalem*: On Mendelssohn’s Religious Universalism,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 28, No. 2 (2020): 151–83; Gideon Freudenthal, “Idolatry Everywhere, Idolaters Nowhere,” in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism*, eds. Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2015): 205–35, at 219–23.

**17** While in *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn does not present his conversations with his “best friend” as a form of inter-religious dialogue, he had earlier written a similar description in relation to explicitly inter-religious conversations: “I am lucky to be friends with many an excellent man who is not of my faith. We sincerely love one another, even though we suspect and suppose that we are of entirely different opinions in matters of faith. I enjoy the pleasure of their company, which improves and delights me. Never did my heart secretly call out to me: Too bad about their beautiful souls! Whoever believes that no salvation is to be found outside of his church must quite often feel such a sigh rising in his breast.” Mendelssohn, “Open Letter to Lavater,” in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, ed. Michah Gottlieb (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2011): 11; *JubA* 7:13.

to truth and interpersonal engagement as deriving not merely from more recent liberal-minded Enlightenment notions of free inquiry, but as having a longstanding and indeed pre-modern precedent in rabbinic tradition. He asserts that traditional Judaism “has no symbolic books, no articles of faith [*Glaubensartikel*]. No one has to swear to symbols or subscribe, by oath, to certain articles of faith. Indeed, we have no conception at all of what are called religious oaths; and according to the spirit of true Judaism, we must hold them to be inadmissible” (*J* 100/167). While he says that Judaism and the Torah do contain a wide range of “religious doctrines” (*Religionslehren*) (*J* 99/166), these are taught through “living, spiritual instruction” (*J* 102/168) and are not bound into fixed verbal propositions that all Jews must affirm—there are various faith-commitments that are taught and passed down, but not *articles of faith*.<sup>18</sup> While various Jewish thinkers have sought to condense Jewish teachings into a smaller number of formulations, Mendelssohn expresses thanks that “these have not yet been forged into shackles of faith” (*J* 101/167), in which someone would be condemned if they put forth divergent formulations. He holds that the “debate” (*Streit*) over what should be counted as “fundamental doctrines” (*Fundamentallehren*)—or indeed over whether any teachings should be separated out as “fundamental”—has instead been conducted “with earnestness and zeal, but without animosity and bitterness,” and that “no one has ever branded Albo a heretic [*verketzert*]” due to his divergence from Maimonides’ proposed formulations (*J* 101/167–68).<sup>19</sup>

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**18** In other words, while various basic forms of “religious commitment”—e.g., the importance of the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, God’s special relation to Israel, the future coming of the messiah—have played prominent roles in Jewish thought, tradition, and teaching, Mendelssohn seeks to emphasize that there is no one *specific verbal formulation* about what happened at Sinai (or about election or about the messiah) that Jews have been required to affirm in the form of a fixed creed. Thus, the precise way(s) in which one should understand these general ideas remains open and given over to continued discussion.

**19** On questions of doctrinal formulations in the medieval period, see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Oxford: Littman, 2006). On the wide range of medieval and post-medieval departures from Maimonides’ formulations, see Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman, 2004). See also Michah Gottlieb, “Does Judaism Have Dogma? Moses Mendelssohn and a Pivotal Nineteenth-Century Debate,” in *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies 2019*, ed. Yoav Meyrav (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 219–42, at 220–26.

For our purposes here, we can note that Mendelssohn is historically correct in his claim that rabbinic Jewish communities, in actual practice, did not employ any set of fixed doctrinal formulations in order to deem certain people heretics. That is, even if some figures like Maimonides sought to assert certain doctrinal formulations, these formulations did not take on the status of a litmus test of communal exclusion or inclusion, and different thinkers explicitly differed from

In addition to making this historical claim concerning the absence in rabbinic tradition of “formulations from which none are permitted to diverge,” Mendelssohn also posits a positive theoretical affirmation of such tolerance of multiple diverging thought-constructions: “In this respect, we have not yet disregarded the important dictum of our sages, ‘Although this one loosens and the other binds, both teach the words of the living God’” (*J* 101/168). In drawing upon the expression of *elu ve-elū divrei elohim ḥayyim* (“these and these are words of the living God”), Mendelssohn posits a basis in the Talmud for his stance of affirming ideational multiplicity.<sup>20</sup> This expression is found most prominently in Babylonian Talmud (hereafter BT) *Eruvin* 13b, in relation to multiplicity of halakhic perspectives in relation to the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai—and there, even in contexts where one upholds a certain halakhic position in practice, one nevertheless engages the reasoning and details of the opposing view, and thus continues to “learn from both,” and indeed precisely by setting the one in dialogical relation to the other. This engagement with another person’s opposing opinion stands in contrast to simply shutting down the other person as “false” or “wrong.” Furthermore, in that same passage, the school of Hillel is praised precisely because they teach the opinions of both schools, and even mention the opposing opinion before their own. Thus, where one might expect schismatic division and condemning rejection and non-engagement of the opposing view, the Talmudic text instead praises continued conversational engagement.

Additionally, the same phrase (“these and these are words of the living God”) is found in BT *Gittin* 6b, in relation to the concubine of Gibeah, with R. Evyatar asserting that her husband found a fly, and with R. Jonathan asserting that her husband found a hair. Elijah the prophet proclaims that God, engaging the matter in the heavenly academy, teaches both opinions. It is then asked: “Does this mean that there is doubt before God?” And Elijah replies, “Both these and these are words of the living God”: namely, the husband first found a fly, and then found a hair. In this

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Maimonides without being labeled as heretics. Even if not all *ideas* were treated as equally acceptable, there was nevertheless not an attempt to tie ideas to specific verbal formulations, and this led to a dynamic significantly different from a cultural framework involving a requirement to affirm specifically worded formulations. In addition, the absence in rabbinic communities of centralized institutional structures for declaring certain formulations as authoritative is also an important factor in this regard.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to drawing upon this phrase, the first half of Mendelssohn’s sentence (“Although this one loosens and the other binds”) refers to Mishnah *Yevamot* 1:4 (BT *Yevamot* 13b), which states that although the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai took opposing halakhic positions on issues such as permitted or forbidden marriages, they still did not refrain from marrying women from families of the opposing school.



framing, both views capture something of the truth, but each one does so only partially. This passage notably describes not a halakhic question, but rather a question about the true understanding of the Torah's narratives, and can plausibly be understood as affirming that when two people sincerely come to two differing and seemingly incompatible views about a religious matter, one should not insist that "at most only one can be correct, and the other must be wrong." Rather, taking a "divine perspective" means assuming that one can find important true elements in both perspectives, and that one should engage with both, while not assuming that either captures the truth completely.

In addition to these thematizing formulations, scholarship on classical rabbinic literature has emphasized the ways in which the Babylonian Talmud consistently operates by putting competing ideas in back-and-forth conversation with one another, and that this discursive practice can be understood as setting a model for training readers of the Talmud in how to engage intellectually with the presence of differing positions.<sup>21</sup> Namely, the goal in thinking about these types of issues is not to isolate any single view, but precisely to approach deeper understanding as something that emerges from putting ideas into dialectical conversation.<sup>22</sup>

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21 For portrayals of the Talmud's approach to dialectical argumentation that resonate with Mendelssohn's orientation, see, for example, David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990); Louis Jacobs, *The Talmudic Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 39–53. There is some debate in scholarship as to what the Talmud's discursive *practice* of engaging with opposing opinions implies about the Talmud's *conception* of truth. For an example of such debate, see Christine Hayes, "Legal Truth, Right Answers, and Best Answers: Dworkin and the Rabbis," *Diné Israel* 25 (2008): 73–121; Richard Hidary, "Right Answers Revisited: Monism and Pluralism in the Talmud," *Diné Israel* 26 (2009): 229–55; Christine Hayes, "Theoretical Pluralism in the Talmud: A Response to Richard Hidary," *Diné Israel* 26 (2009): 257–307. See also Daniel Boyarin, "Dialectic and Divination in the Talmud," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 217–40.

However, for my purposes in this essay, there is no need to resolve the best way to characterize the Talmud's theoretical conception of truth. Rather, the main relevant point (on which there is broader scholarly agreement) is that the Talmud encourages the *practice* of engaging critically with competing positions, in a manner that resonates with the practical orientation that Mendelssohn promotes. That is to say, regardless of whether the Talmud thinks that "truth" lies partially with each of the voices in a dialectical debate, or only with one of the voices, it nevertheless encourages critical engagement with the opposing positions and assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each of them.

22 For a good example of a passage in which not merely halakhic positions, but also theological ideas (on messianic redemption) are put into dialectical conversation with one another, see the dispute between R. Joshua and R. Eliezer in BT Sanhedrin 97b–98a.

The thematizations as well as the discursive practices of the Talmud come across as very similar to the description that we saw above (*J* 66/134–35) of the type of back-and-forth conversations that Mendelssohn presents himself as engaging in with his friend. Indeed, when he says there that “*Streit und Wortwechsel*” (debate and word-exchange) is crucial for the pursuit of truth, his use of “*Streit*” may be a rendering of the rabbinic notion of *mahloqet*—particularly in the sense of *mahloqet le-shem shamayim*, a dispute/debate for the sake of heaven (*Mishnah Avot* 5:17)—and by “*Wortwechsel*” he may well have the phrase “*shaqla vetarya*” (give-and-take in Talmudic argumentation) in mind. Likewise, when he insists that his ideas and his friend’s ideas had to “rub against” one another for a long time (*an einanderreiben*), he may well be thinking of the Talmudic assertion from *BT Taanit* 7a: “Just as with iron implements, one sharpens the other [when they are rubbed against one another], so too *talmidei hakhamim* [Torah scholars; lit. students of the sages] sharpen one another in *halakhah*.”

Likewise, Mendelssohn’s account of fruitful argument with his friend is also similar to the narrative in *BT Bava Metzia* 84a, which describes R. Yoḥanan’s friendship with Resh Lakish. There, after Resh Lakish dies and R. Yoḥanan is disconsolate, the other rabbis try to find him a replacement dialogue partner, and send R. Eleazar ben Pedat. However, when R. Yoḥanan puts forth an opinion, R. Eleazar provides argumentation to support R. Yoḥanan’s position. R. Yoḥanan does not like this, and says that when he would put forth an opinion to Resh Lakish, Resh Lakish would raise twenty-four objections, and R. Yoḥanan would respond with twenty-four counter-claims, and their understanding of the matter would be broadened. He does not like R. Eleazar’s approach, because, in R. Yoḥanan’s words, “Don’t I already know that what I say is good?”—in other words, he wants someone to tell him why they disagree with him, and not someone who tells him why they agree with him. Thus, encountering an opposing position is not a threat; rather, it is the absence of such oppositional engagement that is the true threat to learning and the pursuit of truth.

As such, Mendelssohn may indeed have a significant textual basis when he claims a Jewish theological underpinning for his attitude towards engagement with opposing opinions.<sup>23</sup> The orientation displayed in the Talmud does indeed

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23 Alongside the role of dialectical engagement with opposing opinions, another rabbinic dynamic that correlates with and may have shaped Mendelssohn’s position is the practice, particularly in classical rabbinic midrashic collections, of presenting different interpretations of a scriptural verse alongside one another. The presentation of multiple different possibilities for understanding one verse resonates with Mendelssohn’s stance that ideas cannot be captured well in static verbal formulations: the fact that one scriptural formulation can be understood in so many different ways points to the need to engage in further dialogue.

seem opposed to the notion of treating the ideas of another person as unworthy of engagement and to the notion that such engagement is something dangerous that must be avoided. Even when presenting a seeming “heretic” in the figure of Elisha ben Abuya, who, with regard to a central theological matter, raises a “doubting” question of “Could this mean that there are two powers in heaven?”, and who subsequently engages in violation of Torah prohibitions, that same passage presents R. Meir as continuing to study with and learn from him. When asked how R. Meir could do so, the passage simply states: “He found a pomegranate, ate the inside, and threw away the peel” (BT *Ḥagigah* 15a–b).<sup>24</sup> In other words, when you encounter someone with supposedly divergent theological ideas, a seeming “heretic,” should one refrain from conversational engagement with that person? Of course not! Rather, the assumption is that one can learn important things from such a person, so one should continue talking with him, and in the process of doing so discern which of the things he says are worth retaining and which are not.<sup>25</sup>

## Heretics, Institutional Authorities, Power, and Truth

In the context of Mendelssohn’s framework of engagement with those labeled as “heretics,” he provides an analysis according to which such “heretics” are, in ac-

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Mendelssohn presents an account of rabbinic scriptural interpretation in his introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes, in ways that resonate with his treatment of language in *Jerusalem*; see *Moses Mendelssohn’s Hebrew Writings*, trans. Edward Breuer, eds. Edward Breuer and David Sorkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 123–32/*JubA* 14: 148–53. There, he likewise emphasizes that multiple different interpretations can all be linked to the “words of the living God” (123, 126/148, 150), and also refers to the thematizing assertion in BT Sanhedrin 34a that “one scriptural verse gives rise to many meanings” (128/151). On Mendelssohn’s engagement with rabbinic midrashic hermeneutics, see Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 184–201; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 37–40.

<sup>24</sup> Mendelssohn references this description of R. Meir and Elisha ben Abuyah in his *Be’ur Millot Ha-Higgayon*; see *Moses Mendelssohn’s Hebrew Writings*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to linking his approach to rabbinic texts, Mendelssohn also viewed the Book of Ecclesiastes as deliberately engaging dialogically with “heretical” views. In David Sorkin and Edward Breuer’s description, Mendelssohn “suggested that the best way to comprehend Ecclesiastes was to read it as a philosophical dialogue in which the contradictory, skeptical, or heretical opinions were presented by a series of interlocutors. Solomon laid out a series of arguments and counter-arguments in which he quoted current opinions or worldly wisdom in order to assess their validity” (*Moses Mendelssohn’s Hebrew Writings*, 113).

tual practice, likely to possess “more truth” than thinkers in positions of institutional authority:

If religion permits itself no arbitrary punishments, it should least of all allow this torture of the soul which, alas, is felt only by a person *who truly has religion*. Think of all the unfortunate ones who from time immemorial were supposed to have been improved by excommunication and damnation. Reader! To whatever visible church, synagogue, or mosque you may belong! *See if you do not find more true religion among the host of the excommunicated than among the far greater host of those who excommunicated them.* Now, excommunication either has civil consequences or does not have them. If it does produce civil misery, its burden falls only on the high-minded man who believes that he owes this sacrifice to divine truth. He who has no religion must be mad if he exposes himself to the least danger for the sake of an imaginary truth. If, however, its consequences are but of a spiritual nature, as some people wish to persuade themselves, they, again, afflict only the man who is still susceptible to this kind of feeling. The irreligious man laughs at such things and remains impenitent. (*J* 73/140–41, italics added)

This passage comes immediately after Mendelssohn’s assertion that “religion” in its true and proper sense does not make use of coercion; rather, “Its weapons are reason and persuasion; its strength is the divine power of truth” (*J* 73/140). That is to say, for Mendelssohn, whatever one’s denominational affiliation, a key defining characteristic of “religion,” properly understood, is that it can be “defended” through open engagement and discussion, and that these modes are also the proper forms for engaging with matters of “religion.” “Religion,” in this sense, is distinguished not so much by a specific formulated content, but in *how* one goes about seeking to engage with others regarding the ideas that one affirms. If a certain idea requires something other than reason or persuasion in order to defend it, then this is a strong indication that it is not properly classed in the sphere of “religion.” And, one can similarly assess a given person’s relation (or lack of relation) to “religion” by the way in which they relate to the ideas that they affirm. Thus, in the passage above, the “person who truly has religion” is one who, rather than imposing ideas through force, is committed to pursuing truth and being open to learning through self-criticism and mutual engagement with others.<sup>26</sup> Due to this

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26 On a theological level, linking intellectual honesty and intellectual courage with “true religion” may be bound up with an understanding of the unique God of all creation as transcending the partiality and partisanship often linked to human groups. While human groups may tend to affirm ideas that are familiar to or advantageous to their group, and may tend to resist or reject ideas that would challenge their preconceived notions, Mendelssohn appears to hold that commitment to the God who transcends all human groupings likewise entails a willingness to pursue truth critically beyond the confines of individual or group partisanship. Thus, for Mendelssohn, a stance of intel-

commitment to truth, honesty, and critical reflection, such a person may be led to uphold ideas that are viewed as unacceptable to institutional authorities, particularly if those institutional authorities are less inclined towards such approaches to truth, and may insist on adherence to authoritatively declared doctrines. Thus, such a person may end up declared a heretic or excommunicated by those authorities, if that person refuses to renounce the convictions at which he or she has arrived through a sincere pursuit of truth.

In Mendelssohn's analysis, someone who is *not* sincere in their pursuit of truth (and is thus "irreligious") would be more likely to give in to the authorities' pressure, if social or economic loss is threatened. For Mendelssohn, only someone sincerely committed to the truth as they understand it would be willing to continue to uphold their convictions in the face of such threatened losses, and would be willing to make such a "sacrifice to divine truth." As such, Mendelssohn holds that one is likely to find "more true religion" among the excommunicated than among those who do the excommunicating. It need not be that the excommunicated are correct in *everything* that they say, but simply that the willingness to make such a heavy sacrifice indicates that it is something that they would have thought about with care and sincerity, and they would therefore have performed various types of critical checks on their ideas. By contrast, the actions of those who do the excommunicating are less likely to be the result of their having personally examined the ostensible truth of the authoritative doctrines in a critical manner; instead, they are more likely to be upholding the authority and power of the institution and of their social position rather than acting on a commitment to pursuing truth openly and for its own sake. Thus, in any given case, it is always *possible* that the stance of the person doing the excommunicating corresponds more to truth than the excommunicated person's stance does—but according to Mendelssohn's analysis of institutional and social power-dynamics and their relation to truth, this is less likely to be the case in actuality, in most instances.

Thus, while Mendelssohn's position is that one should in general engage openly with another person's ideas, it may be the case that there is an additional motivation to engage with the ideas of a person who has been deemed by institutional officials to be a "heretic," since such a person's sacrifice for truth (as they see it) likely means that there are important things that one can learn from their ideas, not only despite, but even on the basis of, their having been labeled a heretic by others. In Mendelssohn's approach, it would appear, there is a greater likelihood that a person's views do have an important connection to truth if institutional au-

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lectual honesty and critical questioning is not simply a product of Enlightenment liberalism, but is a fundamentally religious obligation and a form of worship of the unique God.

thorities cannot refute a person's views through reason and persuasion and can only make use of force and the blunt instrument of excommunication.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, if the officials say, "Do not engage with that person's ideas!", this is in itself a reason to engage and examine that person's ideas more closely.

Importantly, Mendelssohn treats "true religion," linked to a "religious" commitment to the pursuit of truth, as something that can come into conflict with institutional authorities both in a "church" and in a "state" context. He asserts that, in relation to a person's convictions, neither the state nor the church "may reward or punish, compel or bribe; for the state, too, cannot have acquired by means of any contract the slightest compulsory right over our convictions" (*J* 61/129). The fact that Mendelssohn has to assert that neither the state nor the church legitimately has the right to apply coercion in relation to convictions stems from his awareness that, in actual practice, both have regularly applied such forms of coercion, and Mendelssohn seeks to persuade his readers that these practices have no rational legitimacy and ought to be opposed. In the case of both state and church, therefore, Mendelssohn is well aware of tendencies to suppress ideas which may well have a basis in truth, but which institutional power-holders have an interest in suppressing rather than openly engaging with.

We can thus view Mendelssohn's affirmation of engaging even (or especially) with those deemed "heretics" as informed by rabbinic attitudes to dialectical engagement, which he then applies to the context of modern intellectual and cultural debate.<sup>28</sup> Rather than seeking a truth proclaimed to be authoritative and shutting

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27 Among those in favor of Enlightenment in Mendelssohn's time, one of the most famous examples of someone condemned as a heretic despite his reasoned arguments and evidence was Galileo; see Mendelssohn's positive reference to Galileo in his *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 14; *JubA* 3.2: 25. See also the treatment of Kepler in Rothman, *The Pursuit of Harmony*.

28 While Mendelssohn's stance is not the only possible reading of rabbinic tradition, the connections to the Babylonian Talmud enable us to appreciate the fact that his affirmation of open dialectical engagement is not simply a "modern innovation" on Mendelssohn's part, and that his stance might be shaped by both by theoretical and practical attitudes displayed in classical rabbinic literature. On broader aspects of Mendelssohn's engagement with previous rabbinic tradition, see Elias Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Daniel H. Weiss, *Modern Jewish Philosophy and the Politics of Divine Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

In addition, recognizing the way in which rabbinic thematizing and praxis of dialectics may have shaped Mendelssohn's view that Judaism, properly understood, possesses no fixed doctrinal formulations can enable us to trace similar influences on subsequent debates about Judaism and the question of "dogma." On such debates, see, for example, Gottlieb, "Does Judaism Have Dogma?," 219–42; Leo Baeck, "Does Traditional Judaism Possess Dogmas?" [1926] in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State

down views that depart from it, Mendelssohn casts such stances—whether coming from “religious” or “secular” authorities—as inimical to the pursuit of truth, since in any form of disagreement over intellectually complex issues, there are likely to be elements of truth present on both sides of a debate. While others in Mendelssohn’s Enlightenment-era context (e.g., Lessing<sup>29</sup>) might also have affirmed similar forms of dialectical engagement with competing ideas, Mendelssohn is able to forge a closer link with previously existing practices in his own religious tradition, and can view his dialectical pursuit of truth as having a “religious” and “traditional” basis. By contrast, thinkers coming from a Christian background, with a more entrenched institutional history of “heresy” and “authoritative doctrinal formulations,” might have experienced more of a tension vis-à-vis dominant intellectual tendencies within the previous tradition that they have received.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, while various Christian thinkers by Mendelssohn’s time had affirmed the importance of dialogue and tolerance in various ways, they had fewer resources for pointing to a basis for those stances in the dominant forms of pre-modern Christian religious tradition. By contrast, Mendelssohn is able to point not merely to the Renaissance or Enlightenment eras, but to Jewish views held already “in antiquity,” and exhibited in the Babylonian Talmud as the central, mainstream, and “authoritative” text of rabbinic Torah study down to Mendelssohn’s own time.<sup>31</sup>

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University Press, 1981), 41–53. In the latter essay, note Baeck’s assertion that in Judaism, tradition “is not a mere transmission of tenets but includes the demand to inquire [*die Forderung des Forschens*] ... The commandment to inquire is the opposite of dogma. Where dogma is transmitted, inquiring in the Jewish sense would become a sin against the church” (49).

**29** Like Mendelssohn, Lessing also places emphasis on dialogical interaction and engagement with conflicting opinions in a self-critical pursuit of truth. See, for example, Robert Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany 1750–1800* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), 76, 87, 135. Likewise, one could also draw comparisons with thinkers like Herder, who also argued for recognizing diversity in ways of talking about God among different human cultures, with no one way grasping the truth in full; see, for example, Marcia Bunge, “Human Language of the Divine: Herder on Ways of Speaking about God,” in *Herder Today*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990): 304–18. However, it may be that Herder is more open to affirming diversity across different cultures, and may be less accepting of internal diversity within a given culture and of dialectical disagreement between individuals; see, for example, Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 242–46.

**30** Cf. Alexander Altmann, “Moses Mendelssohn on Excommunication,” 48–49.

**31** For an interesting discussion of ways in which various Christian thinkers prior to Mendelssohn (especially John Selden) were influenced by rabbinic tradition in shaping their views on religious pluralism, and on the ways in which these rabbinically influenced Christian thinkers in turn helped contribute to Mendelssohn’s own views, see Eric Nelson, “From Selden to Mendelssohn: Hebra-

In addition to his enculturation and habituation in rabbinic practices of dialectical engagement, Mendelssohn's sensitivity to dismissal of heretics may stem from his own experiences in eighteenth-century German intellectual and cultural contexts. As noted above, Mendelssohn repeatedly experienced prejudicial views about Judaism and its relation to rationality and coercion. In such contexts, he repeatedly encountered people who were ostensibly highly intelligent and cultured, yet denigrated Judaism in inaccurate and biased ways that stemmed more from social prejudices than from open and truth-seeking forms of investigation and engagement.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, a key motivation for his writing *Jerusalem* was in order to respond to such "parochial" misrepresentations of Judaism. He was thus personally aware that confident pronouncements about a given subject matter by figures with high levels of social and cultural authority could in fact frequently be highly distorted; as such, he would have had even more motivation to encourage a stance of close and sincere engagement rather than authoritative dismissal of "alternative" points of view.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the common eighteenth-century practice of imposing Christian "doctrinal oaths" for holding public office and related privileges would have excluded not only "Christian heretics," but also Jews. Thus, as a Jew seeking to engage in wider society, Mendelssohn was functionally (even if not technically) in the position of an "excommunicated heretic," and was unable to swear "in good conscience" to such Christian doctrinal formulations.<sup>34</sup> His sense that there may be "more true religion" among the excommunicated than among

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ism and Religious Freedom," in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe: Volume 1: Religious Freedom and Civil Liberty*, eds. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 94–114.

32 On the challenges Mendelssohn faced in putting forth his ideas due to widely held prejudicial views concerning Judaism, see, for example, Jonathan Hess, *Jews, Germans, and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 91–135; Edward Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History: Rabbinic Judaism and the Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Civil Equality," *Harvard Theological Review* 85, No. 3 (1992): 357–83.

33 On Mendelssohn's general opposition to censorship, see Michah Gottlieb, "The Limits of Liberty: Baruch Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn on Censorship," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism*, eds. Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2015): 61–77; however, cf. Mendelssohn's comments in which he says that in certain situations (of threats to social stability), some forms of state censorship could be legitimate, although still not in the case of doctrinal opinions (Gottlieb, "The Limits of Liberty," 73–77). In addition, Mendelssohn is aware that previous authorities frequently appealed (as did Aquinas and others) to *claims of a threat to social stability* in relation to censorship and exclusion of those with differing beliefs, and so critical engagement is all the more important for being able to properly distinguish between *claimed* threats to social stability and *actual* ones.

34 See in particular Mendelssohn's plea against such linking doctrinal formulations to legal privileges in the concluding pages of *Jerusalem* (135–39/200–204; and see also 61–62/129–30).



those implementing the excommunicating acts of exclusion may therefore stem from both intellectual and social-experiential factors on Mendelssohn's part.

Mendelssohn's analysis thus provides us with tools for tracing the subsequent cultural and intellectual history of two broadly different attitudes towards social power and the investigation of truth. If one encounters an institution, group or individual with social power condemning a certain view as "dangerous" or "clearly false" and encouraging others to dismiss it out of hand and not engage with it closely, what should be one's instinctive response? One attitude would be along the lines of: "If there were a legitimate basis in truth, evidence or rationality in the view being criticized, those with authority would not be condemning it in this manner or discouraging engagement with it. If they are discouraging engagement with it, it must be because the view itself lacks a basis in truth, and may therefore be socially harmful. It is therefore right not to engage with it closely, and to trust the authoritative rejection of it."<sup>35</sup> Such an attitude corresponds to the orientation encouraged by previous ecclesiastical labeling of certain views as "heretical," in the sense discussed above, but can also be an attitude that manifests in more "secular" social and political contexts as well.

The alternative attitude, by contrast, might respond to the same situation by saying: "If the view in question were actually lacking in truth, evidence, and rationality, it would be possible to display its actual flaws by close engagement with it, showing its falsehood rather than simply asserting it. If those with claimed authority are instead discouraging engagement with the view, it is likely because they would *not* be able to dismiss it so easily if they were actually to engage with its details."<sup>36</sup> Thus, their emphasis on non-engagement and dismissal is likely

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<sup>35</sup> This attitude corresponds in many ways to what Charles Sanders Peirce calls "the method of authority" in his 1877 essay "The Fixation of Belief." See Peirce, *Selected Writings*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York, NY: Dover, 1966): 91–112.

<sup>36</sup> Again, it is in theory *possible* that those who are discouraging engagement with a certain view are doing so for reasons that are less in opposition to truth-seeking. For instance, they may think that other people do not have the skills to recognize the problems with the view (although they themselves do), and that delving into the details could confuse or mislead those other people. However, Mendelssohn's stance appears to be that, in his experience, such attitudes of non-engagement, or encouraging non-engagement, are in practice less likely to be the result of an honest and critical truth-seeking attitude, and that one should be remain carefully attuned to the possibility that the excommunicating stance is stemming from more problematic motives or interests.

In addition, when Mendelssohn says that there is likely to be "more true religion" among the excommunicated than among the excommunicators, this need not imply a conscious desire to suppress truth—e.g., those who declared Galileo a heretic did not consciously think of themselves as condemning something that they themselves viewed as true, so in this sense their condemnation may not have been deliberately deceptive. However, Mendelssohn's analysis indicates that in terms of actual substance and content, those in the position of power are less likely to have engaged in

not because the view actually lacks a legitimate basis, but because engagement with the details of its arguments and claims would conflict with the particular interests of those seeking to dismiss it without engagement. It is therefore worthwhile to engage with the view more closely, to better understand it and to see which of its elements might conflict with the power-interests of those seeking to dismiss it, and to evaluate those honestly and critically.” This attitude corresponds to Mendelssohn’s rabbinically influenced stance of “talking with (those labeled as) heretics,” his sense that power-dynamics can play a significant role in prejudicial exclusion of certain views or individuals, and his sense of the difficulty of capturing ideas in words, so that in the case of complex issues, various elements of truth are often found on multiple sides of a given debate.

With these basic attitudes in mind, one can trace the greater prominence of one or the other of them across different thinkers, and also across different cultural moments in different times and places. While in Mendelssohn’s specific context, the formal labeling of certain views as heretical in institutional ecclesiastical contexts played a more prominent role in society, one can trace related social dynamics in subsequent periods as well. In today’s contexts, one can assess whether social, cultural, political, or intellectual disputes and disagreements generate a response of honest and open back-and-forth engagement of the other person’s position, or whether there is a tendency simply to denigrate and dismiss the opposing position as “unworthy of engagement.”<sup>37</sup> The latter tendency, as Mendelssohn’s analysis emphasizes, can lead to situations in which views that contain important elements of truth might be unjustifiably dismissed, and in which those with cultural or political power can make use of a non-engagement attitude in order to avoid having to engage with views that run counter to their non-truth-oriented interests. Such attitudes can also increase polarization, if different groups engage in mutual dismissal and non-engagement. Moreover, on the level of emotion and affect, if disagreements are approached in this way, then the presence of or encounter with an opposing viewpoint can generate a sense of conversational and social crisis, with no apparent solution other than forcefully shutting down the dissenting perspective. By contrast, more open engagement, even if it would not lead to full agreement, would at least enable a recognition of areas of overlap and mutual acknowledgement of specific elements of reasonability, thus reducing tendencies towards

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proper self-criticism of the ideas that they are promoting and proper open consideration of the ideas they are condemning.

37 In this regard, one might trace potential historical and conceptual connections between practices of ecclesiastical authorities labeling something as “heresy” and practices of modern state authorities labeling something as “disinformation” or “misinformation.”

demonization or prejudicial misrepresentation, and removing the “crisis” status of the situation. Likewise, even if after close engagement one still finds significant problems in the other person’s position, the act of engagement would also have helped one become aware of flaws or weaknesses in one’s own initial position. In addition, cultivating habits of close engagement with differing views would also likely enhance one’s ability to judge when dismissal and non-engagement is taking place on the basis of power rather than the honest pursuit of truth. Accordingly, continuing to study and reflect on both Mendelssohn’s and classical rabbinic literature’s approaches to “talking with heretics” can contribute fruitfully to philosophical and cultural efforts of honest and critical truth-seeking in the present day.

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## Part Three: **History**





Cedric Cohen-Skalli

# **Leo Strauss in Paris 1933: A Missed Opportunity for a Dialogical Understanding of the Crisis of Liberalism**

## **Introduction: Against a Fateful Division of Labor in Scholarship**

A dichotomy and dissymmetry has long been accepted in scholarship on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies of the political and theopolitical question of the Orient in these centuries have made clear how it is imbricated with the political and intellectual transformations in the West in the same period. It has become a well-established methodological norm that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Levant cannot be studied independently from European and American forms of expansionism (colonial empires, global markets, knowledge, civil and military technology, political organization). In sharp contrast, another methodological norm has established itself. The crises accompanying the liberal transformations in Europe from the French Revolution to the Cold War and decolonization era are internal pathologies of the West that can be studied separately from the Levant, or at least from the political and theopolitical question of the Orient. If the Orient features in the scholarship on the crises of liberalism in twentieth-century Europe, it is then only as a battleground for rivalries between British and French imperialism, and later during the American and Soviet Cold War—but not as a cultural and religious area whose study could contribute to a genuine understanding of the crises of liberalism. Scholars of the twentieth century rarely study the upheavals of the 1930s alongside the failure of liberal conceptions and reforms in the broad sphere of British and French imperial politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In this essay, I would like to go against this fateful division of labor in intellectual history. I intend to demonstrate that a dialogical study of the Oriental and Western crises of liberalism is possible and can contribute to their understanding. For this purpose, the following pages will establish an unusual dialogue between Eastern and Western intellectual sources, notwithstanding the dissymmetry of status attributed to these sources. The dissymmetry is linked to the fact that Western intellectual sources are often identified with canonical thinkers and intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In contrast, Oriental intellectual sources are penned by lesser-known figures, yet they contain a unique perspective on and framing of the crisis of liberalism. It is

time to acknowledge the sources in the Middle East (during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as part of our philosophical contemporaneity. In this historical task, Jewish studies can play a new global intellectual role. It can use its vast Oriental and Western sources beyond the traditional elucidation of Jewish cultural, religious, and national heritage, toward a new articulation of East and West, North and South, modernity and tradition. The following pages are a first step in that new direction.

The present essay proposes an inter-regional and inter-religious understanding of the crisis of liberalism. In its first part, it paints with broad brush the migration of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European liberal transformations to the rapidly changing Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. In the second part, the essay focuses on Paris's interwar intellectual scene, where this expansion of liberalism is reflected upon critically from the perspective of the European crisis of the 1930s, but also from a deeper Jewish, Islamic, and Christian inspiration. Moving from the East to the West, the essay reconstructs step by step a growing convergence that established itself between the theopolitical question of the late Ottoman Empire and important intellectual trends in the interwar period in Paris. For this purpose, it uses as a guiding thread a Jewish intellectual episode: Leo Strauss's rediscovery of a Jewish–Islamic philosophical model successfully developed during the Middle Ages. The reconstruction of this episode and its intellectual background in the 1930s will illuminate an overlooked interconnection with similar questioning in the late and post-Ottoman Levant. It will also shed new light on parallel intellectual projects in Paris like Louis Massignon's development of a Catholic–Islamic mystical model and Étienne Gilson's rediscovery of Christian medieval philosophy with its Islamic and Jewish components.

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was a young German Jewish philosopher exiled in Paris around 1933. Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was France's leading historian of Islam and MENA in the first half of the twentieth century, and Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) a celebrated French historian of Christian medieval philosophy. All three met in person in Paris in the years 1932–1933.<sup>1</sup> As will be demonstrated, their philosophical, religious and political projects met too, or at least intersected. They intersected also with the theopolitical concerns of the Orient for reasons linked to their specific area of expertise—Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought

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1 For an overview of these three thinkers, see Philipp von Wussow, *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2020); Florian Michel, *Étienne Gilson: une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2018); Manoël Pénicaud, *Louis Massignon: le catholique musulman* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2020). For evidence about this encounter, see Leo Strauss, Heinrich Meier, and Wiebke Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1996), 353, 408, 427–28, 431, 435, 438, 457, 608, 609, 611, 630.

—but also to their shared interest in medieval intellectual history and in a critical approach to the historical shift of modernity. This moment of convergence, nonetheless, remained limited and soon fell into oblivion. The following pages exhume this forgotten episode, for it entails a unique potential for a dialogical and critical understanding of the crisis of liberalism in the West and the Levant.

## The Political Question of the Orient

The National Assembly, considering that the conditions necessary to be a French citizen and to become an active citizen, are fixed by the Constitution, and that any man who, meeting the said conditions, takes the civic oath, and undertakes to fulfill all the duties that the Constitution imposes, is entitled to all the advantages it provides, revokes all adjournments, reservations and exceptions inserted in previous decrees relative to Jewish individuals, who will take the civic oath, which shall be regarded as a waiver of all privileges and exceptions previously introduced in their favor. (Decree concerning the Jews who will take the civic oath, 27 and 28 September 1791<sup>2</sup>)

The famous French revolutionary decree of 1791 abolished Jewish corporations and their privileges inherited from the Ancien Régime agreements while granting “to Jewish individuals, who will take the civic oath” “all the advantages [the Constitution] provides”. This decree, this shift of legal frame, was the logical consequence of the general abolition of feudal privileges in 1789. Yet it was revoked and suspended for two years concerning the Jews, before eventually being approved by a vote. Historians of Jewish emancipation studied the impact in France and in Europe of the French revolutionary decree or other charters of rights, often adopting a teleological approach and examining how much time it took for the different states to emancipate their Jews. As a consequence, they tended to neglect the peculiar impact of Western European Jewish emancipation in MENA during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, with the conquest of Algeria in 1830 and France’s and England’s growing influence in the Maghreb and Levant after the loss of their American colonies, the question of civic emancipation of religious minorities in MENA became a burning problem.

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2 Jacques Guillaume Thouret, “Décret concernant les juifs qui prêteront le serment civique, lors de la séance du 27 septembre 1791,” in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 – Première série (1787–1799) Tome XXXI – Du 17 au 30 septembre 1791* (Paris: Librairie Administrative P. Dupont, 1888): 372–73.

3 Aron Rodrigue, “From Millet to Minority: Turkish Jewry,” in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, eds. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995): 238–61.

In the nineteenth century, the territories of the Ottoman Empire entered a period of multifaceted political, cultural, and economic reconfigurations. Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya were conquered, and submitted to European modern colonial rule. Greece, Romania, and other territories of the Balkans and Eastern Europe were becoming independent or parts of other states. The Egypt of Mehmed Ali separated from Istanbul and carved for itself a semi-independent kingdom in Egypt, Soudan (Sudan), and Syria, threatening even militarily the central imperial power in Istanbul, and then finally falling under British rule by the end of the nineteenth century. The Wahhabi Saudi dynasty forged in the Arabic Peninsula during the eighteenth century and the difficult reshaping of the Qajar Iran under Russian and British influence also belong to this large picture.

Facing this multifaceted challenge of the Ottoman Empire vis-à-vis its glorious past and Islamic ideals, Sultan Abdulmecid I and leading bureaucrats engaged in a series of reforms (Tanzimat) in the mid-nineteenth century. “On November 3, 1839, Foreign Minister Mustafa Reşid Pasha read an imperial decree before Sultan Abdulmecid and an assembled audience of state dignitaries, religious leaders, prominent bureaucrats, foreign diplomats, and nobles.”<sup>4</sup> The text read by Reşid Pasha illustrates the ambiguities of the reforms. On the one hand, the incipit opens with a traditional understanding and narrative of decline:

As high and low know, since the first days of our exalted state [*Devlet-i Âlî*], the Ottoman sovereignty [*saltanat-ı seniyye*] was powerful and its people had successfully flourished and reached prosperity while they were observing thoroughly the precepts of the venerable Koran and the laws of sharia. Yet, within the last one hundred and fifty years, previous power and prosperity turned into weakness and poverty due to a succession of disasters and disobeying sacred sharia and useful laws based on diverse reasons. It is a crystal-clear fact that states which are not administrated by religious law cannot last for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, this conventional complaint about the loss of religious and moral observance is followed by an unusual reformist project and narrative of improvement and growth:

When we take the geographical position of the Ottoman provinces, their fertile lands, abilities and capacities of the people into consideration, it is clear that we will reach the desired result within five to ten years with the help of divine providence. Legislating new laws is a necessity to administrate the Ottoman Empire and the provinces according to a well-designed legal

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<sup>4</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 72. See also Edhem Eldem, “L’édit des Tanzimat (1839): Une relecture,” *Turcica* 52 (2021): 201–307.

<sup>5</sup> Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi [BOA], MFB/48. My translation.

frame, relying on the help of the Almighty Creator [*hazret-i bârî*],<sup>6</sup> and receiving intercession from the ethereality of the Holy Prophet.<sup>7</sup>

Security of the person and his other property as well as rationalization of the tax system and of army conscription were the efficacious means of “a good administration” (*tedâbir-i müessire-i hüsn-i idâre*) which were supposed to close the gap with Western empires and restore the past splendor of the Ottoman Empire. A new regime of more direct relationships between the Ottoman Sultan and his subjects along the principle of the rule of law was expected to emerge from the difficult implementation of these declarations. The 1839 edict was thus presenting two faces: religious amendment and modern administrative reforms, confusedly suggesting that the moral and religious grandeur of the past could be achieved by new administrative means.

Such an evolution implied progressively redefining the different subjects of the Ottoman Empire, traditionally determined by their belonging to a confessional community, as more equal Ottoman subjects before a more universal law. Yet as evidenced in the 1856 decree concerning the civic equality of the different confessional communities in the empire, the line taken by the Sultan and his administration was again confusing. On the one hand, the Sultan confirmed the privileges granted to the protected *millets* or confessional communities: “We declare that all the privileges and spiritual immunities granted by my sublime ancestors to the Christian and other non-Muslim communities belonging to the constituents of my people who live in my imperial provinces will last until the hereafter. They are eternal.”<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the Sultan tried to affirm a new principle of legal equality between Muslims and non-Muslims:

The guarantees promised on our part by the *Hatt-ı Hümayun of Gülhane* [1839 declaration], and in conformity with my favourable regulation, to all the magnificent subjects of mine, without distinction of religion and sect, for the security of their persons and property and the preservation of their chastity are today confirmed and consolidated, and efficacious measures shall be taken in order that they may have their full and entire effect.<sup>9</sup>

The attempt at civil emancipation of Christian and Jewish Ottoman subjects did not take the French revolutionary path, replacing the Ancien Régime confessional

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6 *Bârî* is one of the ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam.

7 BOA, MFB/48. My translation.

8 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

9 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

agreements with a civic oath to the Constitution. It paradoxically both confirmed the ancient confessional system and transformed it toward a more liberal regime where “the sacraments of all religions are and shall be professed without limitations” and “no subject of my Empire shall be hindered in the exercise of the religion that he professes.”<sup>10</sup> Reform was done not by replacing but by juxtaposing traditional and modern sets of rights. This paradox can partially be explained by the historical background. The 1856 declaration came after the Crimean War (1853–1856) in which the English and French empires took side with the Ottomans against Russia. Their support was conditioned upon Ottoman acceptance of liberal reforms concerning religious minorities, and concerning the right for foreigners to “dispose of land in [the Sultan’s] dominions.”<sup>11</sup> The reforms did not evolve out of an internal revision of the Ottoman system, but out of growing Western interventionism superimposed on it.

This complex attempt at reform and emancipation had even more complex results. On the one hand, it facilitated the emergence of a Christian, and to a lesser degree Jewish, economic and cultural elite, whose most visible representatives were Armenians, Syrian-Lebanese Christians, and Greeks in a series of port cities from Salonica to Alexandria. These elites were integrated into the global economic market more quickly than the Muslim population and often became indirect agents of English and French imperialism, dissociating themselves further from Muslims. Thus, for instance, in the nineteenth century, Beirut became a large Christian city, a commercial hub in constant exchange with Europe and the Americas, as well as a seminal cultural center in which Protestant and Catholic religious agents spurred the rebirth of the Arabic language and Arabic literature, culture, and nationalism.<sup>12</sup> George Antonius (1891–1942), in his 1938 magnum opus *The Arab Awakening*, opens his national narrative with a striking distinction between “a false start” of Arab nationalism in Mehmed Ali’s new Egypt and “the start” in Christian Lebanon under the influence of Christian missionaries and Lebanese Christian intellectuals.<sup>13</sup> This problematic distinction reflected the cultural ascend-

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10 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

11 BOA, MMS/6–245.29–06–1272. My translation.

12 For an overview, see Fruma Zachs, *The Making of Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Concerning the presence of Persian/Iranian intellectuals in Beirut and the significance of this town at the turn of the twentieth century for those intellectuals, see H.E. Chehabi, Peyman Jafari, and Maral Jefroudi, *Iran in the Middle East: Transnational Encounters and Social History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 120–43.

13 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2001). See also Martin S. Kramer, *Arab Awakening & Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 111–23.

ency of Christians in the late Ottoman Empire, and its role in reshaping the socio-political configuration of the Levant.

On the other hand, this ascension of Christian and Jewish elites within the Ottoman Empire together with the growing imperial influence of Britain and France sparked a series of harsh reactions from Muslim subjects and leaders, leading to the genocide of the Armenians, which unfolded from the 1890s until the aftermath of World War I.<sup>14</sup> In his chapter on “the Hamidian despotism,” George Antonius perceives clearly the shift of the Sultan from the Tanzimat reformist project to “an attempt [...] to strengthen his authority [...] by a greater display of his prerogatives as caliph of Islam.”<sup>15</sup> In parallel, he is perfectly able to decipher the same transformation in the national Arab awakening. “One of the lasting contributions which the development of Western education in Syria [including Lebanon] made to the Arab national movement was that it helped to transfer the leadership from Christians to Moslem hands.”<sup>16</sup> The Western influence on the Christians and Jews of the Levant created a growing dissociation with the Muslim majority in Turkish and Arab territories, which manifested itself in a series of phenomena: a growing cultural and linguistic divide between Christian and Jewish minorities and the Muslim majority, Abdul Hamid II’s Muslim shift, the Armenian genocide, and Zionism and its growing rejection by Muslims and Christians. Interestingly, Antonius did not mention the Armenians’ fate in his fresco of Arab national awakening; in sharp contrast, he closed his narrative with the Arab–Zionist divide: “But, the logic of facts is inexorable. It shows that no room can be made in Palestine for a second nation [the Jews] except by dislodging or exterminating the nation in possession [the Arabs in Palestine].”<sup>17</sup>

These final words of Antonius make clear the central political question of the Orient. The transformation of the Ottoman-Islamic concept of ethnic-religious communities into a national and civic notion of a multi-religious society evolved in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century into a growing divide and confrontation between ethnic-religious groups—a confrontation both fostering and challenging the growing Western imperial grip on MENA, with no political framework, ancient or new, capable of harmonizing it. Emblematic of this missing political framework is the tipping of the late Ottoman Empire’s or Mehmet Ali’s liberal reforms into a severe economic crisis followed by increased British and French col-

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent survey of the Armenian genocide, see Benny Morris and Dror Ze’evi, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey’s Destruction of Its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Antonius, *Arab Awakening*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Antonius, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Antonius, 412.

onial interventionism. This process deepened the ethnic-religious divide between Muslims and Christians in Syria-Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, and between Jews and Palestinians in Palestine. The civic conversion envisioned in the French revolutionary decree of 1791 both happened and failed in the Levant, partly because it could rely not on a religiously homogeneous society like French society, but on an imperial mosaic of religious-ethnic communities. In view of the national, imperial, and religious conflicts which emerged in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in parallel, it remains a question why most historians and political philosophers studied separately the crisis of liberalism in Europe and in MENA. The following pages are an attempt to study dialogically the crisis of liberalism in both Europe and the Levant. Before demonstrating the role that Jewish studies can play in this dialogue, central aspects of Oriental intellectual answers to the question of the Orient have to be explained.

## The Theopolitical Question of the Orient

News of the spell of atrocities and abominations committed this summer by the troublemakers in our midst has reached the corners of the Earth. All over the civilized world, it has drawn pity and gloom, on one hand, and anger and wrath, on the other. Yet, we witness charity pour in from all sides to help the needy. Armies from every land are also heading our way to protect the weak and to punish the guilty and the aggressor. (Beirut, September 29, 1860)<sup>18</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the terrible confessional civil war between Druze and Christians in Lebanon in May–June 1860, one of the leading Christian intellectuals of the Arabic Renaissance in Beirut, Buṭrus al-Bustani (1819–1883), took the opportunity to address all Syrians with a new publication, similar to a newspaper, or rather a recurrent pamphlet. It was called *Nafir Surya* (*The Clarion of Syria*), playing with the ambiguity of the word “*nafir*,” which can announce the Day of Judgment (*yawm al-nafir*) or call for a new sense of belonging to Syria.<sup>19</sup> In the opening sentences of the first issue quoted above, he succinctly resumes the imbrication of the local civil war, its diffusion as news within the Christian West arousing identification with the plight of Christians in Lebanon, and the intervention of the Ottoman Empire together with the British and French empires. Here, as occurred after the Crimean War, the solution of late Ottoman tensions involved an increased colonial grip on the Levant, combined with an increased confessionaliza-

<sup>18</sup> Buṭrus al-Bustani et al., *The Clarion of Syria: A Patriot's Call Against the Civil War of 1860*, trans. Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Bustani et al., 45–46.



tion of the Syria-Lebanon political system. Al-Bustani did not suffice himself with this joined imperial attempt at restoring peace in Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> He addressed the civil war from a local Oriental perspective. First, he forged a concept in Arabic to name it: “The worst thing under the firmament is war, and the most horrendous among them are civil wars [*al-hurub al-ahliyya*], which break out between the commoners of a single country.”<sup>21</sup> *Al-harb al-ahli*, the domestic war, dismembers the members of one country, *ahlei bilaad wahidah*. Conceptualizing the civil war in Lebanon not as a confrontation of rival religious-ethnic groups but as a domestic conflict within a novel enlarged notion of kinship, al-Bustani developed a new notion of Syrian national identity, *al-watania*, thus hoping to embed confessional belonging in a larger territorial and historical one.

Syria, which is known as Barr al-Sham and Arabistan, is our homeland with all its diverse plains, coastlines, mountains, and barren lands. The inhabitants of Syria, regardless of their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity, are all our compatriots. For the homeland resembles a chain of many rings. One end of the chain represents our place of residence, birthplace, or ancestral home. At the other end lies our country and everyone in it. The center and magnet of these two poles are our heart. The homeland holds strong sway over its children. It draws and holds them within its embrace, however loose this embrace might be. It also captures their hearts and pulls them closer to their homeland so that they may return even when their lives are more comfortable abroad.<sup>22</sup>

The conceptual attempt of al-Bustani can be best learned from a problematic choice of his translators, Jens Hanssen and Hicham Safieddine. The first two sentences are composed according to a perfect parallelism. First, Syria is our homeland, *watanana*. Second, the inhabitants of Syria are the sons of our homeland. In the middle of these two parallel affirmations, which make clear how al-Bustani widens the traditional notion of family or religious community, he inserts each time the same qualification: *ala ihtilaf*. The translators first translate the expression as “with all its diverse plains, coastlines, mountains, and barren lands.” However, in the next sentence they translate the same expression in the following way: “regardless of their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity.” In the first sentence, the name Syria applies to one territorial entity, “our homeland,” *watanana*, although it contains or includes a great geographical diversity. In the second sentence, the inhabitants of this one geo-

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<sup>20</sup> For a survey, see Kamal S. Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), 106–19.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Bustani et al., *Clarion of Syria*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Bustani et al., 76.

graphical entity are all sons of the homeland, thus forming one large kinship, although it contains great diversity in religions (*mazhab*), in physical appearance (*haiya*), in races (*ajnas*), and even in ethnic groupings (*tushuub*). The translators rightly felt a difference between the geographical diversity enclosed in the one homeland, and the religious, physical, racial, and ethnic diversity enclosed in the national kinship. Therefore, they felt compelled to translate *ala ihtilaf* with the preposition “regardless of,” since they judged that including such a diversity was only possible by transcending the divisions, especially in the immediate aftermath of the civil war. By using the term “regardless of” and the logic of transcending diversity, they adopted a philosophical attitude which characterizes Western European state building, the emerging of the strong state, the Leviathan, as a point of reference and support for leaving behind the religious wars that plagued early modern Western Europe. Yet this strong state is exactly what is missing in the nineteenth-century Middle East and, therefore, the transcending move was not a real possibility. The Tanzimat’s or Mehmed Ali’s reforms were aimed at creating such a strong state apparatus, yet failed and were gradually replaced by colonial interventionism. As a consequence, the correct translation is “with all their religious beliefs, their physical features, their ethnicities, and their general diversity.” Al-Bustani did not conceive his concept of national belonging beyond the confessional-ethnic communities, but within them, using a geographical model, according to which the different geographical zones of Syria belonged inherently together, forming an organic entity without having to transcend toward the superior entity of the state. This organic entity, the expanded kinship of all Syrians with all their differences, was conceived as relying on a common history, on a common language and civilization, and on moral-religious interaction and commitment. Syrians’ and more broadly Arabs’ attempts to give a concrete political and cultural shape to al-Bustani’s concept of *watania*, in times of Ottoman imperial reconfiguration and British and French imperial interventionism, constituted the central theopolitical question of the Middle East.

The theopolitical problem of the concept and project of *watania* crafted by al-Bustani and other Arab or Turkish nationalists in the late Ottoman Empire can be extracted from an article entitled “Al-Waṭaniya” and published in the first issue of the Lebanese journal *Al-Mašriq* in 1898. In this article, a Christian Lebanese scholar and theologian, and leading figure of Beirut St. Joseph University, Father Louis Cheikho, takes issue with an earlier article, probably by Halil Ganem, in *La Jeune Turquie, Turkia Al-Fatat* to engage in a critical discussion of the newly elaborated concept of *watania*.<sup>23</sup> The definition of nationalism to which Cheikho responds is

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23 For an overview of Louis Cheikho’s life and work, see Robert Bell Campbell, *The Arabic Journal*

the following: nationalism “exists whenever there is an agreement of interests and religion plays absolutely no role in nationalism among the free and enlightened nations.”<sup>24</sup> The definition insists on a new argument: “the agreement upon interest is what makes nationalism.” No longer the geographic model of al-Bustani, but the constructivist model of association inherited from the West.<sup>25</sup> As in the case of the Tanzimat reforms, the evolution of the concept of *watania* involved an increased submission to European models. Cheikho refutes this definition with a theological argument:

If he claims that reason proves this principle, we would reply that the judgment of reason proves the opposite [...] The human being has a creator and he is the most elevated and most glorious being. The creature, primarily, has to perform duties of worship and service for God, the cause of his existence, whether he has a homeland or not. Al-Ghazali said in the beginning of his book ‘You lad’: ‘God created you to pursue His service, you shall worship Him, glorify Him, and prostrate unto Him in the morning and evening’, and Labid<sup>26</sup> said: Isn’t it that Everything except God is vain?<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the intellect proves the importance of religion over nationalism.<sup>28</sup>

This rational refutation reveals the cosmological and ontological gap between the Western notion of agreed interest relying on a strong immanent notion of autonomy of nature and human society, and Cheikho’s affirmation of medieval cosmology and theology of creation. Cheikho’s reclaiming of two famous medieval Middle Eastern religious figures (Al-Ghazali and Labid) positions his creationist stance in the spiritual and geographical Orient. The second refutation of the modern notion of nationalism relies on an historical argument:

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*Al-Mashriq: Its Beginnings and First Twenty-Five Years Under the Editorship of Père Louis Cheikho*, S.J. (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1972), 18–60. On Halil Ganem, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 264–65.

24 Louis Cheikho, “Al-Waṭāniya,” *Al-Maṣriq* 1 (1898): 20–21 [Arabic]. My translation.

25 For an exposition of this new understanding of nationalism, see Jurji Zaidan, “Community of Interest,” in *Jurji Zaidan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism: A Study*, ed. Thomas Philipp, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick and Paul Starkey (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014): 330–37.

26 Abu Aqil Labid ibn Rabi’ah (c.560–c.661) was an Arabian poet. He accepted Islam after his visit to the Medina seeking a remedy for his uncle from Mohammed. One of his poems is contained in the Mu’allaqat.

27 This verse is part of Abu Aqil Labid ibn Rabi’ah’s famous poem where he vowed to feed people whenever the east wind began to blow, and to continue doing so until it stopped. This verse is also mentioned in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and Islam as part of the Hadith: “the most truthful statement a poet has ever made is the saying of Labid: Everything besides God is vain” (Riyad as-Salihin, Introduction, Hadith 489).

28 Cheikho, “Al-Waṭāniya,” 21–22 [Arabic]. My translation.

Is he ignorant, may God correct him, that the histories of all nations clearly contradict his claim and attest to its error? I mean among the pagan nations, among the tribes wandering in the darkness of ignorance and savagery as well as among the peoples who possess civilization. All of them, without exception, favor their religion over their terrestrial life. No one can deny that the nation is part of the 'terrestrial life'.<sup>29</sup> [...] Therefore, the claim of the author stating that peoples favor the love for their nations over their religion has to be rejected. The correct proposition is that the highest rank pertains to religion and the love of the nation comes only afterwards.<sup>30</sup>

Cheikho's historical and theological understanding of human history clarifies that nationalism, meaning "the duties [men] have to fulfill to Caesar," has to be interpreted within the religious division of this world and the world to come. Therefore, nationalism is a form of materialist or terrestrial arrangement, in sharp contrast and inferior to the spiritual norms and value of religion. If we take into consideration the historical and cultural fact that Western modern scientific cosmology and liberal political philosophy were not the cosmological and social conceptions of great parts of the Middle Eastern elites in the nineteenth century, then nationalism, in its more constructivist form, could be perceived as inversion of the right order between terrestrial and spiritual, this world and eternity. An inversion coming from outside which had to be resisted or kept within reasonable religious borders. Cheikho's critique brings to the fore the theopolitical danger encapsulated in the concept and project of *watania*. Doubting the capacity of national feeling to bring late Ottoman subjects to recognize a common good only on the basis of a common interest, Cheikho argues that

religion alone, along with the reward and punishment it gives to man for his good and bad deeds, can revive his spirit and inspire him to favor the welfare of his nation over his personal interests. That is the reason one says that the love of the nation is rooted in faith because religion is the source of the love of the nation.<sup>31</sup>

For Cheikho, prioritizing nationalism over religious duty and community would eventually ruin the moral and legal religious basis on which Middle Eastern national conscience had hitherto rested, detaching it from its theological and cosmological framework. Confronting al-Bustani with Cheikho has illuminated a central aspect of the theopolitical question of the Orient. The envisioned transformation of an ethnic-religious notion of belonging into a new national one could not rely on a

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29 The word "دنيا" has a religious connotation meaning that this world or life is part of the lower place, as opposed to "الآخرة" or "the after-life," which is considered the higher world.

30 Cheikho, "Al-Waṭāniya," 22 [Arabic]. My translation.

31 Cheikho, 23. My translation.

strong state or on solid imperial institutions being achieved. This absence eventually increased external colonial interventionism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a bearing upon the content of the Tanzimat reforms as well as the Arab or Turkish notion of nationalism. Finally, the shift from a religious to a civic or national notion of belonging happened only partially while spreading a sense of external threat vis-à-vis the religious and ontological foundations of Ottoman society.

## A New Role for Jewish Studies

Having illuminated the political and theopolitical question of the Orient in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second half of this essay intends to complete this dialogical study of liberalism in Eastern and Western contexts by focusing on a fascinating episode in modern Jewish intellectual history: the years 1932 and 1933, which Leo Strauss spent in Paris at the beginning of his exile from Nazi Germany and his interaction with the Parisian interwar intellectual scene around his reappraisal of the Jewish–Islamic philosophical model as well as Hobbes’ political thought. As mentioned earlier, this Jewish intellectual episode will demonstrate the new global role that Jewish studies can endorse in providing historical and literary sources for a new articulation of the East and the West. Using as a guiding thread a Jewish intellectual episode, Strauss’s exile years in Paris, the following pages depict a moment of convergence between the theopolitical question of the late Ottoman Empire, described earlier, and important intellectual trends in Paris that will now be presented. The interconnection of Leo Strauss’s early intellectual evolution in the 1930s with Étienne Gilson’s and Louis Massignon’s more mature research project will illuminate an overlooked interconnection with similar questioning in late and post-Ottoman Levant.

## Leo Strauss’s Shift of Alliance

An interesting symptom of the crisis of liberalism can be detected in the shift of alliance apparent in the early works of Strauss in the 1930s—a period in which he left Germany for France, before heading to England and, finally, to the United States.<sup>32</sup> This shift of alliance can be described as a shift from German Jews’ imag-

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<sup>32</sup> See Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 54–80.

ined association with the Protestant cultural elite to Strauss's imagined Jewish–Islamic association during the medieval period. It is also a shift from Kantian to Hobbesian philosophy.

Strauss's shift of alliance can be traced in his early works through his transformation of a central conceptual motif in Hermann Cohen's thought.<sup>33</sup> The motif in question is that of rapprochement or affinity; in German, *Annäherung* or *Verwandschaft*. In Cohen's famous 1915 war essay *Deutschtum und Judentum*, this motif refers to a certain affinity between Judaism and central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation. In section 20 of his essay, Cohen expresses this affinity with two formulae: *die Verwandschaft von Juden mit Grundbegriffe der Reformation* and *die Annäherung an den Prophetismus*,<sup>34</sup> referring to the proximity of Jews to central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation or the rapprochement of German Protestantism to Jewish prophetism. Cohen delineates in this section a dialectic movement of rapprochement. First, Luther's Reformation rediscovered a series of central features of Biblical Judaism: justification (*Rechtfertigung*), moralization of human vocation (*Versittlichung aller menschlichen Beruf*) and general priesthood (*allgemeineines Priestertum*). Second, this rediscovery engendered misunderstanding and tension between Luther and early modern Jews. Each side saw the proximity of the other, yet the dominant structuring of society by Christian religion did not allow the rapprochement of Judaism (which had already undergone a reform in the Middle Ages under Islamic philosophical influences) and German Lutheran Reformation. Third, when, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Reformation became primarily a religious background for the development of German culture and science, the Jewish–Protestant rapprochement could finally happen, bringing with it a new Judaism (*neues Judentum*) elaborated by German Jews who were active in German science and culture.

Yet, twentieth-century history took a far less positive path than that envisioned in Cohen's idealistic narrative. In 1933, eighteen years after Cohen's powerful formulation of the German Jewish–Protestant alliance, World War I was lost, the Weimar Republic collapsed, and the Nazis seized power. At that time, Leo Strauss was a Rockefeller research fellow in Paris with no way back home. In a letter dated May 1933 and addressed to Karl Löwith, Strauss articulates his accept-

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33 On Strauss's complex relationship to Herman Cohen, see Wussow, *Leo Strauss*, 31–39; Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94–114; Leo Strauss and Michael Zank, *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 1921–1932* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3–49.

34 Hermann Cohen and Hartwig Wiedebach, *Kleinere Schriften V, 1913–1915* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 486–497.

ance of his exile from Germany. He also adds a swift but cogent expression of his intellectual and political shift of alliance:

I see no acceptable possibility to live under the swastika [*dem Hakenkreuz*], i. e., under a symbol that says nothing else to me except: 'You and your kind, you are subhuman φουσεϊ and therefore true pariahs.' There exists here only *one* solution. We must repeatedly say to ourselves, we 'men of science'—for so people like us called ourselves during the Arab Middle Ages—*non habemus locum manentem, sed quaerimus* [we have no place to stay, but only seek].<sup>35</sup>

Confronted with his exclusion as a Jew by the Nazis, Strauss accelerates an existential quest, replacing Cohen's failed Jewish-Protestant alliance with a scholarly model retrieved from the past and from the Orient: the medieval Jewish-Arabic or Jewish-Islamic alliance. It seemed in 1933 more appealing to Strauss than "the ridiculous and pitiful appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l'homme*," as he writes in the same letter.<sup>36</sup> Far from forcing him to embrace liberalism, Strauss's 1933 exile from Germany led him to seek a stable philosophical and historical axis in the attitude of Arab "men of science," an attitude shared by Jewish philosophers in the medieval Islamic era, but unfortunately abandoned in the modern European period. This imaginative and intellectual shift of alliance (prepared by his earlier renewed interest in Maimonides)<sup>37</sup> enabled Strauss to face the nearing catastrophe for German Jewry from an old-new position, renewing the present signification of Jewish and Islamic philosophy, as clearly expressed in his 1935 book *Philosophie und Gesetz*: "if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally *publicizes* its teachings, one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric, while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric."<sup>38</sup>

Strauss learned from the collapse of German political institutions linked to the *Aufklärung* the political value of esoteric medieval Oriental enlightenment. Inverting Cohen's historical narrative, Strauss was particularly prone to decipher, in the

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35 William H.F. Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 221. For the original, see Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 625 (original emphasis).

36 Strauss, Meier, and Meier, vol. 3, 625.

37 For a description of Strauss's evolution toward *Philosophie und Gesetz*, see Wussow, *Leo Strauss*, 32.

38 Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, SUNY Series in the Jewish Writings of Strauss (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 103. For the original, see Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 89.

Jewish–Protestant alliance crafted in the age of enlightenment and nineteenth-century positive science, not a historical rapprochement impossible in earlier times when religion ruled, but, on the contrary, the deterioration of an earlier and more successful model—the Jewish–Islamic political model, which articulated in the Islamic world accepted religious norms and the classical philosophical drive toward perfection. Such erosion could only lead, according to Strauss’s newly invented historical vision, from the more stable medieval Enlightenment to the short-lived modern Enlightenment.

In his 1936 *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis*, Strauss added a deliberate preference for Hobbes’s political philosophy over that of German thinkers like Kant to his turning upside down of the history of medieval and modern *Aufklärung*. In his monograph, he presents Hobbes’s political philosophy “as the first peculiarly modern attempt to give a coherent and exhaustive answer to the question of man’s right life which is at the same time the question of the right order of society.”<sup>39</sup> He explains the reason for his choice as follows:

Thus not the naturalistic antithesis of morally indifferent animal appetite (or of morally indifferent human striving after power) on the one hand, and morally indifferent striving after self-preservation on the other; but the moral and humanist antithesis of fundamentally unjust vanity and fundamentally just fear of violent death is the basis of Hobbes’s political philosophy. It will be objected that this moral antithesis is to be found in Hobbes’s political philosophy only because Hobbes had not yet completely freed himself from the influence of the Christian Biblical tradition. For what is the antithesis between vanity and fear of violent death, if not the ‘secularized’ form of the traditional antithesis between spiritual pride and fear of God (or humility), a secularized form which results from the Almighty God having been replaced by the over-mighty enemies and then by the over-mighty State, ‘the Mortal God’? [...] Had Hobbes waived it, had he developed a naturalistic political philosophy, he would have renounced the possibility of distinguishing between ‘the offensiveness of a man’s nature’ and ‘the right of every man to everything’. He would have had to recognize man’s natural appetite, all his passions, and particularly vanity, as justified by nature in the same degree as is reason. In other words, political philosophy deprived of its moral foundation is, indeed, Spinoza’s political philosophy, but it is not Hobbes’s political philosophy. Spinoza, indeed, and not Hobbes, made might equivalent to right. Naturalistic political philosophy necessarily leads to the annulment of the conception of justice as such.<sup>40</sup>

Hobbes succeeded in reformulating the question of man’s right life by recasting the traditional antithesis between spiritual pride and fear of God in the more secular form of an antithesis between vanity and the fear of violent death. Thus, he

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<sup>39</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 27–28.



escaped the danger of a completely naturalistic political philosophy, which equates, as in the work of Spinoza and his heirs, might with right. By choosing Hobbes over Spinoza, Strauss was not only adding a British flavor to the Jewish–Islamic model recently developed in *Philosophie und Gesetz*, but also pointing out the Achilles’ heel of modern Enlightenment thought: its failure to conceptualize a *summum bonum* (or *malum*) for human passions, and to articulate such a concept in the political and social realms. The early modern shift from Christian kingdoms to modern states was constructed on a paradoxical affirmation of the state’s pervasive intervention and administration, while progressively renouncing its role in the pursuit of religious goals. Modern state building went along with its metaphysical flattening, resulting (in Strauss’s view) in a certain incapacity to define a new *summum bonum* or *malum* regarding growing political and economic expansion. This incapacity defined nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century politics for Strauss, and led to the catastrophe of 1933. Hobbes, and, perhaps the British monarchy and empire with him, appeared to the exiled Strauss as a moment of equilibrium between the medieval theopolitical tradition and the rise of the modern state and modern Enlightenment.

To summarize my claim of a shift of alliance, we can say that the dramatic changes of the 1930s (together with his personal intellectual evolution) triggered for Strauss a dual nostalgia or return to the medieval Jewish–Islamic model and to the pre-Enlightenment Hobbesian moment, instead of the Jewish, Protestant, and Kantian model. This replacement is particularly visible in a 1936 French article, “Quelques remarques sur la science politique de Maïmonide et de Fârâbi”:

The medieval character of the politics of Maimonides and the *falasifa* is not contradicted by the fact that it is nothing other than a modification, however considerable, of an ancient conception. For there is a profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought on the one hand and ancient thought on the other: it is not the Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought.<sup>41</sup>

Strauss’s “profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought” replaces Cohen’s earlier “proximity of Jews to central concepts of the Lutheran Reformation,” while adding to this Oriental repositioning of Jewish philosophy a critique and disillusionment vis-à-vis “Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought.” This shift of alliance and critique of religious and philosophical modernity in response to the collapse of Jewish and European en-

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<sup>41</sup> Leo Strauss and Robert Bartlett, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (January 1990): 4–5.

lightenment opened confusedly an opportunity to think the crisis of liberalism in Europe and in MENA together. It interconnected with similar questioning in the Levant, exemplified by the earlier quoted text from Cheikh, concerning the dangers of a limitation of individual and collective commitment to political authority to a mere civic and national rationality, abandoning deeply rooted religious and moral discourse and practice. Interestingly, it is exactly to this Jewish–Islamic Oriental tradition that Leo Strauss recurred when faced in Germany with the harsh consequences of modern paradoxical state building.

## Intellectual Affinities

Having highlighted a salient aspect of Strauss’s reaction to the crisis of the 1930s and its connection to theopolitical question of the Orient, I would like to explore its intellectual ramifications with other contemporary intellectual projects in Paris. These ramifications can be partly reconstructed from a letter that Strauss addressed to his friend Karl Löwith (1897–1973) in November 1932 upon his arrival in Paris. In this long letter, he writes:

I met two extraordinary men, both—obviously— not philosophers. 1. The geographer André Siegfried [...] 2. The Arabic scholar Louis Massignon, a burning soul, incredibly learned, gifted with a remarkable capacity to penetrate in the heart of the questions.

[Étienne] Gilson is not here: he is giving a series of lectures in Canada. [Alexandre] Koyré is a jolly fellow.<sup>42</sup>

This letter provides much information about the intellectual circles in which Strauss was moving. André Siegfried (1875–1959), Louis Massignon, and Étienne Gilson were three professors at the Collège de France, the highest academic institution in France. Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) was one of Gilson’s most brilliant students.<sup>43</sup> In this essay, I would like to focus especially on two great French intellectual figures mentioned in the letter: Étienne Gilson and Louis Massignon. In the following pages, I shall expose the intellectual affinities of Strauss’s intellectual shift with Gilson’s recovery of Christian medieval philosophy, and with Massignon’s elaboration of a Christian–Islamic model. Not only have these affinities have been generally overlooked by the specialized scholarship on these thinkers, but they constitute important pieces for a dialogical reconstruction of the intellec-

<sup>42</sup> Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 608. My translation.

<sup>43</sup> For more information on the relationship between Gilson and Koyré, see Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, 13, 20–21, 27, 38, 40, 69, 72, 77–78, 105, 143, 212, 300, 415–416, 427, 445.

tual crisis of the 1930s in Europe and the Levant. This crisis pertained to a moment in which Western Europe tried to foster and monitor liberal state building in MENA via a colonial system of mandates (or bilateral agreements with Egypt, the Saudi Kingdom, and Iraq), while being challenged internally by anti-liberal trends, fascism, Nazism, and Stalinist communism most notably.

## Étienne Gilson's Christian Medieval Model

In an unpublished letter to Gilson dated May 1933, Strauss refers to an earlier meeting with the great professor and scholar in medieval philosophy. During the encounter, he writes, "I had the opportunity to explain [to] you [meaning Gilson] my ideas on the political science of Hobbes and its historical origins." Strauss continues by acknowledging that "the objections you raised helped me a lot."<sup>44</sup> The young Jewish German philosopher hoped to compensate for his limited ability to defend his position in French by sending Gilson his first book in German, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft*. In the letter, he refers to two passages in the book in which he defended his views on Hobbes.<sup>45</sup> In these two passages, Strauss insists on the different attitudes of Hobbes and Spinoza vis-à-vis the basic modern political attitude, the conservation of oneself (*Selbsterhaltung*), which came to replace the Christian medieval search for the *summum bonum*. For Strauss, Spinoza's political philosophy equates right with might, and is therefore constrained by the dichotomy of a mob driven by affects opposed to a philosopher immersed in theory or contemplation, resulting in the failure to find a common good that transcends might and affect. In sharp contrast, Hobbes succeeds in founding a modern state in the rational and moral decision of the individual and the collective to protect themselves from civil war.

True, both philosophers [Hobbes and Spinoza] see self-preservation as the essence of man, but they mean very different things by the same term. Self-preservation, truly understood according to Spinoza, compels to theory; according to Hobbes, it compels to assuring the future, to peace and to state. Therefore, the essential content of Hobbes' moral philosophy is the peaceable attitude. For this reason, his theory of natural law and his moral philosophy are

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<sup>44</sup> Letter of Leo Strauss to Étienne Gilson, May 11, 1933, St Michael College Archives (Toronto), Gilson Collection. See Michel, *Étienne Gilson*, 26. I deeply thank Prof. Michel for having transmitted a copy of the letter.

<sup>45</sup> In the letter, Strauss mentions pages 66 and 222 in the first German edition of his book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas theologisch-politischem Traktat* (1930). See Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 130–31, 288.

essentially the same. Similarly, from Spinoza's ultimate assumption it follows that there is no immediate bond of union between his moral theory and his theory of natural right: he must refrain from enjoining the precipitous path to his goal in life on the common run of men, or even considering it as open to them.<sup>46</sup>

This was what Strauss wanted to add to his earlier conversation with Gilson. Nonetheless, it is strange to read that the conversation between Strauss and Gilson revolved around Hobbes, while Strauss was developing at this time his own philosophical reappraisal of Jewish–Islamic medieval philosophy.<sup>47</sup> This project was apparently much more connected to Gilson's monumental endeavor to unearth Christian medieval philosophy as a model for a contemporary Christian philosophy. In *Christianisme et philosophie*, published in 1936, Gilson delineates the larger rationale of his project thus:

To be an effective apologist, one must first be a theologian; I would even say, as much as possible, an excellent theologian. The thing is rarer than you think: there will be scandalized by it only those who speak of theology only by hearsay or are content to recite its formulas without having taken the time to deepen its meaning. But if one wants to do apologetics through science, it is not enough even to be an excellent theologian, one must also be an excellent scholar [...] The same is true of philosophy; it is deluding oneself to believe that one is serving God by learning a certain number of formulas which say what one knows must be said, without understanding why what they say is true.<sup>48</sup>

Gilson understood his monumental program of research in medieval philosophy as a complete renewal of Catholic apologetics and theology on a scientific and historical ground—whereas contemporary nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Catholicism had degenerated to a mechanical and anti-modern set of doctrines. Diving into the history of medieval philosophy would allow Gilson to rediscover the historical possibility of a Christian philosophy, which he defines as follows in his 1932 *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*:

This effort of believed truth to transform itself into known truth (*cet effort de la vérité crue pour se transformer en vérité sue*), is truly the life of Christian wisdom, and the body of rational truths resulting from the effort is Christian philosophy itself. Thus the content of Chris-

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46 Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1965), 229–30.

47 For a broad description of Strauss's engagement with Arabic Muslim philosophy, see Georges Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna, und Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

48 Étienne Gilson, *Christianisme et philosophie* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), 155.

tian philosophy is that body of rational truths discovered, explored or simply safeguarded, thanks to the help that reason receives from revelation.<sup>49</sup>

This passage may explain why Strauss was not interested in discussing his own understanding of Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophy with Gilson. While Gilson's research in medieval philosophy arose from a quest for a new Christian philosophy, Strauss's research was not designed to develop a Jewish philosophy, in the sense that Gilson attributed to a religious philosophy:

Thus I call Christian, every philosophy which, although keeping the orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason. For whoever understands it thus, the concept does not correspond to any simple essence susceptible of abstract definition; but corresponds much rather to a concrete historical reality as something calling for description. It is but one of the species of the genus philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

For Gilson, this Christian understanding of medieval philosophy was supposed to be widened by research on Muslim and Jewish medieval philosophy as well as on the transfer of philosophical tradition and knowledge from the Islamic East to the Christian West. "Christian thought, Jewish thought, and Muslim thought acted and reacted on each other as we know and it would not be at all satisfactory to study them as so many closed and isolated systems."<sup>51</sup> Yet, Strauss was not attracted by a joined elaboration of a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim philosophy. He was rediscovering the political esoteric setting of Jewish and Islamic philosophical medieval practice and developing an understanding of it as a counter-model to the present failure of enlightenment.

In his book *Philosophie und Gesetz*, Strauss defends the thesis that "Plato's approximation to the revelation furnishes the medieval thinkers with the *starting-point* from which they could understand the revelation philosophically."<sup>52</sup> With this formulation, he refers to the political medieval articulation of an Islamic or Jewish general "recognition of the authority of revelation" with its elitist philosophical elaboration. Strauss believed he had discovered in the Jewish–Islamic setting of the divine Law a more stable political setting for philosophy than in the unstable liberal states of the twentieth century. The medieval philosophical model in question lasted *grosso modo* from the eighth century to the conquests and expulsions of the late fifteenth century, from the heydays in Bagdad and Al-Andalus to

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49 Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York, NY: C. Scribner, 1940), 34–35.

50 Gilson, *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 37.

51 Gilson, *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 1.

52 Leo Strauss and Eve Adler, *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995), 76 (original emphasis).

1492. In sharp contrast, liberal states in the 1930s appeared as more ephemeral experiments. The reason for the longevity of the medieval Jewish–Islamic model was for Strauss the continuous collective acceptance of an esoteric philosophical interpretation of the *Shariah* or *Halakha* which was both integrated and concealed within common religious commitment. Both common religious practice and philosophical esoteric interpretation relied on a shared notion of supreme good, be it the God of the biblical or Koranic revelation or the Platonic Idea of good or the Aristotelian cosmological god. The ambivalence of the supreme good in the medieval Islamic and Jewish setting was particularly successful for Strauss, since it fostered a general recognition of authority, while allowing a dual interpretation of it: a religious-monarchic one on the one hand, and a purely philosophical one on the other. This ambiguity of the supreme good is what the modern state in its liberal justification suppressed, thereby putting philosophy at the risk of exoteric enlightenment, with no protected private or esoteric sphere for philosophical practice.

As for Christian medieval philosophy, Strauss, in contrast to Gilson, saw in it a danger, rather than an opportunity, for philosophy. In his 1937 article “On Abravanel’s philosophical tendency and political teaching,” Strauss even denigrates Don Isaac Abravanel’s intellectual contribution for “following the Christian teachings of the Middle Ages.” Indeed, for Strauss Abravanel “had preferred Christian scholasticism to the philosophy of the Jewish rationalists ... He had [thus] undermined Maimonides’ political philosophy of the law.”<sup>53</sup> Strauss was in quest of a countermodel to the Jewish–Protestant alliance; therefore, he could not respond positively to the research program of Gilson by adding a Jewish medieval philosophy to Gilson’s Christian medieval philosophy. The two projects could not meet, since Gilson was looking for a Christian answer to the crisis of liberalism, whereas Strauss believed not in a religious solution but in a political one. The medieval model offered the possibility to articulate a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim answer to the crisis of the 1930s, in Europe and in the Middle East. It could have offered a new understanding of the transition from the medieval to the modern condition. A joint Christian, Jewish, and Muslim effort could have led scholars to rediscover in the medieval or early modern heritage religious, social, and political models, which could have helped prevent the catastrophe of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe and in the Middle East, a catastrophe anticipated partially by Cheikho and produced in great part by the complex social and political dynamics launched by nationalism. But Strauss preferred to speak of Hobbes with the great medieval scholar, each one sticking to his Christian or Jewish interpretation of the traumatic transi-

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<sup>53</sup> Strauss, Meier, and Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 224.

tion to modernity. And so the occasion of a multi-religious articulation of the medieval paradigm was lost.

## Louis Massignon's Catholic–Islamic Model

The confrontation of Gilson's medieval project with Strauss's left us with the sense of a missed opportunity. Comparing Strauss's Jewish–Islamic model with Louis Massignon's Catholic–Islamic one unveils similar problems. Louis Massignon shared many of Gilson's aspirations to rejuvenate Catholicism. Leading Catholic intellectuals, like Maritain, felt the need to renovate, if not save, Catholicism from both inner degeneration and external challenges by rediscovering an appealing meaning for Catholicism. In contrast to the great medieval historian, Massignon did not dig into the Christian medieval past, but rediscovered the possibility of Christianity through physical and spiritual encounters with Islam, with Muslims, and with the Orient and the Maghreb in the first decades of the twentieth century. The psychological and spiritual dynamics of these encounters are masterfully summed up in an article by Massignon in which he defines his notion of the Catholic–Islamic encounter, discussing one of his spiritual masters. Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) was a French colonial explorer who went through a deep process of conversion in the Levant and the Maghreb. Describing Foucauld's encounter with the disciple of a Muslim mystic, Massignon explains: "Before the spiritual reflection of Cheïkh Baye, deep in the soul of his disciple, Mouss ag Amastance, the wild mystic that was Foucauld, felt a force of the same metal [nature] that it was a question of outclassing in spiritual perfection."<sup>54</sup>

Encountering vivid faith and a religious spirit in a Muslim provoked in Charles de Foucauld, and later in Louis Massignon, a dual psychological movement of identification and emulation. Through this, the religious authenticity of the colonized becomes an object of nostalgia for the colonizer, launching in the colonizer a revival of his own ancient Catholic faith, which is then nourished time and again by each physical and spiritual encounter with the Orient and Islam. This movement of identification-emulation with the Muslim was, for Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon, but also for Strauss, a way to confront and redress the cultural and religious challenges of Modern Europe, and to a lesser extent of MENA. Indeed, Massignon and Strauss perceived in Islamic philosophy or mysticism an important answer to contemporary concerns: how to respond philosophically or re-

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<sup>54</sup> Louis Massignon, Christian Jambet, François Angelier, François L'Yvonnet, and Souâd Ayada, *Écrits mémorables* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), vol. 1, 111.

ligiously to the failures of liberalism. Recovering an earlier philosophical tradition or religious Semitic mystic continuum out of Islamic sources was the road taken by both scholars, a choice meaningful in both European and Oriental contexts.

On a scholarly level, this attitude of identification-emulation led Massignon to a gigantic *oeuvre* dealing with Islamology, the history and geography of MENA, and Arabic and Semitic linguistics, which revolved around his fascination with early Islamic mysticism, and, especially, with the heretic mystic al-Hallaj (858–922). An early article by Massignon demonstrates how the study of Islamic mystics could spur a new understanding of Christianity. In 1914, Massignon published in *Der Islam* an article about the famous heretic saying of al-Hallaj, “*ana al-haqq*” (“I am the truth”).

In the first lines of the article, Massignon quotes this saying, adding: “a strange formula, certainly—in which vibrates like an echo of certain *logia* of Jesus [*formule singulière, certes—où vibre comme un écho de certains logia de Jésus*].”<sup>55</sup> Al-Hallaj’s heretic saying is an echo of Jesus’ words. This affirmation exemplifies how Massignon moves from the level of the personal encounter with Muslims to that of a spiritual or intellectual encounter with Islam. This can be read in the following passage:

The Hallaghian vocabulary expressly designates in al-Haqq the pure divine essence—the creative substance—as opposed to creation, al-Khalq ...

And now, how to explain that after having isolated, by definition, al-Haqq, the pure divine essence, from all logical contact with created things—al-Hallaj dares to put it in verbal connection with his ‘self’—ana—as a creature.<sup>56</sup>

Beyond the personal encounter of the Catholic and the Muslim, beyond the literary echo of Jesus in al-Hallaj’s formula, Massignon discovers in al-Hallaj’s mysticism a source for understanding the whole process of incarnation of the transcendent divinity not only in Jesus, but also in the Semitic faith, from Abraham to the later Muslim mystics.

If we now juxtapose Strauss’s Jewish–Islamic model with Massignon’s Catholic–Islamic model, we may find clear similarities. Both scholars found in Islamic philosophy or mysticism an answer to their Jewish and Catholic concerns: how to philosophize as a Jew after the collapse of German *Aufklärung*? Or how to reintegrate Christ’s incarnation into a Semitic continuum that ranges from Judaism to Islam? This new insight was meant to be an answer to both the European and Oriental crises. As with the medieval paradigm previously studied, it proposed a

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55 Massignon et al., 444.

56 Massignon et al., 446.



renewed religious and philosophical sense of authority, against its liberal and later fascist flattening. Yet, the differences between Massignon and Strauss are also clear. If Massignon devoted his whole academic, public, and personal life to the Christian–Islamic encounter at all levels (religious, scientific, and political), no similar commitment to Jewish–Islamic or Jewish–Arab collaboration can be found in Strauss’s life and work. With his emigration to the United States, Strauss invested less in developing this 1930s Jewish–Islamic model in favor of a broader comprehension of Western political philosophy. Similarly, Massignon’s commitment to his Catholic–Islamic model obliged him to dissociate himself more and more from Zionism and Judaism after 1948. As in the case of the rediscovery of medieval philosophy, the dialogical rediscovery of Christianity and Judaism through the Islamic tradition in Massignon’s and Strauss’s works did not merge into a collaboration. Nor into a vision of and commitment for the shared Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious-cultural history inherited from the past, as articulated programmatically by Egyptian scholar Taha Husayn (1889–1873) in his 1938 book *The Future of Culture in Egypt* with the paradigm of a Mediterranean culture.<sup>57</sup> An opportunity for a joined Christian, Jewish and Muslim answer to the crisis of liberalism was missed once again on the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

## Epilogue

A fateful division of labor has brought scholars to study the history and crisis of liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe entirely separately from the history of liberal conceptions and reforms in late Ottoman Empire and early British and French imperial politics in MENA. This essay is an attempt to pick up the broken pieces of the crisis in liberalism spread in the East and the West. The dialogical confrontation of Leo Strauss’s rediscovery of a Jewish–Islamic medieval model of philosophizing, with Gilson’s gigantic mapping and conceptualizing of Christian medieval philosophy, and with Louis Massignon’s development of a Catholic–Islamic mystic model, has revealed a Jewish, Christian, and Muslim articulation of the religious-political problems of modernity in connection with the theopolitical question of the Orient. A critical understanding of the shift from medieval to modern philosophy as well as the retrieving of Jewish–Islamic and Christian–Islamic models (esotericism and mysticism) appeared as promising intellectu-

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<sup>57</sup> Taha Husayn, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, trans. Sidney Glazer (Washington, DC: American Council of Learned Societies Devoted to Humanistic Studies, Near Eastern Translation Program, 1954).

al possibilities to articulate a shared crisis of liberalism in Western Europe and MENA. Strauss, Gilson, Massignon, and their colleagues in the Levant often practiced highly comparative and dialogical scholarly research, yet they failed to articulate their renewed understanding of the Abrahamic religions and the challenges in the West and the East into a joined reform of liberalism. Finally, the encounter of the 1930s ended in the three independent paths of Gilson, Massignon, and Strauss, with no memory of their shared possibilities.

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Elliot R. Wolfson

# Death and the Infnitization of Finitude: Negation and the Ethical Crisis of Modernity in Edith Wyschogrod's Postmodern Hermeneutic

Silent eyes  
Burning  
In the desert sun  
Halfway to Jerusalem  
And we shall all be called as witnesses  
Each and everyone  
To stand before the eyes of God  
And speak what was done

Paul Simon<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will explore the crisis of modernity in the thought of Edith Wyschogrod as it pertains to what she labeled the death event; that is, the unprecedented phenomenon of mass murders, which attests to the fact that “the *means* of annihilation are the result of systematic rational calculation, and scale is reckoned in terms of the compression of time in which destruction is delivered.”<sup>2</sup> The technological capability of bringing death to vast numbers of people represents the “ever-present danger of the irreversible null-point”; that is, the eradication of all human life.<sup>3</sup> Intriguingly, Wyschogrod relates the logic undergirding the objective of the total destruction to be delivered through the compression of time, or what she calls the sorting myth of the death event, to the infracalculative structure of Zeno’s paradoxes that emerge from the presumed infinite divisibility of the finite qualities of space that lead to the conundrum that the very possibility of motion is denied.<sup>4</sup> Analogously, the final solution proffered by the Nazis rested hypothetically on the premise that the execution of a finite number of individuals constituted a seemingly infinite reserve even though the goal to exterminate the non-Aryan pop-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Simon, *Lyrics 1964–2008* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), x (emphasis in original).

<sup>3</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*.

<sup>4</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, xii, 36–39, 46, 182, 199, 213, 215.

ulation entirely, fostered by the phantasmic desire to achieve ideological purity,<sup>5</sup> inevitably would be thwarted by the realization that “all division must come to an end when the null point is reached.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, just as the paradox enunciated by Zeno “is a radical negation of motion and an eating away of space, so the death world sorts and sorts but produces nothing.”<sup>7</sup> The issue, however, is not just quantitative in scope; indeed, pondering the matter from a quantitative perspective reinforces the deleterious objectification of humanity that arose in the twentieth century, an anthropological decline that has only been magnified with the onslaught of the digital revolution and the ascendancy of computationally engaged research in the humanities and the social sciences in the twenty-first century. The crisis of the death event goes to the core of how the finitude of human life is to be evaluated, which is to say, how we comprehend the inexorability of our exorability, the predictability of our unpredictability. Despite acknowledging that there have been varied articulations of the significance of human mortality in Western thought, Wyschogrod alleged that the understanding of death “has been dominated by a single pattern which depends upon interpreting the self as a cognition monad and the process of dying as requiring behavior appropriate to a rational subject.”<sup>8</sup>

This insight is crucial to the attempt—as feeble as all such attempts are in the final analysis—to fathom the unfathomable, to discern that the concrete reality of the concentration camps surfaced as a consequence of a systematic effort to deconstruct the life-world. For Wyschogrod, the latter term denotes the horizon of experience from which the meanings of human existence originate, the whole of our pre-reflective experiential field, the point of intersection between what is constructed noetically in consciousness and what is given noematically to consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on previous phenomenological literature, Wyschogrod characterizes the life-world as a three-tiered field of experience: the inanimate world given in primary sensation, the vital world given to us as living beings, and the axiological or ethical dimension in which other persons are apprehended as centers of value. Reflecting a postmodern resistance to essentialize or to posit a grand explanatory narrative, Wyschogrod maintains that there is no specific pattern of culture that is endemic to the life-world as such. Rather, the structure of experience, which enables cultural forms to transpire, involves the pedagogical ordering of these three

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5 *Spirit in Ashes*, 52.

6 Edith Wyschogrod, “Concentration Camps and the End of the Life-World,” in *Echoes From the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, eds. Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), 330.

7 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 182.

8 *Spirit in Ashes*, x–xi.

9 Wyschogrod, “Concentration Camps,” 327–31.

levels as concentric circles. From that vantage point, the inanimate and the vital are classified as the ontological ground of the ethical,<sup>10</sup> and hence it follows that the corrosion of the former instigates the weakening of the latter. The National Socialist ideology not only occasioned a reconsideration of the existential import of the permanence of our impermanence, but it also triggered a fundamental shift in the way we calibrate the merit of safeguarding the prolongation of our species. Prior to the appearance of concentration camps, it may have been possible to imagine the extirpation of human life, but it was not possible to imagine the paradox that *life perdures even as the life-world ceases to exist*.<sup>11</sup> But what is the value of protecting and promoting life in the absence of a life-world? In what way can this be reckoned as a mode of preserving the propriety of self-esteem? Wyschogrod insists that the phenomena of atomic conflagration and death camps—and I am fairly confident she would concur to adding to the list the potential ecological genocide we are presently facing<sup>12</sup>—requires a shift in orientation away from the monadic conception of self that has overwhelmed the modernist construal of individual and communal identities.

To rectify this situation, Wyschogrod proposed a new transcendental framework, by which she did not mean something eternal and immutable—a retrieval of an ontotheological ground to secure a postmetaphysical religion after religion—but rather a “new historically conditioned a priori by considering the logical and ontological structures exhibited by man-made mass death” in the previous century.<sup>13</sup> The purported rectification is commensurate with the surmise that even though the myths of the death event are derived from earlier gnostic and apocalyptic myths of purity granted to a given section of the human population, the former are self-contained inasmuch as they are not organized around a God who brings history to an end. Accordingly, the myths of the death event advanced by the Nazis are not “an assault upon transcendence,” but on “the creation of a new wholly immanent totality.”<sup>14</sup> The latter expression, I submit, refers implicitly to the Christological underpinning of Hegel’s idea of Spirit, a totalization of the identity of the absolute that conceals difference in the subsumption of the other

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<sup>10</sup> “Concentration Camps,” 327–31.

<sup>11</sup> “Concentration Camps,” 328.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 176, where the “last fruit” of the history of metaphysics is said to mark “our own era of nihilism and is expressed in atomic power and ecological decline.”

<sup>13</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 46.

under the stamp of the same.<sup>15</sup> The antidote to the attack on viewing history through the trajectory of the wholly immanent totality, and the ensuing reclamation of a heteromorphic sense of plurivocality, are tied to postulating a Deleuzian plane of immanence that is concomitantly “that which must be thought and that which cannot be thought. It is the nought within thought. ... It is the most intimate within thought and yet the absolute outside—an outside more distant than any external world because it is an inside deeper than any internal world.”<sup>16</sup>

Pushing against the Hegelian dialectic whereby even what cannot be thought is sublated within the contours of what can be thought, Wyschogrod appeals to Deleuze to support the theorizing of a hypernoetic margin at the center of noēsis, or in Foucauldian terms, the unthought that lies at the heart of thought, the “impossibility of thinking which doubles or hollows out the outside,” the finitude of the interior that comprises the fold of the exterior of infinity.<sup>17</sup> Notably, in explicating the Deleuzian idea of the plane of immanence as the image of thought that “gives itself as what it means to think”—that is, the movement “that can be carried to infinity,” the “infinite movement or the movement of the infinite”<sup>18</sup>—Wyschogrod detects, paraphrasing Genesis 27:22, the hand of Deleuze but the voice of Heidegger.<sup>19</sup> A pivotal idea of the latter was his insight that the unthought is “the greatest gift that thinking can bestow” insofar as it marks the unique element in a thinker’s thought that must be rethought constantly from new perspectives to the point that the “more original the thinking, the richer will be what is unthought in it.”<sup>20</sup> Repeti-

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15 Edith Wyschogrod, “Those Weeping Eyes, Those Seeing Tears: Reading John D. Caputo’s Ethics,” in *Styles of Piety: Practicing Philosophy After the Death of God*, eds. S. Clark Buckner and Matthew Statler (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 215.

16 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 59. The passage is cited by Wyschogrod, “Those Weeping Eyes,” 215, but the wrong pagination is given on 296 n. 7. See, however, Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy’s Others* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006), 46–47: “Deleuze and Guattari’s antinomianism derives from an account of desiring production that conceals a metaphysical monism beneath the differential and pluralistic character of their version of the real.”

17 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. and ed. Seán Hand, foreword by Paul Bové (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 97. For citation of this passage and other relevant sources, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Suffering Time: Philosophic, Kabbalistic, and Ḥasidic Reflections on Temporality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 52 n. 160, and the reference cited there to Keith Robinson, “Thought of the Outside: The Foucault/Deleuze Conjunction,” *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999): 57–72.

18 Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 37.

19 Wyschogrod, “Those Weeping Eyes,” 215.

20 See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred W. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, with an Introduction by J. Glenn Gray (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1968), 76; and discussion in Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chi-



tion, on this score, is to be envisaged as the iteration of the same that in each occurrence is entirely different,<sup>21</sup> the “again” that is “altogether otherwise.”<sup>22</sup> Insofar as the unthought is always what is yet to be thought, it is prevented from ever being objectified as a thing that is no longer on the way to being thought, and hence we can speak of the kinesis of thought as the infinite movement or the movement of the infinite. However, as Wyschogrod astutely noted, the reference to the movement to infinity suggests “a left-handed Heideggerian swipe by Deleuze against Levinas in that the infinite is now subject to thought rather than the converse.”<sup>23</sup> Without denying this possibility, it must be emphasized that even if the infinite is subject to thought, it is the image of thought, which is the unthought, that marks the asymptotic progress to infinity and therefore it is not entirely clear to me that speaking of the unthought as that which is concurrently outside and inside thought—the distance that is proximate and the proximity that is distant—is a betrayal of Levinas. Leaving that aside, taking the full measure of Wyschogrod’s own thinking, appeal should be made to Levinas for whom “the infinite is an outside that maintains its exteriority, even when inwardized, in that glory persists in the internalized infinite as disrupting thematization and ‘giving sign’ to the other. ... But if glory is Saying, substituting oneself for another, taking responsibility for the other, proclaiming peace or proscribing violence, and if infinitization is this process ... then glory is the dynamism of the infinite.”<sup>24</sup>

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cago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 9–10, 13; Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 2, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 205, 209, 212–13; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiesis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019), 11, 68–75, 165–66, 311. Heidegger often marks the distinction between the same (*das Selbe*) and the identical (*das Gleiche*) by noting that the former upholds the “belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of difference” (*das Zusammengehören des Verschiedenen aus der Versammlung durch den Unterschied*), whereas the latter “always moves toward the absence of difference” (*verlegt sich stets auf das Unterschiedlose*). See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans., with an introduction, by Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 218; Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze [GA 7]* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 196–97. Regarding this distinction in the Heideggerian lexicon, see Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 11–13, 40, 55 n. 102, 265.

21 Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 61–62.

22 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 58. This passage and others that articulate the novelty of the repetition of the unique as the replication of difference in Heidegger’s thought are cited and discussed in Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 39–40; Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 67–70.

23 Wyschogrod, “Those Weeping Eyes,” 215.

24 Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 44.

The irrational and unspeakable upheaval of the death event facilitates opening the discursive space to this infinite, the nonconceptual within the purview of the conceptual,<sup>25</sup> the utterance of the unutterable,<sup>26</sup> an externality that is most internal in virtue of being an internality that is most external. Contra to Hegel's insistence that the truth of space is to be assessed from the quality of punctiformity, which is "the negation of continuity," and that time as the form of the ideality of space is "the negation of the negation,"<sup>27</sup> Wyschogrod argued that temporal duration provides the key to ascertain the truth of space. Insofar as the extended beings that become in space are made of time, we can delineate the latter as the template through which the exteriority is internalized and the interiority externalized. Time is not simply the destructive power of negation in things—the structure of contingency marked by the incessant coming to be and passing away—such that the nonbeing of past and future assure the primacy of the present characterized by the fullness of being, but it is rather the radical becoming of the discontinuous continuity that challenges the portrayal of eternity as an absolute timelessness that is altogether different from time.<sup>28</sup> It is in the *dark diachronicity* of time—the now that is always the same because it is always different—that eternity is instantiated as a profounder and a more lasting inflection of the diremptive heterogeneity of lived time that overcomes the punctiform homogeneity of clock time.<sup>29</sup> What is experienced phenomenologically as temporal continuity in reaching backward through memory and extending forward through anticipation is constructed hermeneutically in the moment that cuts the timeline by looping pastness, presentness, and futurity in the eternal continuity of a threefold bond of temporal discontinuity. Time's passing is not overcome by the dissolution of temporal transience in an ocean of eternity, but by abiding in the persistent demise of what has never been but what is ever to come, the eternal cycle of recurring difference wherein being becomes interminably in the terminable becoming of being. In the ephemerality of time's ebb and flow lies its endurance; the one thing constant in the inconstancy of our transient existence is change.<sup>30</sup> Inspired by several prominent

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25 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979), 10, 12, 15. For citation and analysis of these passages, see Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 642–44.

26 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 9.

27 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 95.

28 *Spirit in Ashes*, 96–97. See Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 121, and the analysis in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Theomania and Overcoming Apophasis* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 224.

29 Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 107–11.

30 I have repeated my formulation in Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 256–57.

twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, such as Rosenzweig and Heschel, Wyschogrod identified the Sabbath as the ritual that exemplifies this temporalization of eternity in the eternalization of temporality; that is, “the turning of space into time, the respite from creation as the temporal self-articulation of identity-in-difference.”<sup>31</sup> In line with the soteriological characterization of the Sabbath enunciated in rabbinic dicta and exploited by the kabbalists,<sup>32</sup> Wyschogrod remarked that the Sabbath is “conceived as outside time within time,” and hence it proleptically portends a “redeemed temporality” that “opens out the possibility of an eternally recurring time of mercy and grace.”<sup>33</sup>

As a corrective to the dominance of technology that helped expedite the downfall of the life-world through the dawn of the death event and the violent suppression of diversity, the Jewish Sabbath endures as the possibility of retrieving the time that is within time as what is outside time, thereby inhabiting the place of the nonplace, the identity-in-difference that stands in diametric opposition to the autochthony promulgated by the ethnonationalism of the Nazis; that is, the valorization of the other whose otherness is grounded in the lack of signifier that consummately signifies the signifier of lack.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere Wyschogrod universalized the idiomatic marker of Jewish specificity by avowing that the dissemination of the Jews among the nations bestowed upon them the rank of the saint, for they are “neither inside nor outside.” Moreover, as a consequence of the itinerancy of the Jews in the world, all the nations are endowed with the nomadic status.<sup>35</sup> The spatial dislocation translates into the surmounting of the temporal evanescence insofar as the penchant to wander begets the “overcoming of death,” which is the “boundary that separates interior from exterior, absence from presence.” The conquest of mortality is expressed in the vision of Isaianic peace, the eventual end to violence, and thus the ideal of identity-in-difference is realized

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31 Edith Wyschogrod, “Crossover Dreams,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 546.

32 Elliot R. Wolfson, “Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 301–43. For references to primary and secondary sources, see Wolfson, “Coronation,” 307 n. 19.

33 Wyschogrod, “Crossover Dreams,” 546.

34 One can detect here an influence of the Lacanian sense of the Other. See Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 119: “This Other, the place of truth and of ‘the treasure of the signifier,’ is nonetheless grounded in lack, a nonplace, as it were, whose signifier is a signifier of lack that Lacan calls the signifier of the barred other [S(∅)]. Yet this Other, unable to come into plenary presence and still remain Other, cannot fail to respond to the value of the treasure.”

35 Wyschogrod, “Crossover Dreams,” 546.

through the “nomadic crossing over of nations.”<sup>36</sup> Far from being an impediment, the homelessness of the Jew serves as the utopian antithesis to the toxic enrootedness of the Nazi.

Insofar as the geopolitical ideology of National Socialism availed itself of industrial machinations to carry out its homicidal intentions, technological society—understood by Wyschogrod in Heideggerian terms as the instrumentality through which the truth of being is clandestinely disclosed in the present age as the will to produce, which is described in terms of enframing (*Gestell*) or the standing reserve (*Bestand*), the bringing-forth that has the character of setting-upon (*Stellen*) or challenging-forth (*Herausforderung*), the art of revealing, *technē*, that is the essence of technology,<sup>37</sup> and the service of that will by means of the ratiocination of calculative thinking<sup>38</sup>—can be branded as the precondition for the death-world. Indeed, the pretext for the appearance of the death-world is the

movement toward a single homogeneous culture, global in scale, whose functions are transparent to everyone [who] has emerged along with technique, but no overarching system of meaning has accompanied it, because such meaning cannot derive from the language of utility and quantification. The death-world makes its appearance upon this already demythologized ground as an effort to sacralize a world of impoverished symbolic meanings by creating a totalizing structure to express what is irreducible even in technological society: the binary opposition of life and death.<sup>39</sup>

Technological society is to be distinguished from the death-world, since the aim of the former is to increase technique whereas the aim of the latter is to inculcate the terror that brings about the demise of the inhabitants deemed unworthy to remain in the life-world.<sup>40</sup> The distinction notwithstanding, the nexus between the augmented depletion of the death-world and the constricted expansion of the technological society casts a dark shadow on the utilitarian dehumanization and disavow-

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**36** “Crossover Dreams,” 547. Compare the analysis of Nietzsche’s “nomad thought” in Deleuze and Guattari offered by Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 205–208. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze the trope of nomadism in Wyschogrod’s thought, but perhaps this will be a future undertaking.

**37** Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans., with an introduction, by William Lovitt (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 34: “There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technē*. Once that revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearing also was called *technē*. ... And the poiēsis of the fine arts also was called *technē*.”

**38** Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 178–79. Wyschogrod’s analysis is based on Heidegger, *The Question*, 3–35, esp. 12–23.

**39** Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 27–28.

**40** *Spirit in Ashes*, 25–26.

al of the willfulness of the self that ensued from the negativity imposed on the world by Nazism.

Disconcertingly, Hitler's agenda is coincident with Heidegger's assumption that the ferocity of the self-will that belongs to the essence of technology gives way to the renunciation of the self-will that allows the human being to gather into his or her own mortality to fulfill the exceptional duty allocated to *Homo sapiens*, in contradistinction to all other animals, not just to be but to *become* mortal.<sup>41</sup> This is the import of the statement of Heidegger that the animal perishes whereas the human dies; that is, the latter alone is capable of the expropriative appropriation of death as "that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. As the shrine of Nothing, death harbors within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being."<sup>42</sup> Mortality does not signify the obvious factual reality that our earthly life—as the life of every being that exists on the planet—invariably comes to an end but that of all sentient beings we are capable of foreseeing death as death, which is to say, foredisclosing death in the sheltering of the nothingness of being as the beingness of nothing. "To be able to die means: to be capable of death as death. Only man dies—and indeed continually, so long as he stays on earth, so long as he dwells."<sup>43</sup>

The distinctive capacity of humanity to die is closely connected to the prospect of attaining the world as world whence out of world becomes a thing,<sup>44</sup> the ontological clue through which Heidegger ponders the coming-to-presence of being and thereby restores the meaningful relationship of thingliness and the department of being human—the poetological rule of bethinging (*Bedingnis*) by which the word makes the thing into a thing,<sup>45</sup> "the granting saying in which the being of language

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41 *Spirit in Ashes*, 185–86.

42 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 178–79. Compare Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 107, where the matter is presented in terms of the essential relation between death and language: "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either."

43 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 222.

44 *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 182.

45 Heidegger, *On the Way*, 151. Compare *On the Way*, 62–63: "Only where the word for the thing has been found is the thing a thing. ... The word alone gives being to the thing. ... We could go further and propose this statement: something is only where the appropriate and therefore competent word names a thing as being, and so establishes the given being as a being" (emphasis in original). For the poet, the relationship of word and thing is akin to the relationship of world and thing in Heidegger's notion of worlding (see reference in n. 44). Consider *On the Way*, 66, where the poet is said to obtain "entrance into the relation of word to thing," but this relation is not "a connection between the thing that is on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the re-

speaks as the language of being,”<sup>46</sup> the act of naming by which the things named are called into their thinging and thereby unfold the world in which those things abide as the abiding ones without being objectified in their thinghood<sup>47</sup>—a remedy to the technological bedrock of nihilism, the “blindness to the destining of Being which shows itself as technique.”<sup>48</sup> The world so conceived—delineated mythopoetically by Heidegger as the unitary world play of the fourfold of sky, earth, mortals, and divinities by which time-space is enacted<sup>49</sup>—is “no longer used in the metaphysical sense. It designates neither the universe of nature and history in its secular representation nor the theologically conceived creation (*mundus*), nor does it mean simply the whole of entities present (*kosmos*).”<sup>50</sup> For Heidegger, world designates the deed of worlding (*Welten*), the term coined to name the intimacy of world and thing present in the difference (*Unter-Scheid*) of the between, the middle in and through which the two are at one with each other in their disclosingly appropriated separateness,<sup>51</sup> the space of divergence in which language

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lation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it ‘is’ a thing.” The relation of word to thing is granted to the poet through the renunciation of self-denial that compels him or her to safeguard the silent treasure of the unspoken that is the source of all that is spoken. See *On the Way*, 69, and compare Niall Keane, “The Silence of the Origin: Philosophy in Transition and the Essence of Thinking,” *Research in Phenomenology* 43 (2013): 27–48; Richard Polt, “The Secret Homeland of Speech: Heidegger on Language, 1933–1934,” in *Heidegger and Language*, ed. Jeffrey Powell (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 63–85, esp. 65–70; Richard Polt, *Time and Trauma: Thinking Through Heidegger in the Thirties* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 92–103; and my previous discussions of this aspect of Heidegger’s thought in Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy’s Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), 109–30, and references cited on 243 n. 25 and 245 n. 42; Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 299–302, 307–11, and references cited on 322 nn. 13 and 17.

<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, *On the Way*, 79–80. See *On the Way*, 94 and 96, where Heidegger refers to the proposition “the being of language: the language of being” as the “guide-word” that “holds the primal tidings of linguistic nature” and as that which “beckons us away from the current notions about language, to the experience of language as Saying.”

<sup>47</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 199–200.

<sup>48</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 188.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 199; Heidegger, *On the Way*, 106, 108.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 201.

<sup>51</sup> *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 202–203. See also Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings II–VI: Black Notebooks 1931–1938*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 153, 155. The first of these passages is cited and discussed in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Gottwesen and the De-Divinition of the Last God: Heidegger’s Meditation on the Strange and Incalculable,” in *Heidegger’s Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology*, eds. Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 221. Needless to say, many have opined on the Heideggerian tautology of worlding the world (*Welt-weltung*). Particularly pertinent is the study by Ka-

as the peal of stillness takes place and calls world and thing into the simple onefold of their disparate propinquity.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, just as Heidegger spoke of technological calculation as a mode of thinking that “could blast everything to nothingness,”<sup>53</sup> so the dwelling that is the death event can be considered the unworlding that demarcates the characteristic that is genuinely new in the age of technique: what is living and what is dead cannot be easily disentangled.<sup>54</sup> Eliciting a similar conclusion from Lacan, albeit expressed inversely, Wyschogrod writes, “The ‘I’ comes to stand in the place where neither life nor death can be said to exist and from which the voice of the Other is heard. The ‘I’ is a defect in this pure non-place just as, Lacan insists,<sup>55</sup> ‘the universe is a defect in pure non-being.’”<sup>56</sup> The pure nothing of the death-world is the silent void of the pure being,<sup>57</sup> the place wherein living and dead cannot be separated, since neither life nor death exist in that nonplace. From the negation of the world, and the attendant reduction of alterity to the same, the self materializes as the locus of the other.

By her own admission, Wyschogrod’s thinking sways between efforts to overcome manifestations of the negative and claims about its irrevocability and that an especially important influence haunting her project is Hegel’s struggle with the negative as “the possibility of the nonexistence of the totality of all that is currently seen as world or as the maximal intensity of disvalue that can be attributed to the world.”<sup>58</sup> In the Hegelian dialectic, history culminates with the “emergence of an all-encompassing Absolute ... an ontological and logical vacuum that has sucked into itself all that is and sees itself as having brought to completion the work of historical and philosophical negation, thereby obviating the need for further inquiry into the labor of the negative.”<sup>59</sup> Sublation of the negative in its ultimate overcoming is thus intrinsic to each moment of the World-Spirit’s history. The latter, in

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therine M. Robiadek, “Worlding versus Worldview: Heidegger’s Thinking on Art as a Critique of German Historicism,” *Monatshefte* 108 (2016): 383–94.

52 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 207.

53 Heidegger, *On the Way*, 84.

54 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 187.

55 There is a slight inaccuracy in Wyschogrod’s citation of the passage from Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1977), 317: “‘I’ am in the place from which a voice is heard clamoring ‘the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being.’” On some of the conceptual affinities between Heidegger and Lacan, see Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 45–46, and references to primary and secondary sources cited on 58–59 n. 131.

56 Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 120.

57 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 94.

58 Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 2. I have taken the liberty to rework my previous analysis of Wyschogrod’s thought in Wolfson, *Giving*, 205–207.

59 Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 1.

Hegel's own words, wins its truth "by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it,"<sup>60</sup> which is to say, Spirit's unfolding is "contingent upon a continual undoing."<sup>61</sup> But if the labor of the negative is this continual undoing, can the undoing ever be undone in an unsurpassable negation? As Wyschogrod reminds us,

For Hegel negation is never merely the contrary of what has been affirmed, since negation always brings something new into the world. How is this new work of the negative to be achieved? It can ... appear, become manifest in a work, by virtue of difference—the difference between what has been sublated and what comes into being. The negation of the Absolute, therefore, must itself be absolute, and the difference generated by this negation must itself be an absolute difference. Hegel all too quickly passes over the uniqueness of the negation when what is negated in the Absolute itself.<sup>62</sup>

The negation of which Wyschogrod speaks is "without voice; it can only be interpreted as silence and therefore mystery."<sup>63</sup> From the Hegelian perspective, since nothing of the history of Spirit lies outside of intelligibility, the unsurpassable negation of the Absolute, the negation of negation, "can only be thought of as transconceptual, transsymbolic, and translinguistic." If this unthinkable can be imagined at all, it is in the "annihilation of man" implied in the death event.<sup>64</sup> Philosophically speaking, the crisis of modernity is to be located in the extinction of the human being in the negation of Hegel's immanent Absolute—that is to say, the trinitarian circle of history whereby the transcendence of the Father, the hidden Abgrund, is incarnated in the Son revealed through the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian<sup>65</sup>—such that revelation is no longer possible, or at least the revelation of anything but the revelation that there is nothing to be revealed.

Hegel's dialectic necessitates that every presence becomes what it is by negating what it is not, and hence every negation brings some affirmation in its wake. The idea of negativity in Hegel, therefore, "is harnessed to the logic of presence so that the idea of the negative as reserve, pure loss, silence—that which is irrecoverable—is foreign to Hegel. Instead, the negative is brought into plenary presence carried forward by the dialectical activity of Spirit."<sup>66</sup> What is unthinkable for Hegel, and consequently unsayable, is the dialectical overcoming of the dialectic

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<sup>60</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 19, cited by Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 3–4.

<sup>62</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 144–45.

<sup>63</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 145.

<sup>64</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 145.

<sup>65</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 144.

<sup>66</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 93–94.



that results in the negation of the Absolute, a negation so extreme that it generates an absolute difference—the Derridean *différance*<sup>67</sup>—in which all difference is annihilated, the pure void, the emptiness that is neither something nor nothing, in which all presence is abolished. The negation of negation theologically entails the obliteration of transcendence that results from the Nietzschean slaying of God, and anthropologically, from the extermination of human beings attested most brazenly by the Nazi death camps. It follows that the negation wrought by the horror of the Holocaust “is manifest as unique and ultimate silence—not the awesome quiet of cosmic space to which Pascal alludes but a historical absence of speech, the silence that supervenes upon speech. The traces of this silence are to be found in language, in the speech of the death-world and its survivors where death attaches to every signifier.”<sup>68</sup> The *mysterium tremendum* of the Holocaust, to use the locution of Arthur Cohen referenced by Wyschogrod, is to be gauged by the silence that has transformed language to the extent that death has become the ultimate signifier of meaning. Note that the silence of which Wyschogrod speaks is not muteness but rather the fact that speech is beleaguered by the limits of its ability to affirm anything that is not a gesticulation of the nothingness of our finitude. The power of taciturn speaking is tied specifically to the role of the survivors to bear witness to the intent of the Nazis to degrade the inmates of the camps to the single signification of death whereby the signifier collapses into the signified,<sup>69</sup> robbing them of the capacity to see themselves or others as centers of value.<sup>70</sup> However, this goal was ultimately foiled, since the modes of significance systematically destroyed by the executioners were restricted to the vital level of existence and thus the dissolution of meaning they intended did not affect the ethical level. “Once survival in order to bear witness was conceived as a value, living for others, for the destroyed sociocultural community, came to the fore. ... Even

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67 On *différance* and Hegelian negation, see Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London: Routledge, 1998), 154–61.

68 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 145.

69 Wyschogrod, “Concentration Camps,” 334: “But, at the same time the signified is also and always death. The signifier ‘collapses’ into the signified which is now no longer more extensive in range than the signifier. For each and every signifier the full range of obsolete meanings is retained together with their negation, the new signified, death” (emphasis in original). The claim that in the world of the concentration camp, the only signified is death somewhat undermines the distinction made by Wyschogrod between the “concentration camp” and the “extermination camp” on the basis that the latter was “designed solely for the extermination of Jews and Gypsies.” See “Concentration Camps,” 338 n. 1.

70 “Concentration Camps,” 336.

with the virtual destruction of the vital level, the apprehension of the other as a node of values was sustained.”<sup>71</sup>

The darkness of the Shoah spotlights the shortcoming of Heidegger’s analysis of death in *Being and Time*, which not only ignores the body but does not break with the primacy of things over persons. From the vantage point of the death event, “space is not grasped primordially by way of equipmental being but is intersubjectively constituted as that which lies between persons separating them or drawing them together. Human beings or selves are encountered as the ultimate referents of moral acts.”<sup>72</sup> Hence, in the context of the death event, corporeality “carries complex symbolic meaning in the absence of a rich equipmental nexus. The dead are not only human existents whose lives have come to an end; they are also symbols of contemporary violence and of the possible death of the entire human world.”<sup>73</sup> In Heidegger’s early work, the nullity of death—examined phenomenologically through the structure of care and anxiety—confers individuality on Dasein, for in the case of each person, it is only death that one can truly appropriate as one’s own.<sup>74</sup> But even in the later work, the lingering grip of Heidegger’s focus on the individualizing nature of death is conspicuous in his scarcely mentioning the creation of death and slave labor camps as the institutional forms that resulted in the aggregation of the unnumbered dead of the two world wars.<sup>75</sup> The slaughter propagated by the Nazis similarly—albeit in a grotesque reg-

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71 “Concentration Camps,” 337–38.

72 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 163.

73 *Spirit in Ashes*, 172.

74 *Spirit in Ashes*, 170–174. Compare the criticism of Heidegger’s perspective in the section “Death and the Time That Is Left,” supported partially by Levinas, in Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 64–65, and my own discussion in the section “Death and the Surplus of Not Yet” in Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 577–92.

75 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 188. The example of death provides another illustration of the continuity of Heidegger’s thought in spite of the obvious shift in orientation that marks the turn (*Kehre*) upon which he embarked in the 1930s. The following passage in Heidegger, *On the Way*, 85, can be applied to the path of his own thinking: “We must first turn, turn back to where we are in reality already staying. The abiding turn, back to where we already are, is infinitely harder than are hasty excursions to places where we are not yet and never will be ... To turn back to where we are (in reality) already staying: that is how we must walk along the way of thinking which now becomes necessary.” I thus concur with the observation of Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 189: “Although extensive commentaries properly record and interpret changes in Heidegger’s thought which result from the shift to Being and appropriation in his later work, it is all too often forgotten that there is an extraordinary unity in Heidegger’s thinking as well, a unity deriving from his single-minded concern with world and thing. Heidegger has not written an ontological *Bildungsroman* first of Dasein and then of Being; to the contrary, he has written a legend of the grail, a quest for the thing by way of different paths.” On the problematic nature of the chro-

ister not envisioned or embraced by Heidegger<sup>76</sup>—construed the man-made mass death as the intervention that imparts a sense of mineness that sublates the social character of the human being. However, when our finitude is considered from the standpoint of the death event, “what comes to an end is a being constituted by its social relations. More, this being is equiprimordially a body. But the body too carries social significance ... The existent who dies is both I and a we.”<sup>77</sup> The self-sacrificial act of witnessing—the feat of remaining alive under odious conditions more difficult than suicide<sup>78</sup>—is precisely what sustained the virtue of living for others, an axiological principle indicative of the fact that the semiosis of language is to be measured by the metrics of the ultimate mystery we now must confront at the periphery of hopelessness, the mystery that there is no mystery but the repudiation of mystery in the absolute disbanding of any absolute induced by the omnipresence of the absence that plagues the death-world.

Heidegger famously argued that to be underway (*Unterwegs*) on the way of thinking one must walk the way by means of thoughtful questioning, the movement by which thinking clears its way in projecting forward from the clearing of the past.<sup>79</sup> To think originarily—that is, to think from the root in the search for the ground of the foundation in the foundation of the ground—is to question,<sup>80</sup> or as he pithily put it, “questioning is the piety of thought.”<sup>81</sup> However, the elemental questioning that comes forth from the cataclysms of the twentieth century “points to the impossibility of the possibility of the question,” and thus, venturing

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nological schematization of Heidegger’s thinking, and references to others who have challenged it, see Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 55 n. 102.

76 Wolfson, *The Duplicity*, 33–34, 145–46, 199 n. 3.

77 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 174.

78 *Spirit in Ashes*, 174.

79 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 169–70. See also p. 185: “To speak of an ‘attempt at thinking’ is not an empty phrase meant to stimulate humility. The term makes the claim that we are here taking a way of *questioning*, on which the problematic alone is accepted as the unique habitat and *locus* of thinking” (emphasis in original). In *On the Way*, 92, Heidegger explicitly mentions the role of *Tao* in Laotse’s poetic thinking as an analogue to his notion of the way or the method as the source of our power to think. On Heidegger’s engagement with Taoism, see sources cited in Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 82 n. 1 and 232–33 n. 10.

80 For example, compare Heidegger, *On the Way*, 71: “the authentic attitude of thinking is not a putting of questions—rather, it is a listening to the grant, the promise of what is to be put in question. But in the history of our thinking, asking questions has since the early days been regarded as the characteristic procedure of thinking, and not without good cause.” See Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 139. For a fuller analysis of the primacy of the question on Heidegger’s path of thinking, see Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah*, 77–78, 92 n. 150.

81 Heidegger, *The Question*, 35. See the exposition of this statement in Heidegger, *On the Way*, 72.

beyond the limits to which the path of Heidegger's thought reaches and adopting the argument of Blanchot in *Writing the Disaster*, Wyschogrod declares that questioning the question "circumvents negation as unfolding in Being itself."<sup>82</sup> The weight of the calamity may be felt epistemically "as annulling the question of self so that both question and self disappear,"<sup>83</sup> but the universality of the death event, its inclusivity, is always determined by the particularity of each individual, and this despite the aspiration of the Nazis to depersonalize the victims with the unanimous fate that all were going to die. The subjugation of the primordial modes of vital being notwithstanding, death did not rob the martyrs of their selfhood.

The ignoble sense of sameness imposed by the diminution of everyone to nothing but a potential or an actual cadaver did not obliterate the magnanimous sense of difference demanded by the dignity of personhood. To the contrary, the birth of the death event opened up "a new phantasmatic meaning borne by the speaker, one that accompanies all discourse. This is the self's demand that it be permitted to persevere in its existence."<sup>84</sup> The will to endure on the part of the transactional self is an expression of the living being's essence and carries no teleological resolve or axiological weight. Yet, the impact of man-made death upon the social self is such that there is a "transition from a psychological to an axiological or moral conception of the I pole."<sup>85</sup> In the face of what Wyschogrod presciently called the "pandemic humanly contrived death," the dilemmas of the depleted self will "be posed within the ambit of this radically altered intersubjective space."<sup>86</sup> A salient repercussion of the death event was the fragmentation of the two components of the transactional self, "an I which is a nondiscursive spontaneity and a me which is integrated through time into a relational field. ... By stressing the me and thus collapsing the self's spontaneity—its I pole—the self requires increasing effort to maintain itself."<sup>87</sup> The perseverance of those marked to be exterminated conveys the ineluctable truism that the ontic experience of being human was fundamentally altered by the atrocities of the camps. "*Once the death-world has existed it continues to exist, in the mode of eternity, as it were, for it becomes part of the sediment that is the irrevocable past.*"<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Wyschogrod, *An Ethics*, 140.

<sup>83</sup> *An Ethics*, 140.

<sup>84</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 214.

<sup>85</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 214.

<sup>86</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 214–15.

<sup>87</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 215.

<sup>88</sup> Wyschogrod, "Concentration Camps," 335 (emphasis in original).

Cast in the formulation of Blanchot, the disaster's mode of self-temporalization is such that the disaster "recurs in perpetuity not as something positive but as a 'nonevent' that never did and never will happen in any straightforward sense. The time of the disaster is a time that always already was and a time that will be in the mode of not being it."<sup>89</sup> Poignantly, envisioning the Holocaust as the event of the nonevent accentuates that the tenacity of the transience of time somatically demonstrated by the denizens of the death camps—heralding the irrevocability of the ephemeral comportment of the human condition as such—signified the tangible embodiment of the abstract idealization of the negation of negation. In some respect, Wyschogrod follows Hegel's contention that the truth of the present must preserve the past and that this preservation can only be achieved through memory.<sup>90</sup> The past is thus the difference between the content of the in-itself and that content as it effects and is commemorated by our consciousness in the present.<sup>91</sup> The philosophical insight corresponds to Wyschogrod's contention that in each of the religious traditions—she specifies Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—"the past must be repatterned and in some way neutralized before a change in moral practices is possible."<sup>92</sup> But remembering the nameless decreed not to be remembered presents an inimitable problem that mandates the memory of forgetfulness, a thinking of nothing that has no recourse to being—to think the "not" even more primordially than Heidegger<sup>93</sup>—and hence the remembering of the past on the part of the historian requires heeding the unsayability that breaks into language in light of the disaster. Ineffability does not betoken some content that eludes language, but rather the saying that escapes so that the unsaid can burst into speech, the alterity of what is held back by the other who resists linguistic captivity.<sup>94</sup>

The historian is thus a time traveler who wishes to enter the material and conceptual world of the past but can do so only from the vantage point of the idiom that is comprehensible in terms of the culture of specularity and information available in the present.<sup>95</sup> The ethical obligation to bring back the past is perforce a reiteration (*Wiederholung*) colored by the dual idealization of time as a stretched fluctuation of mobile individual events ordered in the volatility of their pastness,

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<sup>89</sup> Wyschogrod, *An Ethics*, 140.

<sup>90</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 97.

<sup>91</sup> *Spirit in Ashes*, 98.

<sup>92</sup> Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 110.

<sup>93</sup> Wyschogrod, *An Ethics*, 139.

<sup>94</sup> *An Ethics*, 141.

<sup>95</sup> *An Ethics*, 146–47. See also pp. 148–52, where Wyschogrod examines the task of the historian in light of the possibility of time travel entertained by contemporary physicists.

presentness, and futurity, and a punctiform sequence of measurable and disarticulated now points that succeed one another disjointedly, but in either case, the past is an alterity that can never be spoken or visualized by the historian except as a nostalgic hypostatization in the present, a return to where one has always never been.<sup>96</sup>

The past is disclosed by the 'not' that is imprinted, in Derrida's phrase, *sous rature* in what is actually imaged and told. The no, not, never is not merely a mode of time's disclosure, one of time's ec-stases, but *is* time as the break thrown open by the world between itself and itself in the modes of 'it was before but cannot be again.' *The only way in which that which was can return is through its volatilization in images.*<sup>97</sup>

Contrary to the chronoscopic alignment of time as moving irreversibly from "it was" to "not yet," the occupation of the historian rests on the reversibility of the timeline and thus the historical narrative is created on the basis of grasping occurrences of the past not only as that which was but as that which could have been. The double disclosiveness places the possibility of paths not taken within the conspectus of the past, a temporal bilocation that negates the negative grounding of historical narrativization in the absolute insistence that what came to pass in the causal chain of events could not have been otherwise.<sup>98</sup>

In this foray into the impossible, "the historian must make the dead other remember, speak through the literary and artifactual remains that constitute the historical record or, in their absence, through the burial places which encrypt the memories of dead others."<sup>99</sup> The heterology of the historical narrative must evade the totalization of a metanarrative by confronting the cataclysm from the nonspace of ethics<sup>100</sup> and providing the language to frame prosecution and the defense of a juridical discourse about the past that prevails terminably in its interminable passing.<sup>101</sup> The pain and suffering of the aggrieved do not disappear but remain the limiting condition of the semiological memory of the volatilized hyperreality.<sup>102</sup> Correspondingly, the apocalyptic notion of the endtime is trans-

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96 *An Ethics*, 147. On time's duality, see the extended discussion on pp. 152–59.

97 *An Ethics*, 166 (emphasis in original).

98 *An Ethics*, 167–68.

99 *An Ethics*, 173.

100 *An Ethics*, 213: "But it is precisely the stationing of the heterological historian just as that point where she neither ignores nor is overwhelmed by the cataclysm, is neither inured to alterity nor so wounded by it that she cannot speak, that enables her to evade totalization. Can she not from the non-space of ethics transform a vat of DNA with its unheard of stockpiling potential into a memory palace, a *lukasa* board upon whose retained events she may draw in her depiction of the past?"

101 *An Ethics*, 179.

102 *An Ethics*, 213.

formed hyperliterally by the victims and survivors of the death camps into the time of the end that is not the end of time but the anticipatory victory of eternity over temporal becoming, a deeper oscillation of time through discerning that time is immutable in its immutability, abiding in its nonabiding.<sup>103</sup> The historical recollection of those judged worthy of being disregarded and erased from the book of our collective memory establishes the cognitive apparatus necessary to negate the negation affirming the affirmation of nothing to affirm.

The twofold negativity is tagged by Wyschogrod as the “non-negotiable negative” implied by the event of Auschwitz, in Adorno’s thinking, or, according to Lyotard, the “negation of the negative.”<sup>104</sup> Wyschogrod thus concurs with Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s “positive negation,” that the “nonidentical” cannot be obtained as “something positive” or by “a negation of the negative,” for equating the “negation of negation with positivity” is the “quintessence of identification.”<sup>105</sup> It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the conclusion reached by Adorno could well serve as a summary of Wyschogrod’s own view: “To negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough. ... The thesis that the negation of a negation is something positive can only be upheld by one who presupposes positivity—as all-conceptuality—from the beginning.”<sup>106</sup> The Hegelian system depends on the dialectical principle that “to negate negation is positive,” but the “empirical substance of dialectics,” endorsed by Adorno, “is not the principle but the resistance which otherness offers to identity.”<sup>107</sup> If one speaks of the nothing as nothing, one negates the negation and thereby transposes the negative into a positive. What is necessary, therefore, is to negate the negation of the negative, to reclaim a negativity that no longer contains its own other within the identity of the same. Analogously, from Wyschogrod’s perspective, the unprecedented possibility of the total abolition of human subjectivity necessitates that the ultimate negation can no longer be sublated by the movement of Spirit in history.<sup>108</sup> The undoing of the undoing prompts a negative that is no longer subject to negation, since its own negativity would have been positively negated, whence it follows that the antinomy of being and nonbeing is dismantled and primacy no longer given to the positive or to the negative. The ni-

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**103** For an elaboration of this motif and the citation and analysis of the philosophical sources that have informed my view, see the chapter “Timemask and the Telling of Time in the Time of Telling” in Wolfson, *Suffering Time*, 1–71.

**104** Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 6.

**105** Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 158.

**106** *Negative Dialectics*, 159–60.

**107** *Negative Dialectics*, 160–161.

**108** Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 212.

hilatory inferences to be elicited from the Holocaust are not meant to reinstate a “discursive negation” to express the inexpressible along the lines of traditional negative theology; their intent rather is “to bring to the fore the problem of unsayability” by raising questions concerning the plausibility of the descriptive and analytic functions of language routinely postulated by historical consciousness.<sup>109</sup> The language of the death-world may have been attenuated by the fact that it lacked a “rich referential structure,” but it was nonetheless “dense with psychological reference and metalinguistic irony. Personal names, even if they embody incompatible characteristics, resist the rule of cynical doubling which otherwise governs language in the death-world.”<sup>110</sup> The irenic function of language, expressed in naming the other in terms of kinship and in the use of proper names, endured even in the death-world.<sup>111</sup> Hence, in spite of the effort to quash the individual identity of the victims, their personal names persist—if only in commemoration—as the means to open up the possibility of the self’s answering for itself, the non-referential null point that is at the edge of language, which in turn is the pronominal axis upon which to anchor the response to every other person equally addressed as a self who answers as an I.

In compliance with Derrida, Wyschogrod accepts that the “idea of difference yields deeper insight into negation itself,” that “difference acquires meaning only because we become aware of negation through the *play* of differences which leaves tracks or traces in that which is present ... But a negation so profound that all presence would be snuffed out would annihilate difference as well. Difference and presence alike depend on continuity of the world. Without it, alterity would be reduced to the same.”<sup>112</sup> It is this task of “thinking a negation that cannot be thought” that forges an intrinsic connection between the Holocaust and the postmodern sensibility. The unmasking of rationality, which is indispensable to the postmodern ethos, is instantiated by the event of the Holocaust, which prototypically illustrates the inversion of the Husserlian conception of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) in the death-world.<sup>113</sup> Ironically, the questioning of reason that evolves from the most wretched chapter of human history casts light on what Wyschogrod pinpoints as the Jewish predilection for multivocality and the constant interrogation of texts to derive novel meaning. In her reading of the Jewish tradition, there is a conspic-

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109 Edith Wyschogrod, “Trends in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy: Contexts of a Conversation,” in Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 133–34.

110 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 209.

111 *Spirit in Ashes*, 215.

112 *Spirit in Ashes*, 94 (emphasis in original).

113 *Spirit in Ashes*, 15–16.



uous tolerance for a plurality of opinions; Jewish sources, like theological texts more generally, when read through the Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, can be viewed as “manifesting multiple strands of meaning which become intelligible through an analytic process.”<sup>114</sup> Using this criterion, the manifold meanings are entertained as credible so long as it is recognized that all of them are true. “As a religion of the text,” she writes, “Judaism is compatible with the intertextuality of hermeneutical and poststructuralist interpretation.”<sup>115</sup> Jewish exegesis, accordingly, would allow in Derridean terms for a “textual dissemination” that, in contrast to “discursive polysemy,” implies an “implacable difference,” a “textual stream whose interpretations cannot be brought to closure.”<sup>116</sup> The iconoclastic proclivity of Jewish aniconism is ideationally isomorphic with the demise of the absolute impelled by the negation of negation.

Hermeneutically, the “logic of the text” is altered by an absence of any presence of a transcendental signifier—even an absence that presents itself as nonpresent—and thus “opens previously unthinkable configurations, an errancy, wandering or leaching of meaning that is irrecoverable as that which is fully present.”<sup>117</sup> As she puts it elsewhere, the mark of postmodernism “is not sheer ineffability, but a negation that deconstructs language so that, to borrow a metaphor from the Hasidic master Nahman of Bratslav, language itself stutters.”<sup>118</sup> To stutter, as we know, is not to remain silent; it is to speak, albeit in such a way that what is spoken is never what is said, an “apophatics of denial,” in Derrida’s locution, a “self-deconstructing speech.”<sup>119</sup> Wyschogrod highlights the ethical repercussion of the halting nature of speech: “Language is not only communication but always already interdiction, the no-saying of a speech that prohibits, even if such prohibition is on be-

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114 Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 77.

115 *Crossover Queries*, 311.

116 *Crossover Queries*, 372–73. Wyschogrod cites the passage from Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans., with an introduction and additional notes, by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 351, where the distinction between “discursive polysemy” and “textual dissemination” is made.

117 Edith Wyschogrod, “Religion as Life and Text: Postmodern Re-figurations,” in *The Craft of Religious Studies*, ed. Jon R. Stone (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 248. Compare Edith Wyschogrod, “How to Say No in French: Derrida and Negation in Recent French Philosophy,” in *Negation and Theology*, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 46–54.

118 Edith Wyschogrod, “Hasidism, Hellenism, Holocaust: A Postmodern View,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996), 312.

119 Wyschogrod, “How to Say No,” 40. The expression of Derrida, “apophatics of denial,” is cited by Wyschogrod in that context.

half of the other.”<sup>120</sup> The language of negation—the no-saying of the stutterer as opposed to the reticence of one who cannot speak—can be cast in ocular terms as the negative epiphany, a seeing of nothing to be seen, the invisible that is beyond the opposition of the visible and the nonvisible,<sup>121</sup> the nonphenomenalizable that shapes the phenomenalizability of the sensible world of human experience.

Beholding the unseen and heeding the unsaying are the means necessary to scale the heights of the sacred and to plumb the depths of the cataclysm. In the heterological nonspace of *différance*, there is no discrepancy between the sacred and the cataclysmic: one, as the other, directs the mind to the void that is not amenable to linguistification, conceptualization, or confabulation.<sup>122</sup> Here the role of *poiēsis* is critical for the “proper subject” of the poem is the death event and hence poetry has the potential to open “a discursive space for remembering the lost or dead other.”<sup>123</sup> As an invocation of the other, poetry is the path by which “space is intersubjectively constituted within the ambit of the death event.”<sup>124</sup> The poet is thus bequeathed with the mission that Wyschogrod assigned to “the sphere of ethics to be a holding open of a discursive and ontic space for becoming, specifically the becoming of moral change.”<sup>125</sup> Adorno famously argued in the 1949 essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.<sup>126</sup> In *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966, Adorno revised his earlier view, but in so doing posed an even more agonizing question:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.<sup>127</sup>

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120 Wyschogrod, *An Ethics*, 240.

121 Edith Wyschogrod, “Doing before Hearing: On the Primacy of Touch,” in *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. François Laruelle (Paris: Collections Surfaces, 1980), 187.

122 Wyschogrod, *An Ethics*, 14.

123 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 196.

124 *Spirit in Ashes*, 196.

125 Wyschogrod, *Saints*, 55.

126 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 34. I am taking the liberty to repeat my argument in Wolfson, *The Duplicity*, 163–64.

127 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 362–63.

Heidegger, as is well known, argued that in the wake of the catastrophic failures of the technologically-driven ideologies of the twentieth century—Nazism, Communism, and Capitalism—*poiësis* as a metapolitical gesture<sup>128</sup> is the sole justification for life and the only way to paint a world-picture (*Weltbild*) predicated on the truth of the measure-taking<sup>129</sup> that provokes the freedom to let *the veil appear as what veils*;<sup>130</sup> that is, the unconcealment that reveals nothing but the concealing of the unconcealed revealed as the nothing that is concealed.

Following, but significantly deviating from, Heidegger, Wyschogrod likewise regarded poetry—epitomized by Rilke’s insistence that we must prepare an abode for those who have perished and thus reach into the abyss to find “a counterlogos able to encompass the scale of what is moving toward extinction as well as the speed of this passing”<sup>131</sup>—as the viable route to facilitate “the possibility of thinking not only my death but also the numberless dead.”<sup>132</sup> Specularized through the prism of the death event, the one who survived shoulders no drastic guilt, as Adorno suggested, nor is there a primary blame tied to *Dasein*’s finitude, as Heidegger argued; the culpability rather “belongs to every *Dasein*,” which leads to the conclusion that “the guilt of victim and agent are equalized.”<sup>133</sup> There is, however, one crucial way in which the guilt of the victim is not equal to the guilt of the agent: the former singularly embodies the poetic directive to live as the witness to the death event; such agency is denied the agent who committed horrific crimes against humanity. As the survivors suffer the inescapable fate of confronting their own mortality, those who retell the story must assume the responsibility of being witnesses to teach each and every human being how to die both as an I and a we, acceding to the *aporia* of a death that defies the perpetrators of the death-world by proffering an endtime that timelessly engenders the infinitization of finitude.

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128 On the use of the expression “metapolitics,” see Matthew Feldman, “Between *Geist* and *Zeitgeist*: Martin Heidegger as Ideologue of ‘Metapolitical Fascism,’” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (2005): 175–98; Peter Trawny, *Heidegger and the Myth of a Jewish World Conspiracy*, trans. Andrew J. Michell (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015), 112 n. 12; Jeff Love and Michael Meng, “Heidegger’s Metapolitics,” *Cultural Critique* 99 (2018): 97–122.

129 On the characterization of poetry as an act of measuring essential to human dwelling in the ground of being, see Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 221–22.

130 Heidegger, *The Question*, 25.

131 Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, 194.

132 *Spirit in Ashes*, 197.

133 *Spirit in Ashes*, 173.

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Ronny Miron

# The “Hermeneutic Triangle” of Modern Judaism: “God,” “History,” and “Meaning”

## 1 Introduction

The understanding of history as a stage on which figures and nations acquire significance and relevance at a certain point, and later on give way to others, goes back to romanticism, and Hegel in particular. To an extent, this holds also for late Heidegger, in whose idea of history each epoch gives priority to some types of relationship to Being and allows others to withdraw into irrelevance or insignificance.<sup>1</sup> However, in modern times this view of history is challenging for traditional cultures formed around reference to a transcendent entity or perceiving their history as sacred. In particular, the encounter of traditional culture with secularism is often regarded as threatening to rob its members of the indispensable means of achieving self-understanding. Primarily, this concerns the peculiar vocabulary employed in the narration of history and even the very motivation of the members of the cultures to tell their story. Consequently, in times of secularism, the possibility of telling the story of sacred histories is challenged to the point of a crisis or even impossibility.

In what follows, the challenge of addressing a sacred history in secular time will be scrutinized via common aspects in the thought of two figures regarding modern Jewish history: the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009) and the literary critic Baruch Kurzweil (1907–72). The discussion marks three vertices creating a triangle within their understanding of modern Judaism: “God,” “history,” and “meaning.” As in the classic “hermeneutic triangle” tying together the “author,” the “text,” and the “reader,” in this regard the first element possesses a transcendent quality, the second refers to the givenness under scrutiny, and the third concerns the subjective means employed in attempt to understand the two preceding it. More specifically, “God” marks an ontological element within Jewish existence, “history” signifies current Jewish secularism, and “meaning” concerns the subjective stance toward God in the secular era. The initial displaying of the shared insights regarding the three elements in Yerushalmi’s and Kurzweil’s respective perspectives seems to provide the so-called vertices with equal gravity within

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1 Regarding Heidegger, see Mark A. Wrathall, “Adaptation (Ereignis),” in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 19–30.

the related “triangle.” However, in the Discussion section, the implicit hierarchy taking place among the elements of “God,” “history,” and “meaning” will be unveiled and thereby the discussed thinkers will also be manifested as constituting a sequence within which Kurzweil’s view appears as taking a step farther than Yerushalmi’s. Thus, where the latter remains to a large extent confined to the conservative departure point, Kurzweil observes an activist potency within the same view of Judaism as a sacred history. The discussion is followed by a short epilogue.

## 2 “God”

In his essay *Zakhor*, described as “part history, part confession and credo,”<sup>2</sup> Yerushalmi postulated the following: “I submit that no Jewish historian today [...] would bring himself to write an explicit ‘reasons-from-God’ epilogue [...] [W]hat would be inconceivable in a history of the English, the French, or the Dutch is still possible in a serious twentieth-century historical work concerning the Jews.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Yerushalmi went further when he postulated the following: “to be a Jew without God is, after all, historically problematic and not self-evident, and the blandly generic term secular Jew gives no indication of the richly nuanced

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2 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1989), xxxiii.

3 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 91. *Zakhor* raised enormous interest and continuous scholarly references once it was published in 1982. See in particular David N. Myers, “Remembering *Zakhor*: A Super-Commentary,” *History and Memory* 4, no. 1 (1992): 129–46; David N. Myers, “Of Marranos and Memory: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, eds Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998): 1–21; David N. Myers, *Resisting History, Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Amos Funkenstein, “History, Counter History and Narrative,” in *Probing the Limits of Representations: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 66–81; Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Jacob Neusner, “From Historical to Paradigmatic Thinking: Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor* Revisited,” *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* VII (1995): 219–39; Michael Graetz, “Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*,” *Zion* 48, no. 4 (1983): 430–435; Yaacov Shavit, “(On) Yosef Haim Yerushalmi *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*,” *Studies in Zionism* 6, no. 1 (1985): 143–48. The journal *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (JQR) devoted the fourth issue of volume 97 (see David N. Myers, ed., *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 4 [2007]) to *Zakhor* in connection with discussing the wider context of Yerushalmi’s historical approach.



variety within the species.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, on another occasion Yerushalmi maintains unmistakably: “for me secular Judaism is a contradiction. If you want something Jewish and secular, do not call it Judaism, because this semantically empties the word of all meaning. You have to find another word.”<sup>5</sup> Yerushalmi, of course, did not deny the existence of a real phenomenon of secularization among the Jewish people, but he saw it mainly as a cultural expression of Judaism, and elsewhere stressed that “culture [...] cannot do what religion can do [...]. In the end, secularism was not and is not sufficient to nourish the soul.”<sup>6</sup> Either way, as a hypothesis, a belief, a research-based argument, or a statement about reality, for Yerushalmi, God was an axiom in Jewish history.

Yerushalmi’s view that establishes the permanent presence of God in Jewish history is foundational to his historiographical approach, which discerns the existence of a break between modern Jewish history and the Jewish past. Nonetheless, this does not imply a firm identification of Jewish history as sacred, so that it should be scrutinized via unreal criteria. Certainly, as a historian studying modern Jewish history, Yerushalmi frequently focused on real processes in the history of the Jewish people.<sup>7</sup> Also, in principle, Yerushalmi would agree that historical thinking as known to us is not alien to the Jewish religious tradition, as long as it is founded on the historical-real level of past events.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Yerushalmi does not argue with the common historiographical approach whereby up to the modern era, the Jews perceived the history of their nation as sacred, as ruled by providence and guided by a transcendent factor. However, the related argument regarding the possible pertinence of “‘reasons-from-God’ in a serious twentieth-century historical work concerning the Jews”<sup>9</sup> intimates primarily Yerushalmi’s certainty regarding the real presence of an ahistorical transcendent entity in Jewish histo-

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4 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 9.

5 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Interview with Prof. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi,” interviewed by Shulamit Volkov and Josef Kaplan, *Historia* 16 (2005): 21.

6 Yerushalmi, “Interview,” 15.

7 See here Yerushalmi, “Interview,” 13; *Zakhor*, 93.

8 This opinion is shared by Idel. See Moshe Idel, “The Rise and Fall of the Historical Jew,” in *The Past and Beyond: Studies in History and Philosophy*, eds. Shai Elazar Weinrib et al. (Raanana: Open University, 2007): 495. See here also Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “A Flawed Prophecy? Zakhor, the Memory Boom, and the Holocaust,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 4 (2007): 511–15.

9 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 91.

ry.<sup>10</sup> Hence God's absence from secular Jewish historiography cannot push Him aside, let alone negate His existence or dismiss the contents associated with it.

Moreover, just like Freud, Yerushalmi distinguishes between memory as a mental space, to which repression and sometimes denial have contributed, and history or events taking place in real reality.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the innovation that Yerushalmi identifies in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*—the dynamic of the tradition in which the repression takes place and later the return of the repressed<sup>12</sup>—touches upon his very interest in Jewish history; that is, God cannot disappear from Jewish history as Yerushalmi understands it. The title of the fourth chapter of *Zakhor*; "Modern Dilemmas: Historiography and Its Discontents," also makes a clear reference to Freud's famous essay, indicating Yerushalmi's own discontent with modern Jewish historiography, which manifests incapability to communicate what for him is indispensable; that is, the experience of God's presence and influence over Jewish history. Alternatively, the discontent concerns exactly the break from Jews' experience of the original presence of God in Jewish history that is traditionally considered as such that cannot be breakable. Yerushalmi's personal voice cannot be disregarded, given the following articulation in the first person: "I live within the ironic awareness that the very mode in which I delve into the Jewish past represents a decisive *break* with that past."<sup>13</sup> Thus, either as present or as absent, for Yerushalmi, God is an indispensable element in any attempt to approach Jewish history.

The certainty regarding the presence of God in the Jewish reality is also enforced in Kurzweil's critique of modern Hebrew literature. For Kurzweil, God is "the great, real hero" of all events, and a source of explanation for them,<sup>14</sup> thus an overall object of meaning and of presence:

The main reason for the tragic or atragic essence of the comings and goings should not be sought in the hero's actions or in their guilt. We have different fates, different structures of human character, i.e., factors independent of man [...] It is clear that the reason for the cruel fate, or for the grace, should not be sought in man, but in the sphere of God, revealed or hidden [...] The incomprehensible and hidden divinity is the source of suffering.<sup>15</sup>

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10 For further reading, see here Myers, who believes that although Yerushalmi viewed modernism as bringing about in many cultures a break with their respective collective memory, he did not find a parallel for them in the Jewish world (see Myers, "Remembering *Zakhor*," 133).

11 See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1955), 170–171.

12 See Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, 79.

13 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 81.

14 Baruch Kurzweil, *In Struggle Over the Values of Judaism* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1970), 125.

15 Baruch Kurzweil, *Essays on the Stories of S. I. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 201–202.

The phrase “it is clear” embodies the certainty connected to the image of God and the transcendent entity in general, and it reappears elsewhere; for example, in a poem by Uri Zvi Greenberg, who wrote, “God knows why this is so.” About this, Kurzweil postulates: “*It is clear*: God alone, the always present, has solutions to the riddles of time.”<sup>16</sup> For Kurzweil, then, God does not only denote a reality that cannot be disputed. Moreover, God is a source of explanation and meaning for every significant event in life. Moreover, for Kurzweil God is primarily a fact that is taken for granted.

It should be clarified that for Kurzweil, God is just one embodiment of the transcendent presence in Jewish reality that also possesses other manifestations, referred to “*realities hidden from our minds*.”<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, the identification of transcendence with God, common to Yerushalmi and Kurzweil, denotes the ultimate ontological core of the perception of this entity. However, in this regard Kurzweil takes a step further when acknowledging a wide range of modes of God’s presence within modern Hebrew literature, regarded as an ultimate field of its expression. Indeed, Kurzweil identified a real connection existing between literature and the transcendent entity—a connection that will later be discussed as providing a historical testimony to the presence of the transcendent entity within Jewish existence. In Kurzweil’s words:

The landscapes in Greenberg’s poems are *not primarily real landscapes* but landscapes of the poetic vision, which brings tidings from pre-existence, trans-personal, and pre-personal entities. These landscapes are [...] identical with the ancient landscapes of history, rising above the time dimension in depth, the denoted and *divine* time.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Kurzweil writes elsewhere:

Shoshana, like all the other women in Agnon, is not a symbol and not an allegory. She is *the presence*, the constant crystallization of the Jewish beauty, *reflecting beyond itself, beyond reality, the transcendence that is its homeland*.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the search for the traces of the transcendent entity in modern literature guides Kurzweil’s criticism of key figures in modern Jewish thought. For example, he argues that in the thought of Ahad Ha’am, concepts “such as ‘sanctity’ [and]

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<sup>16</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, *Our New Literature: Continuity or Revolution?* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1960), 127. All translations from the Hebrew original are mine, and emphases are added, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd* (Jerusalem: Schocken), 80–81.

<sup>18</sup> Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 299.

'holy spirit' [...] no longer receive their weight and value from their rootedness in transcendence. They originate in worldliness and their tendency is worldly. The God of Ahad Ha'am was created by the nation. His prophets are messengers without a sender."<sup>20</sup> The disruption caused by the absence of God is also mirrored in Kurzweil's analysis of Yosef Hayim Brenner's literary work:

deep down in their souls, Brenner's heroes know that what causes the pathetic process of the thinning of the eros is the 'religious collapse,' meaning a Jewish world without God, a human world without a creator, without Gods.<sup>21</sup>

Loneliness is cosmic, the self is isolated from "the whole world" and cannot find its repair due to the modern curse of singleness that prevented it from communing with the God of mercy and forgiveness [...] The single self did not receive what all the world was blessed with.<sup>22</sup>

Against this background of perceiving Jewish history as sacred, Kurzweil regards modern Hebrew literature as "the literature of the religious problem" despite the fact that it "arises from the secular world." Consequently, he establishes that "literary problems are much more than merely literary problems; or they are not also literary problems."<sup>23</sup>

### 3 "History"

Yerushalmi's view of Jewish history is closely related to its understanding as sacred. Thus, he discerns two foundational characteristics in Jewish collective memory. The first, dealing with the origin of this memory, is "a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and the will of the group itself."<sup>24</sup> Yerushalmi contends that this faith is established on two premises: "the belief that divine providence is [...] an active causal factor in Jewish history, and the related belief in the uniqueness of Jewish history itself."<sup>25</sup> These premises, just like divine law, proclaim sub-

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<sup>20</sup> Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 203.

<sup>21</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 299.

<sup>22</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 257–58.

<sup>23</sup> Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 110, 54. The expression "religious problem" appears also in the writings of Gershom Scholem, denoting the religious possibilities to reach realization even in a reality whose historical appearance is of secularization and anarchy. See Gershom Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), 398; Gershom Scholem, *Another Thing: Chapters in History and Revival II*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990): 192, 196.

<sup>24</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> *Zakhor*, 89.

stantivity, permanence, and unconditionality. Moreover, in the absence of reference to the involvement of human subjects in shaping Jewish collective memory, they further stress the force of transcendent divinity upon it. Indeed, already the premise that a transcendent element is permanently present in Jewish history does not comply with the attempt to interpret worldly occurrences as real processes resulting from human choices and actions. The second fundamental characteristic of Jewish collective memory concerns its selective nature, as a result of which “certain memories live on; the rest are winnowed out, repressed, or simply discarded by a process of natural selection.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, the historical quality of this characteristic clashes with both components of the first one. Simply, this selectivity reveals that just like that of other groups and nations, Jewish collective memory is exposed to changes and developments external to it, and thereby challenges its uniqueness and separateness protected by divine providence.

Undoubtedly, the apparent gap, to the point of contradiction, between the two characteristics of Jewish collective memory suggested by Yerushalmi unveils a fundamental tension in the historian’s view, whose honest reflection on his profession leads him to admit that the delving into the past typical of the historian “cut[s] against the grain of collective memory which, as we have remarked, is drastically selective.”<sup>27</sup> Yerushalmi further explains that:

long after an essentially secular view of world history had permeated ever-widening European circles, a providential view of Jewish history was still held tenaciously [...] by Jews and Christians alike [...] Of all histories, that of the Jewish people has been the *most refractory to secularization* because this history alone, as a national history, was considered by all to be sacred to begin with. [Consequently] the notion that Jewish history is on the same level of reality as any other history, subject to the same kind of causality and accessible to the same types of analysis, did not find its way into actual historical writing until the *nineteenth century*.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that for Yerushalmi, the peculiarity of Jewish collective memory concerns not only its difference from those of other cultures, but also the claim inherent within it regarding the particularity of Jewish history. Thus, while the collective memory is expressed in real human institutions, which as such exist in a particular place and time, within Jewish heritage they also represent an autonomous transcendent presence. Therefore, Jewish collective memory may only be accessed through a Halakhic connection to Judaism, or through literature and ideology, which Yerushalmi considered to have had greater success in shaping the attitude

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<sup>26</sup> *Zakhor*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Zakhor*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> *Zakhor*, 89–90.

of modern Jews to the past, in a way that did not involve a break from the original Jewish collective memory.<sup>29</sup>

However, in modern times, a break within the collective memory took place. Yerushalmi explains that since the early nineteenth century, the establishment of Jewish historiography and secularization joined forces and greatly weakened the transcendent presence in whose existence Jewish collective memory was anchored.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, what was previously regarded as a manifestation of the divine existence, primarily providence, was no longer regarded as denoting the presence of an independent transcendent power, but at most as an idea subject to the interpretation of individuals, and as such as a disputable matter. Thus, the entry of immanent elements into Jewish collective memory was enabled. This was apparent in the stamp left upon the memory by real historical and human forces, primarily the penetration of secularization and historiography into the Jewish world. In Yerushalmi's words: "at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living [...] For the first time history, *not a sacred text*, becomes the arbiter of Judaism."<sup>31</sup> For Yerushalmi, "If the secularization of Jewish history is a break with the past, the historicizing of Judaism itself has been an equally significant departure. It could hardly be otherwise."<sup>32</sup> To this extent, the appearance of modern

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29 See here Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 100–101. In this, Yerushalmi manifests a fundamental similarity with Yeshayahu Leibowitz, for whom Judaism is but the fulfillment of the Jewish law. See Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman, trans. Yoram Navon et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3–29, 79–87. On Leibowitz's attitude toward history, see Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Faith, History, and Values* (Jerusalem: Academ, 1982), 140–169. For further reading, see here Ronny Miron, "The Possibility of Religious Subjectivity: Its Defense and Critique," in *Watchtower Religionswissenschaft Standortbestimmungen im wissenschaftlichen Feld*, ed. Anne Koch (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 2007): 95–118. For the interrelations between history and the literary form, see Harold Fisch, *Remembered Future: Study in Literary Mythology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985). Sidra Ezrahi criticizes Yerushalmi's approach to Hebrew literature and its connection to the Jewish past and to myth. See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Fiction and Memory: Zakhor Revisited," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 4 (2007): 521–29.

30 Yitzhak Conforti suggests that Yerushalmi did not sufficiently appreciate the vitality of engaging in history for the collective memory in the modern era. See Yitzhak Conforti, *Past Tense: Zionist Historiography and the Shaping of National Memory* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 2006), 208, n. 70.

31 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 86.

32 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 91. The influence of Maurice Halbwachs, and later of Pierre Nora, on Yerushalmi's approach regarding the contrast between history and memory has long been mentioned in research literature about *Zakhor*. See Conforti, *Past Tense*, 5–8, 57–60; Patrick H. Hutton, *History as Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 73–90; Nathan Wachtel, "Introduction: Between Memory and History," *History and Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1986): 207–24. Idel presumes that the religious background of the historians contributed to their view of the break in modern Jewish history; see Idel, "The Rise and Fall," 204.

Jewish historiography, just like the appearance of secularization, denotes the pushing aside of the various appearances of transcendence from both the Jewish being and the collective memory inherent in it.

Similar to Yerushalmi’s, Kurzweil’s reading of Jewish history discerns an operative metaphysical presence in it and consolidates it as divine or sacred.<sup>33</sup> This view is conspicuous in his interpretation of Uri Zvi Greenberg’s poetry, regarded as playing a central role in crystallizing “a special appearance of historical vision,”<sup>34</sup> and as “a poetic vision of history.”<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Kurzweil states that “the special connection of [Greenberg’s] poetry to history is known. The landscapes of history are the source of his poetry,”<sup>36</sup> and hence that poetry is regarded as revealing the connection between history and God, and the metaphysical nature of Jewish history itself. In Kurzweil’s words: “It is clear to us beyond all doubt that the origin of all the fire metaphors so abundant in Greenberg’s poetry is the eternal presence of the divine fire of Sinai.”<sup>37</sup> Kurzweil further adds that Greenberg’s poetry “emerges and arises from the wells of primary, authentic vision that sees history, with all its images and its metaphorical power, whose essence is the living presence of *divine history*.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, just as the divine presence is not manifested in human reality, the sanctity of Jewish history is revealed only in “sparks of moments” that join together in “the divine time”<sup>39</sup> in which the split and fragmented appearances of the transcendent presence are joined together.

The perception of Jewish history as permeated with divine presence realizes a rigid dimension in the relation of this history to the transcendent entity. This relation has additional expressions—possessing a clear ontological character, though less general than the identification with God—through which Kurzweil can fill his perception of Jewish history with content. First and foremost, the ontological as-

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33 Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 87.

34 *Between Vision and Absurd*, 75.

35 *Between Vision and Absurd*, 86.

36 *Between Vision and Absurd*, 80.

37 *Between Vision and Absurd*, 62.

38 *Between Vision and Absurd*, 93. This perception linking the past, history, and the entity is directly influenced by Löwith. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 17–9; see Karl Löwith, *Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie: die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichts-philosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953); Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilgeschehen: die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichts-philosophie* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1973). Kurzweil himself mentions Löwith several times in his writings; e.g., *Between Vision and Absurd*, 159.

39 Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 62–63.

pect is apparent in Kurzweil's attempt to characterize Jewish history in terms of "reality" and "presence":

The poetic landscape [...] is the same historical landscape of *the presence of the living myth*. And myth here does not mean legend, nor aesthetic fashion, nor artistic game [...] but] *the reality of realities!* The historical-mythic vision is for the poet an absolute truth, not an experiment, a sort of 'let's assume this once happened.' There are those who live with profound knowledge of the 'wisdom of the ages,' which is the wisdom of the living historical presence.<sup>40</sup>

Despite characterizing Jewish history in explicitly ontological terms of "reality" and "presence," in no way does Kurzweil identify them with the overt world of phenomena. Moreover, the dominance of the concept of God in Kurzweil's discussions of Jewish history may testify that Kurzweil's interest is not in the overt dimensions of reality, as indicated from his linking of the historical and the concealed: "We must note that there exists a great difference between the concept 'history' in our scientific sense and the appearance of the historical landscapes in Greenberg's poems. The history of the scientists is a certain thing that is unrelated to *realities hidden from our minds*."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Kurzweil repeatedly employs the terms "depth," "time in depth,"<sup>42</sup> and "history in depth,"<sup>43</sup> as well as "reality" and "presence," thus expressing his attempts to obtain a solid ontological characterization of Jewish history, independent of the interpretations directed at it. Finally, Kurzweil's desire to grant an ontological articulation to Jewish history contributes to emphasizing the mark of the transcendent entity, manifested through his frequent characterization of his approach as dealing with history and meta-history, as if these concepts were equivalent.<sup>44</sup> Either way, Jewish history is portrayed in Kurzweil's references to it as containing concealment and depth that do not allow exhausting it in its overt manifestations.

## 4 "Meaning"

While the vertices of "God" and "history" displayed Yerushalmi's and Kurzweil's view of modern Judaism, that of "meaning" concerns the subjective stance toward them. Alternatively, "God" and "history" occupy the objective pole in Yerushalmi's

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<sup>40</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 80–81.

<sup>42</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 69, 75.

<sup>43</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 82, 85, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 59 (see also pp. 63, 92, 93). Kurzweil also reveals a "meta-temporal" perspective in his analysis of Agnon's work. See, for example, *Essays*, 289.



and Kurzweil’s phenomenology of Jewish tradition, while the element of “meaning” concerns its completing subjective pole. In this regard, the common ground shared by the two thinkers can be easily discerned. Thus, in describing the different attitude of the memory and of modern historiography toward the Jewish past, Yerushalmi stresses the “unprecedented energy” directed at revealing details of the past that have been omitted or filtered out of the memory, and thereby “challenge” it and seek to “recover” it.<sup>45</sup> He further explains that “the historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact. [...] He seeks ultimately to recover a *total* past [...] even if he is directly concerned with only a segment of it.”<sup>46</sup> In this way, “the historian, *uninvited, disturbs and reverses*” the process of historical selection.<sup>47</sup> However, in their endeavors to represent the Jewish past in its entirety, modern Jewish historians do not act for the uniformity of Jewish collective memory by protecting its contents from loss and forgetfulness. Rather, Yerushalmi explains that “though modern historiography may give the illusion of both *mneme* and *anamnesis*,”<sup>48</sup> when the *mneme* denotes what is essentially unbroken while *anamnesis* refers to what has been forgotten,<sup>49</sup> historiography is neither of these but “a radically *new* venture.”<sup>50</sup> Yerushalmi observes that this initiative activity of the historian eventually arrived at a “divorce from Jewish collective memory and, in crucial respects, thoroughly at odds with it.”<sup>51</sup> True, the modern historian is helpful in protecting the content of the collective memory from loss and forgetfulness. However, for Yerushalmi, the problem concerns the historian’s excessive involvement in the representation of Jewish history, while in a sacred history a transcendent presence is assumed. This complexity is implied in Yerushalmi’s designation of modern Jewish historiography as giving “the illusion of both *mneme* and *anamnesis*.”<sup>52</sup>

Undoubtedly, the emphasis on the transcendent entity in Yerushalmi’s view of the collective memory, requiring the marginality of the conscious dimension involved in it, frustrates the conscious-interpretative reference to the external reality surrounding the subject. Within these limitations, the transparency of the elements within the collective memory might be diminished in the subject’s eyes,

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45 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.

46 *Zakhor*, 94.

47 *Zakhor*, 95.

48 *Zakhor*, 114.

49 *Zakhor*, 107.

50 *Zakhor*, 114.

51 *Zakhor*, 93.

52 *Zakhor*, 114.

and probably also the ability to assimilate them into the mental world of the bearers of the memory. Consequently, not only can these elements never achieve full transparency or awareness, but also their primary consideration as mental contents that fill Jewish collective memory might also be undermined. To this extent, for Yerushalmi the element of “meaning” does not necessarily comply with achieving understanding of aspects in the collective memory. On the contrary, it seems that here one’s incapability to understand Jewish collective memory all the more reinforces the transcendent presence within it, which is an unintelligible dimension operating in Jewish history.

The above-displayed aspects of activeness, innovation, and a split with Jewish collective memory in Yerushalmi’s view of the modern historical study recur also within Kurzweil’s discussions, accompanied by a bold critical tone. Thus, Kurzweil stresses the activeness of Jewish historians, designating them as “*workers of history*” and “*historicism workers*.”<sup>53</sup> Also, the related “divorce from Jewish collective memory”<sup>54</sup> resonates with a metaphysical emphasis in Kurzweil’s references to the “‘Historical reality’” portrayed by historians out of “arbitrary selection of ‘facts’, of endless papers,” and such that “exists exclusively in the research books.” However, Kurzweil contends that this “historical reality” is merely “a pretentious fiction,” and that “even tens of thousands of ‘documents’ and of ‘scientific facts’ do not create any ‘historical reality.’” In Kurzweil’s view, these facts are none other than “subjective axioms” and “private beliefs” trapped in “the vicious circle of mere subjectivity.” In this regard, Kurzweil establishes that “the nation’s life did not and does not take place according to [...] this ‘historical reality’,” or alternatively: “the truth of the ‘scholars of history’ did not provide for the nation; it is only important to historians.” Thus, in his attempt to maintain the detachment from the genuine historical reality of the Jewish people, Kurzweil goes so far as to argue that modern Jewish historians suggest a new religion possessing its own God and commands, in his words: “the truth of the ‘scholars of history’ acts under the commands of the God of historicism, who is the God of the science of the normalization and historization of Judaism. But [... this] is not the God of Israel.”<sup>55</sup> Consequently, instead of mirroring the exceptional commitment of Jews to their tradition, whose anchor is in the transcendent existence of God, “*studying the past history*” by Jewish historians “*raised hopes for the renewal of the character of Judaism in the future.*”<sup>56</sup> Finally, Kurzweil’s emphasis on the essential gap be-

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53 Kurzweil, *In Struggle Over the Values*, 209.

54 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93.

55 Kurzweil, *In Struggle Over the Values*, 209.

56 Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 145.

tween the scholarship on Jewish history and “Historical reality”<sup>57</sup> indicates that for him, the element of “meaning” too does not necessarily imply possession of understanding. To this extent, for both Yerushalmi and Kurzweil, the force of subjectivity conflicts with the transcendent presence and thereby further radicalizes the split of the modern Jewish people from unitary collective memory of the Jewish past.

Furthermore, for both Yerushalmi and Kurzweil, an irreconcilable clash between two aspects underlies the element of “meaning.” On the one hand, the subjective being assumed by the related thinkers is unmistakably the protégé of the secular enlightenment, whose mental connections directed at the world manifest not only activeness to the point of sovereignty but are also constitutive of the historian’s scientific endeavor and bring about the innovative perspectives on the Jewish collective memory. However, precisely this initiative-taking activeness attributed to the historian is unacceptable in both Yerushalmi’s and Kurzweil’s approaches within which the centrality and constancy granted to the transcendent reality dictate the minimal involvement of the subject. In short, the knowledgeable person cannot reconcile with the opaque constancy of the transcendent presence within the history.

It is instructive that both thinkers respond to the related clash with the constitution of the passive subjective stance, which, unlike the innovative activity typical of the modern historian, is meant to comply with the transcendent presence central to their view of Judaism as sacred history. In particular, the subject’s passive stance enfolds the ability to stand at a certain distance from occurrences in the historical-real reality, and thereby recognize the autonomous transcendent dimension that determines the character of this reality. Thus, since for Yerushalmi Jewish collective memory is filled not with contents but rather the transcendent presence of God, which in any event is beyond human understanding, erudite subjectivity is required to show restraint and passivity. In this regard, the proper observation on the Jewish past is of Jews who “are in search of a past,” but “are not prepared to confront it [history] directly,”<sup>58</sup> namely recognizing the autonomy of historical reality in relation to its observers. This deliberately constituted stance is meant to affirm the autonomous existence of the transcendent being. In this way, instead of realizing the sovereignty the modern era had intended him to have toward the objects of his consciousness, in Yerushalmi’s approach the subject is expected to appear at most as affirming their external and independent presence. The passivity of the subject should serve as a reliable reflection not only

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57 Kurzweil, *In Struggle Over the Values*, 209.

58 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 97–98.

of his correct place in the hierarchy, compared with the transcendent entity, but also of the nature of the past at the basis of the collective memory, which in Yerushalmi's approach denotes an ahistorical, permanent reality independent of human attempts to understand it.<sup>59</sup>

We can therefore conclude that the transcendent foundation presupposing the divine presence guiding Jewish history is not solely responsible for ensuring the permanence and independence of Jewish collective memory. In addition, Yerushalmi understands the transcendent element of the Jewish collective memory as existing above and outside the immanent frame of reference. In any case, this understanding does not open the transcendent to different interpretations, but rather blocks the possibility that it could absorb into itself difference originating from a variety of subjective references (in the past, present, or future). In other words, the system relating to the transcendent entity and the immanent system requiring passivity and restraint from the subject operate together to realize the permanence and independence of Jewish collective memory.<sup>60</sup> Also, the withdrawal of the subject from involvement in the contents and from judgments about the Jewish past indirectly ensures the particularity of Jewish collective memory. To a certain extent, the subject's passivity facing Jewish collective memory can be considered a declaration by the subject, affirming the power of the transcendent entity over himself, or alternatively the permanent metaphysical gap between immanence and transcendence. Thus, the past to which the collective memory refers denotes the connection of ideals or information that the subject identifies as transcendent not only in terms of their origin, but due to their being inexhaustible by human consciousness. Consequently, the individual's existence appears in Yerushalmi's perception of Jewish history as taking place vis-à-vis a total otherness or transcendence.

Similar to Yerushalmi, for Kurzweil the constitution of the passive stance is meant to remove the possibility that the mental connections the subject directs at reality would subjectivize it, and, as a result, reality would be relativized to per-

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<sup>59</sup> Compare here Yerushalmi's stress on the ahistorical aspect of Judaism with Leibowitz's essay "Ahistorical Thinkers in Judaism," in Leibowitz, *Judaism*, 96–105.

<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on the Jews' passivity throughout history led to criticism in the literature about *Zakhor*. Thus, for example, Michael Graetz: "It is difficult to agree with the nostalgia expressed by Yerushalmi in the final chapter [...] Here it is as though forgotten that the transformation of the messianic idea was a bitter necessity for the Jewish nation. It was *necessary to redeem it from passivity*, from over-emphasizing the future at the expense of the present [...] for politicization and self-liberation. This transformation indirectly contributed to the unprecedented momentum in the profession of historical writing" ("Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi," 435). In contrast, the suggested interpretation regards the constituted passivity of the subject as a crucial complement to Yerushalmi's ontological emphasis on the transcendent being presence of God in Jewish history.

sonal interpretation. Instead, self-restraint and self-restriction on the subject’s part might help him or her experience the autonomous and transcendent dimensions of reality, which in themselves do not depend on his or her disposition toward them, including the passive one. In the first place, Kurzweil discerns passivity within literary works expressing the autonomy of reality over the figures populating the work. In this context, autonomy implies a hierarchical system in which external reality possesses power over the individual subject that is thereby subordinated to it. Thus, Kurzweil describes Agnon as someone for whom “this reality of the Jewish town is his reality, [...] he *surrenders* to it as a natural given.”<sup>61</sup> The autonomy of reality over the subject is illuminated via the distinction between the author and the artwork that is meant to avoid the subjectivizing reality; that is, the constitution of reality as a human creation. In this regard, Kurzweil establishes that “the artist is not identical with his characters. As a result, the faith of Menashe Hayim, Reb Yudel [...] is not the faith of Agnon. [...] Modern reality is what separates Agnon from ‘our friends’ [‘Anshei Shlomeinu’].”<sup>62</sup> The separation between the author and the artwork that is essential for the constituting of the author’s passive stance is further restated elsewhere, in Kurzweil’s following words:

From the clear recognition that he was a member of a flawed generation, Agnon exists in constant search of the lost time. But that same lost time *is not for him something dependent on subjective experience*, on diving into the springs of the self and raising anew as a subjective aesthetic fiction. The fateful connection between Agnon and the Jewish tradition, a connection that exists despite the poet being swept into the noise of the murky flow of a flawed period, is what allows the lost time to rise again, to grasp the present self and to overpower it a little or a lot.<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, Kurzweil harnesses the distance of the author from the characters of the artwork to the experience of the presence of the transcendent reality. In his words, “*only someone who does not share Reb Yudel’s faith is capable of immortalizing him and his period.*” Kurzweil finds proof of “the great distance separating the artist and the faith of his heroes” in stories “in which the author ceases to be omnipotent and is swept along by the flow of actions.”<sup>64</sup> This description of the author as conquered by the reality with which his work deals imbues the fruits of the passive stance that shapes the power relations in which the author’s sovereignty is appropriated by the objects of his work, and thus the power reality possesses in relation to him is also clarified. This insight becomes extreme to the point of detaching the

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<sup>61</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Essays*, 329.

<sup>63</sup> *Essays*, 232–33.

<sup>64</sup> *Essays*, 329, emphasis in original.

work from its author, who becomes a sort of servant for reality, as if it were independent of him. The distant stance of the author is further crystalized by descriptions of the lack of decision on the side of the narrator in favor of the traditional reality of the past or in favor of the secular reality of the present. In this context, Kurzweil describes the author as someone whose “*lack of decision* [...], his standing from an ideational point of view between two contrasting worlds, is *actually his decision*.”<sup>65</sup> In other words:

*Agnon's stories are a special appearance of the fundamental religious design in our secular literature* [...] What is special about the artistic design of the religious problem in Agnon is in the exposure of the contrasts, especially those that challenge traditional Judaism, without taking a stance of decision [...] The author requires the contrasts, lives them without achieving a decision by himself [...] The mental assumption of this process is the *author's renouncing his decisive personality*. We encounter in all these stories a sort of situation of *passivity*, of willingness to follow [his heroes].<sup>66</sup>

The absence of decision in this context is meant to prevent the author's involvement in the reality the artwork is intended to reflect. It seems to be implied that the subject's presence could have a detracting influence regarding the reality presented in the literary work. In contrast, the stance of non-decision that Kurzweil identifies in modern Hebrew literature may enable the reality to appear holistically. In this way, the autonomy of reality in relation to the subject will become clarified, and the separation between the subject and the reality external to him will be established and deepened. However, the absence of a constituting power toward reality by the subject, who reveals a passive stance toward it, does not damage his connection to it or his ability to refer to it or even desire to become part of it. In this spirit, Kurzweil writes: “We must not forget that Agnon actually remained faithful to the principles of the world of the ancestors, that he would honestly have liked to see himself as one of the faithful in his stories.”<sup>67</sup> Kurzweil clarifies that the author does not express in this an attitude of neutrality regarding reality of the past or of the present.<sup>68</sup> In his opinion, “Only someone who loves his

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<sup>65</sup> *Essays*, 346.

<sup>66</sup> *Essays*, 330–32. The non-decisive stance that Kurzweil identifies in Agnon's work contains a central element in his interpretation that rejected its identification with orthodoxy. In his opinion, Agnon's artistic language is a “dispute of the ways of religious Judaism for hundreds of years” (*Essays*, 347) and reflects “his dialectical view of the religious tradition of his nation” (*Essays*, 201). Kurzweil addresses the issue of the contrast between Agnon and the orthodox position in various contexts in his book about Agnon (*Essays*, 12, 16, 325, 328, 331, 343, 345).

<sup>67</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 84.

<sup>68</sup> *Essays*, 239, 241.

epic topic [...] he alone can draw the portrait of our real life, with all the great and precious it contained.”<sup>69</sup> This is not “love” that leads the author “to escape to some idealization of the past, to amuse himself in romantic worlds,” but “the confession of strong love that does not hide the weaknesses, it is a sad eulogy for the loss of harmony.”<sup>70</sup> Kurzweil even connects the author’s relation to and love of reality with the “desire for objectivization” and defines it as “objectivity-from-love.”<sup>71</sup> Within the boundaries of the relation to real reality is embodied the possibility of achieving a degree of distance from it, which is expressed in the “feelings of esteem” and “awe” to the world of tradition and the past.<sup>72</sup> While the “feelings of esteem” and “awe” toward reality position the distance of the author from his work, the dimension of the lack of decision establishes and deepens the separation between the subject and the reality external to him. This separation reaches its climax in the disposition of silence, which seems to enfold within itself both distance and separation. In this regard, Kurzweil describes Agnon’s work as follows: “Agnon’s characters are never loquacious. Perhaps even *their silence is their most real and faithful expression* [...] Agnon’s dialogue *is entirely reserved*.”<sup>73</sup>

However, the restraint and the gathering into themselves of Agnon’s characters shows that the independence of reality in relation to the subject referring to it is not granted to him but requires him to display initiative and activism. Indeed, the substrate for constituting an active stance toward the entity or transcendence has been laid in Kurzweil’s general perception of the author’s role, as entrusted with presenting reality to himself and his readers and as responsible for ensuring the preservation of what exists.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the perception of reality at the basis of the active stance is wider than that on which the passive stance rests. It includes not only immanent reality; also apparent within it is the overt directedness to the transcendent entity hidden from the society with which the literary work deals and from the target audience he addresses: “The poet [raises] before our eyes magical, preexisting landscapes. [...] They are suddenly a presence of grace within our landscapes; they are a sort of breach of supreme existence, of transcendent reality, within our reality.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, Kurzweil establishes the affinity between the hiddenness of the transcendent dimension in Jewish existence and the constituting of both the passive and active dispositions on the part of the sub-

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<sup>69</sup> *Essays*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> *Essays*, 39, 133.

<sup>71</sup> *Essays*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> *Essays*, 300, 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Essays*, 16, emphases in original.

<sup>74</sup> *Essays*, 187, 284.

<sup>75</sup> Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 68.

ject, indicating that this hiddenness is a fundamental given of human existence. The need to form an active stance arises in this context due to the hiddenness of the transcendent entity itself. The subject's activism seems to seek to capture this entity that continues to live in concealment. At the same time, the active stance itself is restrained, namely not over-estimated, by the insight that the transcendent reality is necessitated by the metaphysical evidence regarding its existence—evidence that only allows the rejection of the “total renouncing of any transcendence whatsoever, which is a principle” of the secular worldview.<sup>76</sup> From this metaphysical perspective, Kurzweil discovers that modern Hebrew literature is merely “the secular transformation of the orders of sacral reality! Jewish heritage, religious and moral, celebrates a strange revival in secular clothing.”<sup>77</sup> To this extent, the subject is granted the powers of initiative and activism, as long as these are employed in the service of un-concealing transcendent reality. But from the moment this reality is manifested in the literary work, the author's activism is qualified step by step, and a window naturally opens to the passive stance.

## 5 Discussion

The view of Jewish history as essentially sacred and thereby as capable of withstanding modern secularism transpired as operative within the distinctive observations of Yerushalmi the historian and of Kurzweil the literary critic. To a considerable extent, this commonality indicates the primary precedence of the element of “God” over “history” and “meaning.” In other words, the similarities between Yerushalmi's and Kurzweil's views regarding the elements of “history” and “meaning” can be regarded as derived from the constitutive agreement regarding the indispensability of “God” in Jewish history. Moreover, both thinkers encountered the classic problematic of expressing the transcendent using linguistic-epistemic means; that is, referring to God via historical study à la Yerushalmi and illuminating the transcendent reality via literary criticism for Kurzweil. Lastly, the evidence regarding the existence of God within the historical reality of Jews raises for both scholars the question regarding the meaning of the real overt reality; that is, does it deceive its observers or deprive the being of the real phenomena of the ability to possess meaning and value?

However, the foundational similarities discussed above should not blur the essential differences between Yerushalmi's and Kurzweil's views of Judaism. The

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<sup>76</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 158.

<sup>77</sup> *Between Vision and Absurd*, 165.



first difference concerns the very understanding of the act of addressing the Jewish past. As we have seen, Yerushalmi maintained that directing the historicistic method to Jewish collective memory in the modern era created a break within it, since, in his opinion, the involvement of God in Jewish memory makes it inaccessible to any method, or alternately liable to create flaws in any method claiming to access it.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, for Yerushalmi, making the transcendent into an object of study and research, and not just denial of it, might be problematic as it threatens to change the subject’s proper relationship with it, namely: instead of facing the collective memory from subordination and passivity, affirming the decisive power of transcendence in Jewish existence, the subject acts as the sovereign regarding his object by investigating and interpreting it.

Against this background, it is no accident that eventually Yerushalmi’s approach arrives at a tragic dead end; that is, it acknowledges the impossibility of addressing Jewish history via the tools suggested by the historical method. As he puts it: “Yet those who would demand of the historian that he be the restorer of Jewish memory attribute to him powers that he may not possess. Intrinsically, modern Jewish historiography cannot replace an eroded group memory which, as we have seen throughout, never depended on historians in the first place.”<sup>79</sup> It appears, then, that Yerushalmi shares the original demand directed at the historian to reconstruct Jewish memory. The reconstruction action emphasizes the subject’s aiming at the object, and at the same time the transcendence of the object in relation to that subject. Adopting the stance of the historian as the reconstructor of the Jewish memory suits the nature of this memory as permeated by a transcendent presence. However, in Yerushalmi’s opinion, modern historians of Judaism fail at this and thereby transpire as tragic figures.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps the historian’s failure in reconstructing the Jewish past does not result from his inability to realize the ideal of objectivity proclaimed by the historicistic method. It is also possible that the very existence of a method does not in itself stand in the way of access to a given with an entity-centered or even transcendent character. Rather, the problem seems to concern the priority and importance granted in the objective approach to the real historical context of the historical given, which does not apply to the given permeated by a transcendent presence that lifts it above the real context where it appears. This is all the

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<sup>78</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Zakhor*, 93–94.

<sup>80</sup> Yerushalmi’s words here seem to contain the inherent expectation from historians, articulated by Carl Becker, to serve as “priests of memory” in the sense of maintaining the memory for members of the present generation; see Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 233–55.

more radicalized by Yerushalmi's quite rigid belief that underlies his approach to modern Jewish historiography, according to which a contrast exists between the transcendent reality and the epistemic connections of the subject toward it. In his opinion, Jewish historians failed to reconstruct the Jewish past as shaped in the collective memory due to the lack of the theological foundation essential for an approach directed at a given perceived as transcendent. Hence, what obstructs modern historians from viewing "Judaism as something absolutely given and subject to a priori definition"<sup>81</sup> concerns their secularity, which cannot enable them to reconstruct the transcendent given that constitutes Jewish collective memory, whose reality he does not recognize, let alone experience its real presence.

However, what was for Yerushalmi an unsolvable hermeneutic problem, the existence within one setting of an objective method and a given perceived as transcendent, becomes for Kurzweil a challenge he constantly faces by tracing the expressions of transcendence on the subject's part in modern Hebrew literature. This is well exemplified in the following determinations by Kurzweil: "The poet's despairing lamentation for the loss of his God is much more than a personal expression of his mental orphaning. Feierberg is revealed at this point too as a profound thinker, perceiving his personal fate as a symptom of the fate of his nation";<sup>82</sup> "The poet's I is connected to the most distant past. It originates in the great distance, and bears within it the events of his ancestors' lives";<sup>83</sup> "From exclusive and obstinate devotion to the burning fire in his soul, his poetry obeys only the immanent truth of the history of his nation."<sup>84</sup> It seems, then, that unlike Yerushalmi, Kurzweil observes that the involvement of the poet, in particular his immersion in his stormy soul, is crucial for exploring his devotion to what exists beyond his reach; that is, the remote past, the fate of his people, and the lost God.

The second difference to be indicated in this regard concerns the subjective stance vis-à-vis transcendence. As we have seen, both thinkers praised the passive stance for its inherent restraint in the face of what lies beyond it. However, differently from Yerushalmi, Kurzweil also employs an active disposition on the subject's part. To a certain extent, by not detecting a threat coming from an active subject, Kurzweil indirectly reinforces the power of the external reality over the subject, whether passive or active. Indeed, Kurzweil's view of the passive stance is much more explicit and elaborated than Yerushalmi's. As discussed above, Yerushalmi considered the passivity shown by the subject toward his past as confirming the gap with the reality external to it and thereby also the autonomy of that

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<sup>81</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 93–94.

<sup>82</sup> Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 167.

<sup>83</sup> Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 79.

<sup>84</sup> Kurzweil, *Our New Literature*, 125–26.

reality. In this regard, the criticism of the activism shown by modern historians, and the stress on the passivity resulting from it, implies Yerushalmi’s idea of the correct ontology determining the character of Jewish history; that is, a reality that is not constituted by the subject but is created by a transcendent force that bestows it with the quality of scarcity. In this way, for Yerushalmi, the passive stance of the subject reflects the marginal status of the conscious and subjective dimension within it. In turn, this marginality is harnessed to the fortifying of the transcendent presence in Jewish history.

However, while Yerushalmi’s idea of the passive subject is denied almost any constitutive involvement, Kurzweil not only introduces an active subject but also seems to go so far as to regard the passive stance as deliberately self-constitutive by the poet. Hence, the passive stance does not preclude the involvement of an active attitude on the part of the subject. Moreover, Kurzweil also establishes the need for an active effort expressed in self-restraint and self-restriction, whose purpose is to enable the subject to actively consolidate his or her stance vis-à-vis the transcendent entity. However, this activity is not regarded as implying a personal expression or as an exhaustion of the conscious power the human directs toward the external world.<sup>85</sup> It appears that the primary certainty regarding the autonomous existence of transcendence in Jewish history is robust enough to avoid a possibility of threat coming from the subject and staining it with his subjectivity. Moreover, the involvement of the subject bears an importance of its own, as it is an indispensable condition for experiencing the transcendent presence in the human world. The great achievement of Kurzweil’s consolidation of the passive

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85 From a phenomenological viewpoint, it is necessary to distinguish between intentional reference to the object, typical of any conscious occurrence that frequently involves its object (see Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Vol. 1 [Husserliana III] [Tübingen: Nijhoff, (1913) 1952], § 36), and the perception attributing the constitution of the object to intentional action; through this reference, the object becomes immanent and its qualities are determined by the subject. This transition denotes a change from an epistemological attitude, meaning the world as “existing for me” (*für mich*), and a metaphysical statement about the world as “stemming from me” (*aus mich*), and in Husserl’s words: “The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me [*für mich*]—this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me [*aus mich*] myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*, the Ego who comes to the fore only with transcendental-phenomenological epoché” (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* [The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1960], 26). And: “By my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing, and acting, I can enter no world other than the one that gets its sense and acceptance or status in and from me, myself” (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 21). See also Paul Ricoeur’s critique of this phenomenon in Husserl’s thought (*Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967], 85–90).

stance concerns, then, its capability to maintain on the one hand reality's autonomy in relation to the subject and on the other hand the complex connection of the subject to the reality external to him. Namely, the activism and the striving for objectivization on the one hand, and the consciousness of distance it involves on the other, grant the subject an experience of transcendence. Thus, it transpires that the discussed experience of transcendence imbues both the passivity of the subject due to the encounter with an excessive reality, and the active stance that is addressed inwardly and meant to achieve self-restriction and self-restraint.

The fact that the two differences between Yerushalmi and Kurzweil concern the elements of "history" and "meaning" further substantiates the unconditionality of the element of "God" within what is designated as the hermeneutics triangle of Judaism. In this regard, the status of unconditionality means primarily its being unaffected by other nuances regarding the other two elements. Alternatively, as much as there exists an agreement regarding the element of "God," dissimilar views regarding the two other elements can be contained in one and the same "triangle." At the same time, Kurzweil appears to suggest regarding the other two elements as a considerably farther elaborated perception that avoids polarity in favor of a nuanced understanding of Jewish history and its meaning for the human subject referring to it. Thus, despite the conflicts generated by secularism regarding the view of Jewish history as sacred, the latter is still not dismissed by the former but co-exists with it as "living myth." As mentioned earlier, Kurzweil has this explanation:

The poetic landscape [...] is the same historical landscape of *the presence of the living myth*. And myth here does not mean legend, nor aesthetic fashion, nor artistic game [...] but *the reality of realities!* The historical-mythic vision is for the poet an absolute truth, not an experiment, a sort of 'let's assume this once happened.' There are those who live with profound knowledge of the 'wisdom of the ages,' which is the wisdom of the living historical presence.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, for Kurzweil the passive subject and the active one do not exclude each other but both contribute to the substantiation of meaning that can comply with the presence of God in Jewish history, consolidating it as sacred. Thus, the activity expressed by the subject definitely involves a creation of a "new reality," yet at the same time it rehabilitates the lost ancient and sacral unity. In Kurzweil's words:

What is *every true art* if not the effort to create a new reality, which is also the start of a new unity, with the loss of ancient unity? Here the artist reaches the total annihilation of the forces of chaos and his poetic appearance realizes the ancient sacral unity that was once an everyday reality. Every art is an attempt to create a sort of 'small eternity' [...] because

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<sup>86</sup> Kurzweil, *Between Vision and Absurd*, 86.

art is an essential push toward constituting a new order, a new unity, instead of the primal unity before the separation.<sup>87</sup>

## 6 Epilogue

The exhaustion of the communality between the two approaches discussed in this chapter eventually arrived at a point in which fundamental disparities burst forth. Thus, Yerushalmi’s rigid adherence to an ontological view of Judaism is well mirrored in his testimony, according to which “The author’s intention was something sacred to me. I grew up on the intention of the literary reviewer or historian being to reach, as much as possible, the author’s original intention,”<sup>88</sup> while Kurzweil’s passionate perspective is manifested in his view of role of the Hebrew poet as “struggling to discover its [the world’s] truth and reality that only he [...] is called and destined to grant *to him and to us*.”<sup>89</sup> Obviously, the transpiring of this fundamental disparity distinguishing the approaches from each other does not dissipate the robust sharing whose illumination occupied the bulk of this chapter. On the contrary, the fact that the unveiled differences concern particularly the elements of “history” and “God,” and the gravity that both thinkers granted the element of “God” is not undermined therein, reinstates their common understanding of Judaism as sacred history. To this extent, what was first marked as a “hermeneutical triangle” transpired as a “hermeneutical circle,” indicating the unavoidability of encountering God within Jewish history.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 278.

<sup>88</sup> Yerushalmi, “Interview,” 18–19.

<sup>89</sup> Kurzweil, *Essays*, 161. On the perception of literature as filling a social mission, see Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and Critical Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), 14–21.

<sup>90</sup> Compare here the section “Epilogue: The Old Angel” in Ronny Miron, *The Angel of Jewish History: The Image of the Jewish Past in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 425–29.

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Gilad Sharvit

# Is Jewish Exile a Crisis? Zionism, Modern Jewish Thought, and the Historical Dynamics of the Term

## Introduction

The origin of the term “crisis” can be traced back to the ancient Greek word “κρίσις” (*krisis*), which denotes an act or ability to separate, to make a decision or a choice. Throughout its lengthy history, the term was typically associated with pivotal moments of decision-making, where one alternative is selected over another, as exemplified by similar Latin words such as “criticism” and “criterion” that share the same root. In Christianity, the term gradually became linked with the idea of the apocalypse, which pertains to God’s ultimate decision or judgment at the end of the world, and in its more recent history the term was routinely associated with the peak of a disease, the point after which a person either recovers or not. Although various conceptualizations of “crisis” exist,<sup>1</sup> some even in opposition, this etymology sheds light on some aspects of the term that I intend to draw on below: (A) crisis is a critical moment of *danger* or *distress* with an exceptional damaging effect that (B) requires a *response*. Crisis is inherently linked to agency: In contrast to “ordinary” suffering—think, for example, of a person suffering from chronic illness—a crisis is a moment of danger in which one is required to decide, or to act. Crisis, to continue the example, is therefore closer in meaning to an acute disease that calls for a medical intervention. (C) Crisis is an *extraordinary* event. It is an unusual moment that eclipses the normal course of events or of history. To put it bluntly, the death of a seafarer in a storm in the ancient world would normally not qualify as a crisis, as sadly it often happened. However, a Category 5 hurricane that inflicts massive damage on entire communities, such as Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, certainly would. (D) Crisis is usually measured in *short spans of time*. It is a *moment* of crisis, defined as the peak of a disease or its culmination, rather than the entire course of a chronic illness. In short, and for the purposes of this chapter, I submit that crisis is to be understood as an extraordinary moment of distress or danger that calls for a reaction.

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of the term, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michaela W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 357–400. For a discussion of *mashber* (“crisis” in Hebrew), see Galili Shahar’s chapter in this volume.

In what follows, I would like to shed light on how the idea of crisis thus understood, particularly the historical crisis of the Jewish exile (*galut*), was taken up in some parts of modern Jewish thought and Zionism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it may have been lost on us, but from a historical perspective the idea that the Jewish exile is a crisis or a traumatic experience is a relatively recent addition to or modification of the term. Surely, there were many different conceptualizations of exile in the period that spans two millennia. Yet at the outset I would like to suggest that the alarming description of exile is mostly an innovation of the last two centuries. I draw here on Daniel Boyarin, who notes in *A Traveling Homeland* (2015) that “in Hebrew/Aramaic, this term גולה (exiled) is not always negatively charged. Thus, the Rabbis can say: ‘Be a *goleh* to a place of Torah.’ [...] We cannot think of Jewish diaspora, therefore, as always and everywhere being understood as a forced and oppressive exile.”<sup>3</sup> For Boyarin, it is important to note, trauma and oppression are therefore “not necessary or the most useful of taxa for describing diasporic situations.”<sup>4</sup> To be sure, this is not to say that exile was not seen or experienced as challenging, difficult, nor painful. Rather, my claim is that in a difference from modern perspectives, exile was not seen *primarily* as a trauma, nor, in terms of this volume, as an acute crisis. There were different shades, other perspectives, that were just as viable, pervasive, and influential.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, these differences were largely lost in the Zionist discourse of the Negation of the Diaspora (*shlilat ha’golah*), where the Jewish exile was seen first and foremost as an existential crisis; that is, as an urgent danger to the survival of the Jewish people that calls for a prompt response. Within this perspective exile was viewed as a contingent historical circumstance

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2 “*Galut*” is typically understood as a religious term, while “exile” carries a broader connotation derived from its Latin origin, *exilium*, meaning banishment. Given its less specific and conceptually loaded nature, “exile” is therefore a more suitable term for the argument being proposed, as it addresses the topic from different conceptual perspectives.

3 Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 6.

4 Boyarin, *Traveling Homeland*, 17. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin shares Boyarin’s point in “Exile Within Sovereignty: Critique of ‘The Negation of Exile’ in Israeli Culture,” in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*, eds. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017). See also Shaul Magid’s forthcoming *The Necessity of Exile*. For a different discussion of *galut* in the contemporary Jewish world, see Arnold M. Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), and, for the Israeli society, see Ofer Shiff, ed., *Israeli Exiles: Homeland and Exile in Israeli Discourse* (Hebrew) (Sde Boker: Ben Gurion Institute, 2015).

5 For canonical works on the Jewish exile in the early twentieth century, see Jizchak Fritz Baer, *Galut* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936); and Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Exile and Estrangement: A Socio-Historical Study on the Issue of the Fate of the Nation of Israel from Ancient Times Until the Present* (Hebrew), 4 vols. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1929–1930).

with social and political dimensions that the Jewish people had the ability and responsibility to alter. My main argument is that several modern Jewish philosophers, particularly Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, incorporated this idea of exile-as-suffering into their works. However, they diverged from Zionist formulations by elevating the experience of crisis into a *foundational* and *enduring* core of the Jewish experience. In simple terms, the experience of the crisis of exile came to serve in modern Jewish thought as an entry point to speculations about the Jewish experience writ large. That is, “crisis” emerges in some models as a conceptual framework that informs and even grounds debates about the “nature” of Judaism or the “historical mission” of the Jewish people.

The juxtaposition of modern Jewish thought and Zionism vis-à-vis notions of exile in the Middle Ages aims to show a conceptual shift in the evaluation of exile in modernity. Interestingly, this shift is shared by modern Jewish thought and Zionism, challenging the perception that thinkers like Hermann Cohen are merely critical of the Zionist project. Instead, I demonstrate how these two perspectives actually converge on fundamental aspects of the Zionist worldview, particularly in the perception of exile as a crisis. In other words, if the modern Jewish thinkers I discuss here are commonly known for their emphasis on the significance and value of Jewish exile, as well as on its role in world history and redemption, my suggestion is that they still accept an essentially negative perception of exile, which Zionism embraced, as a matter of fact of Jewish life. Whether Cohen and Rosenzweig took their cue from the Zionist terminology or shared a perception of exile that was widespread in modernity is a question for another investigation. Lastly, my brief survey of the transformation of the Jewish exile into a crisis is not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. We find different interpretations of exile in different periods of Jewish philosophy. The place of exile in the works of the philosophers discussed here is also still a subject of debate. Instead, my objective is to outline a shift in the meaning of exile and explore its theoretical implication.

## 1 Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages

The following lines focus on Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> My plan is to shortly detail how Nahmanides, Maimonides, and Jehuda Halevi employ different

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<sup>6</sup> For a good reference for exile in medieval Jewish philosophy, see Moshe Halamish and Aviezer Ravitzky, eds., *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1991).

sets of terms to conceptualize exile, instead of characterizing it as merely a crisis. This portion of the discussion serves to establish a contextual backdrop for the examination of exile in Jewish modernity.

Exile in Nahmanides, Maimonides, and Jehuda Halevi is understood primarily as a punishment, a challenge, and a mission (respectively). The notion of exile as a crisis is, by and large, foreign to them. Overall, one can even argue that the exilic experience is not at the forefront of medieval Jewish philosophy. These philosophers think of exile when they engage with messianic hopes, or messianism more generally; when they think of the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel; or when they defend Judaism against Christianity or Islam. The mere experience of suffering or the notion of exile as a critical or a pressing danger that all but dominated the works of Zionist thinkers centuries later do not appear to have special significance in the works of their medieval counterparts, to the effect that the strong feelings of longing for the Land of Israel that governed poems of the era seldom translated into a philosophical system. Nahmanides, who articulates his position about exile only sporadically in his voluminous *Commentary on the Torah*, is a good example of this earlier *Weltanschauung*.

Nahmanides presents his explanation to the Jewish exile most clearly in his discussion of Leviticus 25:18: “Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.”<sup>7</sup> In this short phrase, Nahmanides finds the main reason for the Jewish exile. The Land of Israel is of special divine value, he claims, and it is therefore not possible for a community that is in a state of sin to dwell in it. Exile, in other words, was a result of the Jewish people’s failure to uphold their covenant with God.<sup>8</sup> It was a *punishment* for their wrongful doings. Nahmanides, accordingly, strove to identify throughout his commentary many instances of corruption that resulted in the Jewish exile, ranging from adultery

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7 All the quotes from the Torah are taken from the King James translation.

8 “Thus the Land which is the inheritance of the Glorious Name, will vomit out all those who defile it and will not tolerate worshippers of idols, nor those who practice immorality.” *Commentary on the Torah*, 5 vols., trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York, NY: Shilo, 1971–1976), 3:269. In response to the obvious question of why other people have settled and continue to settle the Land of Israel, Nahmanides explains in his commentary on Genesis 10:15 that all the other peoples were only temporary residents of the Land of Israel: “But at the time of the dispersion of the nations, the Holy One, blessed be He, gave it to Canaan, on account of his being a servant, to keep it for Israel. This is just as a man who deposits for safe keeping the belongings of the master’s son with his servant until such time as the son will grow up and acquire the belongings as well as the servant.” *Commentary on the Torah*, 1:152. The sinful Jewish people, however, were quite capable of persisting in other places, because “outside the Land of Israel, although it all belongs to the Glorious Name, yet its purity is not perfect, because of ‘the servants’ who hold sway there, and the nations go astray after their princes to worship them as well.” *Commentary on the Torah*, 3:269.

(Numbers 23:55) to disregarding the regulations pertaining the Doctrine of *Shmitta* (Leviticus 25:2).

Nahmanides' perspective on exile is emblematic of other works of the time. Most importantly, exile is conceptualized here and elsewhere in metaphysical terms: It is part of a divine plan. In Nahmanides, this is manifested, for one example, in his attempts to find in the Torah clues (*remez*) to the forthcoming exile.<sup>9</sup> Importantly for the suggested argument, because of it being part of a divine plan—that is, an integral part of history—exile is not understood primarily as an extraordinary event. Rather, the metaphysical explanation of exile often translates to an argument that provides a justification, a *raison d'être*, for the pain and suffering of the Jews in exile. To go back to the example I suggested earlier, exile is therefore perceived in terms more closely associated with a chronic illness, not an acute disease; that is, a crisis. Nahmanides gives a radical demonstration of that when he normalizes exile in his commentary to Deuteronomy 28:42 to the effect that the hardship that the Jewish people experienced is virtually denigrated:

[O]nce we have been exiled to the countries of our enemies, the work of our hands has not been accursed. Neither have our oxen and the breeds of our flock, our vineyards and our olive orchards and that which we have sown in the field [been adversely affected]. Rather in the countries [of our exile] we are like the rest of the peoples who inhabit whatever country, or even better than them, for His mercies are upon us, because our habitations in exile are by (virtue of) the promise He made to us.<sup>10</sup>

Another explanation for the Jewish experience in exile that challenges the idea of it being a crisis can be found in Maimonides. In what comes, I focus on a relatively comprehensive reference to exile in Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*. This letter was sent to the Jewish community in Yemen following the forced conversion of many of that community to Islam at the end of the 1160s. The next lines are from the opening words of Maimonides:

You write that the hearts of some people have turned away, uncertainty befalls them, and their beliefs are weakened, while others have not lost faith nor have they become disquieted. Concerning this matter we have a divine premonition through Daniel who predicted that the prolonged stay of Israel in the Diaspora, and the continuous persecutions will cause many to drift away from our faith, to have misgivings, or to go astray, because they witnessed our fee-

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, his commentary on Genesis 26:20.

<sup>10</sup> Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, 5:326. As mentioned earlier, crisis typically implies a need for action. In the context of medieval Jewish philosophical discourse on exile, this is often linked to discussions of messianism, which suggest that the end of Jewish exile will occur at the end of history. However, a more detailed analysis of this intricate conceptual interplay between crisis, action, and messianism will have to wait for another time.

bleness, and noted the triumph of our adversaries and their dominion over us, while others would neither oscillate in their belief, nor be shaken in their conviction.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Epistle to Yemen*, exile is formulated as a purifying *challenge*. Some would fail this challenge: they would convert, they would doubt and despair. They would disperse and would be lost. Yet, for Maimonides, perhaps unexpectedly, this moment of danger is still of value. The afflictions suffered by the Yemenite Jewry, and by extension by all Jews in exile, cleanse *and purify* the Jewish people. Maimonides refers to the prophecy of Daniel (12:10) to argue that while many would forsake Jewish faith as doubt enters their minds, others would emerge stronger. Their belief would remain firm and unshaken. In other words, exile here is crucial for the perfection of the Jewish people. It is not a crisis that the Jewish people must swiftly move past, but a *challenge* or a *test* they should persevere through, even endure, for the sake of growth and progress. Put in Hegelian terms, Jewish exile is reconfigured not as trauma but as a dialectical process, in which some superior elements are elevated and kept, while others are abandoned, forgotten, and lost.<sup>12</sup>

The context of the letter is of special importance here. Maimonides writes to a community in a demonstrable *crisis*: Due to the persecutions of the Yemenite ruler Abd al-Nabi b. Mahdi, a significant number of the local Jewish community converted to Islam, while others succumbed to false messiahs.<sup>13</sup> In that, the Yemenite Jews suffered from a crisis analogous to the crisis of Jewish assimilation in modernity. I will address that in the next section, but, for many, Jewish assimilation or, better put, the failure of assimilation in Jewish modernity are key to the transformation of exile into crisis in Zionism and, perhaps, modern Jewish thought. I specifically refer to the processes of secularization and acculturation that led to the disintegration of Jewish communal structures. These consequential events resulted in social and religious devastation similar in structure, if not in scope, to what the Yemenite Jewish community experienced. In truth, the challenge of Jewish assimilation was, more often than not, perceived to be an exceptional challenge of unprecedented significance in Jewish history. Maimonides's letter, however, proves not only that such crises were more common in the Jewish history than Zionism would

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11 Maimonides, *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (New York, NY: Behrman, 1972), 438–439.

12 Jehuda Halevi suggests a similar point in arguing in the context of the Jewish relations with the Gentiles that “the trials which meet us are meant to prove our faith, to cleanse us completely, and to remove all taint from us.” Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York, NY: Schocken, 1964), 110, 2/44.

13 Yosef Tobi, *Jews of Yemen: Studies in their History and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 34–47.

admit, but also, and more importantly, that even at the face of such critical episodes in Jewish history, exile seemed to have a purpose that was crucial for the success of the Jewish people. What is interesting here is that even at a moment of an undoubtable crisis, Maimonides rejects the idea that exile is a kind of a crisis: He is careful to explain the hardship of the Yemenite community away, to give it a rationale, and, eventually, to see how it still relates to God's divine plan.

Maimonides, to clarify, never minimized the magnitude of the disaster of the Yemenite Jewish community. "This is a subject," he writes, "which no religious man dare take lightly."<sup>14</sup> Still, this disaster—like others during the long Jewish exile—never amounted to the existential danger that Zionist thinkers identified centuries later. "Ever since the time of revelation," Maimonides admits, "every despot or slave who attained power [...] has made it his first and his final purpose to destroy our law, and to vitiate our religion by means of the sword, by violence."<sup>15</sup> Others, he continues, tried to achieve the same goal by using arguments aimed at making the Jewish law ineffective. However, Maimonides concludes, these attempts are destined for failure. Noting the divine promise to Jacob and similar predictions of Isaiah, he writes: "we are in possession of the divine assurance that Israel is indeed indestructible and imperishable."<sup>16</sup> Maimonides, writing to a community that suffered devastation and loss, is careful to warn against the catastrophizing of the Yemenite experience, and of exile more generally. Rather than a crisis, the Jewish exile is a challenge that was "designed [...] to purify us so that only the pious ones [...] will remain within the fold."<sup>17</sup> The Jewish people undoubtedly suffered in exile. However, their experience called for a heroic effort, not an urgent solution.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Maimonides, *Maimonides Reader*, 438.

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides, *Maimonides Reader*, 440. See Isadore Twersky, "Land of Israel and *Galut* in Maimonides' Thought," in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Hebrew), eds. Moshe Halamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1991): 116.

<sup>16</sup> *Maimonides Reader*, 445. Lawrence Kaplan explains the manner in which God exercises His providence over the Jewish people: "Israel was singled out from the nations through being given the divine law enjoining the structured service of God and banning the service of that which is other than God. Otherwise, it could not have sustained itself, subject to the vicissitudes to history, the rigors of exile, the influence of its surroundings, as a people that serves and thereby knows God." Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People," *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 15 (1985): v–xxvii, xxiv. For a different rationale for the assurance of survival of the Jewish people in exile, see Nahmanides' commentary on Numbers 32:26.

<sup>17</sup> Maimonides, *Maimonides Reader*, 445. Elsewhere in the letter, Maimonides adds: "For the bearings of these hardships is a source of glory and a great achievement in the sight of God." *Maimonides Reader*, 448.

<sup>18</sup> Customarily to Maimonides, even in such dire situations messianic calculations were absolutely forbidden: "We have a divine communication through the medium of the prophets that many per-

Jehuda Halevi serves as a third and final example of the rejection of the idea of exile as crisis.<sup>19</sup> I focus here on Halevi's magnum opus *The Kuzari*, where Halevi finds that the influence of Jews on non-Jews is the primary function of exile, preempting more recent discussions on exile in modern Jewish thought. In a famous parable from the book, he notes:

God has a secret and wise design [for leaving us in exile], which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance.<sup>20</sup>

The exile of the Jewish people serves as a mission, according to Halevi, where their purpose is to impact the peoples of the world by sharing the principles of Judaism. That is, to understand the Jewish exile, one needs to see how it relates to Jews' relations with other nations.<sup>21</sup> In a difference from Maimonides, the main function of exile is not the perfection of the Jewish people, but the transformation of the world. The seed, he continues his metaphor, "refines the elements, and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence."<sup>22</sup> It is important here to note that the transformation of the other nations that Halevi has in mind is religious. The other nations should be educated to follow the Jewish law and to accept the Messiah so that "if they acknowledge [the Messiah], they will become one tree."<sup>23</sup> For Halevi, let me further emphasize, the mission of the Jewish people among the nations is the cause of their hardship. The Jews, according to Halevi, are like "the heart amidst the organs of the body; it is at one and the same time the most sick and the most healthy of them."<sup>24</sup> The medical analogy holds particular significance in this context as it elucidates the suffering endured by the Jewish people in exile. The other nations are sick, Halevi declares, and their sick-

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sons will calculate the time of the advent of the Messiah but will fail to ascertain its true date." *Maimonides Reader*, 450.

19 For a good introduction, see Yochanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 253–273.

20 Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 226–7, 4/23.

21 For more, see Shalom Rosenberg, "Heart and Virtue: The Idea of Chosenness in the Thought of R. Jehuda Halevi and Modern Jewish Philosophy," in *The Thought of R. Jehuda Halevi* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1978).

22 Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 227, 4/23.

23 *The Kuzari*, 227, 4/23.

24 *The Kuzari*, 109, 2/36.



ness is hurting the Jewish people (the heart in this metaphor), which in essence is the healthiest—that is, the purest—part of the body:<sup>25</sup> “In the same way that the heart may be affected by disease of the other organs [...] thus also is Israel exposed to ills originating in its inclinations towards the Gentiles.”<sup>26</sup> In short, in Halevi’s perception, exile is not to be understood as a crisis. Rather, the Jewish people have an important theological mission that they should accept, and even embrace, since their actions, in exile, produce the conditions for the coming of the Messiah. Their suffering, to reiterate, is but a side effect: It is the sorrowful and unwanted implication of their messianic vocation.

## 2 Zionism

The span of time between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century naturally warrants any attempt at simple analogy between medieval Jewish philosophy and modern Jewish thought and Zionism. Still, one event in Jewish modernity changed the contours of Jewish history in a way that directly pertains to the argument I am trying to suggest: the failure of Jewish assimilation. Jewish assimilation was seen by many segments of the Jewish community in central and western Europe as the end of exile. Jews were accepted for the first time to the general society to the effect that exile, as an experience of alienation and disassociation from one’s social, political, and cultural realities, appeared to be a thing of the past. However, their hopes for a fruitful and peaceful integration came to a rather swift end with the advent of antisemitism at the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of Nazism just decades later, which brought the aspirations for assimilation “to an end.”<sup>27</sup> The differing visions of Jewish exile in modern Jewish thought and Zionist ideology are partly in response to this “failure.”<sup>28</sup>

The Zionist ideology embraced a perspective of exile that is often encapsulated by the term “the Negation of the Diaspora (*shlilat ha’golah*).”<sup>29</sup> Although there may

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25 A few lines later, Halevi explains: “Just as the heart is pure in substance and matter, and of even temperament [...] so also is Israel.” *The Kuzari*, 110, 2/44.

26 Halevi, *The Kuzari*, 110, 2/44.

27 Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1974), 208.

28 As Leo Pinsker declares: “The essence of the problem consists in the fact that, in the midst of the nations among whom the Jews reside, they form a heterogenous element which *cannot be assimilated*, which cannot be readily digested by any nation.” Leon Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, trans. D. S. Blondheim (New York, NY: Maccabaeon, 1906), 1 (emphasis mine).

29 Yitzhak Conforti, *Past Tense: Zionist Historiography and the Shaping of the National Memory* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2006), 123–159; Gideon Shimoni, “Revisiting the Negation of Di-

be several instances of this position, my intention is to underscore the prevailing belief among Zionist intellectuals that the Jewish exile poses an existential danger to the survival of the Jewish people, which necessitates an urgent response. Leo Pinsker and Theodor Herzl, as the first famous examples of this position, directed their attention towards issues like antisemitism and the safety of Jews in Europe. In Pinsker's by-now canonical *Auto-Emancipation* (1882), the diasporic situation is portrayed as a perpetual and imminent threat. A physician, he analyzed this threat as arising from a deeply ingrained hereditary psychological disorder of Jew-hate he termed "Judeophobia." Describing it as an "incurable" disease "transmitted over two thousand years,"<sup>30</sup> Pinsker argued that the only way for the Jewish people to escape its grasp was to establish themselves as a nation outside of Europe. Yosef Haim Brenner and Ehad Ha'am, on the other hand, were troubled by processes of assimilation and acculturation and their potential impact on the continuity of Jewish spiritual and inner life. They believed that the Jewish people could not survive without a new cultural center that would revitalize the spirit of Judaism and ensure its continued existence. A. D. Gordon, the leader of Labor Zionism and founder of Hapoel Hatzair, defined the danger in yet different terms that reflected his belief in the significance of a direct contact with nature and physical labor: "Untold suffering was inflicted upon us by the diaspora—terrible, deep, hideous suffering of which the worst and most odious was parasitism."<sup>31</sup> Important to the suggested argument, in all these instances and many others, and in sharp contrast with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Jewish exile was perceived first and foremost as a crisis that endangers the survival of the Jewish people. As Jacob Klatzkin clearly declares, "*Galut* Jewry cannot survive and all our efforts to keep it alive are simply an act of coercion, the maintenance of an unnatural existence."<sup>32</sup>

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aspora as an Idea and as an Act" (Hebrew), in *The Age of Zionism*, eds. Anita Shapira, Jehuda Reinharz, and Jay Harris (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2000); Shalom Ratzaby, "The Polemic about the 'Negation of the Diaspora' in the 1930s and Its Root," *Journal of Israeli History* 16, no. 1 (1995): 19–38; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Zionism: Past and Present* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 87–100; Eliezer Schweid, "Two Approaches to the Idea of *shlilat ha'golah* in the Zionist Ideology," *Zionism* 9 (1984): 21–44 (Hebrew).

30 Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, 3.

31 A. D. Gordon, *Selected Essays*, trans. N. Teradyon and A. Shohat (New York, NY: League for Labor Palestine, 1938), 140. Elsewhere he adds: "in the diaspora [we] have become enslaved and persecuted, we have been alienated from nature, from living the natural form of life, and from all productive labor." *Selected Essays*, 77.

32 Jacob Klatzkin, "Boundaries," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997): 324.

These are just a few examples of the prevailing Zionist view of the gravity of the Jewish predicament, and of the fact that it demanded immediate attention.<sup>33</sup> In the context of this volume, I would suggest that Zionism transformed the experience of exile into a crisis. The way of life that had characterized two millennia of Jewish history was recast as an unbearable and perilous state, requiring prompt action. This was not a chronic illness that a patient could endure for extended periods, albeit uncomfortably, but rather an acute and severe condition that demanded urgent treatment. Undeniably, the failure of assimilation played a significant role in driving this transformation. It provided an epistemic clarity with which the Zionists were able to recognize the “true nature” of exile, which was now re-framed as hellish. As Max Nordau puts it in his address to the Second Zionist Congress: “Up till now everything looked like winter, all was bleak and cold, but the picture was majestic, the majesty of death. [...] [O]nly now we can estimate the fearful devastation which eighteen centuries of captivity have wrought in our midst.”<sup>34</sup> This reframing of exile as a crisis also called for a new set of metaphors for the Jewish condition in modernity. Fittingly, many turned to the metaphor of a disease. Most famously Pinsker argued that the anomaly of Jewish existence, particularly the lack of a perceived need for national existence, was akin to a disease: “In a sick person, the absence of desire for food and drink is a very serious symptom. [...] The Jews are in the sad position of such a patient.”<sup>35</sup> In his testimony to the Palestine Royal Commission in 1937, Ze’ev Jabotinsky similarly argued: “it was the common talk everywhere—the feeling that something should be done to relieve that disaster [the fate of the Jews in Russia during World War I], and the feeling that that disaster was only an acute expression of a deep-seated, chronic disease that was alive everywhere.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, if for Maimonides the survival of the Jewish people was promised even when the Yemenite community suffered from what certainly could have been por-

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33 The concept of crisis in “religious Zionism,” including the views of R. Kook and others, is not addressed in this chapter.

34 Max Nordau, *Max Nordau to His People* (New York, NY: Scopus, 1941), 88.

35 Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, 2.

36 Vladimir Jabotinsky, “Evidence Submitted to the Royal Commission,” in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997): 563. A. D. Gordon employed a similar terminology in his focus on “the disease which attacked us” in exile, and on the fact that “work will heal us.” Gordon, *Selected Essays*, 56. Likewise, during a talk in London in honor of Ahad Ha’am, Bialik attributed to the latter a parallel vocabulary: “all of Ahad Ha’am’s work was an unwavering endeavor to direct the nation’s heart towards a central focal point, serving as the cornerstone of an entire era. The sin or punishment of *Galut* is a *disease of the spirit*. And a writer who directs for thirty years the heart of the nation, is the more loyal physician.” Hayim N. Bialik, *Spoken Words* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1935), 2: 194 (emphasis mine).

trayed as a community-shattering crisis, exile, in many Zionist works, turned into a critical crisis that the Jewish people must face, and decidedly overcome, in order to survive. In this worldview, the Jewish exile was not part of God's divine plan or was understood in metaphysical terms. Rather, exile was seen as a tentative historical reality of social and political nature that the Jewish people could and should change. It was supposedly an "ordinary" crisis that was similar in structure to others.<sup>37</sup>

However, by transforming the Jewish exile into a pressing emergency, the Zionist thinkers made it into an exceptional type of crisis. Unlike more typical ways of describing a crisis, the Jewish crisis was characterized as being "eternal." See, for an example, how Leo Pinsker opens his call for Jewish national awakening in *Auto-Emancipation*:

The Eternal Problem presented by the Jewish Question stirs men today as it did ages ago. It remains unsolved, like the squaring of the circle, unlike which, however, it is still a burning question. This is due to the fact that it is not merely a problem of theoretic interest, but one of practical interest, which renews its youth from day to day, as it were, and presses more and more imperiously for a solution.<sup>38</sup>

In Zionism, the temporality of crisis, what is usually seen as a short moment of decision or action, is dramatically overhauled: the moment of crisis was transformed into an ongoing, essentially endless experience. Exile was an "eternal" question or problem, and the *moment* of crisis consequently remodeled into an *eternity*. This sense of crisis was supposedly not confined to the present moment of the Zionist movement. The urgency to address it was not limited to the end of the nineteenth century. In the Zionist imagination, exile was a crisis that permeated Jewish history, and the need to confront it was constantly felt. As Nordau declares in the aforementioned text, it was a "fearful devastation which eighteen centuries of captivity have wrought in our midst."<sup>39</sup>

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37 It is by no means my claim that Zionist ideology had one monolithic view of the exile. Importantly, Ahad Ha'am, the most famous proponent of cultural Zionism, veered off from the alarming vision of *galut*, refusing to acknowledge the state of emergency that the other Zionist ideologists declared: "The Jews remain true to their ancient belief: their attitude toward the Diaspora is subjectively negative, but objectively positive. Dispersion is a thoroughly evil and unpleasant thing, but we can and must live in dispersion, for all its evils and all its unpleasantness. Exodus from the dispersion will always be, as it always has been, an inspiring hope for the distant future; but the date of that consummation is the secret of a higher power, and our survival as a people is not dependent upon it." Ahad Ha'am, "The Negation of Diaspora," in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1997): 271.

38 Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, 1.

39 Nordau, *Max Nordau to His People*, 88.

The most extreme expression of the concept of exile as crisis in Zionist ideology can be traced to the writings of Gershom Scholem, who explored the significance of Jewish exile in Lurianic Kabbalah. Scholem, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, suggested in his analysis of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *Zimzum* that the Jewish exile is in fact a representation of *divine* exile. This is not the place to address this doctrine at length, but it is sufficient to note that Scholem, the ardent Zionist, chose to find in the idea of *Zimzum*—that is, God’s retraction into Himself in the process of creation—evidence of how Lurianic Kabbalah dramatized exile as an event of cosmic proportions. In his words, “one is tempted to interpret this withdrawal of God into his own Being in terms of exile, of banishing Himself from His totality into profound seclusion. Regarded this way, the idea of *Zimzum* is the deepest symbol of exile that could be thought of, even deeper than the ‘Breaking of the Vessels.’”<sup>40</sup> What is interesting in Scholem’s reading of Lurianic Kabbalah is that there are surely several ways to interpret the Lurianic *Zimzum*. And yet Scholem chose to propose a reading that aligns well with Zionist ideology. Scholem’s reading dramatizes, maybe even over-dramatizes, the stakes of the Jewish suffering and alienation in exile. In Scholem’s Zionist interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah, the concept of crisis extended well beyond being a mere truth about the Jewish people: the term served to animate the divine. In this radical reading, the Jewish crisis of exile was not only eternalized but also universalized. The crisis of exile was infinite in time *and* space, resulting in the entire cosmos suffering—in this reading of the Kabbalistic tradition—from the catastrophe of the Jewish people.<sup>41</sup>

It is worth noting that this shift in the temporal matrix of crisis, as seen in its Zionist application, is in fact typical of the modern usage of the term. As Reinhart Koselleck notes in his essay on the topic, the term “crisis” underwent a significant transformation in the eighteenth century. While previously crisis denoted a situation reaching a decisive point, as suggested earlier in the chapter, crisis in modernity was generalized to the entire history. This could be seen, for instance, in Schiller’s dictum “world History is the Last Judgment.” In Schiller’s view, Koselleck

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<sup>40</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1995), 261. Importantly, Moshe Idel rejects Scholem’s Zionist reading of the doctrine; see Moshe Idel, “On the Concept of *Zimzum* in Kabbalah and Its Research,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 10 (1992): 59–112, 92–97.

<sup>41</sup> This trope also has a long history, as Gershom Scholem’s admits: “In Lurianic Kabbalah too the exile of Israel is connected with Adam’s sin, the outcome of which was the scattering of the holy sparks, both of the *Shekhinah* and of Adam’s soul. When the sparks became diffused even further in Adam’s descendants, the mission of gathering them and raising them up, that is, of preparing the way for redemption, was awarded to Israel. The exile is not, therefore, merely a punishment and a trial but is a *mission* as well.” Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1978), 167 (emphasis mine).

explains, since all human actions contribute to the final judgment, “all of human history [is interpreted] as a single crisis that is constantly and permanently taking place.” The concept of crisis, he adds, thus became the “fundamental mode of interpreting historical time.”<sup>42</sup> The term “crisis” has taken on an additional meaning that has made it even more significant in modern consciousness. In the context of modernity, an era that celebrates change, progress, and transformation, “crisis” came to represent a state of imminent transition. As a result, it has become an important slogan of modernity, indeed “a structural signature of modernity.”<sup>43</sup> My suggestion is to consider the Zionist reframing of exile within the broader context of modern society’s fascination with crisis. Zionist intellectuals, I would like to argue, were able to leverage the concept of crisis because it was already widely employed to describe a variety of social, political, and religious phenomena. As Koselleck insists: “If we take the frequency of its use as indicating the actuality of a crisis, then the modern period since the turn of the nineteenth century can be called the age of crisis.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, if Zionism is indeed a modern movement, as widely argued, then its adoption of the term “crisis” to the discourse of Jewish exile may be another manifestation of this connection.

### 3 Modern Jewish Thought

The Zionist dramatization of exile as a catastrophic crisis struck a chord with several thinkers of modern Jewish thought.<sup>45</sup> However, these thinkers redefined the

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<sup>42</sup> Koselleck, “Crisis,” 371.

<sup>43</sup> “Crisis,” 372. On the proliferation of discussions on and the excessive interest in the concept of “crisis,” see Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Koselleck, “Crisis,” 381.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt are two other possible examples of this conceptual structure. In short, Levinas argues that the Jewish people have a responsibility to the world to serve as a reminder of the ethical dimension of human relations and, in that, to promote the idea of the infinite responsibility for the Other. In *Nine Talmudic Readings* (1968), for example, he declares: “We are [...] quite far from the anthropology of the West, quite far from its insistence upon the perseverance in being [...]. To be human is to suffer for the other, and even within one’s own suffering, to suffer for the suffering my suffering imposes upon the other.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 88. To this, he adds elsewhere, “Israel would teach that the greatest intimacy of me to myself consists in being at every moment responsible for the others, the hostage of others. I can be responsible for that which I did not do and take upon myself a distress which is not mine.” *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 85. As with Cohen and Rosenzweig, his work presents a model in which suffering, and ultimately crisis, turns out to be foundational to the Jewish place and function in world history, and, in the end, to redemption. Likewise, in Arendt’s early work on Jewish matters, she finds

meaning of the term yet again. They accepted the catastrophic description of the crisis of exile that the Zionists had consistently popularized, but rejected the Zionist notion of exile as a state of crisis that calls for an *immediate solution*, and in that were closer to their medieval predecessors. Still, the depiction of exile as horrific and dangerous, so prevalent in modernity, colored the perception of exile for Franz Rosenzweig and Hermann Cohen, for whom exile was undoubtedly a crisis, but one that did not require a solution.

To give a first example of this theoretical maneuver, I refer to Rosenzweig's depiction of the Jewish people in the third part of his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption* (1921). As a short reminder, Rosenzweig addresses there the messianic vocation of the Jewish people. His main argument is that the Jewish anticipation of redemption requires a unique form of alienation from mundane reality. According to Rosenzweig, Judaism and Christianity offer two opposing ideals of communal life and temporal modalities that are essential to world redemption. Christians work within history to achieve it: They engage in holy wars and expand their religion to unite humanity under God, in preparation of redemption. The Jews are given a different path. They are estranged from the world and alienated from world history, in order to anticipate a reality of redemption in the present. That is, while the rest of the world slowly marches *in* history towards redemption, the Jewish people must be in exile in its most profound possible meaning—i.e., *outside* history—in order to already be “at that place to which the peoples of the world only aspire. [Their] world is at the goal.”<sup>46</sup> This unique position allows the Jewish people to show the rest of the world the end point to which the world should strive.

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in the figure of the pariah a fruitful image to think of the function of the Jewish people on the world stage. In her 1944 essay “The Jew as Pariah,” she draws on the work of Bernard Lazare to introduce the conscious pariahs. In her view, the conscious pariahs should embrace their status as strangers and outcasts in order to lead the struggle against oppression and injustice in the name of others who suffer similarly: “As soon as the pariah enters the arena of politics and translates his status into political terms, he becomes perforce a rebel. [...] [T]he pariah [should] [...] cut loose from the world of fancy and illusion, renounce the comfortable protection of nature, and come to grips with the world of men and women.” Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kahn and Ron H. Feldman (New York, NY: Schocken, 2007): 284. “[E]very pariah who refused to be a rebel,” she adds, “[is] partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented.” Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 285. Importantly, Arendt's critique of Zionism in “Zionism Reconsidered” is based on her claim that the Zionist establishment refuse the Jewish role as conscious pariahs, and instead became representatives of European imperial forces in Palestine.

<sup>46</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 349.

The Jewish exilic reality is vividly expressed in their exceptional relations to land, language, and law. Unlike other nations that are rooted in their lands—land serves here also as a metaphor for the pursuit of earthly ends of power and success—the Jewish people are “travelers.” They are not allowed to have a homeland, as their land is the eternal and holy, always beyond their grasp and never to be possessed. Similarly, while other peoples have their own languages, which represent “that which is most alive of the people, indeed its life itself,”<sup>47</sup> the Jews are alienated from such mundane languages; they are outsiders, never fluent or familiar with the intricacies of everyday life, and unable to “ever [live] entirely at one with the times.”<sup>48</sup> And while the other peoples have state laws, constantly transforming codes and norms, which allow them to “continuously change their today into new customs,”<sup>49</sup> the Jews have an eternal and unchanging set of laws. In short, due to their unique messianic mission, the Jews relinquish wealth, power, and success. They are—and should be—in exile: displaced, disconnected from the ordinary reality of other peoples in order to guide them to redemption.<sup>50</sup>

Rosenzweig’s description of the messianic role of the Jewish exile resembles that of Jehuda Halevi in *The Kuzari* as both understand exile to be a mission of messianic proportions. The Jews, Rosenzweig and Halevi agree, are in exile because of their role in world redemption. They must educate the rest of the world in the principles of Judaism, and this requires them to exile themselves from the Land of Israel. However, the comparison with Halevi also highlights the deeply uncanny nature of exile in Rosenzweig. Exile is not a pleasant experience, nor is it a happy one; and the Jewish people are certainly not a normal people enjoying regular reality. Rather, they suffer from alienation and uprootedness. However, in a difference from Halevi, the suffering the Jewish people endure is not accidental or tentative. It is, rather, essential to their messianic task. If Halevi attributed the suffering of Jews to the moral inferiority of the rest of the world, Rose-

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47 *Star of Redemption*, 320.

48 *Star of Redemption*, 321.

49 *Star of Redemption*, 322.

50 For more on this uncanny experience, see Louis P. Blond, “Franz Rosenzweig: Homelessness in Time,” *New German Critique* 37, no. 3 (2010): 27–58. In his book of translations of poems and hymns of Jehuda Halevi, Rosenzweig recognizes a similar attitude to exile in medieval poetry. In his reading of Halevi, the medieval Jewish poets grappled with incorporating the experience of exile into their work, rather than suppressing or dismissing it. “All Jewish poetry in exile scorns to ignore this being-in-exile. It would have ignored its exile if it ever, like other poetry, took in the world directly.” This ideological importance of exile, Rosenzweig explains, was manifest through the “constant presence of the scriptural word.” Franz Rosenzweig, “Jehuda Halevi: Ninety-Two Hymns and Poems,” in *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi: Translating, Translations, and Translators*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 177.



nzweig believed that their alienation was a vital precondition for their mission. To achieve the redemption of the world, the Jews had to be separated from it. In other words, Rosenzweig puts considerable focus on the difficulties and struggles that the Zionists associated with the Jewish exile as *sine qua non* for the success of their mission. The Jewish suffering that the Zionists sought to eliminate was remodeled into a heroic experience that should be embraced. The Jews, he argued, should not only accept their unnatural ordeal. They should welcome it, since their alienation, troubling as it is, is crucial to world redemption. In Rosenzweig's words elsewhere: "Israel intercedes before Him for the sins of the peoples, and it is smitten with sickness so that they find healing."<sup>51</sup> The crisis of Jewish exile, put differently, was transformed in Rosenzweig's book to a messianic vocation, one that the Jewish people should not avoid or solve, but rather bravely accept and wholeheartedly champion. In the terms of this volume, crisis thus emerges as a defining aspect of the Jewish way of being. The Jews were those who experienced exile: they were a people in eternal crisis, not simply due to past events, but because their role in world redemption demanded it from them.

Rosenzweig's model borrows in part from the work of his teacher and close friend Hermann Cohen. Important to the suggested argument, in Cohen, like in Rosenzweig later, the Jewish messianic vocation is based on the reframing of exile. However, while in Rosenzweig it could be debatable if the Jewish heroic unworldly reality is one of crisis, Cohen's description openly underlines suffering and pain, and in that provides a straightforward example of the place of crisis in the Jewish experience.

In his posthumous work *Religion of Reason* (1919), Cohen empathically insists that God in monotheism, as the "Lord of the whole earth,"<sup>52</sup> is the principal source of unity of history and humanity. According to Cohen, in order to fully participate in this shared ideal of humanity, different peoples need to relinquish their "independent unity," and dissolve into a "unified mankind."<sup>53</sup> Within this messianic framework, the Jewish people hold a special role. Like in Rosenzweig, they are regarded as the great educators of humanity, entrusted with a mission to convert humanity to the monotheistic religion and its ethical principles. Still, in a difference from Rosenzweig's vision of the Jewish people as alienated from the world, Cohen suggests that in order to fulfill their mission, the Jews must participate in global affairs, albeit in a unique manner. Specifically, the Jews are asked to substitute "na-

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<sup>51</sup> Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 326.

<sup>52</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York, NY: Ungar, 1972), 253.

<sup>53</sup> *Religion of Reason*, 244.

tional consciousness” with “religious calling.”<sup>54</sup> They are called upon to reject worldly—that is, *national*—existence, in order to present an image of communal life that both transcends a national *modus vivendi* and offers an alternative model of communal *ethical* reality.<sup>55</sup> Focusing on the latter, note that the Jewish way of life in exile is partly designed in Cohen’s argument to inspire a shift in the ethical orientation of the rest of the world. Concretely, he argues that the Jewish people should instruct humanity in monotheistic ethics, which entails the “turning away from all eudemonistic desires,” as the first step of “elevation of the dignity of man.”<sup>56</sup> Here, the notion of crisis is fruitful. The hard reality of the Jewish people, “the vicarious sufferer”<sup>57</sup> in Cohen’s words, is foundational for the education of humanity. Their experience in exile, their *suffering* especially, mirrors the “warding off of the idea of eudemonism.”<sup>58</sup> Cohen terms this attitude as one-sidedness: “everywhere it involves the turning away from the egoistical, the curbing of weaknesses.”<sup>59</sup> Rather than being a repository of “cultural treasures,” to echo Walter Benjamin, the Jewish people embody an ideal form of ethical and religious life by way of their sorrowful existence. They are “the representative[s] of suffering, [which bring] into the world [...] the foundation of the ethical concept of history.” Put simply, the Jewish exile, clearly understood here in terms of pain and misery, holds crucial significance as it lays the foundation to a new universal ethical reality, in that it demonstrates that “every eudemonistic appearance is nothing but an illusion; and that the genuine value of life for the entire history of peoples lies in moral ideas and is therefore represented among men only by those who are accredited as carriers of those ideas.”<sup>60</sup>

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54 *Religion of Reason*, 260.

55 The two tasks of the Messiah: “the ideal morality and the unity of mankind.” *Religion of Reason*, 256.

56 *Religion of Reason*, 265.

57 *Religion of Reason*, 265. For more on Cohen’s notion of suffering, see Lawrence Kaplan, “Suffering and Joy in the Thought of Hermann Cohen,” *Modern Judaism* 21, no. 1 (2001): 15–22; Oliver Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 157–164; Andrea Poma, *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen’s Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 243–260. Note that the ideas of suffering and crisis permeate much more than Cohen’s vision of ethical monotheism. For Cohen, the sin, as a form of personal crisis, is foundational for making the individual into an I.

58 Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 268. Note that the suffering that interests Cohen is not a pious experience, which Cohen understands as isolated, but one of humility: “The pious man represents the isolated I; the humble man bears the whole of mankind in his heart. Therefore, he can become the representative of suffering, because he can fulfill his moral existence only in suffering.” *Religion of Reason*, 265.

59 *Religion of Reason*, 256.

60 *Religion of Reason*, 265.

What is important in Hermann Cohen's work is that his perception of exile as an endless suffering does not imply a demand for its end. Cohen, I argue, basically *shares* the Zionist perception of exile as a disastrous experience. However, rather than embracing the logical conclusion of Zionism and call for the ending of exile, Cohen finds that this crisis is in fact essential to the Jewish experience and grounds their messianic vocation. The Jews, he argues, are the eternal sufferers because their suffering is crucial for the success of monotheism.<sup>61</sup> In other words, compared to the Zionists, who turned the Jewish experience in exile into an eternal crisis, Cohen maintained that the same eternal crisis is essential to the Jewish people. That is, if one expects an attempt to avert a crisis or to prevent it, if a crisis usually calls for a response, in Cohen the Jewish crisis of exile is celebrated as inherent to the Jewish condition. The Jews experience crisis because crisis is foundational to who they are—it is their underlying truth.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, I propose a series of transformations in the understanding of exile and its relations with the idea of crisis. In medieval Jewish philosophy, exile is given a metaphysical explanation and is seen as part of God's divine plan. It is not perceived as a crisis *per se*, but as a form of punishment, challenge, or mission. In the Zionist worldview, the Jewish exile is reframed as a traumatic event or a catastrophe, taking on a form of an urgent crisis that should be solved promptly. However, in doing so, the Zionist thinkers introduce critical changes into the concept of crisis: the moment of crisis transformed into an eternity. Rosenzweig and Cohen surprisingly participated in part in the Zionist vision but added important nuance. Exile was a crisis, an endless crisis that prompted suffering and pain, and yet, following the principles of medieval Jewish philosophy, this crisis was not calling for a solution. Rather, it represented a fundamental characteristic of the Jewish people.

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61 "The religious one-sidedness [...] must also be regarded, in the light of higher historical [...] meaning, as a preparation for messianism." *Religion of Reason*, 258.

62 We can perhaps find similar argument in Judah Halevi's *The Kuzari*. In a section I discussed earlier, in which Halevi addresses the mission of the Jewish people in his seed parable, he recognizes the challenges the Jewish people must face. In a rather long paragraph, he notes an accusation that borrows from the place of the poor and the miserable in the New Testament: "Christians do not glory in kings, heroes and rich people, but in those who followed Jesus all the time, before His faith [took] firm root among them. They wandered away, or hid themselves, or were killed [...], suffered disgrace and slaughter for the sake of their belief. [...] Had I ever seen the Jews act in a like manner for the sake of God, I would place them above the kings of David's house." To this Halevi replies that "thou are right to blame us for bearing degradation without benefit. But if I think of prominent men amongst us who could escape this degradation [...] and turn against their oppressors, but do not do so out of devotion to their faith." *The Kuzari*, 225–226, 4/22.

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