

GUEST EDITORIAL

NEHAMA VERBIN
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

DIVINE HIDDENNESS RELIGIOUS PROTEST AND DOUBT: CONTEMPORARY JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

The Jewish tradition, from the Bible to the rabbinic tradition, the medieval philosophical and mystical tradition, Hasidism, and up to the 21st Century, has added a unique voice to the human struggle with God's hiddenness, with pain, loss, suffering, and the religious doubt and despair that they sometimes elicit. The purpose of this special volume is to bring to light this unique voice. It consists of various philosophical reflections on some of the key ways in which this struggle was understood, and of several philosophical analyses of some of the ways in which it was addressed within the Jewish tradition.

The volume begins with protest against God. As Sagi and Sagi and Fisch persuasively argue in this volume, and as I have argued elsewhere¹, confronting God, arguing with Him, criticizing Him as imperfect, protesting against Him and correcting Him, were deemed by Jewish knights of faith along the ages as speaking rightly about God and to Him. From the book of Job to Elie Wiesel, the protesting voice has had bold protagonists that had taken the Talmudic statement in tractate Sanhedrin 105a "Boldness is effective — even against Heaven" as a principle of religious devotion.

Sagi and Sagi set the stage to the discussion of religious protest by providing a rich phenomenological account of it, focusing particularly on rabbinic Judaism. They argue that for mainstream rabbinic tradition, questioning God and criticizing Him is part of a persistent effort to close the gap between the believer's commitment to God's goodness and the flawed reality in which he lives. They emphasize that criticism and protest are an authentic expression of Jewish religiosity, which conveys the human passion for religious perfection — not a stand against God. Moreover, they argue that protest voiced against God is a therapeutic activity "that prevents the shattering of God's image and the unraveling of religious life" by validating the believer's experience of brokenness and despair.

Similarly to Sagi and Sagi, Fisch too, discusses the centrality and significance of the confrontational nature of the rabbis' manner of relating to God, examining its relation to the pragmatist enlightenment. Reflecting on the commitments that underlie the confrontational attitude, Fisch emphasizes its inherently fallible and dialogical forms of reasoning, particularly as they pertain to the community's conception of God. He focuses on various rabbinical midrashim that describe Moses as disagreeing with God's commands, countering them by correcting God, and particularly on midrashim that portray God as admitting to having been taught something by Moses, to having been wrong. Fisch, thus, shows that the confrontational rabbinical attitude undermines the very status of the Bible as a "given". As he puts it: "the Talmud's rational theology... views even recognizably God-given truths, laws, actions and principles as changeable through the active engagement of human reasoning." Moreover, Fisch argues that not only do the Talmudic rabbis anticipate the pragmatist enlightenment with its ontological fallibilism and with its conception of knowledge as produced rather than revealed, but they also go a substantial step beyond it.

1 N. Verbin, *Divinely Abused: A Philosophical Perspective on Job and his Kin* (Continuum, 2011).

The Talmudic corpus, he argues, is unique in making no move at all to adjudicate the religious disagreements that it harbors. It, thereby, becomes a canon that refuses to dictate.

Similarly to Sagi and Sagi, and to Fisch, Margolin too focuses on some of the manners in which the Jewish conception of God's imperfection shows itself in Jewish thinking. Margolin focuses on the kabbalistic doctrine of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction) and its different construals in Lurianic Kabbalah, in Hans Jonas and in Hasidism, emphasizing *tzimtzum* as a radical alternative to the Neoplatonic conception of emanation. Turning from philosophical theology and theosophy to ethics, Margolin finds in Hasidic Judaism's conception of *Ayin* (nothingness) and in its manner of understanding divine and human imperfections, a source of solace and an inspiring motivation not to despair, neither of oneself nor of others. Margolin provides an elucidating analysis of Rabbi Nachman's "The Tale of the Hanging Lamp", through which he argues that Hasidic Judaism's conception of human imperfection as reflecting divine imperfection, functions as an inspiring call to forgiveness and reconciliation, fostering the commitment to mend the world.

The concept of *tzimtzum* and its presumed necessity for allowing something other than God to exist plays a significant role in Lebens' and in Bielik-Robson's contributions too. For both, *tzimtzum* and divine hiddenness are internally related. Lebens discusses *tzimtzum* in the context of his rejection of John Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness, for atheism. Bielik-Robson discusses *tzimtzum* in relation to the conceptions of the "void of God" and "pious atheism" that Scholem and Derrida reflect upon.

Lebens focuses on a specific conception of *tzimtzum*, according to which *tzimtzum* did not really occur but only appears to have occurred. Maintaining that this doctrine was popular in Hasidism, he names the doctrine of apparent *tzimtzum* "Hasidic Idealism". Lebens maintains that if *tzimtzum* did not really occur, then "our suffering isn't real from God's transcendent perspective". He argues that "[It] is not more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author." Since God has merely imagined diminishing himself so that our imperfect universe could exist in God's imagination, but did not really diminish himself, nor did he really create a world but only imagined it, then neither our suffering nor the presence of nonresistant nonbelief in God pose a challenge to belief in the existence of a perfectly good and loving God. Thus, Lebens argues that "Hasidic idealism" bypasses Schellenberg's argument for atheism since "God doesn't appear in this world exactly as he is beyond this world. This is a type of Divine Hiddenness. But he hides in order to make this world possible."

Bielik-Robson too, focuses on the kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum* and on the ensuing commitment to God's hiddenness. Through her comparative analyses of the "void of God" and of "pious atheism" in Scholem and in Derrida, she places *tzimtzum* and the experience of God's hiddenness at the very center of the religious life. She emphasizes that while for Scholem, the "void of God" is a predominantly negative experience, for Derrida, it is an affirmative model of modern religiosity, since it is "the necessary condition of the emergence of the created world." Creation and its creatures become liberated in the divine *tzimtzum*. In other words, God's withdrawal "asserts contingent singular beings in their separate right to be." Bielik-Robson, therefore, argues that "pious atheism" is not a form of non-belief; rather, it "follows from the internal logic of the monotheistic faith." She, thus, argues that once we let go of the confused nostalgia for God's presence, the *paradox* of creation comes to the fore as the only possible form of monotheistic faith. It requires that we maintain ourselves in the "insoluble *aporia* between theology and atheism", which can only be captured by oxymoronic formulations, e.g., "pious atheism", "non-secular secularism", and others. These are a form of faith, not its absence. For Derrida, she emphasizes, it is the only kind of faith that befits mature self-reflexive monotheism.

Bielik-Robson's "paradox of creation", the "insoluble *aporia* between theology and atheism", as she puts it, a paradox to which Margolin too points when discussing the Baal Shem Tov's teaching that "The whole earth is full of His glory, and no place is void of it", while being committed to *tzimtzum*, is an instance of the great paradox between divine transcendence and divine immanence. Kepnes and Verbin discuss different aspects of this paradox, exploring its meaning and significance.

Kepnes focuses mainly on the Bible. He argues that a contradiction between God's hiddenness on the one hand and His being an object of human experience on the other, underlies the Biblical portrayal of

God. He characterizes the paradox as between seeing and not seeing the face of God. Kepnes appeals to three models to shed light on what embracing this paradox may mean: to Gellman's notion of double-mindedness, to Einstein's understanding of light as behaving both as a particle and as a wave, and to Pierce's notion of "thirdness". He argues for the indispensability of both commitments that make up the paradox of the absent and present God, while insisting, by means of the three models that he employs, that holding on to the paradox does not amount to one's breaking away with the norms of rationality but to expanding them.

Verbin focuses mainly on the paradox between divine transcendence and divine immanence as it shows itself in Maimonides. She uses Kierkegaard's works, and the notions of divine hiddenness and paradox within them, as a Wittgensteinian "perspicuous representation" that may shed light on the meaning of the paradox in the *Guide of the Perplexed*: on the one hand, Maimonides maintains that we cannot speak about God, nor can we know anything about Him or stand in any relation to Him; on the other, Maimonides describes God as an intellect that overflows into the world in general and into the prophet/sage who absorbs it in a mystical state of apprehension, during which he contemplates God's articulated name, YHWH, in particular.

Verbin compares the ways in which Maimonides and Kierkegaard construe their paradox and the ways in which the paradox reaches its peak in each of their conceptions of "subjectivity". She argues that Maimonides' conception of God's articulated name, YHWH, which refers to God with no equivocation, functions similarly to the figure of the God-man for Kierkegaard, i.e., as a (vocal) incarnation of the divine. As such, God's articulated name, for Maimonides, *embodies* the paradox between divine transcendence and immanence, serving as the very foundation on which the Jewish religious life is lived. Verbin argues that both Maimonides and Kierkegaard do not intend to solve, resolve or dissolve the paradox between divine transcendence and immanence, nor do they attempt to present a thesis or doctrine about God that their readers are expected to assent to; rather, they intend to show the great riddle of our life with God, to present the great paradox as the ground on which it is lived. For both authors, the paradox is not a transient one and it cannot be undone.

Placing paradox at the core of the religious life, precisely the kind of paradox that does not seem to yield to our ordinary standards of what is possible or rational but, rather, seems to defy them, is a subversive act. As Fisch notes in his comments on the Talmud's refusal to adjudicate between competing views, it pulls away the rug from under one's feet, from under one's conception of "knowledge" and of the "God-given". It may be seen as a radical act through which Maimonides drives his learned readers back to their Talmudic home of unresolved contradictions, of protest and criticism. The life of faith in this Jewish home, as we have seen, is an ongoing, never ending, polyphonic choir of different voices, singing different tunes, in harmony and disharmony: weeping ones, joyful ones, devout elated songs of contemplation, and broken and despairing ones — all seeking the absent God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Verbin, N. 2011. *Divinely Abused: A Philosophical Perspective on Job and his Kin*. London: Continuum.