

2009

Auschwitz has Happened: An Exploration of the Past, Present, and Future of Jewish Redemption

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Recommended Citation

Marcus, Alexander Warren, "Auschwitz has Happened: An Exploration of the Past, Present, and Future of Jewish Redemption" (2009).
Pomona Senior Theses. Paper 32.
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AUSCHWITZ HAS HAPPENED

An Exploration of the Past, Present, and Future of Jewish Redemption

By

Alexander Warren Marcus

Thesis submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, Pomona College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Friday, April 24, 2009
Oona Eisenstadt, Jerry Irish
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Acknowledgements

This project owes its completion to more people than I can count. It is the product of countless conversations with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Any attempt at a comprehensive list of those who should be acknowledged would fail to account for so many of the people who deserve mention. Still, certain people cannot escape being mentioned by name.

I owe an enormous debt to Oona Eisenstadt, who has been a patient and insightful advisor throughout every stage of writing and brainstorming. Oona watched me struggle with innumerable issues, offering helpful advice but never cramming solutions down my throat, instead forcing me to find them on my own. She helped me come to the realization relatively early on that the aspects of the issues that I was emphasizing, the terminology I was using, and my overall tone, were all dead-ends. Thus, it was through her direction that I started over after writing an initial 45 pages. While this was devastating at the time I knew that she was correct, and my thesis is greatly improved because of this. I not only benefited from her guidance, I also relied a great deal on her scholarship. This is most obvious in chapter five. I still remember what she said when I was explaining what I was trying to say in that chapter: she immediately responded, “I wrote a book about that.” This made my work a lot easier.

Another person deserving of gratitude is my second reader, Jerry Irish. Jerry has been an unfailing source of encouragement throughout this process. While he has humbly deferred to Oona in matters of Judaism that were outside of his expertise, he was indispensable in his role as “third party” to discussions between myself and Oona, making sure that they were intelligible to anybody else. He has been an unrivalled sounding board for ideas, and he managed to renew my excitement for the project whenever I got lost in the details.

My parents deserve tremendous thanks for, among so many other things, forcing me to attend Hebrew school against my will throughout most of my childhood. Though my ten year old self will never forgive this statement, I am so grateful for the Jewish background they provided and the sense of the importance of Judaism they engendered in my thinking.

I do not know how I would have survived this entire process had it not been for the presence of Angela Beckon in my life. As a pillar of support and as someone who continually distracted me from the depressing seriousness of this enterprise, Angie cannot be thanked enough for the immeasurable ways that she has rescued my sanity time and again.

Finally, in no particular order, here is an incomplete list of people who have, in one way or another, influenced this project (even if they do not know it) or otherwise deserve a mention: Page Adams, Kyla Spindler, Hillary Carroll, Adam Plunkett, Fred Rossoff, Zachary Baron, Benjamin Greenberg, Ameer Abdul-Badee, Todd Logan, Kevin Frick, Michael Prude, Michael Baum, Ross Green, Rashid Silvera, Zhiru, Erin Runions, Darryl Smith, Balazs Szelenyi, Sharon Portnoff, Zayn Kassam, Thomas Moore, Thandiwe Gobledale, Pavan Thapa, Swami Prapana Charya, Swami Ramananda Giri, Dan Marcus, Michael Mencher, Robin Margolis, Sadie Barr, Ariella Schwerd, Amy Mann, Andrew Barnet, Katie Dutcher, Tara Ericksen, Sarah Burgess, Alix Coupet, Gator, Jordan Gadd, Danielle Joseph.

Notes

The reader will notice that in this study I often refer generally to Jews although what is more specifically meant is “European Jews,” “Ashkenazi Jews,” or “American Jews.” This is shorthand, and should be construed as such, but it is not intended to imply that Jews that do not fall into these categories are any less Jewish. Nor is it claiming that what applies to the situation of an Ashkenazi Jew, for example, necessarily applies in the same way to a Mizrahi or Sephardic Jew, or that the modern American Jewish experience is the same as that of the modern Israeli Jew. The simple truth is that I come from an American Ashkenazi background, and this is the only aspect of the Jewish tradition about which I am prepared to make claims.

Ω

The reader will also notice that I refer to the collective mass slaughtering of European Jews and other groups, facilitated by the German National Socialist regime between 1933 and 1945, as the Shoah rather than the more familiar term “Holocaust.” This is done deliberately. “Shoah” is a Hebrew word meaning “disaster” or “conflagration.” “Holocaust,” on the other hand, comes from the Greek word *holo-kauston*, meaning a sacrifice, a burnt offering completely consumed by fire. I reject the sense of sacrifice that attaches itself to the genocide when it is deemed a “Holocaust.” As we shall see, this is not simply a semantic difference but indicative of a difference in understanding of the nature of the event itself. The word “Holocaust” will only be employed here to make a specific point about this distinction, within the reproduction of a direct quotation, or to describe a proper noun such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Jewish messianic thought (according to certain commentators), suggests the relation between the event and its nonoccurrence. If the Messiah is at the gates of Rome among the beggars and lepers, one might think that his incognito protects or prevents him from coming, but, precisely, he is recognized: someone, obsessed with questioning and unable to leave off, asks him: “When will you come?” His being there is, then, not the coming. With the Messiah, who is there, the call must always resound: “Come, Come.” His presence is no guarantee. Both future and past (it is said at least once that the Messiah has already come), his coming does not correspond to any presence at all. Nor does the call suffice. There are conditions – the efforts of men, their virtue, their repentance – which are known; there are always other conditions which are not. And if it happens that to the question “When will you come?” the Messiah answers, “Today,” the answer is certainly impressive: so, it is today! It is now and always now. There is no need to wait, although to wait is an obligation. And when is it now? When the now which does not belong to ordinary time, which necessarily overturns it, does not maintain but destabilizes it? When? – especially if one remembers that this “now” which belongs to no text, but is the now of a severe, fictitious narrative, refers to texts that make it once more dependent upon realizable-unrealizable conditions: “Now, if only you heed me, or if you are willing to listen to my voice.” Finally, the Messiah – quite the opposite in this respect, from the Christian hypostasis – is by no means divine. He is a comforter, the most just of the just, but it is not even sure that he is a person – that he is someone in particular. When one commentator says, The Messiah is perhaps I, he is not exalting himself. Anyone might be the Messiah – must be he, is not he. For it would be wrong to speak of the Messiah in Hegelian language – “the absolute intimacy of absolute exteriority” – all the more so because the coming of the Messiah does not yet signify the end of history, the suppression of time. It announces a time more future, as the following mysterious text conveys, than any prophecy could ever foretell: “All prophets – there is no exception – have prophesied only for the messianic time {*l’epokhe?*}. As for future time, what eye has seen it except Yours, Lord, who will act for him who is faithful to you and keeps waiting?”

[....]

And why the idea of the Messiah? Why the necessity of a just finish? Why can we not bear, why do we not desire that which is without end? The messianic hope – hope which is dread as well – is inevitable when history appears politically only as an arbitrary hubbub, a process deprived of meaning or direction. But if political thinking becomes messianic in its turn, this confusion, which removes the seriousness from the search for reason (intelligibility) in history – and also from the requirement of messianic thought (the realization of morality) – simply attests to a time so frightful, so dangerous, that any recourse appears justified: can one maintain any distance at all when Auschwitz happens? How is it possible to say: Auschwitz has happened?

– Maurice Blanchot¹

¹ Blanchot, Maurice. The Writing of Disaster. 142-143
Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1986

Tenebrae

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
Pray to us,
We are near.

Askew we went there,
went there to bend
down to the trough, to the crater.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord.
We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

- Paul Celan²

² Celan, Paul. Hamburger, Michael, translator. Poems of Paul Celan. 89
New York : Persea Books, 1989

Introduction: A Destruction Without Adequate Precedent

It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work. But you are not free to evade it.

– Rabbi Tarfon³

Evading and Confronting the Shoah

Given the sheer magnitude and horror of the Shoah, and the fact that it took place in the heart of the Western world, it is surprising how rarely the event is allowed a central role in our consciousness or any forms of public discourse. We have allowed ourselves to compartmentalize the Shoah into categories distinct from the mainstream of almost all realms of thought. Or perhaps we should say that we have forced ourselves to do so. “Holocaust Studies” has become a specialized, self-contained department of various academic fields, and very rarely are the individuals who devote their professional careers to this pursuit given integrated forums. Even the areas where the significance of the Shoah seems most important continue more or less as if it had never taken place. In terms of our ability to assess the possible relevance of the event to the world in which we live – the very same world, it becomes necessary to say, that produced the Shoah – such evasions differ in degree but not in kind with the denial of the Shoah itself.

In another sense this development is not surprising at all. The consequences, if we were to take them seriously, to treat them in a manner corresponding to their significance, are profoundly unnerving. A closer look at the perpetrators, for example, reveals that they cannot be dismissed as ignorant or insane. Rather, we must confront the fact that the

³ Pirke Avot 2.16

people who committed the crime, from the architects all the way down the chain of command, were educated, rational, and civilized men, and that there appears to be no unbridgeable gap between their thinking and our own. Perhaps for this among several reasons, the very question of whether the Shoah has something significant to say about our world is rarely permitted to even be asked.

That these “were educated men of their time,” Raul Hilberg, historian of the Shoah, writes, is “the crux of the question whenever we ponder the meaning of Western Civilization after Auschwitz.” He suggests that “we can no longer assume that we have a full grasp of the workings of our social institutions, bureaucratic structures, or technology.”⁴ Such a reflection on the Shoah presents obvious critiques to many fields of study, including history, sociology, politics, philosophy, and theology.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman broadens Hilberg’s critique, questioning the abilities of “all the other learned men and women who are professionally concerned with understanding and explaining.” He then extends the critique even further:

If Hilberg is right, and our most crucial social institutions elude our mental and practical grasp, then it is not just the professional academics who ought to be worried. True, the Holocaust occurred almost half a century ago [Bauman is writing in 1989]. True, its immediate results are fast receding into the past. The generation that experienced it at first hand has almost died out. But – and this is an awesome, sinister ‘but’ – these once-familiar features of our civilization, which the Holocaust had made mysterious again, are still very much part of our life. They have not gone away. Neither has, therefore, the *possibility* of the Holocaust.⁵

Rather than address this fact our discussions of the Shoah have often revolved around various methods of evasion, ignoring or dismissing the relevance of the Shoah to anything not directly, tangibly related. We are familiar with many of the ways that the

⁴ Hilberg in Bauman, Zygmunt. Modernity and the Holocaust. 83
Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1989

⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt. Modernity and the Holocaust. 84

relevance of the Shoah is brushed aside. Those who try to direct our eyes to these issues are disparaged as pessimists, unreasonable, or fanatical prophets of doom. In response to them we remind ourselves how civilized we are. We point to our democratic progress, our concern for social justice, and our cosmopolitan, modern sensibilities. We make sharp distinctions between ourselves and atrocities of the “barbaric” past or other parts of the world, overlooking the fact that the largest, most effective, and impersonal of these atrocities took place not in some exotic locale or distant time but in the very center of the modern world. Evasion has become so reflexive that it has become a rule of thumb in civil discourse that, a sure way to get people to stop listening to you is to simply mention the Shoah. The resulting effect is that the Shoah, while it remains a seminal event, has left our consciousness and awareness of the tendencies of our civilization unshaken.

Bauman describes the ways that such a result can be accomplished when the sociology of morality is confronted with “events of exceptional dramatic power” that threaten to “shatter the grip of the dominant paradigm and to start a feverish search for alternative groundings of ethical principles.” One way that such a shattering of the dominant paradigm can be ignored is through the “virtual identification of morality with social discipline,” a “programmatically relativism” that works as an “ultimate safety valve in case the observed norms do arouse instinctive moral revulsion.” In other words, events are explained away as deviant, as unrepresentative of the culture from which they sprang. A second way to avoid confronting such issues is to question the need for a search for “alternative groundings of ethical principles” in the first place. This involves attempting to “narrate the dramatic experience” in a way that fits with the old scheme, either by casting the events as unique and therefore irrelevant to general morality or by

“dissolving” the events into a “wider and familiar category of unsavoury, yet regular and normal by-products” of our moral systems. Finally, if the above tactics prove unsuccessful, there is the “refusal to admit the evidence into the discursive universe of the discipline,” proceeding, effectively, as if the events never happened.⁶

Each of these strategies has been employed, in sociology and other fields, in response to the Shoah. Bauman notes two major problems that stem from our inability, or lack of willingness, to confront such implications. The first is that, since our understanding of the processes that produced the Shoah has not advanced, “we could be once more unprepared to notice and decode the warning signs – were they now, as they had been then, blatantly displayed all around.” His second, correlative point is that because of our inability to decode the signs there is no way to know whether the “products of history which in all probability contained the potentiality” of the Shoah have been rendered obsolete. Indeed, we have denied ourselves the tools with which to investigate such claims. “We can only suspect,” Bauman writes, “that the conditions... have not been radically transformed.”⁷

If we do seriously consider the lessons of the Shoah, however, the implications can be equally if not more terrifying. As Bauman has noted, there is a tendency to equate the moral with the social, to assume that our societal institutions – church, government, social justice groups, law – are sources of moral authority. What emerges from the case of the Shoah, though, is the exact opposite conclusion. Here it is these very institutions that were sources of moral repugnance, and here moral theory “*faced the possibility that morality may manifest itself in insubordination toward socially upheld principles, and in*

⁶ Ibid. 175-176

⁷ Ibid. 86

an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus.” As Hannah Arendt noted, those individuals who acted morally in the face of an overarching, socially-determined immorality, “went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed.”⁸

And with the downfall of the theory of a socially constructed morality that maintains moral authority to determine between good and evil, one can turn to no alternative society for moral grounding. Bauman suggests that “*this relativism, however, does not apply to human ‘ability to tell right from wrong’*. Such ability, then, must be grounded in something other than the *conscious collective* of society.” He concludes that “socialization,” rather than being thought to explain the processes by which morality is produced, must instead be understood as explaining the processes by which morality is manipulated. If morality is the object, but not the product, of these manipulating processes then “the factors responsible for the presence of moral capacity must be sought in the *social*, but not *societal* sphere.” We can search for moral behavior in the state of “being with others,” in Bauman’s phrase, but not in the structures that enforce and attempt to codify this behavior.⁹

Bauman distinguishes this “being with others” from notions of a human subject simply “being,” that is, an individual acting in freedom except when confronted by other individuals whose freedom limits her. He is not explicit here but I would suggest he sees in such “subjectivity,” characterized by the “technical challenge” of neutralizing or “reaching mastery over the other,” the beginnings of a social contract that augurs more

⁸ Ibid. 177

⁹ Ibid. 178-179

developed societal structures that manipulate but do not produce morality. Bauman's 'being with others' is a duty and not a limit and it is not defined by an appeal to an ideal outside of an encounter.¹⁰ He finds in the Nazis' skillful manipulation of society the suppression of the effects of this 'being with others,' this personal responsibility derived from the "elementary human condition which makes explicit the universality of human revulsion to murder, inhibition against inflicting suffering on another human being, and the urge to help those who suffer."

Though it has been common among historians, especially soon after the fact, to explain the Shoah in terms of classic European anti-Semitism, perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of these events is that they "required the neutralization of ordinary [German] attitudes toward the Jews, not their mobilization."¹¹ In order to overcome the historically defined limits of aggression toward Jews, grassroots anti-Semitism had to be replaced by impersonal, rational, and bureaucratic forces. Bauman writes:

*The Holocaust could be accomplished only on the condition of neutralizing the impact of primeval moral drives, of isolating the machinery of murder from the sphere where such drives arise and apply, of rendering such drives marginal or altogether irrelevant to the task.*¹²

Ω

Without Promise: Theodicy, Ethics, and Redemption after Auschwitz

As we attempt to better understand the significance of the Shoah another concern immediately follows on the heels of the first. Already alluded to by Bauman, this is the

¹⁰ Ibid. 179-180

¹¹ Ibid. 185

¹² Ibid. 188

problem of how we can heed these lessons, how we can begin to articulate ourselves morally in light of the events of the Shoah while somehow guarding ourselves against the tendencies which produced it. This would entail a major restructuring of our relationship to our societal institutions, and perhaps a restructuring of the institutions themselves. This project is as vast as it is important, and it would be impossible to address the full range of issues in a lifetime, let alone a single paper. The specific subject of this paper is infinitely smaller, and yet only the tiniest bit of that subject will be dealt with here. We will be investigating the implications of the Shoah as they pertain specifically to the Jewish people. While all of the concerns laid out above apply to Jews as they do to everyone, a specific host of problems apply more forcefully to the Jews and Judaism as the principal targets of the Shoah. Ours will be an attempt to more fully understand the specific and general problems as they concern Jews, and to offer tentative prescriptions with regard to ways in which Judaism can successfully move forward.

Corresponding endeavors with regard to Christians and Gentiles more broadly are certainly possible and necessary, and would assuredly contain their own sets of particular concerns. Nothing that will be written here is intended to preclude such projects. They are welcome complements to the task unfolding here. It must be acknowledged, of course, that to consider Jewish responses to the Shoah without at least implicit reference to a Jewish/Christian relationship would be absurd and unproductive. To that end, there will be many references to Christianity throughout this examination when they become necessary. Please note, however, that such references are not intended to represent a fully-formed characterization of Christian possibilities or realities.

The concerns I have laid out above, along with other implications of the Shoah, present rather difficult problems for Jews and Judaism. It is my contention that many of these problems are related to concepts of redemption in Judaism. As we shall see as the study progresses, “redemption” is not something that can be easily pinned down, although in our subsequent chapter we will try to come to a better understanding of its possibilities. It has meant different things to Jews in different ages and communities, and it does not necessarily mean the same thing from one individual to another. It is often expressed in connection with ideas concerning the coming of the messiah and the messianic era. In many ways it is an expression of Jewish hope, of the belief that suffering is temporary and that it will eventually give way to a reprieve from worldly injustice. Here we also find the beginning of an ethical component in that the framework of redemption, along with the imperative nature of the goal, suggests the possibility of human action that contributes to this end or detracts from it. Redemption is also intricately tied up with notions of theodicy, a term coined by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to mean “justification of God,” which Zachary Braiterman expands to mean “any utterance whose source attempts to ‘justify,’ ‘explain,’ or ‘accept’ as ultimately meaningful the relationship between God and evil.”¹³

In much the same way that the Shoah has shaken our understanding of civilization more generally, it has also presented difficult obstacles for many traditional Jewish understandings of redemption. Just as others have ignored the problems of the Shoah, Jewish thinkers have often ignored the difficulties presented by the Shoah for redemptive thought. Perhaps the most readily apparent site of difficulty is the intersection between

¹³ Braiterman, Zachary. *(God) After Auschwitz*. 19
Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, c1998

redemption and theodicy. Much of Jewish tradition, both historical and mythical, can be viewed as attempts to understand events as part of a larger process, to imbue them with meaning and relation to morality. But how is it possible to place the Shoah within this context? Could the Shoah have been a lesson, a moment of collective clarity or revelation? If so, what did we learn? Could it have been punishment for wrongdoing? If so, what was the crime? What could have possibly justified murder on such a colossal scale? Could it be justified as a trial, a necessary purifying process which has prepared us for a new age, the messianic age perhaps? If so, we must ask ourselves what kind of reward could justify such atrocities. Moreover, we would be forced to entertain the question: was this suffering so grievous as to be unjustifiable? And if it can be justified, what does that say about God? And if the answer is that the Shoah has no redeeming value at all, is that not infinitely worse?

Perhaps a better place to start is with this question: Can the Shoah be viewed in terms of past instances of Jewish suffering? Post-Shoah theologian Emil L. Fackenheim compares the Shoah to the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiba at the hands of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Akiba's death is often considered to be the model of traditional martyrdom:

When Hadrian forbade the practice of Judaism on pain of death, Rabbi Akiba and the rest of the "ten martyrs" defied his edict, were caught and tortured, and died with the Sh'ma Yisrael on their lips: their martyrdom can be remembered on Yom Kippur, the most solemn of Jewish festivals, for it has renewed the Jewish faith – and administered Hadrian a posthumous defeat. In the most painful possible contrast, Hitler's name could not be mentioned without the specter of posthumous victories for him. Hadrian's edict gave the ten martyrs the choice between life and the risk of death. But the new Jewish crime was not an act – the practice of *mitzvot*, the study of Torah, the ordination of new rabbis – but birth; and with Teutonic consistency the Holocaust was engineered so as to give few would-be Akibas the choice of how to die, and none at all that between life and the risk of death. For Judaism, then, the Holocaust is a destruction without adequate precedent: it is new.¹⁴

¹⁴ Fackenheim, Emil. L. To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought. xviii

How can the Shoah be related to human choice when, as Fackenheim explains, “the most characteristic new victims were those robbed of choice altogether: the children too young to choose, and the *Musselmänner* unable to choose any longer”? If we are to accept that the Shoah is distinct from other Jewish moments of catastrophe, that it cannot simply be overcome through Jewish persistence and the passage of time, that it cannot be synthesized within the existing options of theodicy and redemption, we must ask with Fackenheim: “Has Hitler, then, succeeded where Hadrian failed?” Is Jewish faith, which has weathered the storms of so many catastrophes and emerged stronger on the other side, “destroyed by the screams of the children and the no less terrible silence of the *Musselmänner*?”¹⁵

Fackenheim proposes, or more correctly claims to have ascertained, a 614th commandment that emerges after the Shoah. In addition to the 613 sanctified, as understood by mythical memory, with the Revelation at Sinai, he puts forward the commandment: “forbidding Jews to give Hitler posthumous victories.” Fackenheim explains, furthermore, that this commandment has already been enshrined out of requirement by the Jewish population. He recognizes his audacity, and acknowledges that the 613 have until now satisfied “rabbis not insensitive to new challenges.” Still Fackenheim defends the necessity of the commandment, explaining his position in terms of the importance of the problem:

Yet to stay with the 613 now proved impossible. As honesty with the facts and fidelity to the victims was making something new – the naming of Hitler – unavoidable, along with it emerged a new necessity. It was forbidden to allow the posthumous destruction of the Jewish faith in Man, God and – this even for the

New York : Schocken Books, 1982

¹⁵ Ibid. xviii-xix

most secularist of Jews – that hope without which a Jew cannot live, the hope which is the gift of Judaism to all humanity. To deny Hitler the posthumous victory of destroying this faith was a moral-religious commandment.¹⁶

Two points that Fackenheim makes here are important enough to be emphasized again. The first point is that this is not a matter that pertains exclusively to what we may or may not speculate about the nature or existence of a deity, or even about the authorship of sacred texts. This is about whether or not, after the Shoah, “being Jewish,” in any conceivable variation of that condition, can bring anything viable to bear on hope and the promise of a better future. And if the answer is no, we must ask whether or not “being Jewish” is viable at all. Of course, if the answer is once again no, it would entail the ultimate posthumous victory for Hitler.

The second point, which is implicit in Fackenheim’s words above, is that his 614th commandment, borne out of such exigency, is correspondingly a radical but necessary addition. “When all is said and done,” Fackenheim writes, “must not the Holocaust either cease to be a stumbling block for the Jewish faith, after all, in which case the 614th commandment is unnecessary, or else be and remain a stumbling block, in which to obey that commandment is ‘humanly impossible’?”¹⁷ I submit that the only way to preserve Judaism while recognizing the stumbling block of the Shoah and respecting the commandment against posthumous victories for Hitler is to reject certain traditional understandings of redemption, hope, and theodicy, and to radically transform our conceptions of these ideas.

It would be valid to wonder how, if we were to do this, Judaism would remain recognizable to the Judaism of the past and therefore be Judaism in anything other than

¹⁶ Ibid. xix

¹⁷ Ibid. xx

name. Fackenheim asks: “Must not Judaism either survive the Holocaust fundamentally as it was, or else, if not destroyed, at least be altered beyond recognition?” From what may seem an insurmountable obstacle emerges the very task we are then required to undertake: we must seek out ways that Judaism can be altered, that redemption can be reimagined, without forsaking classical Judaism fundamentally. Zachary Braiterman writes that we cannot “understand contemporary Jewish response to catastrophe without reflecting upon the shape of classical and modern Jewish thought. At the same time, Auschwitz represents a theological point of no return... this catastrophe and its memory have profoundly reshaped the given theodic and antitheodic contours of [the Jewish people’s] religious culture.”¹⁸

Ω

In order to decide whether or not we can alter Judaism in light of the Shoah while sufficiently maintaining a connection to the Jewish past, taking our cue from Emmanuel Levinas we will make use of “ethics” as the litmus test. Ethics, what Bauman called “being with others,” must inform our decisions every step of the way. If the Shoah holds our conceptions of redemption, the framework within which we have traditionally acted ethically, up to scrutiny, then whether we can preserve an ethics that is conceptually continuous with classical understandings, as well as our modern imperatives after the Shoah, is a measure of our success or failure.

Levinas presents us with the same problems as Bauman and Fackenheim, but through the lens of morality:

¹⁸ Braiterman, Zachary. (God) After Auschwitz. 5

If there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted. Consequently, what remains? Either this means that there is no reason for morality and hence it can be concluded that everyone should act like the Nazis, or the moral law maintains its authority...¹⁹

Richard J. Bernstein, writing about Levinas, explains that the radical revision required by Auschwitz does not necessarily thwart the possibility of an “absolute commandment”²⁰ that speaks to moral concerns. “It still cannot be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise,” Levinas writes in agreement with Bauman’s claims.²¹ Levinas’s argument is that there is, in fact, a source of moral law that survives the destruction of a redemption that is predicated on promise. In Levinasian terms, then, morality after Auschwitz must contain an ethical principle that straddles the abyss of the Shoah and does not require “promise” as it has previously been construed.

But what is such an ethical principle? Similar to Bauman’s “being with others,” it must summon an ethics that withstands the manipulations of socialization by appeal to direct relation, or encounter, with the Other. It is the infinite obligation, as in Bauman’s distinction between duty and limit, that arises out of sympathy and of the suffering we experience due to the suffering of another. The suffering is even more profound when, as in the case of the Shoah, the suffering of the other can only be characterized as “useless.” Levinas writes:

¹⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel in Critchley, Simon and Bernasconi, Robert, editors. The Cambridge Companion to Levinas. 254

Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002

²⁰ Bernstein, Richard J. in Critchley, Simon and Bernasconi, Robert, editors. The Cambridge Companion to Levinas. 254

²¹ Levinas, Emmanuel in Critchley, Simon and Bernasconi, Robert, editors. The Cambridge Companion to Levinas. 254

...the suffering for the useless suffering of the other person, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon the suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human... It is this attention to the Other which, across the cruelties of our century – despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties – can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle – the only one which it is not possible to contest...²²

For Levinas it is the suffering as a response to the suffering of the Other that provides for the possibility of ethical action that can overcome the moral relativism in the Nazi problem. Such ethical action rejects redemptive promise – the assertion that actions can be ethically pure and justified in a culminating sense – but it maintains the possibility of moral action. Several developments spring from such a stance, but one in particular that will prove important to our subsequent discussions is that the moral action prescribed by Levinas cannot be derived from sources of action that can be described as “triumphal.” In an essay entitled “The Virtues of Patience,” Levinas describes such sources as “whatever is harsh and pitiless, adventurous and heroic, dangerous and intense.” He means by this that even ethical action that is inevitable and just must be simultaneously understood for what it also is: violent and unjust. Ethical action must preserve the pain from which it springs, it cannot discard injustice. “To anaesthetize this pain,” Levinas writes, “brings the revolutionary to the frontiers of fascism.”²³

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Overview

As noted several times previously, a Judaism that is transformed after the Shoah must also be recognizable in character to previous forms of Judaism. We must therefore

²² Ibid. 259

²³ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 155
Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, c1990

establish whether there are in classical Judaism anti-redemptive elements, or even differently articulated expressions of redemptive meaning that rupture triumphal redemptive narratives, and if we can continue to preserve an ethics that springs from such instances of rupture. Along Levinas's understanding of ethics, other Levinasian concepts, more of which will be discussed as they become relevant, will remain in the background of our thoughts as we proceed.

The next two chapters will be a survey of historical understandings and developments in redemptive thought in Jewish memory throughout history. In chapter two we will focus on selections from the Hebrew Bible, and in chapter three we will look at subsequent developments. Mythical and historical memory will be treated as one, not necessarily because they are equivalent but because they perform such similar functions in our consciousness. Underlying the survey will be the contention that redemptive thought in a given instance is never as straightforward as it may appear, and that even with redemption's most triumphal, dominating, or culminating formulations strong criticisms and counter-trends embed themselves within these codified moments. I do not intend for these chapters to be a comprehensive study of either the options discussed or the sum of options that have been possible in Judaism. Rather, they should be construed as an attempt to provide for a better understanding of the context within which we will explore these themes at greater length in subsequent chapters. I have done my best here to emphasize connections in redemptive thought between different situations, but also to allow for an understanding that each situation is unique, and does not necessarily correspond directly to the categories of another.

In the fourth chapter we will discuss previous Jewish responses to suffering and catastrophe through the prism of redemption, and compare them to our possibilities after the Shoah. Once again, we will make little distinction between the mythical and the historical. We will discuss what these previous instances might have to teach us, but also where we must perhaps acknowledge the limits of their usefulness. We will begin with a discussion of the Scroll of Esther, which relates another moment in our collective memory when the Jewish people were threatened on a monumental scale. From there we will explore a Talmudic discussion of messianic texts with Emmanuel Levinas as our exegetical guide. We will end with an exposition of a few songs of the contemporary poet/singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen. The task of this chapter will be to more fully understand the contours of the space in which we are working.

Chapter five will begin with problems posed by the post-Shoah theologian Richard L. Rubenstein. These will clarify some specific issues with which we must contend when articulating Judaism after the Shoah. From there we will compare the linguistic deconstructions, as well as the mystical and ethical practices of two medieval Jewish mystics, Abraham Abulafia and Bachya ben Asher, with aspects of Levinas's philosophy, and explore the relationship between their formulations and Levinasian ethics. The goal here will be to learn from the insights of these mystics, and also to speculate as to which aspects of their practices continue to resonate with our current concerns.

In the final chapter I will revisit the themes we have explored throughout, apply them more explicitly to the problems of the Shoah, and discuss specific responses to the Shoah less reservedly, including art and literature, holding them up to critiques based on

the issues that have been explored throughout this project. It is incumbent upon me to stress here that everything stated in this chapter is intended to be tentative and in no way conclusive. By the time we reach this chapter, it should be clear from our previous investigations why the disclaimer is necessary.

Finally, let me note that it is not my intention to pronounce that Judaism is, or must be, this or that thing, to catalogue, in William James's terminology, "live" or "dead" options as they stand for other people. As much as I have striven here for ways of expression that resonate with other people, and as much as I have couched my ideas in terminology and language that hopefully lends them legitimacy, this project remains personal in many ways. Every concept I focus on, everything I quote, every editorial nuance, is chosen by me because it resonates with my own understanding of these ideas. I am under no illusion that these inclinations will be shared. I invite you to formulate your own understandings and to hold everything I write up to suspicion. But keep in mind that there is no single realization or readjustment that "fixes the problem," and that the work is not nearly complete, with so much more that remains to be done.

Zachary Braiterman ends his own study of "theodicy and antitheodicy" in post-Shoah Jewish thought with an apology. Rather than try to devise a better one, let me leave you with his:

...even the best-informed attempts to remember and draw conclusions from the testimonies of this event will miss the mark. This includes my own study... For that I am sorry. I have tried my best to address insoluble theological problems created by the catastrophic suffering of other people.²⁴

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²⁴ Braiterman, Zachary. (God) After Auschwitz. 178

Rupture and the Holy Ideal: Redemption in the Hebrew Bible

To acknowledge how literature acts upon men – this is perhaps the ultimate wisdom of the West; perhaps in this wisdom the people of the Bible will recognize itself.
- Emmanuel Levinas²⁵

The Hebrew people gave Moses a crucial lesson in reading when they forced him to break the tablets of the law. Because they were not able to accept a word without origins, the word of God. It was necessary for Moses to break the book in order for the book to become human.... This gesture on the part of the Hebrew people was necessary before they could accept the book. This is exactly what we do so well. We destroy the book when we read it to make it into another book. The book is always born from a broken book. And the word, too, is born from a broken word.... (Auster, "Interview" 23)
- Edmond Jabès²⁶

Narratives of Obligation and Power

From the earliest instances of Jewish identity formation, the concept of redemption has been a central feature of Jewish thought. "Redemption" is meant here in its broadest sense, encompassing all of its possible forms. It can be a deeply personal, individual experience or belief, or it can take place on a communal scale, however expansive. It can be a model for understanding the world, and for acting with reference to such an understanding. It takes many forms, but often it can be viewed as system that lends a degree of coherence and direction to time. It presents events as having meaning and value in relation to an ultimate end, which will elucidate the pattern and necessity of these events. It is the larger framework that allows us to conceive of such themes as suffering, repentance, and justice. Our conceptions of redemption can permeate our thoughts at a level more deeply than everyday consciousness, and they remain

²⁵ Levinas in Blanchot, Maurice. The Writing of Disaster. 141

²⁶ Jabès in Handelman, Susan A. Fragments of Redemption. 344
Bloomington : Indiana University Press, c1991

surprisingly persistent regardless of our relationships to God, scripture, or religious institutions.

In this chapter and throughout the study, we will be discussing different understandings of redemption. What may make our study a bit confusing is that any “type” of redemption is not actually an isolated conception to which other redemptive understandings do not pertain. In some cases there will be so much overlap that a clear distinction between one or more types would be improper. In other cases, one or several types may apply while others clearly do not. We will at times, for example, talk about “triumphal” redemption – redemption characterized most explicitly by reference to an eventual victory, often a victory over evil. Other types of redemptive thought that we will discuss include “utopian,” in which a vision of a perfect world holds sway, and “progressive,” in which notions of progress in time play a big role. Later, a distinction will be made between “totalist” thinking and “totalizing” thinking in redemptive thought. The former is concerned with domination, envisioning the expanding capacity for power and control over others as the means by which redemption can be attained, the latter is focused instead on wholeness and coherence as the goal of redemption. Elsewhere we will simply discuss redemption generally, as the idea that entities, from an individual to the entire universe, can or will be redeemed – rescued, delivered, reborn, transformed, vindicated, or fulfilled in some ultimate sense.

Each of these types, and others that we will also discuss, may or may not overlap with each other in particular instances. They will also be intertwined with other, related ideas such as hope, action, enthusiasm, politics, and suffering. At the same time, we will be emphasizing how, even when certain notions of redemption are strongly articulated,

there exist critiques of these notions within their articulation, elements that argue against different redemptive types or that counter notions of redemption with anti-redemptive ideas. Though we will be primarily focused on tracing the evolution of various conceptions of redemption, and finding similarities in different situations, we should remain aware throughout our study that even when connections between situations can be made, the situations also remain distinct in significant ways.

While redemptive thought is often intimately connected with ideas of culmination it can often only be fully understood with reference to beginnings as well. For this reason we will look to our origins as laid out in the Bible in order to begin our explorations of the different forms that redemption can take. The Book of Genesis provides mythical descriptions of God's creation of the world, the earliest encounters between human beings, early instances of divine retribution, and the eventual election by God of Abraham as the father of the Jewish people. Looked at from afar, Genesis has sometimes been thought of as overly harsh, domineering, and violent in its presentation of things. The first act of disobedience, which leads to separation from God and paradise, an ideal to which returning sometimes becomes the focus of redemptive promise, seems to take place through the deceptive actions of outside forces. The punishment therefore appears inordinate, and subsequent acts of retribution are even less merciful. The task of achieving God's redemptive promise and returning to blissful pleasures appears, then, to consist in practice of acting out similar struggles of power and domination. Redemption then becomes an exercise in ruthlessness, in which the goal is absolute triumph over all impediments, that is, entities that are outside of our control.

A closer inspection of the textual material, however, provides a much more complex understanding of Genesis' treatment of such issues. Certainly, motifs of domination appear again and again. But it is not so clear that they are endorsed uncritically. Perhaps they appear for another purpose. They most assuredly represent a very real option for understanding the world and acting in it, a very accessible model of redemption, but is this model the only one? As a description of the nature of humanity, Genesis would be remiss if it did not include such common urges – urges to control and dominate – but, I submit, these urges are presented as one possibility amongst several, and the question of where Genesis stands, if indeed it stands anywhere definitively, is much more nuanced. To explore this assertion, let us look at Genesis' depiction of the first brothers, the first human beings who encountered each other with opposing interests.

Genesis 4.8-12 describes the encounter:

8: Kayin said to Hevel his brother... But then it was, when they were out in the field that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother and killed him. 9: YHWH said to Kayin: Where is Hevel your brother? He said: I do not know. Am I the watcher of my brother? 10: He said: What have you done! A sound – your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil! 11: And now, damned be you from the soil, which opened up its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. 12: When you wish to work the soil it will not henceforth give its strength to you; wavering and wandering must you be on earth!²⁷

First we should note the importance of the word “brother” in this passage, a word that continues to echo even after the bloody act. We have literal brotherhood, but also an

²⁷ Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. 27. New York : Schocken Books, c1995

Whenever possible, translations of the Torah will come from Everett Fox's The Five Books of Moses. Fox's project is unique in the English language, as far as I am aware, in its attempt to preserve the nuance of the Hebrew, rather than “smoothing over” the prose to please the ears of English speakers. Fox makes up for some degree of grammatical awkwardness by presenting a text indispensable to our task in terms of the connections and specificity of words and sentences. In direct quotations I will preserve Fox's renderings of places, names, and other proper nouns in Hebrew transliteration, but in my own writing, for ease of recognition for the English-speaking reader, I will employ the standardized English versions of biblical names. Thus, Fox's Kayin and Hevel will become the more familiar Cain and Abel, etc.

implied relationality with respect to the text's consideration of the act: Cain said to Abel *his brother*... rose up against Abel *his brother*... Am I the watcher of *my brother*... *your brother's blood* cries out... receive *your brother's blood* from your hand. The ringing repetitions of "brother," which in Hebrew are declensions of the noun "brother" (that is, my-brother or your-brother is a single word) become the implied accusation in itself. Even before the crime, the inseparability of "your" and "brother," "my" and "brother," implies a relationship that bespeaks something different than two entities in disconnected spheres, one confronting the other. There is already an implicit obligation, a responsibility toward the other whose being is literally presented as a being-in-relation to Cain. It is the context within which we must interpret the questions: "What have you done!" and "Am I the watcher of my brother?"

We find this relationality again in the opening formulation, in which "Kayin said to Hevel *his brother*..." a seeming fragment or non sequitur. We are not told what Cain said. It could not be that it was deemed so irrelevant and inconsequential that it merited no inclusion. The seeming omission must be more purposeful than it might appear. Would not the completion of the fragment in any form render its meaning too specific? Leaving the confrontation ambiguous allows us pursue an exegetical path that would have been muted by any particularity in the completion of the sentence. By maintaining the fragment, Genesis leads us toward a clarification of the nature of encounter that critiques the dominating aspects of redemptive models.

The question of the relationship between Cain's actions and his missing speech is a difficult one. But there most certainly is a relationship, which is not surprising because speech has already played a major role in Genesis. Some of the significant ways that

speech has appeared include God's forming of the world, pronouncing creation "good," issuing early instructions and warnings to humans, and demarcating what is permissible and what is not. Speech was also the special privilege of Adam, formed in the image of God, who is accorded the opportunity to name the beasts. All of these uses of speech demonstrate subtle forms of dominance and control, but they are used for positive ends. Now we find themes of rage and jealousy, of murder, associated somehow with speech. The lack of clarity about what the speech consists of gives us a sense that perhaps speech is fundamentally related to power and action. The alternative interpretation, that Cain's actions are related to a lack of speech, suggests that while speech is related to power, so is the lack of speech. In other words, the privilege of speech entails an obligation that cannot be avoided by speaking or by keeping quiet. As beings capable of speech and action we are already responsible even before the choice to speak and act. Both speech and silence, as aspects of the ability to speak, are domination because they represent choices that come from a place of power over others. This power has both creative and destructive aspects, and the choice must be made one way or the other – there is no avoidance.

If speech contains both creative and destructive aspects then as human beings endowed with free will we have the ability to use our speech, like God, in either way. With speech as power, we find ourselves with an almost divine responsibility to use it wisely. But even more than that, we have an obligation to use speech with the acknowledgment of its dominating drive, and of our own urges in this regard. As we have seen, this is not a question of refraining from speech on the one hand, or exercising our power indiscriminately on the other. Tales like that of Cain and Abel force us to confront

these problematic themes, but give us no clear, easy way around the problems. We are given guides and clues, often in the form of more questions or self-referential commentary, but it remains for us to navigate through problematic circumstance after problematic circumstance. These caveats do not negate the possibility of redemptive narrative but they do raise a strong, possibly insurmountable criticism of an unchecked redemption focuses on models of domination.

While it is true that not all domineering urges should be understood in terms of redemptive narratives, redemption is implicit whenever such actions are justified, either in hindsight or before the act. In order to respond to the accusation of murder, for example, Cain must offer a conception of himself and the world in which his action is justified. He does so with his question, “Am I the watcher of my brother?” It should not be dismissed as a crude retort or an attempt to hide his crime. Cain is trying to challenge the notion that he has some sort of responsibility toward his brother. It has little to do with whether Cain has kept tabs on Abel. If Cain has no responsibility toward Abel, if Abel is simply in the way of Cain’s own goals to curry God’s favor, then his act is not a crime at all. In this way domination intertwines itself with redemptive schemes.

Before moving on, we should note that even here the text is not content with a simple critique. It is not just the case that different trends in viewing redemption, speech, and dominance are juxtaposed in Genesis and elsewhere. They are intertwined with one another, often in the same narrative, so that they are not so much opposed as engaged in conversation with each other. For example, Cain responds to his fate as a wanderer with fear that, without the protection of property or God’s presence, he will be subject to the domineering, perhaps murderous, whims of anyone he encounters. This is a peculiar

concern given that his parents, Adam and Eve, have not borne any other children, or at least it has not yet been mentioned. Cain is surely aware that the experiment of the human race will not end with him, and he is all too aware of crimes that a human being is capable of, having pioneered that route.

God's response to this fear, in Genesis 4.15, is a promise of protection, a pragmatic recognition of the reality of human action, which is itself a dominating threat. It warns of a "sevenfold" vengeance,²⁸ which is purposefully reminiscent of the seven days of creation. What we have then is a narrative that, while it seeks to counter the notion of redemption based on domination and triumph, emphasizing instead the obligatory nature of relationship, still falls back on itself in acknowledgment that people do not play by the rules, as it were. Which precept, which conception of redemption, then, is the text espousing? What I am trying to show here is not that it is one or the other, but that the answer is not simple, and that the text only points us toward the questions that deserve our attention, not the answers.

Ω

Let us turn now from discussions of personal, individual encounters to issues of collective redemption, which present somewhat different, albeit related, concerns. The central narrative of redemption, upon which the covenant between God and Israel and the revelation of the Torah – traditionally understood as both the oral and textual word of God – are predicated, is a communal experience: the exodus from Egypt. The narrative of slavery-to-freedom is the Bible's ultimate reference point, containing persuasive power for everything that follows. The Bible abounds with logical, and perhaps more

²⁸ Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. 28

importantly, emotional, references to the redemptive moment. Hebrew Bible scholar Everett Fox writes that “at every stage of biblical literature, that experience is invoked for the purpose of directing behavior (see especially Judg. 2, I Sam. 8, II Sam. 7, II Kings 17, Neh. 9, and Ps. 78; and most of Deuteronomy is rhetorically grounded in it).”²⁹

But to what end is the persuasive power employed? To what sort of behavior, if any, does the event direct us? A cursory account of the story presents a rather formulaic, triumphal trajectory. The Hebrews are enslaved and abused, and through the help of God and strategically placed intermediaries they escape to form their own nation, causing their oppressors to be punished in the process. But the purpose of the Hebrews’ liberation is explicitly not that they can form an equal, rival nation that stands on a par with the Egyptian nation or any other. They are admonished time and again for actions associated with the *goyim* (literally: the nations) – for desiring kings, tangible objects of worship, and other symbols of worldly power. Freedom for the Hebrews is not to be a freedom to oppress, but a freedom that is intimately linked to obligation. Theirs is to be a freedom that refuses to cut the cord from its birth. The slavery-to-freedom trajectory does not lose its memory of slavery. Instead, slavery will decisively inform that which follows.

As Emmanuel Levinas writes with respect to the Exodus, “Man’s freedom is that of an emancipated man remembering his servitude and feeling solidarity for all enslaved people.”³⁰ How might this work in practice? Let us turn to perhaps the most obvious, most direct lesson of the redemption, in Exodus 23.9, which is striking in its easy syllogism: “A sojourner, you are not to oppress: you yourselves know (well) the feelings

²⁹ Ibid. 241-2

³⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 152

of the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.”³¹ The responsibility we found emerging on the individual level with Cain is extrapolated here on a far more ambitious scale. An ethics is beginning to be inscribed and codified, experientially, as a clear “preferential option for the poor,” to borrow a phrase from modern liberation theologies; it is an ethics based on lopsided, unequal encounters that engender responsibility. The emphasis of obedience on right treatment of the widow, orphan, and stranger, and the prohibitions against placing stumbling blocks before the blind and cursing the deaf, all refer back to the redemption from slavery in Egypt, and all point toward an emerging pattern of ethical obligation.

If the redemption in Exodus is a model for a future redemption then we can make further assertions about the nature of the future redemption to which Exodus points. Such redemption will not inaugurate the end of worldly conflict, and it will not give its chosen people a secret wisdom that places them morally above others – the rest of the Book of Exodus makes it amply clear that the Hebrews do not enjoy an inherent moral transcendence. Rather than consign the conflicts and problems of the past to oblivion, it makes them more important than ever, raising them as the basis upon which future action might be ethically performed. In this model, redemption can only be understood in light of the suffering that precedes it.

That the capstone of the redemption is the revelation of the Torah, a distillation of the word of God yet also a set of rigorous guidelines for ethical behavior, once again alludes to a relationship between text or speech, and power, on the one hand, and ethical obligation on the other. Torah is a solace, the reward after tribulation, but its power can only be employed through the very mollification of its power, which is itself grounded in

³¹ Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. 385

the experience of suffering from which the Hebrews emerged to claim the Torah. Speech, and the actions which spring from it, can only be ethical if it retains its constant reference to the dangers of speech, and to the memory of suffering at the hands of dominating forces that employ speech and action indiscriminately.

Once again, this is not to say that narratives of dominance and triumphal redemption are not also at work here. Rather, I am highlighting within the triumphal narrative the embedded countertrends that rupture the overarching dominance, pointing back toward the furnace of suffering from which the redemption took form, refusing to be justified – that is, rendered irrelevant – in the face of triumphal redemption. These counter-trends are just as much a part of the redemptive model that informs revelation and ethics as the triumphal aspects, and it is the inextricable entanglement of the two that forms the legacy we inherit.

Ω

Rebellion and Utopia in Korach

For a closer examination of these intertwined trends in dialogue we turn to the account of the rebellion of Korach in the wilderness in Numbers 16. On the surface this is a mere power struggle. Korach the Levite, a first cousin of Moses, seizes upon a mutinous opportunity, and conflict begins. It seems that Korach and his co-conspirators, the Reubenites Datan and Aviram, argue for a sort of egalitarianism they find lacking under Moses' leadership. The accusation presented before Moses and Aaron by the two hundred and fifty "men-of-stature" who join with Korach in Numbers 16:3 is not easily dismissed: "They assembled against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them: Too much (is) yours! Indeed, the entire community, the entirety of them, are holy, and in their

midst is YHWH! Why then do you exalt yourselves over the assembly of YHWH?” This is not simply a power grab. It is a political conflict, and it merits our attention due to its inclusion in the Bible, the fact that it comes from a Levite backed by so many followers, and particularly that “when Moshe heard, he flung himself on his face.”³² This gesture represents humility and humanity, and is a form of ardent prostration.³³

What makes Korach’s complaint so striking is that it is valid, to an extent. But we must take a broader glimpse at the context within which the accusation is uttered. Korach is a Levite, already a member of the elite, the distinct. We would also do well to heed the point that the men with Korach are referred to as “men-of-stature” or, elsewhere, “men of name.” (Similar swipes are taken at Moses as well, as he is accused of “play[ing]-the-prince over us,” a possible pejorative reference to Moses’ youth as a prince in Egypt.³⁴) Both sides come from “aristocratic” backgrounds, which does not necessarily undermine their arguments, but does remind the reader that a so-called people’s revolution is never entirely such. This is an interesting piece of social and political commentary, but is not the focus of our concern.

The conflict between Korach and Moses is not simply political, social, or even spiritual. It pertains more fundamentally to a disagreement about redemption, and the ramifications that stem from the disagreement. Korach claims that because each member of Israel is holy, and that YHWH is in their midst, Moshe has no right to lead them. The text’s position here is decidedly that Korach is wrong. This seems odd at first, as Israel

³² Ibid. 737

³³ We find this expression used several times to represent a sort of humbling prostration, for example, in Genesis 17.17 when Abraham is told by YHWH that his ninety-year-old wife will give birth to a son, in II Samuel 9.6 when Mephiboshet, the crippled descendent of the disgraced House of Saul, approaches King David asking for mercy, and in I Kings 18.7 when Obadiah recognizes the prophet Elijah in hiding.

³⁴ Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. 738

has been promised before, for example, in Exodus 19.6, that it will be made a holy nation. If we look more closely, however, we can see that Korach's claim is somewhat different from the promise, and that the difference is dangerous.

Korach is proposing that holiness is innate, something a person has by birth or by nature. The position of the Bible, over and over again, is that holiness must be acquired, and can be gained and lost. The purpose of the Torah is to provide a rubric, or a method, by which one can prepare to better serve God, who alone can be described as innately holy. Innate holiness means that one is above reproach and cannot be held to account. It means also, in the sense that justification precedes any action, that one can do no wrong, that decisions need not be held to review. In this sense it is related to all conceptions of redemption in which the ends justify the means. But Korach has it wrong: YHWH is in the midst of the people not because they are innately holy, the people are holy and therefore YHWH is in their midst because of their covenant with God and the ethical obligations it entails. The reason that God is manifesting to the people at this time is because of their growing understanding of holiness as something achieved with difficulty, with reference to their past suffering, and as something all too easily lost if not carefully preserved through ethics that refer to their suffering and the suffering of others. It is precisely the sort of proposition made by Korach, that a people can be holy because of some special plan, and not their ethical actions, that jeopardizes God's presence.

With this in mind, let us look more closely at Moses' responses to the uprising. He pleads his innocence after he is accused of misleading Israel: "Not (even) one donkey of theirs have I carried off, I have not done ill to (even) one of them!"³⁵ His words to YHWH show his concern for the community. He is, in fact, not pleading for himself. He

³⁵ Ibid. 738

is afraid that Israel will be punished along with the leaders of the uprising, and he warns them to keep away from the demonstrations planned to prove “who is holy.”³⁶ He and Aharon again fling their faces to the ground, this time in order to beseech YHWH’s mercy toward the community. And finally, he takes great pains to distinguish himself from God in the punishment that will follow:

28: Moshe said: By this you shall know that (it is) YHWH (who) sent me to do all these deeds, that (it was) not from my own heart: 29: if like the death of all humans these-men die, and the calling-to-account of all humans is accounted upon them, (it is) not YHWH (who) has sent me. 30: But if YHWH creates a new-creation, and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows up them and all that is theirs, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you will know that these men have scorned YHWH.³⁷

Moses, who in the past has not hesitated to take matters into his own hands, is reluctant to do so here. He goes out of his way to make the distinction between himself and God. Perhaps it is because the accusation has shaken him so personally, or perhaps he understands the stakes of the debate and that the response cannot be construed as just another episode of human domination. We can also view Moses’ actions as a model for holiness – a different sort of holiness than that expressed by Korach. This holiness does not proclaim itself, it humbles itself. It is visibly shaken when presented with legitimate accusations. Moses’ holiness expresses itself through active concern for others, not through utopian pronouncements.

For Moses, if Korach, Datan, and Aviram die as humans die, that is, if they are killed by another human or die a normal death, it will have undermined the entire enterprise of a redemption that is grounded in something other than dominance. This

³⁶ Ibid. 737

³⁷ Ibid. 741

makes what happens next even more significant. The ground indeed splits open beneath the leaders of the rebellion, swallowing them up with their households and property: “33: So they went down, they and all theirs, alive, into Sheol; the earth covered them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.”³⁸

While the two hundred and fifty men-of-stature who had kindled an incense-offering on behalf of the rebellion are consumed by a fire from YHWH, the leaders are separated, and are swallowed into the underworld alive. We may consider this a punishment of sorts, but it is not the one we might have expected. We can view their separation and life-in-death as a commentary on their argument.

Separation has been a point of contention, a metaphor for holiness, throughout the narrative. We can speculate that Korach’s accusation implies a critique of all hierarchies of inequality. His choice of surrounding himself with other “men-of-stature” dilutes the purity of his claim to represent a fulfillment of such a non-hierarchical scheme, however. In fact, what he would have inaugurated is an attempt to overturn the authority of God, a situation where actions could be committed with impunity by an entitled, “holy” mob. His vision of redemption has no room for relationship, for the acknowledgment of obligation grounded in real differences in power. His death, then, is a reminder that these differences do exist, and they are significant.

The message of Korach is very attractive, and its staying power lies in its kernel of truth, and the positive, albeit misguided, urges it exploits. Korach’s message is not the only example of an appealing, somewhat legitimate, alternative vision of redemption – this phenomenon shall become more central in the next chapter as we discuss the

³⁸ Ibid. 741.

Haskalah, the Jewish response to the European Enlightenment. Korach's is a message of uplift, in line with God's pronouncements of potential holiness for all, and it taps into an understanding that God is to some degree accessible to everyone.

Korach's vision follows the redemption model of the Exodus, but it smoothes over distinction and difficulty with its utopian eagerness. It follows a single line of thought blindly, with little consideration of all the implications or the intricacies that envelop it. To the extent that Moses represents an alternative model of redemption here; his is more tentative, more explicitly concerned with others, and less inclined to reach for a future by leaving behind the realities of the present or past. It lies in a promise that is to some extent predicated upon an ideal future, but it does not let go of separation, distinctiveness, and hierarchy, and it attempts to achieve its ends through tentative steps, through persuasion as opposed to oversimplification or heroic arousal.

Korach's accusation – "too much is yours" – provides us with the crux of his own redemptive model, and points to why it is so hazardous. Korach understands the world in terms of dominance and control. His solution is to overturn the state of affairs, to remove Moses from power. If he is trying to assume control, to take what is Moses', then he is no better than what he is describing and his understanding of redemption is no better than Cain's. But the argument that he makes, that all of Israel is holy, suggests an even more worrying redemptive model. Not only is his utopian vision naïve, but his willful dismissal of separation and difference offers a view of redemption that embraces unity and wholeness that would ignore any criticism just as it would justify any action decided upon by the "innately holy" community.

The redemptive conception of Moses, however, which remains linked to a promise, is capable of responding to criticism with complete humility. Rather than reminding Korach that he, Moses, has been picked by God to lead Israel, Moses instead emphasizes the distinction between himself and God. And even in crisis he does not lose sight of ethical requirements and concern for others. While his redemption does inherently involve domination, it emphasizes discretion despite the ability to control (eg. “not (even) one donkey of theirs have I carried off”) rather than taking whatever one is capable of taking. And Moses’ (or God’s) response, while it entails violence, goes out of its way to emphasize difference even in punishment.

Korach is no straw man, however. His story would not be relevant, and it would not merit inclusion in the Torah, if it did not also contain a truth to be reckoned with. Korach is right to challenge Moses’ dominance, and since Moses himself makes the distinction between a human punishment and a divine one, we can say that Korach is right to challenge God’s dominance. There is perhaps recognition of this in the supernatural deaths of Korach and his followers. The Korach narrative points out that there is dominance even in the process of articulating a redemption and an ethics that pierces the overarching framework of dominance.

If Korach can teach us anything it is that there is no moment, if we try to reject dominance, where we can rest in comfort and not be required to mount a critique once again. There is no redemption that severs itself completely from narratives of domination, and thus there is no redemption, however ruptured it presents itself to be, that does not also contain a grain of dominating triumphalism. But while the conflict between these trends cannot be won, neither is it in deadlock. To acknowledge this fact is not to call for

resignation in the face of dominating urges; it is to call for a renewal of the struggle, and insofar as Korach renews the struggle his contribution is an important one.

Ω

Judgment Emerges Deformed: Ethical Ritual in the Prophets

So far we have confined our discussions to the Torah. To look at how redemptive trends develop further, we will turn to Nevi'im, the prophetic literature, the centrally located texts of the Tanak – the Hebrew Bible, which is comprised of Torah (Law or Instruction), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Marvin Sweeney discusses the role of the prophetic literature within the larger biblical context:

Overall, [the books of the Former and Latter Prophets] are concerned with the disruption of the holy ideal for Israel articulated in the Torah and the possibility of the reconstruction of that holy ideal. Because the Prophets appear at the center of the Tanak, they do not point beyond the Bible itself, but to the next segment of the Bible, the *Ketuvim*, “Writings,” which express the reconstitution of that ideal.³⁹

The prophetic writings become situated, then, within a moment of rupture of the ideal. Though this is a rupture that, assuredly, is meant to be reconstituted – the ways in which it is reconstituted will be discussed below – it remains significant that the rupture exists. In terms of literary structure, but also in terms of redemptive narratives more generally, the prophetic rupture can be seen as a sort of focal point in the larger text of the Tanak. This period of rupture is brought about by a clear failure of the ideals of the Torah, a failure that manifests itself physically as the failure of the nation of Israel.

³⁹ Sweeney, Marvin. The Prophetic Literature. 19
Nashville, TN : Abingdon Press, c2005

The question that the prophets must grapple with is twofold: (1) Why did they arrive at this state of affairs (destruction of the Temple, Babylonian exile, etc.) and (2) How can our situation be understood within a larger context? The overall question is one of how we can relate to redemption of any sort in light of calamitous realities that defy such hope. We may be tempted to assume that the solutions offered by the prophets present a linear, comic trajectory of redemption, but, as Sweeney explains, the situation is not as clear:

Altogether, the *Tanak's* presentation of the holy ideal for Israel in the world, its disruption, and its restoration, represents a combination of linear and cyclical understandings of the course of human history and Israel's relationship with G-d... Such an understanding has enabled Judaism both to weather periods of challenge and persecution and to develop progressively through the course of human history into modern times.⁴⁰

In other words, the vision is not simply progressive and straightforward. The experience of disruption of the holy ideal lends the prophets a more complex view of redemption in the main. That their conception is both linear and cyclical means that redemption cannot simply follow the trajectory of a straight line. It always maintains the possibility of falling back upon itself, of being disrupted again. Any future restoration of the ideal is subject to the sort of rupture experienced in the time of the prophets. It is from this perspective that we must view what the prophets have to tell us.

In line with the twofold question contended with by the prophets, their response is also twofold: (1) Though we may not see it, there is a reason for suffering, and (2) suffering will not be endured forever. We find the prophets utilizing every conceivable

⁴⁰ Ibid. 20

model for a relationship with God in order to explain these positions. Take, for example, Isaiah 49:14-16:

14: Zion says,
“The Lord has forsaken me,
My Lord has forgotten me.”
15: Can a woman forget her baby,
Or disown the child of her womb?
Though she might forget,
I never could forget you.
16: See, I have engraved you
On the palms of My hands,
Your walls are ever before Me.⁴¹

Here we have a comparison of God with a mother, and the pronouncement that God’s remembrance and care exceeds even motherly care. Other models include God as a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14), and God as a cuckolded husband (Hosea) among many others. The common thread in all of these examples, though, is that whatever Israel might have done wrong, her relationship with God is intimate enough that any punishment will be temporary, that God’s compassion will win out eventually.

The reasons for Israel’s suffering are made fairly explicit throughout the prophetic writings. One famous example of an explanation for Israel’s punishment is found in Amos 5:21-24, in which it is explained that Israel has ignored the most fundamental requirement of God:

21: I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
22: If you offer Me burnt offerings – or your
meal offerings –
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.

⁴¹ Jewish Publication Society. The Jewish Study Bible. 884
Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, c2004

23: Spare Me the sound of your hymns.
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
24: But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.⁴²

The emphasis on ethical action that we found in parts of the Torah is here emphasized to such an extreme that ritual becomes suspect if it is not coupled with justice and righteousness. Justice is now explicitly the focal point, refiguring the other forms of worship and channeling traditional ritual through a differently oriented mode. Abraham Joshua Heschel points to Isaiah's simple plea, which is directed toward every member of Israel, in Isaiah 1:17: "Seek justice, / Undo oppression; / Defend the fatherless, / Plead for the widow,"⁴³ to explain the essential requirement in Isaiah.

Heschel finds an extrapolation of this position in Jeremiah 22:3: "Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place."⁴⁴ Worship of God is here equated with emulating God-as-liberator and the slavery-to-freedom redemption model, breaking bonds of slavery, upending economic and social stagnation, and tearing down existing structures of oppression. Even though such models are presented with the best of intentions such a view of upheaval risks becoming like that of Korach, overly triumphal and dominating, ignoring difference and suffering in its vision of the future. Therefore it is important to look not only at the promise of prophetic ethics, but at the prophetic understanding of suffering and how it informs the promise.

⁴² Ibid 1186-7

⁴³ Heschel, Abraham J. The Prophets. 262
New York, Harper & Row: 1962

⁴⁴ Ibid. 262

We should point out that while newly emphasized and somewhat newly articulated, there is actually little that is novel in the prophetic position from the perspective of the Torah. The tradition that it is predicated upon goes back, as we have seen, to the salvation narrative in Exodus, which grounds an ethics in collective, redemptive experience. But amid all this talk of justice and righteousness, a newer, more difficult problem begins to emerge – one that is tied up with conceptions of justice, but which cannot be fit neatly within a linear redemptive motif. The problem is expressed in the beginning of Habakkuk’s prophecy, 1:2-4:

2: How long, O Lord, shall I cry out
And You not listen,
Shall I shout to You, “Violence!”
And You not save?
3: Why do You make me see iniquity
[Why] do You look upon wrong? –
Raiding and violence are before me,
Strife continues and contention goes on.
4: That is why decision fails
And justice never emerges;
For the villain hedges in the just man –
Therefore judgment emerges deformed.⁴⁵

It is in passages like this that we can see how the prophets’ experience of rupture informs their redemption narratives, allowing them to defy simplistic progressions of domination that ignore the realities of suffering. Even if suffering is temporary and the oppressed will eventually be redeemed it does not discount the suffering that is taking place in the present. Suffering is not nullified by the emergence of justice. In fact, Habakkuk seems to suggest that the injustice that persists as we anticipate justice can alter the very character of the justice that follows.

⁴⁵ Jewish Publication Society. The Jewish Study Bible. 1227

The text of Habakkuk, which is only three chapters, presents a very difficult picture of redemption. Following the lamentations presented above, a dialogue takes place between Habakkuk and YHWH. Sweeney writes that after Habakkuk's initial plea for God "to act against the wicked who surround the righteous," YHWH's response "includes the surprising disclosure that YHWH is the party responsible" for raising up the forces against Judah. Furthermore, Sweeney explains, "YHWH never defines the reason for bringing the Babylonians, but simply describes their appearance as evidence of a great work that is being done," and refers to "their fearsome and impious character."⁴⁶ In response to Habakkuk's plea for justice, God does not only refuse, but claims responsibility for the injustice.

After the prophet expresses his astonishment at the disclosure, YHWH's answer focuses on the fact that Babylon will also fall eventually, due to his "greed and gluttony in swallowing up that which does not belong to him." This is claimed despite the fact that Babylon is an instrument of YHWH against Judah. "Again," Sweeney writes, "no reason for the appearance of the oppressor emerges other than YHWH's great deeds." Habakkuk 3 is a prayer, and there is no response from God again. The prayer "constitutes a petition that YHWH act against the oppressor," "a portrayal of YHWH's anticipated action," "an expression of the prophet's confidence in YHWH," and the prayer itself ends "instructions to the choirmaster... with an indication that it was to be performed as part of a liturgical ritual."⁴⁷

Habakkuk defies any simple redemptive reading, and its only solace comes in YHWH's assurance that the oppressors, even though they are tools of God, will

⁴⁶ Sweeney, Marvin. Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology. 162 Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, c2008

⁴⁷ Ibid. 162

eventually be punished for their domination. There is no clear response on the part of YHWH to the problem of a justice that emerges deformed. Not only is there never a clear explanation for the punishment, “indeed, YHWH emerges in the book of Habakkuk as a potentially culpable figure.” Even the liturgical composition in Habakkuk 3, which expresses the prophet’s confidence, is not enough to stem the tide of impending destruction. “In the end,” Sweeney writes, “the book of Habakkuk emerges as the prophet’s plea to YHWH to end the threat leveled against Judah by the Babylonians, who would ultimately destroy Jerusalem and Judah in the early sixth century B.C.E.” There is “no substantive action on YHWH’s part.”⁴⁸

Given all of these clear problems, we can rightly wonder why the text was written at all, what its intended purpose was, and why it was canonized. The intended audience is certainly expected to be aware of the hollowness of Habakkuk’s confidence in light of the historical results: Judah will be destroyed, and the Jewish people will experience even more devastation. One possible answer, or an inkling of an answer, might come if we view not only Habakkuk 3 as ritual liturgy, but Habakkuk in its entirety as a ritual process that portrays an ethics of rupture. First, difficult questions of theodicy are posed. We ask not only whether our suffering will be justified but whether such suffering can be fully justified, not only whether we will be redeemed but what such redemption can possibly look like. The semblance of an answer we receive leaves these questions inadequately addressed as it raises new issues of God’s complicity in suffering. Finally, we reaffirm our faith in God’s ability to redeem, to reconstitute the holy ideal, despite, or perhaps because of, all evidence to the contrary. Even when redemption eventually comes there is a lingering unease. Our confidence that God will “smash the

⁴⁸ Ibid. 162-163

roof of the villain's house" and "crack [his] skull with Your bludgeon" those "whose delight is to crush me suddenly, / To devour a poor man in ambush"⁴⁹ (Habakkuk 3.13-14), is informed also by anxiety:

16: I heard and my bowels quaked,
My lips quivered at the sound;
Rot entered into my bone,
I trembled where I stood.
Yet I wait calmly for the day of distress,
For a people to come to attack us.
17: Though the fig tree does not bud
And no yield is on the vine,
Though the olive crop has failed
And the fields produce no grain,
Though sheep have vanished from the fold
And no cattle are in the pen,
18: Yet will I rejoice in the Lord,
Exult in the God who delivers me.
(Habakkuk 3.16-18)⁵⁰

∩

As we have seen, even those narratives in biblical literature which would seem to adhere to problematic narratives of redemption contain elements that continually rupture and criticize these overarching narratives. These elements do not divorce themselves from redemption; they embed critiques within the redemptive narratives themselves. Another important aspect of these narratives that we have yet to elaborate upon is their relationship to notions of reward and retribution. This is expressed in many sections of scripture, for example in Deuteronomy 8.5: "You are to know in your heart that just as a man disciplines his child, (so) YHWH your God disciplines you."⁵¹ This is presented as an ideal to follow on the path toward redemption. Here, as elsewhere, the counter

⁴⁹ Jewish Publication Society. The Jewish Study Bible. 1232

⁵⁰ Ibid. 1232-1233

⁵¹ Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. 889

elements do not reject such thinking as such – they seem to understand their necessity and import – but they work within and around them to add layers of more complex meaning that can be accessed along with the retributive meaning. Neither do these elements offer distinct alternatives, ways of definitively rejecting linear redemptive trajectories that can turn retribution against ethics. Rather, they force us to confront the complexities, and in doing so they point to a more nuanced approach.

Marvin Sweeney writes that “even among those books or writings in the Hebrew Bible that articulate traditional viewpoints of reward for righteousness and punishment for wrongdoing, problems emerge in their respective presentation of this issue.” Some of the unresolved questions that Sweeney notes include, “Does G-d always act responsibly in the world? Are acts deemed as sinful in the Hebrew Bible actually sinful?” and “What role must human beings assume when G-d fails to act or when G-d acts sinfully?”⁵² These critical, problematic, and highly volatile questions are some of the many that the bible seem to be urging, tempting, and even challenging us to confront, and in doing so to also reconsider straightforward models of redemption. They become, in effect, the alternative model, by presenting us with a ruptured triumphalism, a striving toward a holy ideal that not only runs the risk of being disrupted but whose very reconstitution is predicated upon speaking from within these disrupted moments.

None of this is to say that such passages cannot ignore the rupture or mount a counterattack by smoothing over rupture and difference while justifying non-ethical action (as we have defined it) with triumphal promise, domination, or other comprehensive, coherent narratives. The desire to do this is perhaps a fundamental aspect of human nature, made all the more easier when this sort of expediency supports a

⁵² Sweeney, Marvin. Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology. 2

decidedly righteous goal. Such interpretations, and the actions they justify, are perhaps more common than the more difficult alternative of grappling with such questions as Sweeney presents. And even when one does consider them it is tempting to look for ways to overcome these ruptures rather than treat them as integral parts of the narrative. I have taken pains to highlight these aspects precisely because they are so easily discarded. These moments of rupture are what we must look to as we forge a link between our scriptural traditions and how we must begin to shape Judaism after the Shoah.

Each of the texts that we have considered here, along with so many others, offers indispensable guidance for us as we begin the task of articulating a post-Shoah Judaism. And while the Shoah places some of the issues Sweeney describes in starker terms than ever before, we must keep in mind that they do not necessarily constitute a rejection of our traditions. Rather, they necessitate dramatic reorganizations and differently focused emphases. Such projects are, of course, hardly foreign to Jewish exegetical possibility. In the next chapter we will consider the ongoing evolution of redemptive themes historically, and we will also note the precedents for transformation that already exist within our traditional frameworks. In this way we will develop a better understanding of what is possible in such an undertaking, but also what is required of us if we take such a task seriously.

Giving the Sense: The Rise of Commentary

The fact that nothing great can emerge in the world without changing, that a Kingdom of God that is not of this world takes advantage of men, was the great lesson of Judaism, the one best understood by the political people. But it made them violent with messianism. They renounced their reason and sought it in the events that bore a messianic meaning and in which intelligence was born from bloody confrontation of our human follies and of the gentleness, as in the enigma of Samson, of a cruel and devouring force. Cruelty is taken to be the rigour of logic, and crimes to be works of justice. This was the tragic error of an interrupted lesson – the master was too hastily given leave for rambling on aimlessly. He taught action in history but, for the Jews, men can live nineteen centuries against it.

- Emmanuel Levinas⁵³

A Great Yeshiva on High: Catastrophe and the Age of the Rabbis

In the previous chapter we discussed some of the instances in which different models of redemption engage with each other in the Tanak. Despite my attempts to tease out some of the more complicated aspects of redemptive narrative in the text, there remain decidedly triumphal, dominating overtones. Nonetheless, we find strongly critical and thought-provoking counter-trends that focus on the disruption of these triumphal narratives, accentuating the importance of suffering. It is arguably the counter-melody to the main harmony that lends these texts their continued relevance.

Though such discussions could conceivably continue forever, brevity requires that we move on to discuss the ways Judaism has developed through subsequent interpretations of these and other texts. We shall skip ahead, then, to the start of the rabbinic era, which inaugurates what is perhaps the most significant transformation in redemptive thinking. We are overlooking, for now, many texts and events that are significant for our discussion. We will return to the Tanak, looking at Kethuvim, or

⁵³ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 226

writings – notably the Book of Esther – in subsequent chapters. There is, however, too much relevant material, and much of it will be overlooked in this discussion.

There is one historical point which we must discuss before we can understand the impetus for the rabbinic re-imagination of redemptive themes. Subsequent evolutions cannot be fully understood if we do not first understand that by the first century AD a certain kind of triumphal redemptive narrative had run into a brick wall. This was an exile unlike any previously experienced, and it followed two huge catastrophes for the Jewish people: the failure of a rebellion against Rome in 70 AD that led to the destruction of the Second Temple, and the failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion around sixty years later, which resulted in a high death count and complete loss of political autonomy. These crises understandably instigated a reevaluation of the ideas that led to the rebellions.

The Bar Kochba rebellion particularly was overtly messianic in its orientation, and its messianic understandings were informed by a triumphal redemptive conception. Simon Bar Kochba was considered by many to be a Messiah who had come to restore Jewish sovereignty, and he led an all-out war against the vastly superior Roman forces. The rabbis, sages who had become more prominent in the community due to the vacuum in separate political leadership, reworked much of the failed redemptive paradigm that was less threatening to the political rulers of the lands they inhabited, and thus served to insulate the community against the sort of folly that had led to the Diaspora in the first place.

The transformation was truly an epic and consequential undertaking, and it was a process that took centuries. Its origins can be traced back long before the events described above, but it was only able to reach its full prominence after the loss of the

Temple and any semblance of Jewish self-governance. Susan Handelman provides us with a closer look at the mechanisms of this evolution in redemptive thought. She traces the roots of the rabbinic tradition, and its differently oriented redemptive emphases, to Ezra's restoration of Israel in the fifth century BC, which more directly established the Torah as the religious and political center of the nation – a position that had been previously occupied by the First Temple.

This event, in which Ezra publicly read the Torah while others stood by and “gave the sense” (Nehemiah 8.8), Handelman writes, is “often cited as the beginning[...] of the exegetical tradition of *midrash*.”⁵⁴ *Midrash* (literally: to investigate, to study) is the practice of delving more deeply into the text, finding hidden meanings, and providing more comprehensive explanations than the text itself may provide. The previous chapter, for example, could be considered my own attempt at midrash. We should note that the moment that inaugurated midrashic exegetical interpretation as a central Jewish practice is tied to the reconstitution of Jewish life, and that it reaffirmed the prominence of the Torah as a means for the survival of the Jewish nation. As with the prophetic literature, Ezra's midrashic spectacle reoriented worship and communal uplift away from ritual and toward Torah, the written and oral tradition and the locus of commandment and ethics. As distinct from some later forms of commentary, Handelman reminds us that “an important characteristic of midrash is that its interpretations are always tied to the Biblical texts itself.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Handelman, Susan A. The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory. 43-4

Albany : State University of New York Press, c1982

⁵⁵ Ibid. 44

We are about to explore what might appear to be radical deviations from strict biblical tradition, but we would do well to remind ourselves that these novelties claim their legitimacy through their grounding in tradition, be it written law or oral law. The latter refers to the unwritten Torah received by Moses, which is said to illuminate the hidden and subtle meanings of the written Torah. While the rabbis maintained that the Torah was their initial inspiration they allowed for a surprising amount of innovation in the reconfiguration of redemptive thought and other pertinent themes.

After the midrashic period proper, in the second and first centuries BC, the *Mishnah*, or code of oral law, was composed. The distinctive characteristic of *mishnah*, in distinction to *midrash*, Handelman explains, is that “the *Mishnah* is concerned with the oral law *apart from* its ties to the written text.”⁵⁶ Louis Finkelstein lays out how the rabbinic understanding of Torah allows for such innovative elaboration on the written word:

That the text is at once perfect and perpetually incomplete; that like the universe itself it was created to be a process rather than a system – a method of inquiry into the right, rather than a codified collection of answers; that to discover possible situations with which it might deal and to analyze their moral implications in the light of its teachings is to share the labour of Divinity – these are inherent elements of Rabbinic thought, dominating the manner of life it recommends.⁵⁷

Such a position, we should note, is not foreign to the Torah or other biblical writings. In fact, it is related to the redemptive position that I have highlighted throughout the previous chapter. In order to make the case for a ruptured vision of redemption, we have been emphasizing precisely those points in the text that speak to a sense of

⁵⁶ Ibid. 44

⁵⁷ Finkelstein in Handelman, Susan A. The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory.⁴⁰

incompleteness, or rupture, in order to show how they relate to the “perfect,” complete aspects of the text to create a process. If text and word is the locus of power, and if we use these tools to express non-dominating modes of redemption, then the same understandings of redemption must apply to the text itself.

It is the vision of the text as a process that allows us to understand its complexities, how it enshrines questions, debates, and commentaries, not “a codified collection of answers.” It is no surprise, then, that when the Rabbis wanted to access these ideas of a non-triumphal, disruptive redemption they extended the notion of process even beyond the text itself, analyzing the “moral implications” and even preserving in text their own commentaries and debates about previous texts.

These additions, Handelman notes, are nothing less than “the elevation of later commentary to the status of earlier primary text,” which, she reminds us, “is one of the extraordinary characteristics of rabbinic interpretation, and involves a not so subtle power struggle.”⁵⁸ Even so, the Judaism with which we are familiar today is incomprehensible without the rabbinic transformation as its midwife. Handelman explains that it is the audacious exegetical framework described above, along with the additional commentary of the *Gemara* and the completion of the Talmud in the fifth century AD, that paved the way for such concepts as “building a fence around the Torah” and that understood the famous “eye for an eye” as monetary recompense.⁵⁹ It is the same exegetical tradition that allowed Hillel the Elder (c. 1st century BC) to circumvent the literal meaning of the Jubilee year, providing an incentive to give loans to the poor by invoking the spirit of

⁵⁸ Handelman, Susan A. The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory. 41

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 42-3

tikkun olam.⁶⁰ It laid the groundwork for later exegeses like that of R. Shlomo Yitzhaki of Troyes (1040-1105 AD), for much that the Kabbalistic tradition takes for granted, and for such interpretive techniques as *pilpul*, which Handelman describes as “a method of complex dialectics attempting to create harmony between incongruent matters, often in the form of question, answer, and retort between two sages.”⁶¹

To further delve into the intricacies surrounding these newly oriented redemptive motifs, we must take a step back to look at Jewish development from a more sociological perspective. As mentioned earlier, it is not until the events of the first and second centuries AD that we can correctly speak of a rabbinic mainstream tradition. With hindsight we can describe the more politically aggressive aspects of redemptive thinking up until this point as significantly less restricted than they would later be. Redemptive thought often encouraged a more overt activism, lending legitimacy to the rebellion of the day, be it against the Romans or others. It is precisely the sort of activist zeal that informed the events leading to the destruction of the Second Temple, the Bar Kochba rebellion, and ultimately the Diaspora. These events resulted, in Jewish consciousness, in a sort of moratorium on such overtly political, activist thinking, and they defined, through this negative association, the newly acceptable parameters of the redemption narratives that followed. Among other changes redemption would now constantly stand alongside a nagging sense of threat and danger.

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⁶⁰ See Halkin, Hillel. “How Not to Repair the World.”
Commentary Magazine, July/August 2008

⁶¹ Handelman, Susan A. The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory. 47

The new reality of the Diaspora also presented an alteration in Jews' understanding of their relationship to other nations. For the first time all Jewish encounters with non-Jews took place not in terms of one nation encountering another, but in terms of Jewish minorities living within Gentile nations. For our discussion we are focusing specifically on the Jewish presence within Christian nations. Judaism was directly threatened by assimilation or agitation of the Gentiles. The best way to avoid both of these threats was to remain separate.

Jewish identity began to coalesce, then, in direct opposition to Gentile thought. As time went on Gentile thought, for Jews, became more and more synonymous with Christian thought, specifically in its Greek philosophical grounding. This oppositional development took place on the plane of Jewish self-awareness as well as in reaction to Christian understandings of Jews and Judaism. Certain elements of rabbinic Jewish thought became hostile to correspondingly emergent Christian trends precisely because of their incompatibility with Christian conceptions of redemption that too neatly and comfortably defined narratives of redemption and theodicy.

Jewish redemptive thought therefore developed to a significant degree along the lines of what we might label "anti-Greek." This can be understood in terms of Susan Handelman's insight that "for the Greeks, the culmination of theology was a wordless vision of divine being; for the Jews it was commentary on the divine word, deeper immersion in the text, further interpretation of Scripture."⁶²

Due to the shifts in redemptive thought outlined above, and the addition of a more triumphal redemption against which the Jews could compare their own, Jewish thinking deviated more firmly from culmination and embraced commentary more fully as its

⁶² Ibid. 84

primary mode of redemptive understanding. Jews rejected not only the figure of Jesus who fulfills the word but the very notion of an end to biblical and Talmudic juxtaposition that “resolves all opposites, stabilizes all meaning, provides ultimate identity, and collapses differentiation.”⁶³ This development was made possible by appeal to the doubts about redemption, critical countertrends and disruptions we discussed in the previous chapter, but here they coalesced more explicitly within narratives of redemption, which established doubt, criticism, and rupture in a more prominent role.

As mentioned before, rabbinic understandings of text have become inseparable from Jewish thought as we know it today. Handelman writes that the view of the text as incomplete, in perpetual rupture

expresses an attitude toward the text and its interpretation which is fundamental to Jewish thought. The Rabbinic world is, to use a contemporary term, one of *intertextuality*. Texts echo, interact, and interpenetrate. In the world of the text, rigid temporal and spatial distinctions collapse... There is no linear chronology in the Talmud.⁶⁴

The emphasis on intertextuality is certainly indicative of a shift in redemptive understanding. It would be inappropriate, however, to point to the rise of the rabbinic perspective as signaling the termination of redemptive narratives of domination. While it is easy to talk about opposing views of redemption we must remind ourselves that these do not signify isolated modes of thought. Redemption based purely on disruption is difficult, but perhaps not impossible, to conceive. Regardless, it was not the case that redemptive thought in the rabbinic age somehow transcended the more perilous aspects of redemptive thinking. As with earlier formulations of the trends within redemptive

⁶³ Ibid. 89

⁶⁴ Ibid. 47

thought it is the nuance of the conflict that provides us with the entire picture. It would be completely wrong to suggest that, with the rise of the Talmudic perspective, the Jewish people no longer hoped for a better future, for victory over the forces of oppression, and for complete transformation on both the individual and the global level. Such notions continued to loom large in both the mind of the populace and in the words of the sages. They were now simply differently oriented, differently articulated, and contained different emphases.

It is the very unending nature of rabbinic exegesis and commentary that allows for a concept of eternity that eclipses even redemptive culmination. But this does not necessarily reduce messianic expectation or theodic innovation. In fact, one could argue that it is the rabbinic tradition, with its grander scope of redemptive promise in a time of more precarious Jewish existence, which lends redemptive thought an even greater level of eagerness for an ultimate justification. Fantasies of overturning the world order, of regaining political sovereignty, continued to bubble under the surface, but even these were tempered by the cyclical and more unending nature of normative redemptive thought.

Hope remains, along with redemptive narratives that express the desire for victory and the urge to dominate. The most notable difference in the rabbinic era is that such redemptive thought remains more explicitly unfulfilled even in its most totalizing expressions. The shift is reflected in the supplemental literature, the commentaries on the Tanak (and commentaries upon these commentaries), perhaps more unambiguously than in the Tanak itself, though it continues to be unyieldingly expressed with reference to biblical tradition and Torah. “All begins with the text of the Torah given to Moses, and

consummates with the text of the Torah that the redeeming messiah will teach,” Handelman explains, “and what is the world to come, but a great yeshiva on high, where one studies Torah on deeper and deeper levels. Indeed, the Talmud is never completed.”⁶⁵ In this way the marriage of the redemptive trends of dominance and rupture remains intact, even as its orientation is radically transformed.



Kabbalah: The Spirit and its Sheath

For a variety of reasons, as we have seen, overtly triumphal and culminating redemptive thought that did not leave room for rupture was delegitimized with the rise of rabbinically dominated, diasporic Judaism. But we would be remiss if we did not look more carefully and further explore some of the ways that triumphal redemptive thinking manifested. Gershom Scholem warns against the tendency of scholars “to dissociate apocalyptic from rabbinic Judaism,” and argues that “Jewish experience during the thousand years following the destruction of the Temple could only intensify the catastrophic traits of the eschatological picture.”⁶⁶ His point is that, as we have discussed in other terms, rabbinic reorientation did not so much overcome culminating thinking as suppress it and discourage its expression in normative discourse. Furthermore, what Scholem means by “catastrophic traits” is that the rabbinic shift, and the realities of the Diaspora, led to a more nuanced take on traditional triumphal motifs that emphasized the suffering that was to precede redemption.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 47

⁶⁶ Scholem, Gershom. *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*. 9 Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973

Scholem's primary example of the newfound emphasis on the suffering that precedes redemption is the midrashic mythology of the messiah of the House of Joseph, preceding that of the House of David. This messiah "would fall at the gates of Jerusalem fighting against the gentiles, constitut[ing] a new mythological trait whose function it was to differentiate between the messiah of catastrophe and that of utopia."⁶⁷ This lent redemptive thought a way to overcome the progressive necessities of a more simplistic triumphal perspective by codifying a built-in element of rupture, and, quite simply, it was a method of explaining the incongruity between utopian hopes and the reality of Jewish existence.

The messianic tensions Scholem is describing did not necessarily conflict with rabbinic authority in theory, but, he notes, "whenever messianic hopes assumed actuality, the tension with regard to rabbinic tradition became manifest."⁶⁸ Thus, Scholem points to various instances of antinomianism, most fantastically the messianic movements begun or inspired by Nathan of Gaza (1643-1680 AD) and Sabbatai Sevi (1626 – 1676 AD) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as outbursts of revolutionary redemptive feeling that subsumed both the catastrophic and triumphal. Scholem credits Kabbalah, medieval Jewish mysticism, with providing an outlet for the antinomian messianic tendencies suppressed by rabbinic authorities and such towering figures as Maimonides.⁶⁹ He argues that Kabbalah both preserved and developed these tendencies, specifically through the Zohar and Lurianic systems, fanning the flames of messianic sentiment and laying the groundwork for the Sabbatians, the Dönme, the Frankists, and other antinomian movements.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 9-10

⁶⁸ Ibid. 10

⁶⁹ Ibid. 17

While he acknowledges that early Kabbalah focused more on individual experience and the mysteries of creation and the “divine chariot,”⁷⁰ he finds the seeds of eschatological thought in the very nature of the kabbalistic endeavor and its ideal of communion with the divine. According to Scholem the focus on creation, and the emanations of God dispersed throughout the world, eventually led to a greater emphasis on the notion that “all proceeds from the One and returns to the One,” and that the task of the kabbalist was to redeem the world through spiritual and worldly action.⁷¹

While Scholem’s picture of the relationship between Kabbalah and messianism is certainly insightful and helpful, some modern scholars, notably Moshe Idel, have argued that he has overemphasized certain aspects of Kabbalah and ignored others. If we take these suggested corrections into account, a somewhat different picture begins to emerge that, I believe, presents a more nuanced view of the interlocking developments of mysticism and the Jewish mainstream. Two important elements of the relationship that Scholem does not fully account for are the importance of esotericism embedded within early kabbalistic thought, and the corresponding degree to which seemingly radical deviations from mainstream Judaism remained normative in the eyes of the Jewish communities and the kabbalistic practitioners.

The level of esotericism in the early formulations of this tradition is astounding even for mysticism. Moshe Idel writes that “unlike philosophy, [early Kabbalah] was studied within families and limited groups, making no attempt to disseminate its tenets to larger audiences.”⁷² He explains that “Kabbalah is by definition an esoteric body of

⁷⁰ Ibid. 17

⁷¹ Ibid. 16

⁷² Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. 250
New Haven : Yale University Press, c1988

speculation; whether in its theosophic-theurgical explanation of the rationales for the commandments, or in the ecstatic trend dealing with techniques of using divine names, esotericism is deeply built into this lore.” He cites R. Isaac the Blind (1160-1235 AD), who claimed that his teachers would never write down matters of Kabbalah. Even as esoteric kabbalistic ideas were expanded upon in the thirteenth century, Idel writes, scholars such as

Rabad [1125-1198 AD], Nahmanides [1194-1270 AD], and R. Solomon ben Adret (Rashba) [1235-1310 AD], although Kabbalists and, in the case of the latter two, even known as teachers of Kabbalah, were faithful to the halakhic interdiction against public transmission of topics related to the “Account of the Creation” and the “Account of the Chariot,” and refrained from dealing with such issues either in writing or in public speech.⁷³

Despite these restrictions, in the wake of the Maimonidean controversy in the twelfth and early thirteenth century, which proposed a “reinterpretation of Judaism in Aristotelian terms” and challenged earlier mystical texts like *Shi’ur Komah* and *Sefer Yetzirah*, Kabbalah emerged in a newly innovative and exoteric form.⁷⁴ Idel argues that this came about as “part of a restructuring of those aspects of rabbinic thought that were denied authenticity by Maimonides’ system.”⁷⁵ Regardless of the reasons there is a definite trend in the thirteenth century onwards toward a more exoteric understanding of Kabbalah exemplified by the “voluminous treatises of such Kabbalists as Abraham Abulafia [1240-1291 AD], Moses de Leon [1250-1305 AD], Joseph Gikatilla [1248-1305 AD], and Joseph of Hamadan [14th century AD],”⁷⁶ perhaps reaching an apex after the

⁷³ Ibid. 253-254

⁷⁴ Ibid. 251-252

⁷⁵ Ibid. 253

⁷⁶ Ibid. 254

expulsion from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century and during the rise of the Safedian school in the sixteenth.⁷⁷

How little controversy or outrage resulted from this development, even as the followers of the Cordoverian and Lurianic schools (16th century AD) published details of mystical techniques, outlined ethical and psychological mystical systems, and propagated mystical interpretations of the commandments, is a testament to the unique marriage of the mystical tradition and the mainstream of rabbinic thought. “It is a striking fact,” Moshe Idel points out, “that the emergence of major Kabbalistic schools did not stir significant controversies in the Jewish milieus in which they arose.”⁷⁸ This is true to a large extent because of the fact that many of the major Kabbalists were also highly respected rabbinic authorities. This fact, along with the safeguards and esotericism that still remained, resulted in a mystical tradition that was palatable, or at least tolerable, to the normative tradition. Kabbalah did not transgress the everyday halachic life of the observant Jew, and therefore posed very little direct threat. In fact, Kabbalah, more often than not, affirmed the primacy of halachic practice by imbuing it with spiritual dimensions of which the rabbinic tradition was incapable, and by referring in its own practice to halachic observance.

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It should also be noted that Kabbalah, even in its exoteric forms, did not necessarily follow a pattern of unrestricted triumphal thinking. Even where it posited direct communion with God as its ideal there was room for disruption. In fact, kabbalistic systems of rupture have at times gone hand in hand with unitive practice. Even spiritual

⁷⁷ Ibid. 255

⁷⁸ Ibid. 250-1

encounter or cosmic melding, perhaps even temporary annihilation, at times allowed for the possibility of a final act in which the mystic breaks with the union, reconstitutes separation, and attaches even more thoroughly to the world. While such techniques certainly prescribe unitive experience as part of a process, they insist that the world of the senses is the ultimate concern, and the primary realm in which mystical life is acted. And so we have the conclusion of a description of the kabbalistic technique of Abraham

Abulafia:

And then wishing to honour the glorious Name by serving it with the life of body and soul, veil thy face and be afraid to look at God. Then return to the matters of the body, rise and eat and drink a little, or refresh thyself with a pleasant odor, and restore thy spirit to its sheath until another time, and rejoice at thy lot and know that God loveth thee!⁷⁹

We find here that after the height of ecstatic experience the way to truly act in accordance with divine requirements is to recognize, respect, and re-establish the separation between creature and Creator. After the mystical experience proper, or perhaps as the concluding act of the mystical experience, one is instructed to “return to the matters of the body” and “restore thy spirit to its sheath.” Even the most ecstatic spiritual experience can culminate by reconstituting distinction from God and orienting one back toward the world. As with rabbinic transformations of narratives of dominance, unitive mystical experience can also incorporate rupture in a way that tempers desires for completeness and redirects them back toward the incompleteness of the world.

We can see the possibility in Kabbalah, then, even when its techniques are published, for providing a channel through which one can have spiritual, divine, and messianic insights in a highly personal way while simultaneously containing these very

⁷⁹ Jacobs, Louis. *The Jewish Mystics*. 63
New York: Schocken Books, 1977

tendencies or channeling them back toward the rupture of the world. This dynamic siphons the messianic urge away from the communal, activist, and political toward more controlled and regulated expressions. This is not to say that redemption or messianic feeling does not exist here, even in its most astonishingly triumphal and dominating forms. Rather, it provides an outlet for such expression, or a way to direct such urges in more contemplative directions.⁸⁰

The final issue that must be addressed is Scholem's assertion that Sabbatianism was more or less a direct result of a public reception of Lurianic thinking. Idel points to three major flaws in Scholem's argument. First, even in its propagation, "the knowledge of Lurianic Kabbalah was, roughly speaking, limited to the elite." In fact, part of the reason for this was a resurgence of esotericism in Lurianic circles, and, Idel notes, the bulk of the Lurianic corpus, which was possessed by Hayyim Vital, "remained unknown to the wider public for several decades" after the supposed dissemination of Lurianic Kabbalah.⁸¹ It is therefore somewhat misleading to suggest that Sabbatianism, which so indiscriminately aroused the Jewish masses, could have uniformly found its impetus in Lurianic teaching.

Second, the few who "could be considered to have really mastered this complicated type of theosophy... did *not* perceive it as a messianic ideology." In adopting Lurianic thought they "attenuated the mythical, demonical, theurgical, and eschatological facets of Kabbalah to various extents." Third, "to the extent that Lurianic Kabbalah had a messianic message, it was not greater than the messianic burden of

⁸⁰ These issues will be discussed in much greater detail in chapter five.

⁸¹ Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. 257

earlier Kabbalah.”⁸² There is simply not enough evidence, Idel argues, to say definitively that the messianic elements of Lurianic Kabbalah were disseminated widely at the time, let alone to make the case for a direct causal relationship between this esoteric system and the immensely popular grassroots messianic movement that followed it.

And even where its orientation was messianic there were significant differences between Lurianic messianism and Sabbatian messianism. Lurianic Kabbalah, Idel explains, like the Zohar, “perceived human activity to be capable of restoring primeval harmony to the divine world,” and “envisioned the achievement of a perfect state in the divine world as a cumulative process requiring collective theurgical activity.” As such, both Lurianic and zoharic Kabbalah that preceded it understood the coming of the Messiah to be a product of human theurgical activity. In contrast, Sabbatianism was focused on the specific personage of Sabbatai Sevi as a messiah whose own redemptive actions, “not those of the people of Israel, would initiate the eschaton.”⁸³ This represents a fundamental difference between Sabbatianism and Lurianic Kabbalah, enough to consider a causal relationship from the latter to the former highly suspect. Thus, while Sevi’s prophet, Nathan of Gaza, did skillfully employ Lurianic terminology and jargon, it would be misguided to assume that the teachings of Luria incited the enthusiastic reception that Sevi received throughout the Diaspora.

Idel proposes that we consider the reasons for the messianic outburst on the sociological level. The Sabbatian phenomenon must be viewed as representative of a desire within Jewish communities that was not exclusive to their susceptibility to

⁸² Ibid. 258

⁸³ Ibid. 258-259

kabbalistic doctrines. While it was conveniently expressed in Lurianic terms, it is perhaps indicative of a deeper longing for a kind of redemptive fulfillment that could not be provided either by halachic practice, or even by mystical theurgical speculation for those few for whom such speculation was significant. Perhaps this movement, and others like it, ultimately indicates a failure on the part of the rabbinic-kabbalistic relationship to channel triumphal tendencies and dominating redemptive urges into benign and lasting modes of thought and action. Such a conclusion would seem to be supported by subsequent developments, which we will discuss below.



May You Be Cursed: The Mithnagdic Critique

As we have seen before, the Diaspora inaugurated a new understanding of Jewish distinction and separation within Western culture. The sense of difference became, over time, intimately connected to Jewish self-identification, and with it Jewish redemptive understanding. The extent to which the arrangement of Jewish religious life was oriented away from unmitigated messianic actions and pronouncements must, as has already been suggested, be viewed at least in part as a conscious preservation of culture against the most influential trends of Christian thought and expression. This difference weathered every stage of historical anti-Semitic violence against European Jewry, leaving Jewish identity very much intact. Overall, such episodes only strengthened Jewish resolve and sense of distinction. And, ironically, it was an olive branch of sorts that placed Jewish identity in a greater existential flux in the eighteenth century than any form of hostility ever had. Perhaps this was in part a result of the unfulfilled redemptive urges we speculated about at the end of the previous section.

The ideals that emerged alongside the European Enlightenment represented a new chapter in Jewish-Christian relations. While not necessarily novel in terms of a break with the larger philosophical trends that defined Europe, the Enlightenment was a significant reworking of concepts in favor of a more inclusive premise. It became an invitation for Jews to join in a universalist fraternity that transcended the traditional squabbles of religion and sect in favor of such lofty and unifying concepts as reason, liberty, and equality. The implications for Jews were profound. It directly prefigured Jewish emancipation – the abolishment of discriminatory laws – and inaugurated the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, as a response to the Gentile invitation to engage with the European conversation as equal citizens.

The issues that formed around the Enlightenment and Haskalah had social, philosophical, spiritual, and, most importantly for us, redemptive implications. This was a call to “come out of the ghetto,” physically, emotionally, and intellectually. It marked the first time that a Jew could rightly think of herself as a German, a Frenchman, or a Pole, and it was the first time that Jews could adopt the Western philosophical traditions with little or no sense of apostasy. Not surprisingly, there were valiant attempts by Jewish thinkers in this era to present overarching systems that coherently articulated a mutually beneficial relationship between Jews and Christians, and between Jewish and Christian modes of thinking, often appealing to the commonalities of reason and intellect. The evolution of these attempts can be traced from figures like Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786 AD) through to Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1925 AD).

The influence of this period is far-reaching, and we can look back and find here the roots of Jewish denominationalism, Zionism as a form of national self-determination,

and notions of “secular” or “cultural” Judaism. But there was plenty of skepticism amongst Jews, and responses to the Enlightenment were by no means uniform. We can trace resonances of Jewish notions of distinctiveness and difference, in critical distinction to the egalitarianism that the Enlightenment presented, as early as the story of Egyptian bondage. In fact, some Jews rejected the Gentile invitation. Others were intrigued by the message of the Enlightenment and embraced the Haskalah in various forms, for a variety of reasons, both conscious and otherwise.

As denominations formed, most prominently Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, affiliations along the so-called spectrum seemed to more or less correspond with the extent that a Jew, or Jewish community, embraced the Gentile invitation to become a European: the Reform end of the spectrum being the most embracing and Orthodox being the most skeptical. The adoption of this overall scheme, for better or worse, has led to the notion that the closer one affiliates herself with the Orthodox side of the spectrum, the more legitimately one can call herself a traditional, “religious” Jew.

While the various ways in which the Reform movement embraced the Haskalah are more obvious – dress, custom, social mores, etc. – the situation was far from being that simple, especially in terms of redemptive understanding. Setting aside the complex issues surrounding Reform movements, but by no means discounting them, we shall now focus on how the debates within the Orthodox community began to shape new understandings of redemption in response to the Enlightenment. While the debates within the Orthodox movement do not necessarily parallel those of the Reform and other movements, they will provide enough of a glimpse into how complex and problematic the Haskalah was for all of Jewish thinking.

Allan Nadler, in his book, The Faith of the Mithnagdim, dispels the misconception that Jewish Orthodoxy maintained a homogenous position with regard to the major questions of the day. The Hasidim, proponents of more ecstatic, rapturous expressions of faith, actually represented a radical departure from traditional modes of religious expression that the opposing Mithnagdim sought to protect and preserve. Nadler explains that, while at first glance the Hasidic and Mithnagdic positions might seem rather similar, their differences lie in their ideas about how kabbalistic speculations should or should not be applied, rather than in any real disagreement about the speculations themselves. And their disagreements concerning the application of these ideas, we shall see, fall in line precisely with differing emphases in their respective understandings of redemptive thought. The Mithnagdic argument, then, will give us a clearer picture of the issues surrounding the developments in redemptive thought after the Enlightenment.

On the question of divine presence in the world, for example, Nadler tells us that “there was virtually no substantive theological difference between Hasidim and Mithnagdim in their respective theoretical understandings of the nature of divine immanence. Where they did differ was on the place and application of this belief in religious life and the propriety of propagating it to the Jewish masses.”⁸⁴ The Mithnagdic critique of Hasidism, then, was not that Hasidism misunderstood or even distorted Kabbalistic notions of divine presence, but, as Gershom Scholem explains, “that the

⁸⁴ Nadler, Allan. The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture. 16
Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, c1997

secrets of the divine realm are presented in the guise of mystical psychology.”⁸⁵ It was the transformation of Kabbalistic ideas into a readily accessible terminology that so terrified the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797 AD), R. Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821 AD), R. Phinehas of Polotsk (1746-1823 AD), and other prominent Mithnagdim. And it was such audacity that prompted their vigorous opposition to Hasidic teachings. “What the Mithnagdim apparently feared most,” Nadler writes,

was the psychoreligious consequences of the popularization and personalization of the theory of divine immanence.

The crucial difference between the Hasidim and the Mithnagdim on this issue, then, was less one of theosophy than one of religious anthropology. All agreed that in theory the *Eyn Sof* [God; literally “without end”] fills all worlds and all spaces. However, for the Hasidim, who maintained a supremely optimistic view of man’s spiritual and psychoreligious capacities, this truth must not remain a matter of esoteric theory but must become the object of extensive human contemplation, enriching the religious life of all Jews and ultimately allowing them to achieve mystical union with God in and through the created world. For the Mithnagdim, on the other hand, who harbored a deeply pessimistic view of man’s spiritual capabilities, the truth of God’s immanence must remain in the realm of mystical speculation, reserved for a small, select and well-guarded spiritual elite. The average Jew, they insisted, must conduct his life in this world as if estranged from a distant, transcendent, unknowable God.⁸⁶

As with the issue of divine immanence, the Mithnagdim maintained that all of the secrets of Kabbalah should remain hidden, only to be disseminated to a select few. When their warnings did not stem the propagation of Hasidic teaching, however, they sometimes rejected mystical speculation altogether, at least publicly. They believed that for the majority of Jewry, goals should be much more modest, mystical speculation and theurgical action should be avoided, and that “the way to attain piety was assiduously to study conventional rabbinic texts and faithfully to obey the commandments of the Torah;

⁸⁵ Scholem, Gershom. Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. 340-341
New York : Schocken Books, c1995

⁸⁶ Nadler, Allan. The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture. 27-28

in other words, to heed the basic requirements of the faith, without any heroic attempts at acquiring a profound knowledge of God or understanding the mysteries of creation.”⁸⁷

This humility extended to realms beyond mysticism, to such issues as the relative merits of study and prayer. The Mithnagdim were appalled at the Hasidic emphasis on prayer as more important than study and their attempts to imbue prayer with cosmic significance through theurgical or pragmatic *kavana*, or intention. Once again, the dispute was not about the possibilities of prayer, but about appropriateness. It was not that the Mithnagdim believed that one could not affect the world through prayer – without question they believed that one could – but they maintained that one should not do so. Like the Talmudic rabbis before them, they tried to reorient religious practice back toward a deeper immersion in the text, and away from outward expressions of devotion. Nadler explains that “the Mithnagdic approach to prayer is thus rooted in a deep sense of historical decline, religious alienation, and personal spiritual inadequacy,” in contrast to the Hasidic approach to prayer as “a joyful experience entered into with the most strident confidence and optimism...”⁸⁸ The Mithnagdim found in Hasidic prayer an attitude of confidence that they viewed as dangerous.

At the heart of the divide, then, are two competing conceptions of history and the role of the human being, corresponding to the triumphal and disruptive trends in redemptive thought that we have traced throughout this study. Each movement was responding to the issues posed by the Enlightenment, one embracing its philosophy of progress and the other rejecting it as perilous. Hasidic conceptions embrace an unabashedly optimistic view of the world while the Mithnagdic perspective is decidedly

⁸⁷ Ibid. 49

⁸⁸ Ibid. 77

misanthropic, wary of the dominating undertones of progressive discourse, and therefore purposefully small-scale and limited in scope.

But the Mithnagdic critique, aware of the larger forces affecting Jewish thought, extended well beyond the spiritualist optimism of the Hasidic movement. Many of the same convictions that put the Mithnagdim in hostile opposition to Hasidic thought, Nadler writes, made them “as fundamentally hostile to the Haskalah as to Hasidism.”⁸⁹ Though sometimes considered to be early advocates of the Haskalah because of their interest in secular disciplines, Mithnagdic thinkers, R. Phinehas of Polotsk most explicitly, rejected the more overarching goals of assimilation that the Haskalah represented, be it the possibilities of spiritual attainment as articulated by the Hasidism or the promise of social and economic advancement that enticed other self-proclaimed *Maskilim*, or advocates of the Haskalah. The Mithnagdim, in line with rabbinic tradition, remained dutifully dismissive of ideas such as human theurgical practice affecting God’s action in history, and they remained fundamentally wary of activism, self-betterment, and the vocabulary of human perfection in its religious and secular forms. Nadler writes that

although Hasidism’s and the Haskalah’s respective notions of the precise nature of human perfection in this life differed radically, and although their shared optimism did not constitute a basis for any genuine agreement between them, in the eyes of the Mithnagdim their deviances from tradition were at least phenomenologically the same... The ideologies of both Hasidism and Haskalah produced a self-indulgent activism that must have appeared deeply unorthodox to the conservative, religiously passive Mithnagdim.⁹⁰

So profound to the Mithnagdim was the threat of the confident redemptive rhetoric disseminated by both the Hasidim and the Maskilim that many Mithnagdic

⁸⁹ Ibid. 130

⁹⁰ Ibid. 148

responses cannot conceal the frightened forcefulness of their polemics. Consider, for example, this excerpt from Phinehas of Polotsk's "Death Poem":

So consider, you son of man, by what right did you ever swagger upon the earth? Therefore, may you be cursed upon this earth, may thorns and thistles grow underneath you, and may they become as barbs in your eyes and prickles in your side, You thought that you were a wise man, and now look how you lie despondently, rusting and rotting away from your wounds and your pain... Oh, how you – such a precious cache – have fallen into abject desolation! You, lowly man, have deluded yourself into falsely believing that you could soar above the tops of clouds, whereas in fact it was Sheol below that was awaiting you in order to bring your empty arrogance down to hell...⁹¹

The Mithnagdim were wary of the results of the "empty arrogance" to such a degree that Phinehas of Polotsk and others thought it better to deprive people of the very hope of spiritual or worldly betterment than to allow for the unrestricted consequences of such thinking. The Mithnagdim argued that rhetoric such as Phinehas of Polotsk's "Death Poem" was necessary to stem the tide of overly optimistic redemptive thought. While instances of Mithnagdic thought seemed to suggest that there may in fact have been a valid sort of hope, this sort of frankness was rarely if ever disseminated publicly.⁹² So great were the stakes, and so perilous was the alternative, that the Mithnagdim could not abide even an inkling of advocacy of progressive possibility.

In response to the philosophical threat of the Haskalah, Nadler writes, the Mithnagdim "fortified to an unprecedented degree the limits of spiritual attainment and the boundaries of acceptable religious conduct." Convinced that the spiritual alienation and degradation of the human predicament rendered nearly any progressive endeavor an exercise in treacherous arrogance, "they offered the individual Jew no path of redemption

⁹¹ Phinehas of Polotsk in Nadler, Allan. The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture. 190

⁹² Nadler, Allan. The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture. 174

from his estranged, shattered existence in this world and no remedy for his divided nature and afflicted spirit.”⁹³ In what we could argue to be the most strongly articulated case against progress in Jewish history, the Mithnagdim publicly denied the very possibility of redemption through human agency.

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Assimilation and Distinction after the Haskalah

Despite the vigorousness of the Mithnagdic critique it would be fair to say that the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries saw a marked trend, particularly in Western Europe, toward Jewish assimilation in all realms. Though the debate within the emerging Orthodox movement, which characterized itself as anti-assimilationist, was actually more complex if we consider assimilation in terms of redemptive thinking, some of the most interesting and innovative engagements with the new redemptive possibilities during this period took place among the increasingly “modern” Jewry. Rather than simply erasing the distinction of Jew and Christian through the anonymity of reason and equal citizenship, Jewish adoption of a more secular perspective, and with it the vocabulary of European academia, led to a new dialectic for Jewish self-understanding as distinct from the larger culture.

For figures like Gershom Scholem (1897-1982 AD), who wrote much about the developments of the preceding centuries, the mechanics of Jewish assimilation allowed Jews to maintain a thorough, albeit complementary, distinctiveness. As with the Hasids, Kabbalah played an important role in his discourses, and much of his own work can be seen as stemming from his understandings of the categories of medieval Kabbalah.

⁹³ Ibid. 178

Scholem's contributions to the academic study of Kabbalah remain unrivalled, so much so that, as Moshe Idel points out, many scholars "working in the field of Judaica or in comparative religion, have tended to the notion that his views on Kabbalah are tantamount to Kabbalah itself."⁹⁴ One of the troubling aspects of this situation for Idel and other Kabbalah scholars in more recent times is the extent to which Scholem presented historical Kabbalah through the lens of his own agenda and prejudices, which, Susan Handelman tells us, included his "stated theological anarchism, his antipathy to Jewish law, and to rational Enlightenment utopianism..."⁹⁵

While sharing the Mithnagdic skepticism of Enlightenment redemption, Scholem rejected what he saw as the political impotence of the Orthodoxy which he found in both the rabbinic and the mystical realms. Handelman explains that he reworked notions of redemptive thought so as to discard the spiritual deferment of the here and now in which "nothing can be done definitively, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished... there is nothing concrete that can be accomplished by the unredeemed,"⁹⁶ replacing such deferment with the concreteness of political power. He attempted to salvage what he saw as the action-oriented thrust of certain forms of redemption, advocating "'utopian' but not apocalyptic"⁹⁷ modes. Scholem's task was intimately connected to his Zionism, which for him was of a piece with his unease with diasporic culture and its passivity.

Where Scholem rejected what he saw as the restrictive nature of halachah, others saw in traditional Jewish law the possibility of constructing an ethical bridge between

⁹⁴ Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. 17

⁹⁵ Handelman, Susan. Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, & Levinas. 46

⁹⁶ Scholem, Gershom. The Messianic Idea in Judaism. 34
New York : Schocken Books, 1971

⁹⁷ Handelman, Susan. Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, & Levinas. 47

political activism and redemptive thought. Thinkers like Franz Rosenzweig pointed to the ethics of halachah, not, in Handelman's words, "as a set of dry and constraining rules, but as something much deeper."⁹⁸ "For me, too, God is not a Law-giver," Rosenzweig wrote, "but He commands. It is only by the manner of observance that a man in his inertia changes the commandments into Law."⁹⁹ In this way Rosenzweig pointed to an ethics that could perhaps successfully speak to the triumphal redemptive narratives of the modern age and temper its dominating zeal.

Rosenzweig, in his Star of Redemption and elsewhere, reinterpreted the categories of creation, revelation, and redemption, elaborating a scheme that placed the ethics of encounter, relationality, and speech in a central role as never before. Even Scholem recognized the significance of Rosenzweig's contribution, lamenting the lack of critical engagement with his ideas and suggesting that "in the long run this work will need ever increasing critical attention."¹⁰⁰ Such a scheme could perhaps no longer rightly be called a theology, but it contained, by way of Rosenzweig's God-who-commands, a seemingly more fundamental point at which to commence ethical thought within a redemptive framework.

In their decidedly modern approaches, Rosenzweig, Scholem, and other thinkers attempted to reinterpret the categories of redemption, suffering, and individual and political action in a way that placed human obligation more explicitly at the fulcrum. Like the Mithnagdim, they recognized something disastrous in the unchecked progressive thinking that informed assimilationist urges, and they attempted to counter such trends

⁹⁸ Ibid. 58

⁹⁹ Rosenzweig in Handelman, Susan. Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, & Levinas. 58

¹⁰⁰ Scholem, Gershom. The Messianic Idea in Judaism. 321

with their own proposals. As such, regardless of their disputes and disagreements with each other or with their Orthodox counterparts, they placed themselves directly within trends of redemptive thought that, I have argued, has always been at the heart of Jewish tradition, ceaselessly working and reworking textual material to address the issues of a particular time and place.

Ω

Looming over our discussion of these projects is the distressing fact that, despite valiant efforts to construct a viable Jewish identity in the modern age and to establish a new basis for Jewish-Christian relations in post-Enlightenment Europe, the Shoah revealed Jewish hopes for assimilation or equal citizenship to be a fantasy. Furthermore, we must confront that it was in part physical and philosophical assimilation and trust in Western notions of progress, guided by linear narratives of redemption and triumph in both secular and religious guises, that facilitated the Shoah's horrors and increased its effectiveness. With hindsight, in light of their failure, we might consider the Shoah a referendum on all previous articulations of redemption. The event and its implications cannot be circumscribed if we are to continue to talk about redemption in Judaism. The Shoah becomes a stumbling block that raises questions never before thought possible. How can we continue to talk about justice and suffering? How can we continue to talk about redemption, within history or otherwise, when our history now includes a rupture so great as to render it irredeemable?

Judaism has certainly experienced great instances of rupture before – horrific events which seemed to put the Jewish people, and sometimes the entire enterprise of Judaism, in jeopardy. Some previous instances of trauma, such as the Babylonian exile,

were confronted and eventually served to enrich Jewish redemptive vocabulary, providing for more explicitly disrupted understandings of redemption. Others, for example the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids, were more problematic and purposefully avoided as redemptive allegories. In all cases, though, suffering was either given a purpose within a meaningful redemptive framework or stripped of its redemptive meaning. But never before has the magnitude and sheer inconceivability of an event shaken the very foundation of Jewish faith as has the Shoah, which can neither be incorporated nor ignored.

While Franz Rosenzweig did not live long enough to respond to the Shoah, Gershom Scholem's career spanned this period, and his awareness of the Shoah's implications seems to have influenced his subsequent thinking. Scholem ends his 1959 essay, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," with a disclaimer that "modern Jewish readiness for irrevocable action in the concrete realm," for example, in the "utopian return to Zion," "is a readiness which no longer allows itself to be fed on hopes."¹⁰¹ "Born out of the horror and destruction that was Jewish history in our generation," modern Jewish utopianism concerns itself much more explicitly with direct political action in history rather than messianic deferment.

While Scholem does not speculate here about what this says about modern Jewry's reckoning with the Shoah, or lack thereof, I would ask whether such emphasis on political action and progress does not speak more to desire to evade the gravity of the Shoah, ignore the disruption it presents, and continue down an uncritical assimilationist path where redemption can only be understood in terms of political triumph. Scholem does, however, leave us with a final, skeptical remark:

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 35-36

Whether or not Jewish history will be able to endure this entry into the concrete realm without perishing in the crisis of the Messianic claim which has virtually been conjured up – that is the question which out of his great and dangerous past the Jew of this age poses to his present and to his future.

Throughout the rest of this study we will be asking this question as well. But we will also be asking some related and more difficult questions: what if Jewish history is not able to endure in this mode? If not, is there a way to reformulate issues of redemption so that it can, indeed, endure? And finally, what might this alternative conception of redemption look like in practice, and what would it mean for the future of Judaism and the Jewish people?

Ω

Rabbi Eliezer's Silence

Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history. We live in and of difference, that is, in *hypocrisy*, about which Levinas so profoundly says that it is “not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets” (*TI*, p. 24).

– Jacques Derrida¹⁰²

Anxious Triumph: Esther and the Hidden God

When considering how the wisdom literature of the Tanak might speak to the concerns we face after the Shoah, the *Book of Esther* seems an obvious point of engagement. There is much overlap between the themes and situations in each case. This is true even though Esther is a stylized, mythical event and the Shoah is a documented historical event. In fact, the *Scroll of Esther's* function as a model of redemption makes it even better to compare to historical events. Despite the differences in function, similarities are apparent. Each of these events takes place within a diasporic context, when issues of assimilation, lack of sovereignty, and preservation of Jewish distinction represent a pertinent threat.

Both events force us to struggle with questions brought about by a seemingly absent or hidden God, and with the way human beings should comport themselves in such circumstances. And each deals with the worry of Jewish destruction, both physical and spiritual, on a colossal scale. Throughout the course of our investigation we will be broaching the limits of such direct comparisons to the point where we are forced to acknowledge insurmountable differences. But as we shall see, it is precisely at these points that the most fruitful insights can be gleaned, and these points will help us consider ways that we might begin to articulate ourselves after the Shoah.

¹⁰² Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. 153
University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978

Let us first compare the circumstances in which the Jews found themselves in each instance. The events of the *Book of Esther* probably take place a few generations after the Jews are exiled from the Kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. While the historicity of the events, and even their exact historical placement, is disputed, what is clear is that *Esther* presents the Jews as subject to the will and the mercy of the Persian king and scattered in communities throughout the Persian Empire.

Yoram Hazony compares the situation of Esther and the other virgins in chapter two of the *Book of Esther* to that of the Jews generally. The Jew, Hazony writes, “has been stripped of his own nation and capital city, and has lost his own king and any capacity to wield power in his own defense... The Jews, like the virgins, have been forced to give up everything of independent value to them and are, it seems, powerless before the will of the state and its ruler.”¹⁰³

Given the intervening time since then it may be difficult for readers today to appreciate the extent of the crisis. Up until the period we are discussing Jews had not experienced such complete political displacement since Egypt. The only previous example of such a condition in the recent past was the dispersal of the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians probably over a century before, which led to the disappearance of these tribes through assimilation or other means. Jewish existence was truly at stake in Persia.

The Jews in the period leading up to the Shoah, especially after the Enlightenment, found themselves in a rather different existential place. After almost two millennia of diasporic survival, the continued viability of Jewish existence without autonomy or sovereignty went for the most part unquestioned, Jews having weathered

¹⁰³ Hazony, Yoram. *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*. 28 Shalem Press: Jerusalem, 1995

various forms of persecution from the Inquisition to the pogroms. And as Enlightenment universalism began to transform European values Jews saw a place for themselves within a larger societal fabric.

As things appeared to be improving, the Jews enjoyed the luxury of certain redemptive expectations. There seemed to be every reason to hitch one's hopes to the wagon of Western civilization and progress, to assume that as the Western world marched ever closer to a humanly constructed utopia, a corresponding Jewish redemption would arise.

It is no coincidence that this period marked the birth of modern Zionism, that it was conceived along the lines of a European nation-state, and that it expected success to come through European acquiescence and support.¹⁰⁴ The goals of Zionism represented a messianic and redemptive fulfillment for the Jewish people, and hopes were expressed in concrete political terms that utilized the vocabulary of the Western nation-state. Here we must acknowledge a significant difference between European post-Enlightenment Jewry and ancient Persian Jewry in terms of their relation to the categories of hope and despair, or where they stand along a psychological trajectory of redemption. But it is for this reason that the *Book of Esther* is all the more relevant in the post-Shoah context.

At the same time, the complacency and comfort of the European Jews at the start of the twentieth century speaks to another, more subtle threat which they shared with their ancient Persian counterparts: the threat of assimilation.¹⁰⁵ Hazon explains that

¹⁰⁴ In Zionism, however, we do find another parallel with the Book of Esther. The context from which Zionism springs can be seen as a modern development of the political methods that Mordechai and Esther employ. They carefully exploit the powerful, so that they can wield their power for their own ends, and in the interests of the Jews. Zionism, in this light, utilizes this political lesson by attempting to establish an Israeli state with the help of Europe.

¹⁰⁵ The Book of Esther's engagement with assimilation is complex and fascinating. Esther, whose name itself is Persian (her Hebrew name being Hadassah), who intermarries with a Gentile monarch, is an

Persia in Esther's time is a cosmopolitan world-empire, which offers success and wealth to those among the Jewish exiles who will give up on the past and play by its rules. In Persia, as elsewhere, the Jews begin to disappear into the fabric of the empire, some of them changing their names and their dress, and arguing with self-confidence against the possibility and desirability of a continuation to Jewish history.¹⁰⁶

Along with the obvious concern this presents for those with a stake in the continuation of Jewish history, the trend described here also represents precariousness for the very lives of Jews. For it is within such a culturally hegemonic context that distinction becomes more apparent and therefore more threatening. It is this predicament that lends force to Haman's argument for Jewish destruction: "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm..." [Esther 3.8].¹⁰⁷

It is with similar sentiment that Richard L. Rubenstein tells us that "radical anti-Semites, including Hitler, were far more troubled by assimilated Jews and intermarriage than by the more obviously alien, separatist Orthodox Jews." Rubenstein writes of the threatening nature of an "alternative perspective" that Jews brought to "political, social, cultural, and economic issues," but points out that the full extent of the threat, in distinction to, say, that of a Buddhist living in Germany, "came from the absence of *clearly perceptible* differences."¹⁰⁸ The threat of the Jew is not simply that he is different, but that he retains a difference even as he seeks equality.

unlikely Jewish heroine. Her cousin Mordechai, who lives amongst the Gentiles rather than in the Jewish quarter, who allies himself closely with the king and other political elites, and who audaciously adds to the Law by establishing the only major Jewish festival that is not mentioned in the Torah, is an equally unlikely Jewish hero. But we must acknowledge that for both Esther and Mordechai it is the extent to which they are assimilated that they are able to save the Jews.

¹⁰⁶ Hazony, Yoram. The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther. 5

¹⁰⁷ The Jewish Publication Society. The Jewish Study Bible. 1630

¹⁰⁸ Rubenstein, Richard L. After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism. 93
Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, c1992

With this parallel we start to see anti-Semitism as another bridge between these two events. The term itself is vague, suggesting at best an approximation of the sentiment to which it refers. Hazony describes the inadequacy of the term “anti-Semitism,” and our understanding of the concept:

It still takes no more effort to explain that one “hates Jews” than it does to ascribe “anti-Semitism” to him; and the Jews, of course, were never actually hated for being Semitic, that is, an eastern people. But the failure to have found a more meaningful name for the disease only reflects on how little we comprehend it. For what term can one devise to express a condition which has sought out a tiny race and hunted it out over the entire globe, generation after generation, for thousands of years, in turn seeking to abolish, expel, shame, rape, convert, torture, confine and exterminate it – and all to no apparent end other than to increase the desire to see the project through the next time around?¹⁰⁹

Of course any attempt to definitively explain the phenomenon of anti-Semitism would be inadequate. But this should not dissuade us from attempting to better understand the very real conflict that the term represents.



To follow one avenue of investigation that should prove helpful for our concerns, we turn to a critical moment in the narrative of *Esther*. After Haman is elevated by the king, Ahashverosh, to a position higher than all of the other officials and starts parading through the palace gate in Susa, the capital, Mordechai refuses to kneel or bow to him as do all the others. We are told that when the king’s courtiers ask Mordechai why he does not bow as all the others had Mordechai responds by explaining to them that he was a

We will discuss Rubenstein’s theories further in the following chapter. For more scholarship on the point about Jewish assimilation, of which there has been a great deal, see also the works of Zygmunt Bauman, Theodor Adorno, Raul Hilberg, Emil Fackenheim, and Hannah Arendt, among others.

¹⁰⁹ Hazony, Yoram. The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther. 104

Jew. Upon hearing this, Haman becomes so enraged that he resolves to not only exact revenge upon Mordechai the individual, but upon the whole Jewish people.

We are presented with two related questions. First, what prompts Mordechai to act as he does and provide such an explanation for his actions; what is the connection he suggests between act and explanation? Second, what is it about Mordechai's posturing that incites such a seemingly irrational, disproportionate revenge? We shall see that the answer to the second question becomes clearer as we investigate the first.

We might reflexively assume that there is some clear prohibition in Judaism against bowing before a figure such as Haman, but this perspective quickly breaks down. Hazony tells us that "nothing in Jewish law or custom forbids a Jew to bow before a ruler, and there is every reason to presume that when in the presence of Ahashverosh in earlier years, Mordechai had indeed bowed to him, as had everyone else in the empire."¹¹⁰ Mordechai and Esther are also by no means strict halachic practitioners, so it seems likely that they would put themselves at risk over such an issue. In fact, Esther will later instruct the Jewish community to fast on her behalf from the 13th to the 15th of the Hebrew month Nisan (Esther 4.16), which means that in that year they did not celebrate the first night of the feast of Pesach, in violation of another commandment.¹¹¹ Even further, Mordechai had actually hidden his Jewish identity up until this point, and he had advised Esther to do the same.

So the question remains, why does Mordechai make this connection, and more specifically, what was it about this moment, as opposed to so many possible other moments, that prompted his actions? Indeed what was it he was responding to with such

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 46

¹¹¹ Ibid. 293

opposition – an opposition that he nonetheless labeled Jewish? The rabbis have acknowledged the lack of clarity in Mordechai’s actions, and they have offered several explanations. They have characterized the situation as an issue of idolatry, explaining that Haman had fastened an idolatrous image to his breast and that therefore bowing to Haman would be akin to bowing before an idol (Esther Rabba 6.2), or alternately that Haman had simply “made himself an object of worship” (Megilla 19a).¹¹²

Other explanations have focused on Haman’s association with the Mosaic villain Amalek. “On introducing Haman to the narrative,” Marvin Sweeney tells us,

Esth 3:1 identifies him as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which of course reprises the character of Agag the Amalekite king from 1 Samuel 15. Exodus 17:8-15 and Deut 25:17-19 identify the Amalekites as a people who are cursed because they attacked Israel from the rear in the wilderness when they were faint and weary. Later Jewish tradition identifies Amalek as the quintessential enemy who will stop at nothing to destroy Israel and which must itself be destroyed before it succeeds in Israel’s destruction.¹¹³

Haman is identified from his very first mention with Amalek, the perpetual enemy of the Jewish people, distinguished by unmerciful cruelty in warfare. Whether this is true in any historical sense is irrelevant in terms of our consideration of the narrative. The antipathy between Mordechai the Jew and Haman the Agagite, for our purposes, extends well beyond the time of their personal conflict. Hazon connects these two explanations for Mordechai’s actions by describing the position that Amalek represents as a sort of idolatry – an elevated, more dangerous idolatry. He points to biblical descriptions of the Amalekites as having no fear of God, in other words, having no moral limits. Though we are never told in any biblical text whether Amalek ever worshipped a physical idol, “what

¹¹² Ibid. 60-61

¹¹³ Sweeney, Marvin. Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology. 222

we do know is that whatever deities may have belonged to Amalek, it was a people which did not fear any moral boundaries established by them. Unlike the most depraved of the idolaters of Canaan, they respected no limits to the desire of their own spirit to control all as it found fit.”¹¹⁴ The figure of Amalek becomes, then, an archetype of domination.

And this position, symbolized by Amalek, is insidious in its pervasiveness and in the difficulty, for all human beings, of overcoming it, of truly living in fear of God. Hazony points out the “ominous warning” that rejoins the Deuteronomic commandment to blot out Amalek from the world, consisting of a further command to not forget to do so. And he points out the irony “that God’s promise to annihilate the memory of Amalek from the earth is to no small degree undermined by his promise to war against Amalek for untold generations.”¹¹⁵ Thus we find that the sinister form of idolatry that Amalek represents is not confined merely to a person or a people. Haman’s blood association with Agag and Amalek loses all relevancy now that we might understand his character as the incarnation of an ethos. But now we are prompted to ask more thoroughly what the nature is of the mentality and its oppositional relationship to Judaism. Why does it warrant Haman’s repeated epithet, the enemy of the Jews?

As the idea of Amalek threatens Judaism, physically in some instances and more subtly in others, so the idea of the Jew threatens Amalek. We have already seen that being a distinctive people dispersed throughout a region threatens the obeisance that a ruler craves, but we find that the Jew in particular threatens what Hazony calls the “original sin of the political world,” the desire to bring to fruition the “totalist fantasy,” that is, the vision of complete control without care for the by-products along the way.

¹¹⁴ Hazony, Yoram. The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther. 102

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 102

And Hazony reminds us that “there is no such thing as a *small* threat to the fantasy of perfect control.” If fantasies of domination are accepted wholeheartedly and without compunction, they require absolute control and cannot abide a single instance of disobedience.

The Jew, seemingly small, powerless, and insignificant, becomes a terrifying enemy to this vision. Through “his perennial reservations, his ceaseless chafing against the will of the state, his conditions, refusals and disobediences,” in other words, the Jew’s insistence on rupture and his constant critique of totalist perspectives, threatens totalitarian authorities because through these disruptions she “always places the control of the ruler in doubt, necessarily offends his spirit, necessarily makes mockery of his pretensions to power.”¹¹⁶ Let us note that Judaism has often been swayed by similar desires. I do not mean to present Judaism as an ideal alternative to structures of power. I mean to say only that in the face of such totalist forces at least some Jews are liable to reflexively fight against these tendencies, explaining themselves by way of their identity as Jews. In this light we begin to find Mordechai’s action and explanation at least somewhat intelligible.

Those who aspire to absolute rule and a completeness that erases distinction perpetuate the legacy of Amalek, relearning anti-Semitism in every age through their encounter with the Jew. The *Book of Esther* emphasized something in the character of Haman that we would later find in anti-Semites of every age. And we shall see that such desires are in no way confined to the ruling elite, that Amalekite thinking is persistent and widespread. But how exactly do these totalist fantasies play out, and what is their relationship to Jewish thought? To investigate how this is done – how Judaism, which is

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 110-111

so many things, transforms itself into an agitating force that questions totalist fantasies – we turn to Emmanuel Levinas’s study of Talmudic texts that deal with messianic redemption. We will not attempt to completely unravel the intricacies of Levinas’s thought, we will merely skim its surface to see what we can learn from his insights into Talmudic argument. The continuity and transformation we find here will serve to further illuminate our questions regarding the Judaism of Mordechai, its corresponding anti-Semitic reaction, and ways that it might survive the Shoah.

Ω

In his opening remarks to his essay “Messianic Texts,” Levinas discusses verses in the final chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin. He distinguishes what he intends by the term messianism from what he calls “the popular concept of the Messiah.” “One has failed to say anything about the Messiah,” he writes, “if one represents him as a person who comes to put a miraculous end to the violence in the world, the injustice and contradictions which destroy humanity but have their source in the nature of humanity, and simply in Nature.”¹¹⁷ The distinction suggests a guiding principle for what is to follow. For Levinas, as with the Mithnagdim and others we have discussed, messianism is not concerned with miraculous ends and it is not about overcoming contradiction. Rather, it starts at a place that acknowledges contradiction and incompleteness, even violence and injustice, as endemic to humanity and Nature itself.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. 59

¹¹⁸ We should note that Levinas does not say that the popular concept does not exist, that it has no place in Judaism, or that it has no merit. While he does seem to consider it an abuse of both terminology and emotion, we would do well to remind ourselves that Levinas’s view does not represent the only valid Jewish perspective on these concepts, nor does it presume to. We can make judgments as to what views are better, and I would certainly consider Levinas’s to be among the best, but we cannot say that other views are therefore outside of Judaism.

In this understanding we have a significantly different starting point for exploration than that which leads to Hazony's notion of totalist fantasy. The understanding of redemption that Levinas finds in these verses defies totalist simplifications by way of argument, uncertainty, and perpetual commentary. Levinas begins by recognizing and accepting a lack of certainty and wholeness in the very enterprise of Talmudic redemptive thought. This approach tempers the excesses of heroism and the desire for control by tempering expectations of justification in history. But it does not despair in powerlessness. It looks to something deeper through rigorously and persistently refusing to rest in the comfort of any one position.

In Levinas's discussion of Sanhedrin 99a we are introduced to the somewhat opposing views of Rabbi Johanan and Samuel. What first appears to be a simple debate about whether the Messiah will bring an end to political violence and foreign servitude, or if the messianic period will also mark an end to wider social injustice, reveals itself as a much more subtle discussion of the nature of redemption. "Rabbi Johanan in some way believes in the ideal of a disincarnated spirit, of total grace and harmony, an ideal exempt from any drama; while Samuel, on the other hand, feels the permanent effort of renewal demanded by this spiritual life."¹¹⁹ Levinas is highlighting an argument that approximates the categories of redemption we have discussed. In the case of Johanan and Samuel we might term it a debate about what ways we can consider redemption to supersede worldly conflict and confusion, and what ways it must continue to reflect these realities.

But Levinas admonishes us to avoid oversimplification, pronouncing ideas "correct" and "incorrect," and ascribing Jewish essentialness to just one position. The back and forth of Johanan and Samuel forms our very answer, the contemplating of the

¹¹⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 63

equally valid positions in dialogue being our unending task. Because it is so skillfully written, and because its content is so integral to our investigation, we will consider the full text of his cautionary reminder:

Let us note – for it is characteristic of the way in which the Talmud broaches questions – that the opposing positions of Rabbi Johanan and Samuel, like every position taken up by the Doctors, reflects two positions between which thought somehow oscillates eternally. Does the spirit indicate a quasi-divine life that is free of the limitations of the human condition, or does the human condition, with its limits and its drama, express the very life of the spirit? It is important to emphasize that these two conceptions come within the area of Jewish thought, for these two conceptions express man. It is also important to be on one's guard against the simplistic use of antitheses indulged in by thinkers anxious to sum up the apparent options within Jewish thought.¹²⁰

Both the “disincarnated and gracious spirit”¹²¹ and the limitedness of humanly conditioned redemption express legitimate options in our thinking. So we must look to the very oscillation between them, but even here we must be wary of assuming we have exhausted the options, of resting in any particular place or places. There are aspects of truth in each, and the two coexist together within a more encompassing idea of redemption, just as they do within human beings. There is a place for something approaching a totalist mentality, and we find glimmers of this in Rabbi Johanan. And there is also a place for Samuel's insistence that the messianic era must take place within history, and that injustice, the poor man as perpetual Other in Levinasian terms, will not become a historical accident.¹²²

While we have only dealt with a mere fraction of Levinas's study of these texts it should be enough to begin to compare these ideas with the thinking of Haman, Hitler, and other Amalekites. Amalek represents an affinity for wholeness and triumphal finality

¹²⁰ Ibid. 64

¹²¹ Ibid. 63

¹²² Ibid. 64

with a corresponding aversion to historical particulars that, as irreconcilable remainders, produce unsatisfying outcomes. And the Jew symbolizes in this context the perpetual renewal of the oscillation between redemption-as-completeness and irreconcilability of particulars in the face of Amalekite rigidity. It is the nagging reminder that, in Hazony's words, "no man may claim for himself the authority to dictate truth, to elevate his perspective into the absolute."¹²³

In a discussion of Levinas's take on the Talmudic text, Oona Eisenstadt writes that "salvation, [Levinas] tells us, is not on the table, for the rabbis place such matters under the rubric of the World to Come, which 'the eye has not seen.' In distinction, discussions of the Messianic Era deal with politics." Eisenstadt explains that "Judaism as a whole is characterized by a reluctance to speculate about salvation and a corresponding interest in concrete political possibilities." So it is not that Judaism rejects, or is incapable of acknowledging culminating redemption that transforms the world. Rather, that certain Jewish trends, which we have been highlighting, refocus one's attention back toward the world, to truths that, in Levinas's words "concern the good of the community and public order."¹²⁴

Jewish thought can, and does, accept eschatological comprehensiveness within a larger conversation even as it suppresses the potency of its effects. But Amalek cannot abide such nuance, especially when his desires manifest in fantasies of totalist control. But what happens after moments like Mordechai's refusal, when the two modes come into open conflict? The Jewish position becomes so menacing to the Amalekite, regardless of the actual force that Jews represent, as to warrant all of the seemingly

¹²³ Hazony, Yoram. *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*. 164

¹²⁴ Eisenstadt, Oona. "Anti-Utopianism Revisited." 130
Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies. Vol. 26, No. 4; 2008.

irrational anti-Semitic reactions described by Hazony, up to and including attempted Jewish annihilation. It is in this light that we come to understand Haman's inordinate response.

Along with the physical destruction that actions based on totalist fantasies have entailed, there has been a psychological, or perhaps a spiritual, component to the destruction that grows greater for the victims as the event itself fades into their collective memory. After anti-Semitic attacks Jews have historically had to reconstruct a sense of redemption, digesting these new traumatic experiences and understanding their purpose within a greater historical perspective.

It is with regard to such experiences – and other instances of suffering, large and small – that we find some of the most fascinating discussions of theodicy, most explicitly in Job, Ecclesiastes and other wisdom literature. But *Esther* is particularly prescient when considering the most extreme instances of Jewish suffering, when the oppressing force is in conflict with Jewishness itself, and when Jewish survival is on the line. During such circumstances questions of divine justice are unavoidable. In this respect *Esther* seems well ahead of its time, prefiguring in some ways the problems in the aftermath of the Shoah.

Marvin Sweeney writes of *Esther*'s special relevance to the Shoah, specifically its position as one of two biblical texts that do not mention God by name (the other being the Song of Solomon). He sees the absence as a key element in the narrative. "As is so often the case in the Shoah and other atrocities or disasters in human experience, the presence of G-d is difficult or impossible to discern," he writes. "On such occasions, human beings

must take the responsibility to act in the face of evil.”¹²⁵ We find the notion of human responsibility, of men and women accepting responsibility, writ large in *Esther*. Hazony, arguing against the popular conception that salvation in *Esther* comes through luck and coincidence, God, understood in a rather simplistic and totalizing manifestation, tells us that the events leading to salvation are in fact “planned by Mordechai and Esther, and come to succeed by virtue of their shrewd understanding of the principles of politics, their courage and their faith in the face of an apparently Godless world.”¹²⁶

It is clear from the text of *Esther* that a kind of faith remains. Esther’s and Mordechai’s notion of the hidden or absent God is not compatible with the Amalekite notion. In contrast, their faith remains and it becomes, somewhat paradoxically, a faith in an absent God and a conviction that there remains an imperative to act righteously as though God were present. The key passages in the text come when Mordechai responds to Esther’s worries that she will not be received by the king if she goes to him to plead the case of the Jews. “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Esther 4.13-14).¹²⁷

There are several ways to interpret this, the most obvious but also the most unlikely being that Esther will be found out as a Jew and killed alongside her fellows. The opposite is much more probable – that her best chance of survival lies in remaining silent about her Jewishness. Another interpretation, which lends insight to our discussion,

¹²⁵ Sweeney, Marvin. Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology. 222

¹²⁶ Hazony, Yoram. The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther. 5

¹²⁷ The Jewish Publication Society. The Jewish Study Bible. 1631

is that Mordechai is, in effect, challenging her courage and sense of responsibility as a Jew. Now is her opportunity to use her position for the benefit of the Jews. To not act would be to abdicate the presumption that she has attained her position for the benefit of others. She would have chosen ruthless desire and the Amalekite idea that action, or inaction, can be justified by its end result, regardless of the collateral damage. She would have succumbed not just to the belief that God is absent but that even an absent God is not to be feared. She and her father's house would truly perish, as she would have separated herself from something essential to the Judaism of her ancestors.¹²⁸

And the vanguard against such thinking is Mordechai's central claim, that salvation is inevitable regardless of whether or not she participates, that for her it is a question of her own salvation and not that of others. Mordechai's position is, in a way, vindicated twice. He is correct in his belief that salvation will come, and it comes in large part as a result of the persuasiveness of this very argument. But there is a foreboding that emerges within the salvation itself. In chapter 9 Mordechai organizes a militarily and psychologically successful counterattack against the genocidal wheels which Haman had already set in motion, slaughtering over 75,000 people. He then establishes the festival of Purim as a remembrance. And chapter 10 brings the narrative to a close by succinctly remarking that Mordechai maintained his favor with the king and continued to seek the welfare of the Jews.

Hazoni argues that these chapters may be overlooked in certain settings due to discomfort with the violence perpetrated by the Jews.¹²⁹ While such a reaction is an understandable and valid rejection of seemingly inordinate violence, we must confront

¹²⁸ Hazoni, Yoram. The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther. 141

¹²⁹ Ibid. 215

the problems that arise from the episode. The Jewish counterattack, incited by a righteous purpose, nonetheless perpetrates horrific, arguably genocidal, atrocities of its own. It would be reasonable, then, to suggest that we can connect such actions with a causal relationship to the overall narrative of salvation in *Esther*. In such instances the difference between the Jew and Amalek becomes difficult to discern. Mordechai's refusal to give up his belief in salvation, arguably the lynchpin of the entire narrative, becomes suspect.

And along with this very serious problem there is perhaps another aspect of the closing remarks that does not sit well. Mordechai's ongoing concern with establishing the best possible situation for the Jewish community, and the fact that danger did not subside with the defeat of Haman and his advisors, betrays the peril with which the Jews remain fraught. There is not, in fact, a culmination. Even in triumph Mordechai is preparing for the next chapter of Jewish suffering. This development undercuts the certainty of salvation, puts the absence of God in even sharper focus, and points to the continued persistence of rupture even in Jewish victory and dominance. While the story is itself one of triumph the anxiety it permits prefigures the Shoah, with which this narrative cannot now escape critical comparison.

We have reached what may very well be the most significant point of divergence between *Esther* and the Shoah. Where Mordechai was vindicated in faith and in action the Shoah allowed for neither possibility. This time there was no Mordechai and no Esther, and one wonders how their presence could have possibly made a difference. There was no bumbling Ahashverosh to be wielded and manipulated as an instrument, only belligerent ideologues and bureaucratic cogs in power. Social propaganda and technological ability were such that the public acquiescence and the bureaucratic

efficiency with which the crimes were committed remain unparalleled. As a result the sheer magnitude of the crime is incomprehensible in any comparable sense. Never before was there been such a directed effort to devastate the very soul of the Jew or any human being, to strip away all humanity, to blur the distinction between living and dead.

Mordechai and Esther successfully affirmed their faith in the hidden God through their actions and courage. Not only could there have been no success during the Shoah, but there could not even have been a meaningful principled stand. Between what could one choose? The anti-Semitic sensitivity, which we have found represented by Amalek as a basic human condition, had reached such a cacophonous expression that even in survival the implications of the experience continue to put Jewishness in jeopardy. It remains to be seen whether even the most radical expressions of a hidden or an absent God retain their pertinence, whether one can continue to speak of redemption of any kind, and whether the aftermath marks a more ultimate triumph of the Nazis and Amalekite thinking.

Ω

The Messiah Who Mourns

We now return to Levinas's "Messianic Texts" in order to more fully understand the intricacies of Talmudic notions of redemption, how they might speak to and beyond the Shoah, and what troubles the Shoah continues to pose. Levinas plunges us into the minefield of redemptive discourse with the second part of his study, entitled *Is the Coming of the Messianic Era Conditional or Unconditional?* It is a study of pages 97b and 98a of Tractate Sanhedrin. Samuel, ever skeptical of any disentangled external grace,

returns, but here he is arguing with Rab instead of Rabbi Johanan. Rab's opening position seems relatively clear but Samuel's is less straightforward.

Rab said: All the predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning.¹³⁰ [clarifying notes appear in Levinas's text]

Rab's thesis contains two significant parts. It represents a form of totalist thinking in that it speaks of an outside pronouncement upon history, and it also occupies itself with human agency and responsibility, placing the burden of redemption on human beings. It resonates with the faith of Mordechai in that it affirms the certainty of salvation just as it seeks salvation through human responsibility.

It is much less obvious from the outset what to make of Samuel's retort. Levinas begins by presenting three opinions as to who Samuel is alluding to as being in mourning. The first is that God is in mourning as a result of the reality of suffering within history. It is sufficient, therefore, that God simply keep the period of mourning because "*the objective order of things cannot remain eternally in check*: it cannot remain eternally in a state of disorder; things will work out, and they will do so objectively." This sets up an opposition to Rab's emphasis on human efficacy. In this perspective "one does not need to wait for the individual effort," which, Levinas reminds us, "is virtually negligible and gets drowned in the magnificent and reasonable course of historic events."¹³¹

Levinas then presents us with a second opinion as to who is mourning. The opinion softens the opposition between Rab and Samuel, leaving space for a compromise of sorts. Here it is Israel who is suffering and Israel who is in mourning. Redemption

¹³⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 69

¹³¹ Ibid. 70

remains objective, external, but is sparked by a moral concern for human suffering. It does not require repentance, that is, it does not require full human awareness and conscious action, but it still provides a place in the process for human experience. While it reconciles the stricter antagonism of the positions with which we began, it becomes problematic in its seeming justification of suffering. If the human being who suffers inaugurates with her suffering the process of her own deliverance, it compromises “the dignity of the victim who, without having deserved it, suffers absurdly the repercussions of historical necessities.”¹³² To put the problem explicitly, such a conception would place the events of the Shoah, and the suffering of its victims, in a central redemptive role. The Shoah then becomes a Holocaust, that is, a sacrifice completely consumed by fire, a religious offering.

Levinas then brings us to a third opinion that deals directly with the problem of suffering as a moral category of redemption. It is the position of the seventeenth-century commentator Maharsha, who, Levinas speculates, “is probably shocked by the idea of a redemption which is obtained by the sole effect of suffering and without any positive virtue being required, something that reeks of Christianity.”¹³³ For Maharsha, suffering plays a role but only because it incites one to repentance. There is a “special place” for suffering within a redemptive scheme: “it is not yet moral initiative, but it is through suffering that *a freedom may be aroused*.” Suffering thus reconciles external salvation with human agency through moral freedom. Here we seem to rest in a temporary solution – salvation is dependent on God and it is also dependent on human beings, and the

¹³² Ibid. 70

¹³³ Ibid. 70

relationship is established through suffering as part of a process. Both aspects are valid, both are necessary, but even now a problem remains.

Levinas offers a fourth option. In his own interpretation, it is the Messiah who is in mourning, the Messiah who suffers. We will discuss the specifics of this soon, but first, let us consider more closely the underlying debate in the three opinions presented above.

After the above exegeses we are still left with a basic difference: “Either morality – that is to say, the efforts made by men who are masters of their intentions and acts – will save the world, or else what is needed is an objective event that surpasses morality and the individual’s good intentions.”¹³⁴ The problem of the Shoah puts these positions in contrast with one another, and it also points to the inadequacy of Maharsha’s reconciliation. The Shoah demands each of these positions just as it will not be contained by either, and it will certainly not be sufficiently explained away through suffering and repentance as a process by which the world is redeemed.

The debate over repentance as the instigator of redemption is continued, surprisingly, in the past. Levinas explains that the text presents the discussion between Samuel and Rab as a reprisal of an earlier debate between two Tannaim, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. Here the discussion now turns explicitly to repentance and redemption. While both see repentance as the predecessor of salvation, Rabbi Eliezer stresses human choice – “If Israel repent, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed” – while Rabbi Joshua emphasizes the extent that worldly events can spark repentance – “But the Holy One, blessed be He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees shall be as cruel as Haman’s whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and he will thus bring them

¹³⁴ Ibid. 72

back to the right path.”¹³⁵ From our perspective we can see the possible placement of the Shoah within a redemptive process as being at stake. Rabbi Joshua rejects what Levinas calls “free deliverance,” the idea that God will sit idly by as human beings amble toward the Messiah. But the alternative that he proposes is one in which “the phenomenon of Haman (or Hitler) is placed in the perspective of messianism.” While repentance through human decision remains the decisive factor, God will incite it through the worldly means of cruelty and suffering. This position is thoroughly untenable when it comes to the Shoah because it places the event within a redemptive narrative. It portrays the Shoah as part of the divine plan, a repulsive thought that insults the memory of the victims and transforms redemption into a demonic parody of itself.

What follows appears to be an almost irrelevant exchange of biblical verses. The Tannaim seemingly trade verses like blows, dredging up more and more scriptural quotations to support their position. Rabbi Eliezer asks, for example, “is it not written, *Return unto me, and I will return unto you* (Malachi 3:7),” emphasizing “return” as the operative principle. And Rabbi Joshua punctuates the objective aspect of salvation, which, Levinas notes, belongs in a category of “violence,” with “*I am the master over you: and I will take you out of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion* (Jeremiah 3:14)”¹³⁶

This continues for a time until, ostensibly out of nowhere, the debate comes to a close after Rabbi Joshua quotes Daniel 12.7, which contains a concrete timetable, an appeal to God’s promise, and an anticipation that “all things shall be finished,” which,

¹³⁵ Ibid. 72

¹³⁶ Ibid. 73

according to Levinas, amounts to an “announcement of unconditional deliverance.” And here, shockingly, Rabbi Eliezer remains silent.

Why does Rabbi Eliezer not respond? Surely he could have continued forever quoting verses that emphasized “return” and so many others that support his thesis, but instead he keeps silent. In order to understand the real issues that have been playing out in the exchange “we must first neglect the points that initially seem to carry the force of the summarized argument,” Levinas tells us in classic Talmudic fashion, “and we must neglect less the verses themselves to which the interlocutors have recourse.”¹³⁷ In the apparently stagnant back and forth of the exchange of verses there has been a definite progression through which a nuanced conversation has been taking place under the surface.

In Rabbi Eliezer’s first argument – “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings (Jeremiah 3:22)” – Levinas tells us that “the essential words are ‘I will heal.’”¹³⁸ The language is medical. If the backsliding – illness, or corruption of evil – is such that it requires medication it must also require an initial act on the part of the sick. The first overture resides in the decision of the human being; salvation requires enough self-awareness in the sick person to seek the doctor. Levinas calls this sentiment “the opposite of the logic of grace” and finds in it “the eternal requirement of a thought that regards sin as breaking with the eternal order, a free being in selfish isolation.”¹³⁹

But the requirement that Rabbi Joshua invokes in his response is “no less eternal.” He responds with the language of finance, quoting Isaiah 53.3, “*ye have sold yourselves*

¹³⁷ Ibid. 74

¹³⁸ Ibid. 74

¹³⁹ Ibid. 75

for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money.”¹⁴⁰ In this view sin is essentially idolatry, a prostitution of sorts, the selling of oneself. Levinas labels it a “lapse,” in that, for Rabbi Joshua, it is indifference to what is right, an offence that demands a pardon, rather than a sickness. Sin can be construed here even as a form of ignorance, lack of education, stemming from “intellectual and doctrinal” flaws. The sinful person sells herself “for nought;” she has been suckered into a raw deal. If this is the case, must we not be forgiven our debt; must it not be “redeemed from the outside”?¹⁴¹

Rabbi Eliezer’s response – “*Return unto me, and I will return unto you*” (Malachi 3.7) – invokes once again “the eternal requirement of morality: the total reciprocity between free people, the equality found between freedoms,” that is, the claim that if sin can only be overcome in a world where moral choice truly exists, the first move must be internal. And Rabbi Joshua’s further insistence on unconditional salvation prompts Levinas, and us, to consider whether freedom does not “rest on a preliminary commitment,” whether the relationship between human beings and God is not closer to a conjugal union which continues to shape us no matter what, even in our possible rejection of God.¹⁴²

Rabbi Eliezer – “In returning and rest ye shall be saved” (Isaiah 30.15) – then reminds us that human existence does not consist of being acted upon. It is “the possibility of suspending the hold things have on us,” the “leisure of being aware, the freedom of thought,” which provides us with a possibility of return that is consistent with our agency as free beings. Rabbi Joshua’s reply evokes “him whom man despiseth” (Isaiah 49.7), servants, workers, and variously underdeveloped people who do not enjoy

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 73

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 75-76

¹⁴² Ibid. 76

the luxury of leisure and self-awareness. Surely some external action must take place, if only to provide for the initial impetus.¹⁴³

It would be easy here to get lost in the scholarly struggle and fail to notice the momentous turn that is about to raise the stakes dramatically. Rabbi Eliezer builds upon the case he has been making about freedom but he adds a striking twist: “*If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return unto me?* (Jeremiah 4:1).” The verse presents the same outlook about free morality and human agency that we have heard before, but the particle “if” tells us that we are entering a realm of uncertainty. This “if” represents the anxiety that God will not redeem, and that neither will Israel return. It speaks to the precarious distinction between Mordechai and Amalek: If God is hidden for both Amalek and Mordechai, the only difference is Mordechai’s continued faith even in God’s absence. If Mordechai does not return, then the Amalekite position triumphs. Redemption, in any form, is no longer inevitable, ethics is irrelevant, and there exists the possibility that justice will never emerge at all.

The high stakes are made clearer by Rabbi Eliezer’s choice of tone in presenting the statement in the form of a question. “To require absolute morality is to require absolute freedom,” Levinas explains, and this is the only possible consequence of absolute freedom: “the possibility of immorality.” If human beings are truly free to choose then they are free not to return to God. “The possibility of an immoral world is therefore included in the conditions for morality.”¹⁴⁴ This is a Godlessness with which Mordechai and Esther seemingly never confronted. It is a Godlessness that excludes the

¹⁴³ Ibid. 76-77

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 77

possibility of salvation and ensures the triumph of evil. It is a Godlessness that confirms the most reprehensible aspects of the Nazi proposition.

It is within this context that we can better understand Levinas's suggestion that the Messiah is the mourner in Samuel's response to Rab. "The Messiah," Levinas tells us, "is ready to come this very day, but everything depends on man. And the suffering of the Messiah and, consequently, the suffering of humanity which suffers in the Messiah and the suffering of humanity for whom the Messiah suffers, are not enough to save humanity."¹⁴⁵ Levinas's thesis is difficult to swallow, but it is just as difficult to circumvent. It is especially hard after the Shoah, which revealed a new depth to which humanity is capable of sinking. Even so, if we go back to Samuel's statement, we can ask this question: If it is indeed the Messiah who is in mourning, and if this is due to humanity's inability to redeem itself, is it still sufficient for the mourner to keep his period of mourning?

It is Rabbi Eliezer's problematic verse, and its implications, that prompt Rabbi Joshua's definitive, unconditional response. And they also prompt Rabbi Eliezer's own silence. Levinas explains that any argument now would be tantamount to the denial of God, "that is to say, the absolute certainty of the defeat of Evil." This is God in "His purest essence... the very principal of the triumph of good." To not believe that the Messiah will come, that good will triumph over Evil, is to not believe in God. Levinas explains that the notion that the Messiah will come when the world is completely sinful is itself a sort of response to this problem. For the promise of redemption to necessarily be fulfilled, there must be a certainty that it will happen no matter what. This is "the extreme

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 72

consequence of an obvious proposition: even if the world is absolutely plunged in sin, the Messiah will come.”¹⁴⁶

Rabbi Joshua has, ostensibly, won the argument. He has called Rabbi Eliezer’s bluff, as it were; Rabbi Eliezer would not go so far as to deny God. But as readers of the exchange we do well to remind ourselves that the conclusions are not as straightforward as that – they never are with Talmud. Rabbi Eliezer is silenced for the moment, but his objection is not withdrawn. There is a reason that the Talmudic discussion does not begin and end with the final statement by Rabbi Joshua. As Levinas explains, the resuscitation of the argument in the time of Rab and Samuel is an indicator of the eternal character of the debate.¹⁴⁷ Rabbi Eliezer’s argument remains alive, and it maintains its place within Judaism, perennially disrupting our hopes for salvation. The Shoah once again arouses this old dilemma in frightening forms, and it forces us to ask the awful question: should Rabbi Eliezer have spoken?

∩

Leonard Cohen: Poet of Persistence

The ideas in the above Talmudic exchanges are not meant to reside exclusively in the minds and the language of scholars. These are concerns for all Jews, and transposed to different terminology, for all human beings, they are relevant to all. The Shoah did not differentiate between the Talmudic scholar and the ordinary Jew, and neither is the trauma experienced by each of a fundamentally different kind. The difference, if there is one, lies in the realm of expression. The playful way that Rabbis Joshua and Eliezer command scriptural excerpts to make their case testifies against a rigid formality. And

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 77

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 78

Levinas explains that the liberty with which they translate passages, and even their seeming forgetfulness at certain points, is “an indication that the argument is less formal than it appears.”¹⁴⁸ For these reasons we will follow the direction of the Rabbis and turn to a somewhat unconventional source as we begin to explore the ditch that we have just dug for ourselves: the contemporary poet, singer, and songwriter Leonard Cohen.

While Leonard Cohen quite openly dabbles in other traditions – employing symbols of Christianity and Zen Buddhism in his work – the tone and the content of his songs and poetry have an unquestionable Jewish character. His grasp of the underlying emotions that characterize the confusion we have so far discussed in other, more academic terms, is remarkable. And he is able to express these emotions through poetry and song in a way that is inaccessible to the academic, providing us with opportunities to explore these issues with new eyes, and perhaps to reach new understandings, if only by way of example, of how Judaism might proceed. It would be wrong to assume that the interpretations we will find as we look through his work are authoritative, or that they are the only possible interpretations, but the relevance of Cohen to our purposes remains, nonetheless, undeniable.

Cohen, who was born Montreal in 1934, did not have a direct experience of the Shoah. This places him to some extent outside of the trauma experienced by survivors, but it does not preclude him from his position as one of the more prominent Jews who has admirably concerned himself, in various ways, with the reality of Judaism in the aftermath of the Shoah. He is an important voice among the post-Shoah generations of Jews who must acknowledge, and in some way incorporate, the trauma into their understanding of redemption and the world. His music, while it rarely overpowers the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 73

force of the words, adds another level to his work and allows Cohen to tap into something even deeper.

His works sometimes find their foundation in a sense of betrayal and of naïveté readjusted by historical circumstance. In his song “The Old Revolution,” from the album Songs from a Room, we find the ominous chorus: “Into this furnace I ask you now to venture, / you whom I cannot betray.” It is difficult not to hear this as the voice of God, or of redemptive hope more generally, reassuringly addressing imminent victims of the crematoria. But in this instance, as is often the case in similar moments in Cohen’s work, it is difficult not to cringe with knowledge that these victims were indeed betrayed. The song continues: “I fought in the old revolution / on the side of the ghost and the king. / Of course I was very young / and I thought we were winning; / I can’t pretend I still feel very much like singing / as they carry the bodies away.”¹⁴⁹

There are several important ideas being expressed in these lines. They begin with an acknowledgment of having fought for something, but the language itself is pejorative, regretful. What is an old revolution but a failed revolution? It implies a cause steeped in tradition, but one perhaps no longer clearly relevant. The ghost suggests both death and vacuousness, and the king seems to represent an antiquated notion of power. Youth is equated with an immature triumphal attitude, and the final two lines counter these ideals with horror and depression. We are left to contemplate the contrasting imagery of bodies being carried away and a singer who feels he must sing but cannot even pretend to do so with feeling.

¹⁴⁹ Cohen, Leonard. Songs from a Room. “The Old Revolution” Columbia Records: 1969

The next song on the same album finds Cohen in a more actively confrontational mode, as if he had finished contemplating the betrayal and had begun to consider its implications. In the aptly named “The Butcher,” Cohen comes right to the fore with his verbal assault on God: “I came upon a butcher, / he was slaughtering a lamb, / I accused him there / with his tortured lamb.” It might be tempting to understand the butcher here as any unspecified murderer, were it not for the subsequent lines: “He said, ‘Listen to me, child, / I am what I am / and you, you are my only son’.” “I am what I am” seems like a reference to the common English translation of the name of God in Exodus 3.14, “I am that I am” (*ehyeh asher ehyeh* in Hebrew), but we must also read the line as a response to Cohen’s accusation of the butcher. Biblically, this line represents a pinnacle moment in the formation of the prototypical redemptive narrative of liberation from Egypt, in which the promise of God’s eternal presence is affirmed, but in Cohen’s incarnation the presence becomes demonic.

God’s response here is a guilty acknowledgment of complicity, coupled with a reminder of our own entanglement with God, our being the only hope for redemption as the “only son.” But Cohen cuts to the core of a related issue with the lines, “I saw some flowers growing up / where that lamb fell down; / was I supposed to praise my Lord, / make some kind of joyful sound?”¹⁵⁰ What are we supposed to do, how are we supposed to act in the aftermath of the Shoah? Even the most beautiful things seem somehow tainted after the knowledge that the world has also produced atrocities like Auschwitz. How much more awful is it then to think that our only option if redemption is to take place, that is, if we continue to have faith in God, is to accept the Shoah’s role in that

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, Leonard. Songs from a Room. “The Butcher”

scheme, to be joyful as the flowers grow out of the carcass of the lamb? And yet, the existence of Cohen's music and poetry is a commentary on this in itself.

One of the richest examples of Cohen's dealing with such themes, and going even further, is the song "The Night Comes On," from the album Various Positions. The song features a similarly tragic father figure to "The Butcher," but here we have a motherly voice as well. After Cohen's admission of fear of "the thunder and the lightning," and the worry that "I'll never come through this alone," we are told of the mother, "She said, 'I'll be with you, / my shawl wrapped around you, / my hand on your head when you go'." This is the eternal promise of the *Shekhina*, the feminine aspect of God that shares in Israel's suffering and exile. It is the promise of God's perpetual presence. But the experience of the father presents a more troubling image:

We were fighting in Egypt / when they signed this agreement / that nobody else
had to die. / There was this terrible sound, / and my father went down, / with a
terrible wound in his side. / He said, "Try to go on, / take my books, take my gun,
/ remember, my son, how they lied."¹⁵¹

There is much to unpack in these lines. The reference to fighting in Egypt suggests several interpretations. One way to view this is simply as a reference to the battles that took place in Egypt during World War Two. Perhaps the significance of this particular front, however, is the fact that Egypt was the Nazi gateway to British Palestine, where, if they had succeeded, they would have subjected the Jews there to the same fate Jews were meeting in Europe. So Egypt perhaps represents the only barrier to an even more total destruction of Jewry.

¹⁵¹ Cohen, Leonard. Various Positions. "The Night Comes On"
Columbia Records: 1984

But “Egypt” contains meaning far beyond the military events of World War Two. It is the birthplace of the nation of Israel, the pressure cooker in which the Jewish people were formed, in which redemptive understanding was formed. And of course it was not only through physical strife, but also strong theological and spiritual conflict, that Israel was fashioned into a distinctive people and led to their exodus. Could this lend another layer of meaning to the notion of “fighting in Egypt”?

But then “they signed the agreement / that nobody else had to die.” For our World War Two explanation this seems like excellent news, but we find these lines juxtaposed with the father’s death and a repetition of the word “terrible” – “There was this terrible sound, / and my father went down / with a terrible wound in his side.”¹⁵² Perhaps the news came too late, perhaps the chain of command was faulty in some way, or perhaps there was some kind of accident. After all, we are not directly told, “my father was shot,” or something comparably explicit. The death here is reminiscent of “The Captain,” another song from Various Positions, in which we are told, “Now the Captain he was dying, / but the Captain wasn’t hurt.”¹⁵³

Is it possible that the deaths in these two instances, apparently without cause, are in fact a result of the “agreement”? If we can entertain the notion there seem to be at least two possible explanations. One is that the end of fighting allowed for a moment to take stock of the casualties and the theodical impediments that the Shoah presents, and that this kills the father, who might represent God, Jewish tradition, or both. Another is that the father is somehow killed by the end of the fighting itself, the totalizing resolution of competing views with an agreement that “nobody else had to die,” that is, the false belief

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Cohen, Leonard. Various Positions. “The Captain”

that we have somehow transcended the archaic past through reasonable agreements, treaties, and universal humanism. This echoes the sentiment that Cohen expresses in another song, “There is a War,” from the album, New Skin for the Old Ceremony, where he tells us that “there is a war between the ones who say there is a war / and the ones who say there isn’t.”¹⁵⁴ And this second thesis appears vindicated in the father’s final directive: “Remember, my son, how they lied.”

But in the instruction a task emerges as we are told, “try to go on, / take my books, take my gun.” Cohen is echoing the Jewish imperative after the Shoah, we must try to go on but we must simultaneously “remember how they lied,” we must accept the lessons to be learned from the experience, no matter how blasphemous it seems to consider these lessons; we must rejoice in the flowers that grow from the tortured lamb. Going forward we have our fathers’ books – our textual tradition – and their guns – the various weapons with which they have fought, or acted within history.

The inclusion of guns along with books is interesting for other reasons. It is another clue that the fight has not truly concluded with the signing of the agreement, for what is the use of guns if nobody else has to die? It could also be a reference to the political and military power that Jews established for themselves in the aftermath of the Shoah with the State of Israel. This development is, of course, the most obvious, and therefore the most explicitly problematic example of flowers emerging from the murdered lamb.

The desire to avoid making the choice between accepting a totalizing redemption that incorporates the Shoah and its lessons, on the one hand, and refusing to allow for the

¹⁵⁴ Cohen, Leonard. New Skin for the Old Ceremony. “There is a War” Columbia Records: 1974

possibility of meaning in the Shoah, thus denying belief in God as the promise of redemption, on the other, is understandable. It is expressed in Cohen's commentary on the father's dying words. "I'd like to pretend that my father was wrong," he sings, "But you don't want to lie, not to the young."¹⁵⁵ It seems important to be cognizant of the repetition of the word "lie." In the first instance the father is telling us to remember how "they lied," but now we are being cautioned – "you don't want to lie" – particularly about what we say to children.

There is a connection between these two lies. They are of a kind in that they both deceive the young and naïve, and that the deception is quite alluring. There is a reflexive desire to whitewash much of the gruesome reality of the Shoah when speaking about it to the young, and there are very good reasons for this sort of tact. How dare we rob them of their innocence, their chance to "think they are winning" like the protagonist of "The Old Revolution?" But our children will eventually be the inheritors of the tradition, of our fathers' books and guns, and they will shape the Jewish tradition after we are gone. They must not be lied to, or else they too will be taken in by the lie of those who "signed the agreement" and say that there is no war.

Cohen's warning against lying to the young does not in any way solve the contradictions above, but it makes an important, related point about how we must approach the subject. Cohen sings of an overwhelming urge to recede into a calmness that he equates with the figure of a woman, be it a mother or a lover. The solace he finds in the feminine embrace allows him to temporarily forget the troubles which he has connected with his father, to lose himself in a feeling of distance and otherworldliness. This urge appears several times throughout the song, and there is usually some sort of

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, Leonard. Various Positions. "The Night Comes On"

counterbalancing rebuke that follows. Often, these sentiments begin with the lines “And the night comes on, / It’s very calm.” In the first instance he continues, “I wanted the night to go on and on,” but the mother figure admonishes him: “But she said, ‘Go back to the world.’”¹⁵⁶ It is the recurring emphasis on returning to the world that seems closest to any definitive conclusion in the song. The first two lines repeat again, just before the line about wanting to believe that the father was wrong – denial, another evasive possibility.

The theme of returning to the world reemerges as a response to his admission of guilt about wanting a way out: “I needed so much / to have nothing to touch, / I’ve always been greedy that way.” But here the response comes from children: “But my son and my daughter / climbed out of the water, / crying ‘Papa, you promised to play!’ / And they lead me away, / to the great surprise, / it’s ‘Papa, don’t peek, / Papa, cover your eyes!’ / And they hide, they hide in the world.” There is a certain contrast with Cohen’s earlier concern for the young. We are reminded that, while we have responsibilities as to how we teach children about history, there is also a playful obliviousness to suffering that has its own merit, and that children teach us something important about how we might overcome the gravity of certain issues, at least for a time. Like Cohen the children are hiding, but rather than in some transcendent elsewhere they hide in the world. It is Cohen’s obligations to his children that force him to overcome his need “to have nothing to touch.”

While Cohen certainly does not provide answers, he stands as an unequivocal advocate of persistence, of returning to the world. And on this point we can return to where we began and find the *Book of Esther* in agreement. Though, as we have seen, the experiences are comparable only to a point, Esther and Mordechai, along with Cohen, are

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

struggling to maintain a semblance of their tradition in dire circumstances. They are desperately attempting to preserve the remnants of their faith, to pass along their Judaism to the next generation.

If we view the *Book of Esther* as a kind response to the aftermath of a catastrophe – the destruction of Judah and dispersal of the Jews – perhaps new layers of meaning will open up for us. Maybe the case is not that Mordechai expresses his Godless faith with youthful naïveté, but that he does so with full realization of how perilous his situation is, and with a stubborn refusal to embrace a lofty emptiness and give up on the world. In this scenario the salvation of the Jews and defeat of Haman and his cohorts is not an ultimate redemption but one of many skirmishes along an uncertain path. His faith exists and becomes all the more relevant in the face of danger, but it does not constitute an appeal to comprehensive redemptive modes that ignore the facts on the ground. It remains fully in the world, and it consists of striving with all of his being to protect what he can. Together with Cohen he might sing:

Through the days of shame that are coming, / through the nights of wild distress;
/ Though your promise count for nothing, / you must keep it nonetheless. / You
must keep it for the captain / whose ship has not been built, / for the mother in
confusion, / her cradle still unfilled.¹⁵⁷

Ω

¹⁵⁷ Cohen, Leonard. Various Positions. “Heart with No Companion”

Gold and Glass: Ethical Rupture in Mystical Union?

When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me.

– Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity. 79

Dissonance-Reduction and Rubenstein's Problem

In his book, After Auschwitz, Richard L. Rubenstein offers a fascinating critique of Western thought with the Shoah as his point of departure. He finds in Christianity an overwhelming urge for “wholeness,”¹⁵⁸ for what we have elsewhere called totalizing thinking (not to be confused with Yoram Hazony’s “totalist fantasy), or what Emmanuel Levinas calls totality. The urge pushes one to employ “dissonance-reduction,” a term Rubenstein borrows from psychology. Dissonance-reduction is the attempt to smooth over difference in order to maintain the structural integrity of overarching narratives or explanations. Rubenstein places anti-Semitism within this framework, understanding the Jews’ special relationship to Christianity – that is, the uniqueness of the Jewish threat to the Western world – different from ordinary xenophobia in that it speaks from the inside.

Judaism speaks from within Western culture, utilizes its terms and symbols, and comes not only from a shared mythical past but one in which the Jews seem to retain a secret disconfirming knowledge. “Thus,” Rubenstein tells us, “by virtue of (a) the radical asymmetry between the Christian claim that Jesus is the Savior of humanity and the Jewish insistence on his fallible humanity and (b) the dissonance-reducing strategies

¹⁵⁸ Rubenstein, Richard L. After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism. 89

employed by Christianity,” the Jews find themselves constantly under threat from a more powerful rival.¹⁵⁹

Rubenstein finds this equally in classical Christendom as in the post-Enlightenment Western world, if not more so in the case of the latter. The emancipation of European Jewry, for Rubenstein, was itself an exercise in totality that “did away with official recognition of very real differences in tradition, culture, and function.” This coincided with the rise of the Hegelian “civil society,” in which “a condition of *universal otherhood* displaced a society with some measure of *brotherhood*, however tenuous [emphasis mine].” Here the groundwork is laid for a more comprehensive totalizing process, and perhaps the flux and uncertainty that resulted from the transition even served to increase the urge to eliminate the threat of difference. The move from “brotherhood” to “otherhood” also marked a significant shift in societal structure. The Jew could now become a neighbor precisely because society had become a neighborhood of strangers.¹⁶⁰

Whereas difference was once relatively tolerated, and violence against Jews was more or less confined to the brutish minority, absolute totality had now acquired a rational grounding in the structure of society itself. The change that allowed for the Shoah, then, was a move from the emotional anti-Semitism of the pogrom to the rational anti-Semitism of Hitler and others in the modern age.¹⁶¹ With this in mind, along with reference to other realities of the modern world, Rubenstein seems to answer his own question: if “total, physical elimination of the most significant source of potential disconfirmation has been a perennial temptation in Christendom.... why [did] that

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 95

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 110

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 119

temptation [...] not become official policy until the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942”¹⁶²

Rubenstein concludes that the Shoah was an inevitable result of the direction of Western civilization, and that the progress that has been made in the past few centuries – technological advancement along with political, social, and economic restructuring – only served to foster a more widely sanctioned and devastatingly effective form of dissonance-reduction. It is in this context that we can begin to understand Rubenstein’s provocative thesis:

...the relative silence on the subject [of genocide] stems from the inability of scholars, religious leaders, and the general public to face the fact that, far from being a relapse into barbarism or an atypical “episode,” *genocide is an intrinsic expression of modern civilization as we know it*. Put differently, the genocidal destructiveness of our era can best be understood as an expression of some of its “most significant political, moral, religious and demographic tendencies.”¹⁶³

But while it may be cathartic to continue in this vein, to thoroughly chart the flaws and hypocrisies of Western civilization, it will serve our purposes well enough to simply acknowledge the problem that Rubenstein presents. As Jews living in the aftermath of the Shoah, we cannot extricate ourselves from the depths of our trauma by simply cataloguing the reasons and analyzing the rationale of the perpetrators. The above arguments would cause us little concern if they did not continue to threaten us personally, if they did not continue to exercise their grasp upon the viability of a Jewish future. They would not be so problematic if we did not also find something of ourselves in them.

In his study of these Western tendencies Rubenstein makes reference to the fact that the urge underlying totality is experienced in the Jewish tradition as well. “In fairness

¹⁶² Ibid. 94

¹⁶³ Ibid. 123. In quotations Rubenstein refers to p. 6 of another book of his, [The Cunning of History](#).

to the Church,” he writes, “it must be stated that the Synagogue has an analogous goal.”¹⁶⁴ And he follows the line of thought through when he tells us that “faith in a transcendent God is... rendered problematic by the promise of redemption itself.”¹⁶⁵ Is not the thinking behind a belief in a God who redeems, of a world which will become complete, at the center of the genocidal project of which the Jews were victim? If Judaism is to survive the Shoah, must it not instead emphasize the notions of ruptured redemption that the Nazis found so threatening, or else become complicit in the Shoah itself by perpetuating totality? For Rubenstein, the continuation of Jewish existence in light of this dilemma requires a rejection of so-called normative Judaism, traditional theodicy, the God of History, and the ideas of covenant and election.

Zachary Braiterman, in (God) After Auschwitz, restates Rubenstein’s argument succinctly: “To posit a just and omnipotent God covenanted to Israel *and active in its affairs* could only mean that God justly willed the murder of six million Jewish people.”¹⁶⁶ Rubenstein responded to this problem by variously embracing Buddhism, what he termed “Greek” or “pagan” thought, and Gershom Scholem’s interpretation of a fundamentally antinomian Lurianic Kabbalah. While Rubenstein’s contributions to the study of post-Shoah theology through his radically anti-theodical stance should not be minimized, Braiterman reminds us that many of his conclusions rest on his misreading of much of the Jewish textual tradition, that he “bought his radicalism at the price of ignoring antitheodicy from the canon.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 94-95

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 294

¹⁶⁶ Braiterman, Zachary. (God) After Auschwitz. 87

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 164

What Rubenstein is describing by the term dissonance-reduction, and what Braiterman means by theodicy, share something in common with the phenomena that we have labeled triumphal, dominating, totalizing, progressive, or culminating modes of redemptive thought. These are all modes of bypassing the obligation that stems from an awareness of suffering in the other, thereby jeopardizing the precarious foundation that ethical encounter must be based upon. What Rubenstein has rightly highlighted is that the Shoah required such narratives to not only justify crimes in retrospect but, more significantly, to justify crimes before they were committed by appealing to something outside of the relationship of encounter. Therefore, it places all sources from which such thinking springs under suspicion.

Where Braiterman criticizes Rubenstein, and here I would agree, is in his conclusion that there are no alternative modes of redemptive thought in Judaism itself. In chapters two and three of this study we discussed some of the examples that, although not necessarily obviously so, contain critiques similar to Rubenstein's own within Jewish understandings of redemption. These critiques include what Braiterman calls antitheodicy as well as that which Rubenstein has searched for in other traditions, or in "antinomian" Judaism.

If we consider some of the instances of Jewish thought we have discussed, the Korach narrative, Tractate Sanhedrin, and the Mithnagdic movement, for example, we can argue, as Zachary Braiterman has, that Rubenstein too rashly reaches the conclusion that Judaism is untenable.¹⁶⁸ While we agree that Rubenstein was an important player in the re-visioning of Jewish tradition after the Shoah, we are not required to accept the premise that the existence of theodicy in the Jewish tradition spells the end of Judaism's

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 107

relevance. At the same time we can understand and sympathize with his intolerance “of the men and women... who could not or would not understand the difficulties involved in affirming the traditional God of covenant and election after Auschwitz,”¹⁶⁹ and his attempts to “disorient modern Judaism.”¹⁷⁰ But though we do not necessarily reject Rubenstein’s interpretations as being without value, we must acknowledge that his presentation does an injustice to the richness and complexity of the tradition that he deplors.

I maintain that Jewish tradition, which includes so many facets, does in fact contain the necessary conditions for us to address the problems posed by the Shoah, and that much of the most important work that has been done in articulating the Jewish position after the Shoah is influenced by certain trends from within that tradition. To consider this argument we must look at material from both before the Shoah and after. In this chapter, then, we will be comparing the work of post-Shoah Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to certain strains of kabbalistic thought. We will discuss the significance of Levinas’s focus on the problems of totality and the relevance of the kabbalistic trends he chooses to emphasize for Jewish thought after the Shoah.



The Violence of Union: Levinas’s Critique of Mysticism

Comparing Levinas’s thought with that of medieval kabbalists seems at first glance to be a misguided task given Levinas’s stated antipathy toward “mysticism.” But Oona Eisenstadt, in Driven Back to the Text, explains that if we consider the nature of Levinas’s objection to mysticism, and if we carefully parse some of the different strains

¹⁶⁹ Rubenstein, Richard L. After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism. 293

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 110

of Jewish mysticism, there are some significant affinities between Levinasian concerns and those of certain mystics and mystical schools. Levinas's criticism of mysticism is itself quite pertinent to our larger discussion, and it will in fact become a launching pad for our exploration of kabbalistic motifs in Levinas's thought. Eisenstadt finds in Levinas two related concerns regarding mysticism and mystical union in particular. The first is that "such a desire cannot ground an ethics for it takes the mystic away from her fellows in an attempt at lone ascent."¹⁷¹ For Levinas transcendence cannot include annihilation, that is, complete union with God, because it would lose its "as-for-me," its capacity to live out the experience as a being in distinction and relation to others. A mysticism that removes one from her community, cutting off the possibility of a dialogical ethics, then, seems antithetical to a Levinasian perspective. This discussion is reminiscent of Leonard Cohen's desire for "the night to go on and on." Here we would find Levinas in agreement with the injunction to "go back to the world."

Levinas's second concern is broader, but it speaks even more to the problems with transcendence that we found with Rubenstein. Eisenstadt explains the criticism:

The desire for mystical union is a desire for violence, an attempt to make a totality encompassing God or to throw oneself into a totality made by God.... [it] implies an understanding disposed or habituated to totalization; the mystic will focus always on what is common or participatory and ignore difference.¹⁷²

Such a union is violent in that it willfully ignores difference in favor of totality, be it a human projection that contains God or a simple acquiescence to cosmic oneness.

Rubenstein would have certainly labeled this as a form of dissonance-reduction. Not only

¹⁷¹ Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas's Postmodernism. 140 Pittsburgh, Pa. : Duquesne University Press, c2001

¹⁷² Ibid. 141

does it remove one from all communal and relational space, but it actively embraces a wholeness that cannot allow for particularity. Thus, the desire for mystical union appears as a sort of reversal of Levinasian ethics in a two-step movement. It precludes the possibility of encounter just as it implies a sort of domination of the differentiated Other.

Modern Kabbalah scholarship has engaged with this problem, and it has more or less followed the conclusions of Gershom Scholem, who maintained that Jewish mysticism differed from other forms of mysticism in that it was overwhelmingly in opposition to the sort of union described above, ascribing to it instead a uniquely intellectual flavor. If this were the case, Levinas's criticism would be a moot point.

Oona Eisenstadt presents us with a somewhat different picture, however, explaining that the debate on the issue of union “revolves around the meaning of two words: *devekut* (usually translated ‘cleaving’) and *yichud* (usually translated ‘identity’ or ‘union’).” *Devekut*, the more common of the two, seems distinct in meaning from *yichud*, more prevalent in Hasidic texts, where it does indeed seem to suggest annihilation of the self. And she reminds us that “the existence of two words implies the existence of a distinction.”¹⁷³ The existence of a distinction means furthermore, for Eisenstadt, that at least in terms of pre-Hasidic mysticism there is a sense of unity that maintains a distinction between God and the human being. This allows, in the words of Edward Caird, for a “vivid consciousness of moral obligation as involved in the worship of God.”¹⁷⁴

In drawing this conclusion Eisenstadt draws upon the analysis of Moshe Idel, who argues that descriptions of union occur just as frequently in kabbalistic literature as in

¹⁷³ Ibid. 141

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 142

non-Jewish mystical sources,¹⁷⁵ but that even as the mystic interlocks herself with divinity she maintains a basic distinction. He points to a mystical source that equates the ‘cleaving’ of *devekut* with the joining together of two palm dates in an interlocking fashion. He concludes that “cleaving is a closer kind of contact than ‘attaching,’ as exemplified by the contact of a bracelet with a woman’s arm,”¹⁷⁶ but not that it is annihilating. Elsewhere, he tells us, *devekut* is compared to a sexual union.¹⁷⁷ With these examples he presents a picture of cleaving that is in fact a rather intimate unitive experience, but which does not allow for one to lose herself entirely in this union.

As Eisenstadt shows us, such distinction allows for the possibility of affinities between kabbalistic union and Levinasian ethics. These affinitive possibilities comes into even sharper focus as we consider the unitive aspects of Levinas’s own dialogical notions of ethical relation. Eisenstadt explains that in the same section of Levinas’s Totality and Infinity where we found examples of his concern for the ‘as-for-me,’ “Levinas is overwhelmingly concerned to establish *separation* as the ground of relation,” and that he uses language in this section that “is bent to the support of autonomy even to the point of atheism.”

But, Eisenstadt explains, we find later in Totality and Infinity, and throughout the subsequent Otherwise Than Being that this autonomy “is a good thing only if it exists as the ground for relation with others, atheism a good thing as the ground for relation with illeity, and, most pertinently, ‘as-for-me’ a good thing only as the ground for *hineni*.”¹⁷⁸ *Hineni*, Moses’ response during his encounter with the burning bush in Exodus 3, usually

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 143

¹⁷⁶ Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. 38

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 52

¹⁷⁸ Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism. 143

translated as “here I am,” is for Levinas an “‘I am you’ that retains within it a prior as-for-me,” as in Paul Celan’s “I am you if I am I.”¹⁷⁹

So Levinas and the kabbalists are both concerned with a kind of union, but in Levinas there is a wariness of the totalizing annihilation of a certain type of union. He is also wary of the misuse of his terms for totalizing purposes. Eisenstadt says that his criticism of Kabbalah and mysticism can be explained by this wariness, and she suggests that it may be the result of Mithnagdic influences.¹⁸⁰ “There are reasons for the fact that the Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition,” Eisenstadt proposes, explaining that “these reasons guide Levinas to occult the kabbalistic images in his own text and to protect them under a layer of antimystical argument.”¹⁸¹

The assertion that “Levinasian relation is precisely parallel with mystical union,” however, is still not so easily defensible. What remains to be seen is whether there are ways of thinking in Jewish mysticism that also incorporate the wariness of complete union that exists in Levinas’s thought. Eisenstadt lays out the three criteria that mystical union would have to meet in order to be satisfactory to a Levinasian. First, “in its epiphany it must provide access *not to an ultimate coherence but to an ultimate incoherence* [emphasis mine].” The revelatory moment that comes with any unitive experience must not smooth over difference with sameness. Instead, it must “exist as an anarchy destroying all categories or samenesses.”

Second, the anarchy “must be understood not as arbitrary but as ethical.”¹⁸² Here Moshe Idel may be able to assuage our concerns somewhat, at least as to the point about

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 143-144

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 198

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 146

¹⁸² Ibid. 147

ethics. He tells us that “although *devekut* is a preeminently personal experience,” in some instances “it serves [...] as an opening toward an other-oriented action.”¹⁸³ While complete mystical union remains the individualistic, private affair that Levinas deplores, in certain cases union can serve as a sort of conduit which leads the mystic back to her community.

Eisenstadt calls her third criterion “an ontological conception in which mystical images refer not to other places or times but to human experience in relation.” She explains that this means that “the ‘vertical’ must be understood as happening in the world, in the ‘horizontal’, in the face or the speech of the other.” The mystical experience cannot point us outside of relation, the horizontal that is experience right in front of us, in the person of the Other.

If all of these criteria are met, Eisenstadt tells us, “then we are closer to being able to claim that Levinas has absorbed the insights of these texts.”¹⁸⁴ We will then be closer to our own task, which is to map out a conceptual continuity between kabbalistic relation to God and the Other, which for us represents one possible type of Jewish experience before the Shoah, and the Levinasian relation, which represents a glimmer of Jewish possibility that emerges after Auschwitz. Our first point of inquiry will be with Abraham Abulafia,¹⁸⁵ the thirteenth century mystic, who Eisenstadt calls “the first great kabbalist

¹⁸³ Idel, Moshe. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. 53

¹⁸⁴ Eisenstadt, Oona. *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism*. 147

¹⁸⁵ The Abulafia with which we are dealing, Eisenstadt is careful to note, is that of Moshe Idel, presented in his book, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, along with his other studies of various aspects of Kabbalah. Eisenstadt is also careful to explain that she does not intend to proclaim what Kabbalah is or is not, but simply to compare rupture in Abulafia and Levinas. As we will be using Eisenstadt’s work primarily, along with Idel’s, the same disclaimer is warranted here.

of rupture,” explaining that “it is Abulafia, more than any other mystic, who holds that the route to God is the breaking of the divine name rather than its reconstitution.”¹⁸⁶

It should come as little surprise that the acts of rupture we will discuss take place within text and speech. In chapter two, for example in the Cain and Abel narrative, we discussed the power contained by speech. And throughout this study we have focused almost exclusively on texts – biblical, Talmudic, and otherwise. In at least one example, that of Leonard Cohen, a significant aspect of expression was the spoken or sung word, and we have briefly discussed the importance of the “oral Torah” in the rabbinic additions of midrash and Talmudic commentaries. “Word,” in the Jewish understanding, is connected with action and power in both text and speech, containing within it the creative and destructive possibility. It is perhaps the most basic expression of power, from which all others spring. In this chapter we will find text and speech representing God, the world, and moral obligation. That the thinkers discussed here express their ideas in terms of various approaches to the oral and written word, between which we will soon discuss an important distinction, is therefore no coincidence.

Ω

Abraham Abulafia and the Breaking of the Names

We will be employing many of the arguments that Eisenstadt makes in the third chapter of Driven Back to the Text, “The Kabbalah and Deconstruction,” the first half of which is primarily a comparison between Levinas and Abulafia. The second half compares Levinas with concepts associated with Isaac Luria (1534-1572 AD), who seems to have much in common with Levinas, particularly in his concern for ethics, and

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 149

arguably represents a much more “mainstream” trend in Jewish mysticism. For our own investigation, however, it will be more beneficial to use Isaac Luria as a point of contrast with Abulafia, and we will not explore Lurianic ideas with the thoroughness they deserve. Instead, we will move from Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291 AD) to another mystic, Bachya Ben Asher (c.1250-1340 AD).

Eisenstadt finds easily in Abulafia two of her criteria, or “marks,” for an affinity with Levinas. They are the first and third as we discussed them above: union as rupture, and the transcendent “vertical” existing on the “horizontal,” respectively. The second “mark,” however, is more problematic. This is the concern for ethics, the necessity that rupture be understood as having ethical implications. We will return to the problem of ethics, but we will begin by laying out the relative commonalities between Levinas and Abulafia not only to better understand the import of their positions and what they might tell us about the Jewish future, but also to equip ourselves to move toward the complicated question of ethics in Abulafia.

The most obvious place to begin is with Abulafia’s letter combinations, or breaking down of the Name. Idel tells us that “this technique of breaking-down or atomizing the Name is the most distinctive characteristic of Abulafia’s technique.”¹⁸⁷ This is a practice whereby Abulafia takes the letters of a name of God, usually the seventy-letter name or the Tetragrammaton and combines them, through writing and pronunciation, in various permutations with other letters of the alphabet and with every possible vowel.

¹⁸⁷ Idel, Moshe. The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia. 19 State University of New York Press: Albany, c1988

In Or ha-Sekel, for example, he lays out the practice with the Tetragrammaton. Thus, he begins with letters *Aleph* (א) and *Yud* (י), the first letter of the alphabet and the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, respectively. Using tables he pairs them together and adds different combinations of vowels, so that the first line of permutations, for example, would sound like “*oyo, oya, oyei, oyee, oyui*” and the next corresponding line, with the letters switched, would sound like “*yo’o, yo’a, yo’ei, yo’ee, yo’u,*” etcetera.¹⁸⁸

In order to make sense of this strange practice we must look at the understanding which underlies it. We must comprehend Abulafia’s vision of the world in which his combinations are being performed. Idel explains that the Kabbalah of Abulafia was representative of the ecstatic school, distinguished from the so-called theosophical-theurgic school of Jewish mystics in Catalan and Castile, which were characterized by an emphasis on the theurgical aspect of *mitzvot* (performance of commandments), speculation about the *En Sof* (Infinite; without-end) and the ten *sefirot* (the revealed aspects of the Infinite), exegesis which focused on symbolism, and an emphasis on community.¹⁸⁹

In contrast, Abulafia’s system, which he called *prophetic Kabbalah* or *the Kabbalah of Names*, ignores traditional ideas about *mitzvot*, halachah, and the theurgical notion that the Kabbalist can and should positively alter the world of the sefirot. He advocates, as an alternative sort of *mitzvah* practice, his techniques of letter combination, pronunciation of the Divine Names, breathing, singing, and head movements.¹⁹⁰ Abulafia deplored sefirotic speculation, accusing some of his most prominent rivals of heresy, and

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 22

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 7-9

¹⁹⁰ This has been one of the leading reasons that have led scholars to conclude that Abulafia’s theology contains no ethical component. While this issue will be discussed later on, it is enough now to suggest that the case is not as clear as it might seem.

of “being worse than Christians” by dividing God into ten rather than three.¹⁹¹ And Abulafia’s stance toward community could not be more divergent. Idel writes that “Abulafia, more than any other Kabbalist who preceded him, stressed the need for isolation in order to achieve prophetic ecstasy.”¹⁹²

Eisenstadt, in a discussion of Isaac Luria, reminds us of the kabbalistic dictum that “there are two kinds of evils: the separation of what should have been joined and the joining of what should have been separate.” She describes the former as the nature of ordinary crime – murder, theft, etc. – and the latter as the more severe, “the crime of magic,” of Levinasian totalities that link things together, “blending them and imposing a false order onto them.”¹⁹³

One culprit of the second crime, for Levinas, and for Abulafia too, would be those trends that find their widest audience in modern Hasidic interpretations of Lurianic symbols that “strive for the annihilation of alterity and autonomy in the oneness of everything with God.” In fairness to Luria, his own case and that of his more immediate followers is more complex. Even so, Eisenstadt finds something suspect in Luria in that his “analysis of wholeness... involves the idea of ordered differentiation as the human good,” as opposed to Levinas’s contention that “the idea of rupture” represents the human good, and she accuses Luria of possibly “harbouring a nostalgia for wholeness.”¹⁹⁴

This disdain for certain kabbalists, or kabbalistic ideas, is one that Levinas seems to share with Abulafia, and it may help us to better understand Abulafia’s criticisms of other kabbalists of his time. What he seems to be rebelling against is the striving for

¹⁹¹ Idel, Moshe. The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia. 8

¹⁹² Ibid. 9

¹⁹³ Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism. 180

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 190

wholeness, for magic, and he presents an alternative to this in his rejection of symbolism, community, and sefirotic speculation, opting instead for an emphasis on rupture. “In Abulafia’s exercise,” Eisenstadt tells us, “the unbroken form of the name exists as a vessel for the broken name within it, a vessel that is unable to contain that powerful anarchy and is ruptured by it again and again.”¹⁹⁵

Prophetic Kabbalah, or the Kabbalah of Names, then, encourages the mystic to tap into this anarchy, to cleave not to wholeness but to rupture and alterity, to affirm the basic anarchy and un-contain-ability of the divine. For Abulafia as for Levinas, “the powerful form of the name is the broken form... the unbroken name pushes toward or conveys this brokenness; the unbroken name inscribes a momentum toward its own rupture.” Linguistic and textual deconstruction is therefore a participation in the divine process, perhaps more fundamentally, or on a higher level, than construction.

Ω

To return for a moment to Eisenstadt’s marks of Levinasian affinity, we now see that Abulafia shares Levinas’s contempt for wholeness and upholds a similar principle of rupture, but what of the “vertical” and the “horizontal?” Is there in Abulafia a “vertical” transcendence that is not subsumed within the realm of relation? It might appear so, given Abulafia’s insistence on solitariness, his skeptical attitude toward community, and his rejection of normative understandings of mitzvot, which traditionally speak to issues of social relation. But we will see, in fact, that not only does the Abulafian technique transform the vertical axis onto the horizontal, but that in doing so it lays the groundwork for an indication of a complicated, somewhat counterintuitive ethics.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 152

Let us consider a passage from Abulafia's Sefer Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba, in which he instructs us with regard to the preparation for his technique:

And when thou feelest that thy heart is already warm and when thou seest that by combinations of letters thou canst grasp new things which by human tradition or by thyself thou wouldst not be able to know and when thou art thus prepared to receive the influx of divine power which flows into thee, then turn all thy true thought to imagine His name and His exalted angels in thy heart as if they were human beings sitting or standing about thee.¹⁹⁶

The two requirements here are a warm heart and an understanding that one will be able to access knowledge that cannot be conveyed or deduced by humans. The first requirement suggests that one must approach the experience with a certain level of openness to communion. The second acknowledges that what is to follow is in fact transcendence, a seeming departure along the vertical axis. Together these make for a readiness for communion that is safeguarded from inappropriate blending through solitude and distinction.

The preparation is ultimately not simply for a journey along the vertical axis because, immediately after the mystics receives the “influx of divine power which flows into thee” she is directed to return to the horizontal. The technique concludes by guiding her back to her worldly surroundings, now, presumably, with the ability to imagine the divine name and other celestial powers as “human beings sitting or standing about thee.” The Abulafian technique, then, appears to use textual and oral deconstruction to direct one's receptiveness to the divine power of rupture back into the world of the horizontal, perhaps as a sort of practice round for ethical behavior.

¹⁹⁶ Jacobs, Louis, editor. The Jewish Mystics. 62

We can rightly protest, of course, that there is an important distinction between an ethically oriented imagination and any sort of real action. Abulafia is certainly not forthcoming in how the distinction is meant to be bridged, if indeed it is. But for him it is clear that this imaginative step is a necessary prerequisite. It is the initial vertical step that allows for the possibility of an ethically and spiritually sound human interaction on the horizontal plane that does not commit the crime of magic.

Later in the same work, as Abulafia is describing the final stages of his technique, he writes, “Thy whole body will be seized by an extremely strong trembling, so that thou wilt think that surely thou art about to die, because thy soul, overjoyed with its knowledge, will leave thy body.” What seems devoid of ethics, though, becomes more intricate as we are then told to “consciously choose death,” that is, complete separation from the mundane, “and then thou shalt know that thou hast come far enough to receive the influx.”¹⁹⁷ Again we find the two-step process, this time expressed in even clearer terms. In order to receive the influx of divine power one must first “choose death.” This points to how, for Abulafia, one might act ethically or theurgically in a way that is not profane, and it parallels another important affinity between Abulafia and Levinas.

Just as Levinas is “overwhelmingly concerned to establish *separation* as the ground of creation,” with his “as-for-me” as the first step in a process,¹⁹⁸ so Abulafia seems to suggest a multi-step process for a more cautious sort of ethical behavior. Both Levinasian and Abulafian mystical practice, especially when translated into any sort of constructive action, follows what Eisenstadt refers to as a “threefold exercise,” in which,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 63

¹⁹⁸ Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism. 143

subsequent to the initial rupture of totality, “they reassert the coherence of the unbroken form, allowing totality, in a sense, to triumph.”¹⁹⁹

This is the case in that both Levinas and Abulafia ultimately present us with documents of relative coherence. These coherencies persist, in a necessary nod to the claims of social justice. They follow, then, a pattern of “text/ deconstruction /reconstruction” or “totality/infinity/totality.”²⁰⁰ “But the important point,” Eisenstadt explains, “is that both retain, even in their reconstruction, the desire to stop in deconstruction,” that is, to encourage the instinct to either stop in rupture or to continually disrupt and question even those most compulsory totalistic constructions. This is what Levinas means when he reminds us that, as the messianic moment is inaugurated, God will hold his loins as though in labor “because in the just act there is still a violence that causes suffering. Even when the act is reasonable, when the act is just, it entails violence.”²⁰¹ There is no point, for either Levinas or Abulafia, at which rupture is divorced from triumph.

Of course, there is no way to overcome the totalizing nature of any philosophical coherence. Eisenstadt explains that “one cannot come up with a new nonphilosophical philosophy; this would merely be a new coherence.”²⁰² The only way to try to counter these constructions is to reluctantly reconstruct them from a position of rupture, to persist in a constant skepticism from a standpoint of “fertile social alienation.” The tentative

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 154

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 154-155

²⁰¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism. 79

²⁰² Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism. 155

action “can only do its job because it arises from the incoherence of the deconstruction of the divine name and language in general.”²⁰³

Let us briefly note one more avenue that points to a possible Abulafian ethics – his understanding of his practice as *Kabbalah Nevu’it*, or Prophetic Kabbalah. It is undeniable that Abulafia understood his practice as inherited from the prophetic tradition, and moreover that he understood himself and other practitioners as prophets. Abulafian prophecy, Eisenstadt tells us, “must involve a relation with one’s fellows.”²⁰⁴ Even so, with Levinas the connection between rupture and ethics is much more readily apparent than with Abulafia, and this will not be the last word on whether Abulafian theory or practice involves a non-ethical, vertical ascent. It remains difficult to disagree with both Idel and Eisenstadt that “Abulafia’s overwhelming concern is an ‘escapist’ groping for personal illumination... a concern that comes at the cost of reflection on the *halachah* and brings about a ‘retreat from collective worship as the central and highest form of religious experience.’”²⁰⁵

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Bachya Ben Asher: A Stream of Thoughts and Quiet Resting Places

We will now turn to R. Bachya ben Asher, who may be able to provide us with an alternative, or perhaps a complement, to what we find lacking or in need of clarification in Abulafia. Given the concerns that we have already laid out, R. Bachya will seem to fall disappointingly short on many of the counts where Abulafia shined as a radically deconstructive force. On the other hand, the ethics that we found somewhat lacking in

²⁰³ Ibid. 156

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 162

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 170

Abulafia are much more obvious in R. Bachya, and we will even find in R. Bachya a clearer move from rupture to ethics.

R. Bachya comes from the same theosophical-theurgic school of Castile and Catalan that we spoke of earlier, which maintained a very contentious relationship with Abulafia. In fact, it was R. Bachya's teacher, Solomon ibn Adret (1235-1310 AD), "the major halachic figure of his generation," who spoke out against Abulafia and excommunicated him from Barcelona.²⁰⁶ Idel speculates that this action suppressed Abulafia's status and influence at least until the seventeenth century.²⁰⁷

But, as Idel also explains, R. Bachya's Spain, Castile especially, was a "meeting point for all major trends within Kabbalah" at the end of the thirteenth century, and "such a massive encounter was unprecedented."²⁰⁸ Idel suggests that this encounter must have influenced kabbalists' perceptions of the nature of Kabbalah, engendering a noteworthy amount of creativity and innovation in contrast to the conservative tendencies of previous generations. It is no surprise, then, that R. Bachya inherited a kabbalistic hermeneutic similar in nature to the deconstructions of Abulafia, albeit not quite as radical.

Bachya ben Asher's deconstructive hermeneutic does not involve the complete breaking of the divine name through letter combination like that of Abulafia. Rather, his focus is on the Torah and his deconstruction keeps the words intact, emphasizing instead the variability of the vowels and pronunciation therein. In his kabbalistic commentary on the Torah he writes:

The Scroll of the Torah is [written] without vowels, in order to enable man to interpret it however he wishes – as the consonants without the vowels bear

²⁰⁶ Idel, Moshe. The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia. 1

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 2

²⁰⁸ Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. 212

several interpretations and [may be] divided into several sparks. This is the reason why we do not write the vowels of the scroll of the Torah, for the significance of each word is in accordance with its vocalization, but when it is vocalized it has but one single significance; but without vowels man may interpret it [extrapolating from it] several [different] things, many, marvelous and sublime.²⁰⁹ [clarifying notes appear in Idel's text]

There are several clues here to R. Bachya's conception of the world. Obviously he shares with Abulafia and Levinas the view that linguistic deconstruction leads to deeper understandings of scripture. But does it necessarily follow that he shares their outlook and understands divinity and the universe in terms of rupture?

Perhaps his use of the imagery of sparks will help us to understand where his sentiments lie. Idel notes that the term "spark" is elsewhere used to refer to different aspects of the soul. What is particularly interesting here, though, is that in many kabbalistic motifs the division of sparks, which are divine emanations, corresponds to the origins of evil and suffering.²¹⁰ Here the division of sparks is desirable and the practice that R. Bachya advocates is a sort of replication of this division. It seems, then, that just as in Abulafia, rupture is inherent in R. Bachya's universe, that it is to be sought and imitated, and that the technique is presented as a part of the divine process.

Furthermore, like Abulafia, R. Bachya seems concerned with the idea that the pronunciation of a word somehow falsely contains it, fixes it in place artificially. He seems aware of the totalizing nature of such a project. Just as with Abulafia's understanding of the broken and unbroken names, R. Bachya sees the wonder of scripture in its flexibility, its multiple possibilities in contrast to the rigidity of a vocalized utterance. We might also guess that in his technique there will also be a similar three-

²⁰⁹ Idel, Moshe. Kabbalah: New Perspectives. 214

²¹⁰ Scholem, Gershom. Kabbalah. 13
Keter Publishing House: Jerusalem, 1974

stage process of totality/infinity/totality, in which, after breaking down the word through its possible meanings, the speaker, if she is to speak at all, must eventually choose a certain vocalization and thereby limit herself within a given totality. R. Bachya seems aware of this inevitability when he reminds us that “when it is vocalized it has but one single significance.”

Where R. Bachya’s technique begins to diverge from Abulafia is in the degree of coherent interpretation that remains possible. Whereas Abulafia destroys the structural integrity of the word by rearranging on the level of individual letters, R. Bachya maintains the basic integrity, allowing for variation in meaning only to a certain extent. Perhaps, like Luria, he may be guilty of “nostalgia for wholeness” by way of an “ordered differentiation.” But if R. Bachya does not go as far as Abulafia, and perhaps Levinas, would like, there is something to be said for the coherency he allows within his multiple meanings.

Another important distinction in Bachya ben Asher is that while Abulafia focuses on the divine name, R. Bachya uses the entire Torah as the medium of his practice. The significance of this cannot be understated, for it is the distinction that allows for the possibility of a more flourishing and upfront ethical dimension in R. Bachya. The Torah, the basis of halachah, contains the 613 mitzvot, the ethical foundations of Judaism, which may in some cases differ slightly in precise meaning as various vowel choices are made, but still they remain relatively intact. R. Bachya can be seen in a certain light, then, as presenting an unlikely compromise between two rivals: the radical deconstructionist Abulafia and the halachic proponent Solomon ibn Adret.

Nowhere is the ethical dimension in R. Bachya's thought more obvious than in his discourses for the masses, most notably those collected in his Kad ha-Kemah. In it we find discussed such themes as submissiveness, repentance, humility, peace, and explicit elaborations on mitzvot. Although R. Bachya is perhaps most well known for his kabbalistic commentary on the Torah, the discussions of the bible in Kad ha-Kemah are striking in their lack of kabbalistic concepts.²¹¹ This distinction in his works, the former for the "initiated" and the latter for the masses, speaks to his caution about discussing certain ideas openly.

Charles B. Chavel tells us that R. Bachya was also a preacher, and that he began his career preaching in synagogues in Saragossa and possibly Barcelona. There, in seeming evidence of his character, he remained neutral to the struggle between the pro-Maimonists and anti-Maimonists that raged around him.²¹² His capacity for tact and appropriateness, what Chavel calls his "awareness of the level of the audience he was addressing," is certainly evident in the themes he chooses to leave out of his Kad ha-Kemah, his discourses on the bible.²¹³ R. Bachya himself spoke of this sort of discretion as stemming from Moses in his teachings about the Sabbath. R. Bachya writes:

The subject of the Sabbath contains esoteric matters which the Supreme One commanded Moses to reveal to individuals in Israel. Thus, Scripture begins [the subject of the Sabbath], *And thou [Moses], speak unto the children of Israel*, i.e., inform them of the overt and mystical aspects of the Sabbath. However, Moses made no mention of the mystical higher allusions of the Sabbath, for he spoke to all the men and women of the entire congregation of Israel. Therefore, he concealed the esoteric aspects of the Sabbath and spoke only briefly of its overt

²¹¹ Chavel, Rabbi Dr. Charles B., translator, editor. Encyclopedia of Torah Thoughts. xiii
New York : Shilo Pub. House., c1980

²¹² Ibid. xi

²¹³ Ibid. xiii

matters. From here we have clear proof that one should not reveal and expound mystical matters in public.²¹⁴ [clarifying notes appear in Chavel's text]

It seems that in Kad ha-Kemah, R. Bachya takes this responsibility to heart, and he does not overtly discuss mystical matters in his discourses to “the children of Israel.” But one might hope that these discourses would still reflect R. Bachya's outlook as it is expressed in his more esoteric commentaries, if in somewhat occulted forms. For this reason some of the statements we find in Kad ha-Kemah appear highly problematic. For example, in a discussion of the unity of God, we find statements with a blatantly totalizing tone. “In the Messianic era,” R. Bachya writes, “many of the kingdoms will be abolished and all creeds will turn to the One Faith. The world will exist in perfection under the Kingdom of G-d...”²¹⁵

Given what we know about R. Bachya, or admittedly what we perhaps wish to project onto him, it is difficult to forgive such proclamations or to excuse them on the grounds of appropriateness and tact. Perhaps we can understand this as R. Bachya's attempt at constructing the second totality in the totality/infinity/totality movement, but we cannot easily overcome the criticisms that he presents the totality too strongly, that he does not articulate enough of the desire to stop within rupture or to continue to critique the totality with rupture. Neither does it seem satisfactory that R. Bachya tells us he is seeking to provide a generation “who are tired of the exile and grief” with “a stream of thoughts / and *quiet resting places* [Isaiah 32.18]” that are, Chavel explains, “a source of learning and comfort.”²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Ben Asher, Bachya; Chavel, Rabbi Dr. Charles B., translator, editor. Encyclopedia of Torah Thoughts. 614-615

²¹⁵ Ibid. 300

²¹⁶ Ibid. 4

Still, Kad he-Kemah is not without interesting and subtle attempts to convey a universe and an ethics grounded in rupture, and some of these attempts are fascinating and noteworthy. One such instance takes place within a discussion of the Song of Songs. R. Bachya quotes Song of Songs 2.9: “*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart; behold, this One standeth behind our wall, He looketh in through the windows, He peereth through the lattice.*”²¹⁷ With this verse R. Bachya affirms both divine alienation and divine involvement. He points out the use of the third person to refer to God at first:

Note that Solomon began the verse in the third person, saying *My beloved is like*, not “You are like,” but he continued in the second person, saying *this One standeth*,²¹⁸ not ‘He standeth.’ This teaches us that while G-d, Who is compared to the *beloved*, can be found [by him that seeks Him] and is near to the heart, He is nevertheless remote from [mortal] perception, as the poet²¹⁹ expressed it, “He is extremely far from the heaven of heavens and yet extremely near to me.”²²⁰
[clarifying notes appear in Chavel’s text]

Earlier we discussed Eisenstadt’s conception of the movement totality/infinity/totality as the Levinasian expression of rupture, which we might also term immanence/separation/immanence with regard to the specific issue of divine propinquity. But here, if we apply R. Bachya’s grammatical eye to the verse we seem to have a case of separation/immanence/separation in accordance with “*my beloved*”/ “*this One standeth*” / “*He looketh... He peereth.*”

But this becomes even more complex as R. Bachya proceeds beyond grammar to discuss other aspects of the text. He begins with the phrase “*this One standeth behind our wall.*” “Were it not for this intervening wall,” he says, “we could say, *Behold, this is our*

²¹⁷ Ibid. 185-186

²¹⁸ Chavel explains here that the Hebrew *zeh* (this one) is used to indicate something near to the speaker, while “He” would have indicated something far away.

²¹⁹ Chavel writes: “I have been unable to identify this poet.” Subsequently, neither am I.

²²⁰ Ibid. 186

G-d [Isaiah 25.9], and as Scripture explicitly states, *But your iniquities have separated between you and your G-d* [Isaiah 59.2]. Solomon is teaching us that the wall notwithstanding, G-d still watches from *the windows* of the heavens and *peereth through the lattice* of the Throne of Glory.”²²¹

R. Bachya explains that the verse refutes the notion that God’s separation is due to sin, that the rupture is somehow unnatural. Rather, the existence of a wall implies that such rupture is precisely the nature of our relationship with God. Furthermore, the fact that God *looketh* through the windows and *peereth* through the lattice precludes the suggestion that God is unconcerned with the “lower world.” R. Bachya understands this “double expression” as an allusion to personal and general providence.²²²

If we turn again to the separation/immanence/separation outline and apply this new aspect of R. Bachya’s commentary it seems that we have something closer to a separation/separation-in-immanence/immanence-in-separation-(twice), which in Levinasian terms would look like infinity/infinity-in-totality/totality-in-infinity-(twice). This is before we consider other possible layers such as the significance of the terms “beloved,” “gazelle,” “young hart,” and “behold.” Moreover, if we were to apply R. Bachya’s vocalization techniques we might find even more complex layers of meaning. For example, through vowel manipulation we might be able to play with the temporal tenses, creating combinations of past, present, future, and progressive.

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Of course R. Bachya only lays the foundation here for this kind of exegesis, but this is perhaps what is meant when he says he is concerned with providing us with “a

²²¹ Ibid. 186

²²² Ibid. 186

stream of thoughts.” While the extent of R. Bachya’s desire to stop in rupture is perhaps still suspect, it seems clear at the very least that even in his discourses for the masses he is not content to stop in totality. This is also reflected in the fact that he, like Abulafia, does not take action lightly.

In a discourse in Kad ha-Kemah on purity of heart, R. Bachya explains the comparisons of the Torah to both gold and glass. The Torah is compared thusly, he tells us, “because like gold, its words are difficult to attain and like glass, it is easily lost [Chavel: if not constantly guarded against forgetfulness].” As we have seen, exegesis is rarely a straightforward, simple, or easy process. R. Bachya is here reminding us of the difficulty in fully understanding Torah, or of retaining what we have understood. If Torah is to inform our ethical actions, must we not act with extreme caution and tentativeness if the meanings of Torah are so elusive?

R. Bachya then quotes R. Akiba: “The words of the Torah are compared to glass to teach you that just as glass is transparent, so a scholar should reveal in his speech whatever is in his heart.” It is here that R. Bachya begins to make the ethical connection between the rupture of mystical experience and ethical action that was so difficult in Abulafia. Along with the prudence of humility described above, positive actions must make the mystical experience – in this case, of studying Torah – as transparent as glass, there should be no obscurity between these two aspects.

R. Bachya then applies the metaphor of gold to make a similar point: “Similarly, it is written of the Ark of the Covenant, *And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it* [Exodus 25.11].”²²³ If one is to simply cultivate the

²²³ Ibid. 273

solitary mystical experience – that is, to overlay one’s insides with gold – but not do the same for outward interactions, then one has not fulfilled the covenant.

And R. Bachya has other advice in this regard. Citing Deuteronomy 23.10, “*And thou shalt keep thee from every evil thing,*” he tells us to be on guard against “sinful thoughts during the day in order to avoid impurity at night.” In other words, if we are exceedingly careful when we are conscious of our actions, the cultivation of such heedfulness will extend to those moments when we are less vigilant. He quotes R. Pinchas ben Ya’ir in this vein: “Heedfulness leads to alertness, alertness leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to restraint, restraint leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to humility, humility leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the gift of the Holy Spirit, as it is said, *Then Thou spakest in vision to Thy saintly ones* [Psalms 89.20].”²²⁴ R. Bachya explains that the first five characteristics are “spiritual,” that is, they are cultivated in relative isolation, and he implies that the second five are physically oriented in that they correspond to ethical action. The culmination of these perfections – to be one of God’s “saintly ones” to whom God speaks in visions – corresponds with Abulafian prophecy.

We can even find in the discourse hints of a Levinasian relation to the Other. Elaborating on the insight of R. Pinchas, R. Bachya quotes Tractate Yebamoth: “Sanctify yourself with that which is permissible to you [Yebamoth 20 a],” that is, abstain even from things to which you are allowed. Such a “fear of sin,” which, as we have been told, leads to humility, will cause one to “not only avoid speaking about others, but [to] refrain from retorting even if others speak evil of him.” The cultivation of such humble tendencies will in turn lead to saintliness, wherein one “will also tend to overlook his

²²⁴ Ibid. 274

precise rights in his dealings with other people and will act liberally beyond strict legal requirement.”²²⁵ R. Bachya is advocating something quite similar to Levinasian ethics in which one must relate to the Other with an understanding of an inherent imbalance which favors the Other as the fundamental characteristic of ethical relation.

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Conclusion: Philosophy and the Shadow of Skepticism

It would be disingenuous to conclude by upholding Abraham Abulafia, Bachya ben Asher, Solomon ibn Adret, or Isaac Luria as the definitive exemplar of the Judaism we require as we attempt to articulate a Jewish future. The fact is that each of these figures was speaking from within, and to, his generation. And while there are certainly similarities in their experiences and our own, their concerns are ultimately not strictly congruent with ours. Instead, what we must do is be more discerning and analyze their positions and the reasons behind them, applying these lessons to our own concerns. We can learn from both their insights and their shortsightedness.

It is certainly not my intention to suggest that the problems we face after the Shoah have been neatly resolved centuries previously. One thing that we can learn from the experiences of Abulafia, R. Bachya, and countless others, is that none of these problems has definite or easy solutions, and that the myth of Jewish uniformity was as false in their time as it is today. Eisenstadt reminded us that every attempt to break down totality inevitably constructs a totality in its place. By this score even someone like Emmanuel Levinas, arguably one of the most insightful and intellectually rigorous of the

²²⁵ Ibid. 275

major contributors to such thought in modern times, fails before he begins. But there are two conflicting concerns in this regard, each of them valid.

We can chastise Bachya ben Asher for so unabashedly reconstructing the word and contributing to totalizing processes, but we must also understand why he made the decision and we must applaud his creativity in laying the seeds for rupture even as he constructed totalities. At the same time we can rebuke Abraham Abulafia's disdain for the community and his hazy ethics, but we must commend his profound desire to reject any and all totalities. We must construct totalities just as we severely criticize them, but, Eisenstadt reminds us, we cannot "descend into gibberish or silence."²²⁶ This is our dilemma, our anxiety. Levinas, in Otherwise Than Being, equates these two concerns with the skeptic, on the one hand, and the philosopher, on the other. The philosopher is forever concerned with constructing consistencies and coherences – totalities by other names. And the skeptic "states the rupture, failure, impotence or impossibility of disclosure." The two trends are inherently interconnected and irresolvable. Levinas writes:

Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps. Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for Western philosophy the saying is exhausted in things said. But skepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and the said. Skepticism is refutable, but it returns.²²⁷

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²²⁶ Eisenstadt, Oona. Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas's Postmodernism. 155

²²⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise Than Being. 168
Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1981

Our Impossible Victory

Sabbath morning. A crowded synagogue – more crowded than usual. I stood on the bimah before the open scrolls and read. That Shabbat we read the commandment to celebrate our holidays in joy. I had hardly finished the sentence when the doors were pushed open. The mob took over. The killers were laughing. I remember their laughter as I remember their shiny swords. Minutes later, it was all over. Not one Jew cried out; we didn't have the time. As I heard the echo of my own words: "And you shall celebrate your holidays in joy" – I found myself without a community. I was still standing; I stood throughout the slaughter. Standing before the open parchments. Why was I spared? Is it possible that they failed to see me because I was standing? I saw blood, only blood. I felt swept by madness. I whispered over and over again: "And you shall celebrate your holidays in joy, in joy, in joy." And I backed out and left.²²⁸

- Mendel, in Elie Wiesel's The Trial of God

The Artist Usurps the Actuality

The Destruction of the European Jews, by Raul Hilberg, is the most thorough and meticulous account of the machinations of the Shoah. Hilberg has provided the world with an unparalleled analysis of the intricacies of the horrific event. But while the tone of his text is rather dry and factual, perhaps reflective of his source material, Hilberg understands this undertaking as an artistic endeavor. In his memoir, The Politics of Memory, he refers to his work as an art, and he describes some of the lessons he has learned from the work of artists in other fields. He compares his writing technique to the compositions of Beethoven, who "had to work, to build his music like an edifice, draft after draft, slowly, painfully," as opposed to those of Mozart, the child prodigy. "The Schubert Quintet in C," he writes, "gave me the insight that power is not dependent on simple mass or even loudness, but on escalations and contrasts."²²⁹

²²⁸ Wiesel, Elie. The Trial of God. 146-147
New York : Random House, c1979

²²⁹ Hilberg, Raul. The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian. 85
Chicago : Ivan R. Dee, 1996

Hilberg is also conscious of the weighty responsibility of the artist, particularly given the nature of his art. He credits filmmaker Claude Lanzmann with the insight that “to recreate this event... one must be a consummate artist, for recreation is an act of creation in and of itself.” And when the art is so intimately connected to such a momentous and terrible historical event these concerns become even more crucial. Because “the artist usurps the actuality, substituting a text for a reality that is fast fading,”

Hilberg is aware that his account of the Shoah replaces the historical event in a very important sense. “The words that are thus written take the place of the past,” he writes. “These words, rather than the events themselves, will be remembered.”²³⁰ That the process is unavoidable is its only justification. And such a problematic and unprecedented subject requires the utmost earnestness because “to slip or fall in this effort would have been tantamount to failing tremendously.”²³¹

The process of recreation that Hilberg is describing shares concerns with Saul Friedlander in his distinction between “common memory” and “deep memory.” Both Hilberg and Friedlander are anxious about what it might take to preserve those aspects of the Shoah that are less describable and threaten to be erased with the loss of the firsthand account. According to James E. Young, Friedlander’s “common memory” is similar to Richard L. Rubenstein’s “dissonance-reduction” in that it articulates an event within a consistent framework – it “tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance.” “Deep memory,” in contrast, is “that which remains essentially inarticulable and unrepresentable, that which continues to exist as unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of meaning.” And when deep memory is fully present the relationship

²³⁰ Ibid. 83

²³¹ Ibid. 83-84

between the two prohibits uninterrupted coherency or systematization. Like Emmanuel Levinas's "philosophy," or "totality," as it relates to "skepticism," or "infinity," "every common memory of the Holocaust is haunted by that which it necessarily leaves unstated, its coherence a necessary but ultimately misleading evasion."²³²

If we are to take seriously Hilberg's point that artistic responses to the Shoah become synonymous in hindsight with the events themselves, and if we also maintain, as I have argued using different terminology, that deep memory is a requisite focal point for the preservation of a Judaism that remains both relevant and conceptually continuous, it follows that deep memory must remain central to a Jewish understanding of the Shoah. For this reason we must confront the concern shared by James E. Young and Saul Friedlander that as the generations with a direct or even indirect experience of the Shoah fade into history there is the very real danger of losing deep memory along with them.

Young writes of Friedlander:

[He] wonders, profoundly I think, what will become of this deep memory after the survivors are gone. "The question remains," he says, "whether at the collective level... an event such as the *Shoah* may, after all the survivors have disappeared, leave traces of a deep memory beyond individual recall, which will defy any attempts to give it meaning." The implication is that, beyond the second generation's artistic and literary representations of it, such deep memory may be lost to history altogether.

With the continuity of common memory much more certain and inevitable than deep memory, we risk systematizing the Shoah within a closed redemptive system. This would be an injustice to the victims, the survivors, and, most importantly, to future

²³² Young, James E. At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture. 14
New Haven : Yale University Press, 2000

generations. It threatens to distort the nature of the Shoah, impeding us from taking stock of the very real problems it presents.

Not surprisingly these systematizing processes often take place along the lines of specific agendas, and themes of historical recreation can be discovered in somewhat predictable patterns. Raul Hilberg describes his experiences of struggle with key elements of the Jewish community as a conflict as to the ways historical memory should be incorporated into Jewish thinking: “It has taken me some time,” he writes, “to absorb what I should have always known, that in my whole approach to the study of the destruction of the Jews I was pitting myself against the main current of Jewish thought... that in my research and writing I was pursuing not merely another direction but one which was the exact opposite of a signal that pulsated endlessly through the Jewish community.”²³³

Hilberg saw three major elements in the pulsating signal against which he had pitted himself. The first is the claim that valid remembering should involve a resolute focus on the victims up to the point of ignoring the perpetrators. He witnessed examples of how the process takes place through his involvement with the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. While Hilberg suggested, for example, that the museum should obtain a German railroad car that transported Jews to death camps, “a large product of German manufacture,” a ramp was built through the open door to allow visitors to peer into the car and imagine the Jews locked inside.

In another instance Hilberg’s suggestion of a single can of Zyklon gas upon a pedestal in a room with no other objects, “as the epitome of Adolf Hitler’s Germany,” became “a whole pile of gas cans... heaped in the middle of the floor to be stumbled on

²³³ Hilberg, Raul. The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian. 129

and noticed with a downward glance,” more a memorial to the victims of the gas. Finally, what the planner’s jokingly called the “Hilberg wall,” a suggested exhibit of photographs of known and unknown perpetrators representing “the civil service, the military, industry, and the party,” became an exhibit of the war crimes trials. “Some of the perpetrators are still there,” Hilberg explains, “but in the role of defendant.”²³⁴ The victims are there too, of course, but now they are in the role of punisher, doling out retribution.

While he does not seem to be suggesting that such exhibits are entirely without merit, Hilberg understands these instances as part of a larger pattern. “The fadeout of the perpetrator is no accident,” Hilberg asserts. He compares it to the drowning out of the name of Haman during the festival of Purim, and the Deuteronomic commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek. He recounts hearing the Orthodox rabbi Seymour Siegel mentioning Adolf Eichmann and adding the ritualistic words “May his name be erased.”

Hilberg admits that there is certainly reason to worry about giving the perpetrators human faces, although he has taken it upon himself to do just that: “I insist on delving into forbidden territory and presenting Amalek with all his features as an aggregate of German functionaries.”²³⁵ Obviously, he considers his task to be of worth. For our project, however, we should be concerned about the processes that fade out the perpetrator because understanding the societal mechanisms that produced this horror has been of great importance for trying to understand some of the reasons behind it, what we are up against, and ways to combat these tendencies. Hilberg may have other reasons for his position, though they also may coincide with ours to some extent.

²³⁴ Ibid. 130-131

²³⁵ Ibid. 131-132

While Hilberg does not discount the criticisms of his work, he sees in his critics a different, albeit related desire that is expressed in their criticisms. He points out that those who chastise him for not focusing on the victims seem to be themselves concerned primarily with one subset of victims. Rather than consider more difficult aspects of the Jewish response to the Shoah such as the actions of Jewish councils and “the desperate adjustment strategies pursued by the communities in the wake of strangling German measures,” proponents of Jewish sources have emphasized the oral reports of survivors.

The prominence of survivors as primary sources, a corollary to the fadeout of the perpetrator, is the second element of Hilberg’s pulsating signal. This approach, Hilberg explains, has certain built-in limitations. To begin with, as David Pablo Boder has noted, one cannot interview the dead. What emerges from this practice, then, is not a “random sample of the extinct communities,” but a very particular, self-selected sample. The only fact that can be completely revealed by the survivors, Hilberg tells us, “is the self-portrait of the survivors, their psychological makeup, and what it took to survive.”²³⁶

Hilberg gives us an outline of what these accounts often sound like. They leave out specifics of setting and positions of people they encountered, along with “mundane information about their financial circumstances or their health.” Stories of ghetto life and early labor camps are relatively ignored in favor of the more thrilling accounts of “deportations, concentration camps, death camps, escapes, hiding, and partisan fighting.” Furthermore, stories of humiliation and embarrassment are often glossed over, and when issues of “hunger, thirst, pain, and fear” are spoken of, they are accompanied, implicitly or explicitly, with the dictum that “no one who was not there can imagine what it was like.” This presents obvious problems if we are concerned for the preservation of deep

²³⁶ Ibid. 132-133

memory. The effect of the central role of the survivor in the retelling of the Shoah, for Hilberg, also serves the third and perhaps most significant element of the requirement of the “main current of Jewish thought”: “The Jewish victims must be seen as heroic.”²³⁷

Such a stance necessitates a great amount of revisionism, and an inflation of the magnitude and frequency of acts of resistance. One way this has been done is by playing with the definition of “resistance” itself. Arno Lustiger, Hilberg tells us, includes the Jewish soldiers in the Allied forces in his roster of resisters, along with “those Jews who joined the international brigades in the Spanish Civil War” before World War Two even began. Hilberg explains that the term “resistance” is also redefined to include activities such as “feeding or hospitalizing people in ghettos,” even if these acts had been permitted or encouraged by the Germans. He also points to Martin Gilbert’s book, The Holocaust, which states that “even passivity was a form of resistance.... To die with dignity was a form of resistance.... Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit.”²³⁸

And of course, Hilberg explains, though such instances were relatively spare, “active, armed acts of self-defense within the destructive arena have nevertheless remained the centerpiece of a historiography and celebration.”²³⁹ As of this writing the most recent example of this sort of celebration is the film Defiance, directed by Edward Zwick, based on the book of the same name by Nechama Tec, about the Bielski partisans in what is now Belarus. Defiance glorifies a single atypical instance when Jews were willing to fend off German forces and were capable of doing so.

In an article by Edward Zwick that coincided with the film’s theatrical release, he writes how, as a boy, his impression of the “passivity and victimization [of Jews]

²³⁷ Ibid. 133

²³⁸ Ibid. 134

²³⁹ Ibid. 134

became... not only a morbid obsession but also a source of shame,” and that he was drawn to the project because it was “a story about Jewish heroes. Like the Maccabees, only better.”²⁴⁰ Certainly this story is a true one, and there is nothing inherently wrong with presenting it, but when it is submitted to the consciousness and takes a central place within the collective memory, it distorts our understanding of the nature of the Shoah.

Hilberg understands why resistance revisionism can be such a reflexive response: “The image of a resister with gun in hand is comforting. Something that is uplifting can be salvaged from catastrophe.” But in Friedlander’s terminology this is the agenda of common memory. Hilberg maintains his objections to such a “campaign of exaltation,” explaining that “when relatively isolated or episodic acts of resistance are represented as typical, a basic characteristic of the German measures is obscured. The destruction of the Jews can no longer be visualized as a process.”²⁴¹

Furthermore, the argument that the Jews were resisters, that is, legitimate enemies, was precisely the German argument that justified the mass killings. The “drastic actuality of a relentless killing of men, women, and children,” Hilberg explains, “is mentally transformed into a more familiar picture of a struggle – however unequal – between combatants.”²⁴² Expansion of the definition of resistance, and presenting atypical episodes of resistance as typical, serves to undercut the accomplishments of those who did resist in significant ways, and blurs the very real distinctions between the choices they made and those of the larger communities. As Bronia Klibanski pointed out

²⁴⁰ Zwick, Edward. “Shadows of Valiant Ancestors.” *The New York Times*. December 24, 2008.

²⁴¹ Hilberg, Raul. *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*. 135

²⁴² *Ibid.* 136

to Hilberg, such revisions preclude the possibility of analysis of the complexities of the Jewish response and limit our ability to understand why things happened as they did.²⁴³

We should also critique the “campaign of exaltation” from a related but slightly different viewpoint. In light of Friedlander’s concern for the preservation of a sense of deep memory, and the issues of totalization we have discussed throughout this study, we should find the campaign disturbing in that it seeks to impose a comprehensive, satisfying coherence on what is fundamentally incomprehensible and intrinsically unsatisfying. It glosses over the most troubling aspects of the Shoah, creating sanitized accounts designed to provide comfort and complacency. It ignores precisely those moments of rupture that are so critical to deep memory. The Shoah is thus presented as just another example of an ongoing historical drama – there is nothing distinctive about it that allows for any new degree of self-reflection. Judaism can move forward as if nothing ever happened. This, as mentioned before, would not only dishonor the victims and survivors of the Shoah, but it would do a disservice to future generations who would be closed off from the possibility of grappling with the Shoah.

Like Hilberg, we can understand and sympathize with the urge to find comfort within the horror, to salvage something uplifting from the catastrophe. But we cannot abide such historical modification if it comes at the expense of preserving the inarticulable and unrepresentable aspects of the Shoah. Hilberg’s own unflinchingly technical work presents an important counter-perspective in its very cataloguing of the mechanisms of the atrocities and its refusal to succumb to cliché and pleasantries, and it has laid the groundwork for much further analysis, most notably that of Hannah Arendt.

²⁴³ Ibid. 136-137

Other works of Shoah historiography, meanwhile, have gone in different directions as they attempt to address the problem of deep memory.

∩

Art Spiegelman: Masking and Unmasking the Shoah

One measure by which to judge such historical recreations is Saul Friedlander's conception of the "integrated historian." Friedlander's proposal, as James E. Young explains, is "not so much a specific form but a way of thinking about historical narrative that makes room for a historiography integrating deep and common memory." Like Talmudic exegesis, such historiography must preserve and proliferate self-conscious ruptures of the narrative. Friedlander calls this a form of commentary, and writes that it "should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, [and] withstand the need for closure."

Young explains that such interruptions serve as reminders that we are dealing the problem of reproducing the memories of individuals in specific settings, and that the narrative "would simultaneously gesture both to the existence of deep, inarticulable memory and to its own incapacity to deliver that memory."²⁴⁴ We find in Friedlander's notion of integrated historiography resonances of the totality/infinity/totality scheme we discussed with regard to Levinas and our kabbalists. Just as we must construct totalities yet strive to preserve aspects of rupture within them, integrated historiography must create a somewhat coherent narrative that preserves within it the critique of that coherence.

²⁴⁴ Young, James E. At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture. 14

Friedlander finds an example of integrated historiography in the last panel of Art Spiegelman's "comic book," Maus: A Survivor's Tale, where the dying father, Vladek, addresses Artie, an avatar of the author, by the name of his brother who died in the Shoah. Young, in his book, At Memory's Edge, provides us with a more in-depth analysis of the complexities of Spiegelman's work, which includes Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History, its sequel, Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began, and Breakdowns, an anthology of strips that include ones from the period in which the Maus books were written.

Spiegelman distances himself from the word "comics," preferring the term "commix," meaning "to mix together," with reference to the words and pictures.²⁴⁵ Like the combinations of Abraham Abulafia or the textual flexibility of Bachya ben Asher, Maus contains traces of what Young calls "antinarrative," it creates a sort of template that defies any specific interpretation until it enters the reader's consciousness. At the time that Spiegelman began his first Maus narrative, Young tells us, "the artist's overriding question became: How to tell the story of narrative's breakdown in broken-down narrative?"

In Breakdowns particularly, Spiegelman provides the reader with boxes of images and text, but few clues as to how the boxes should be read in relation to each other, leaving to the reader the task of constructing a sequential narrative. Young tells us that in his introductory panels to Breakdowns, "Spiegelman even rejects the notion of narrative as story, preferring to redefine story as the "complete horizontal division of a building.... [From Medieval Latin HISTORIA... a row of windows with pictures on them.].'"

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 18

As far as the Shoah is concerned, however, Spiegelman has no intention of “descending into gibberish,” to use Oona Eisenstadt’s term. A complete lack of coherence would have nothing significant to say about the Shoah. Spiegelman is certainly aware that, however much he layers the narrative with various sorts of commentary, there must be at least a basic coherence at its core. Once again, this mirrors the issue we found in Levinas and elsewhere: we are forced to construct totalities in order to speak, but if we are to represent the Shoah – and to articulate Judaism after the Shoah – we must find ways to manipulate the totalities to preserve the ruptures. In Maus, Young explains, Spiegelman presents us with a story that “includes not just ‘what happened’ but how what happened is made sense of by father and son in telling... it highlight’s both the inseparability of his father’s story from its effect on Artie and the story’s own necessarily contingent coming into being.”²⁴⁶

Maus also directs the reader to consider those aspects of the story that cannot be told, that are lost forever. At the end of Maus I, Spiegelman depicts a confrontation with his father in which he learns that Vladek had burned Artie’s dead mother’s memoirs without remembering what she had written, except that she had hoped her son would be interested in them. Artie reacts to the news with a menacing glare and an overpowering stance toward his father, yelling “God damn you!” and calling him a murderer. Here Artie represents every subsequent generation that wants to know what cannot be known, to understand what cannot be understood, and his anger is palpable. Even after Vladek calms him down, explaining his own confusion and how depressed he had been when he destroyed the memoirs, Artie leaves his father’s house muttering “...murderer.”

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 24

Spiegelman is representing the awful, but very real, anxiety that in every moment in which we allow part of the story to be lost there is a sense of complicity in the crimes. But Spiegelman makes no attempt to recreate his mother's narrative. Acting on the desire to grasp what is beyond our reach is an even worse offense. Instead, the tragic enormity of the mother's tale is conveyed through its absence. Young considers this a "void at the heart of *Maus*," he tells us that "the mother's lost story may be *Maus*'s negative center of gravity, the invisible planet around which both the father's telling and Spiegelman's recovery of it revolve."²⁴⁷

The broken narrative with which we are presented is also layered with other self-referential commentaries. We are told that "when Spiegelman is asked, 'Why mice?'" in reference to his choice to depict Jews as mice (and Germans as cats, Frenchmen as frogs, Poles as pigs, etc.), "he answers, 'I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them. I want to show the masking of these events *in* their representation.'" Adam Gopnik offers that it is not only that Spiegelman wants to present the story masked, but that it is "too horrible to be presented unmasked." With the unfathomable magnitude of the Shoah there must be unending reference to the impossibility of the telling within the telling itself. The audacity to portray what is simultaneously impossible and necessary to portray must be repeatedly, self-consciously acknowledged.

Yet another layer is added by the fact that, in many panels, we can see certain characters not so much as mice, but as humans wearing mouse masks. Gopnik compares Spiegelman's choice here to the thirteenth-century Ashkenazi Bird's Head Haggadah, in which human beings are portrayed with birds' heads, but he points out that whereas "the

²⁴⁷ Ibid. 31

medieval artist had a subject too holy to be depicted; the modern artist has a subject too horrible to be depicted.”²⁴⁸

Against Hope

Perhaps the most difficult problem we encounter in portraying the Shoah is the issue of meaning. The urge to find meaning in the Shoah – relevant lessons for our lives that fit into categories of redemption – is unavoidable. My entire project is, despite itself, partly the result of this urge. The totalizing coherencies to which we are drawn hold their sway in part for this reason. Events are given value; they are assigned a place within a scheme. As we have seen with the Shoah itself, human beings are prone to lash out violently in the face of the irreconcilable.

Spiegelman’s depiction of his avatar lashing out at his father is a not-so-subtle reminder that the victimized group is in no way insulated from the phenomenon. In fact, faced with the existential threat of non-coherence on such a deeper level, a victim can respond to future confrontation in a totalizing fashion with even more zeal. The Shoah, if allowed to resist totality, becomes an ugly blot upon the dramas that we construct for ourselves through narratives of logic, redemption, and theodicy. It requires a radical restructuring of these categories, pushing to the margins what were once central themes and emphasizing other historically fringe elements.

Zachary Braiterman writes of Richard Rubenstein’s work, “I wonder if he suspected that the radicalism of his thought had less to do with theological propositions per se than with his recoding the contents of an entire religious culture.” In other words, in his attempt to construct a drastically “antitheodic” Judaism, Rubenstein was tapping

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 32

into what Umberto Eco calls “the unlimited discovery of contrasts and oppositions that keep multiplying with every look.”

In accordance with Eco’s notions of “open work” and “unexpected freedoms,” Braiterman explains that “Judaism consists of signs (texts, beliefs, social institutions, literary figures, and ritual observances) that form into a semiotic web of interlinking pieces.” Under the category of “signs” Braiterman also includes “affective states of consciousness brought about by ecstatic experience and catastrophic event,” which brings us back to the distinction made by Gopnik between Maus and the Bird’s Head Haggadah in an interesting way. The changes to Judaism that take place by way of post-Shoah thought – for Braiterman this means the trends inaugurated primarily by Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, and Eliezer Berkovitz – is evidence that “the cultural nexus that constitutes ‘Judaism’ in any given period is itself built upon detachable parts. Its units can be moved between the center and margins of the community’s attention to reveal new meanings at different historical moments.”²⁴⁹

Braiterman tracks the change in the thinking of the post-Shoah theologians as a shift in antitheodic expression from the margins to the center. “This shift,” he writes, “speaks to the changed face of catastrophe in the modern era. Antitheodicy (the refusal to justify, accept, and value suffering) proves especially compelling in an age of extermination camps and nuclear weaponry.”²⁵⁰ But this is no guarantee that antitheodicy can, in itself, provide an avenue of living that is not fraught with the Scylla of reactionary totalities and the Charybdis of antitheodical despair. James Young asks, astutely, of

²⁴⁹ Braiterman, Zachary. (God) After Auschwitz. 166

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 167

Shoah narratives, “Can we keep such stories separate or do they seep into the rest of our lives, and how corrosive are they?”

Antitheodicy can only be understood in relation to theodicy, and there is no “stepping outside” of these ideas, whatever one might rationally propose about the existence or non-existence of God, for example. And antitheodicy, which tries to reject redemptive lessons, is itself a kind of lesson imbued with its own didactic meaning.

Young cites the essayist Jonathan Rosen, who offers some related questions that cut to the core of these anxieties:

Why should we assume there are positive lessons to be learned from [the Holocaust]... What if some history does not have anything to teach us? What if studying radical evil does not make us better? What if, walking through the haunted halls of the Holocaust Museum, looking at evidence of the destruction of European Jewry, visitors do not emerge with a greater belief that all men are created equal but with a belief that man is by nature evil?²⁵¹

Young answers these questions as a devil’s advocate, accentuating our fears:

[In that case] the Holocaust was an irredeemably terrible experience then, had a terrible effect on many survivors’ lives, and endows its victims with no great moral authority now. Categories like good and evil remain, but they are now stripped of their idealized certainties. Neither art nor narrative redeems the Holocaust with meaning – didactic, moral, or otherwise. In fact, to the extent that remembering events seems to find any meaning in them, such memory also betrays events by blinding us with our own need for redemptory closure.²⁵²

With these words Young appears to have resigned us to the most pessimistic, Mithnagdic perspective of the human trajectory. There is nothing to look forward to, no great lessons learned, only more despair. The repetition of the word “terrible” here is reminiscent of Leonard Cohen’s “The Night Comes On,” suggesting another possible understanding of

²⁵¹ Young, James E. At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture. 37

²⁵² Ibid. 37-38

the lyrics, “There was this terrible sound, / and my father went down / with a terrible wound in his side.” There is no victory, not even at the end of war. The agreement that nobody else has to die is illusory, naïve at best and deadly at its worst. Have we then lost all possibility of any sort of redemption? Is this the sound of Rabbi Eliezer’s absent response to Rabbi Joshua, the disconfirmation of God, of Levinas’s principle of the triumph of Good?

Ω

There are obviously profound consequences to these problems as one considers issues of both individual and political action. Is there even the possibility of any sort of persuasive ethics when there is absolutely no hope? The preceding discussion, after all, coalesces into a devastating critique of hope, or what Oona Eisenstadt calls “a Meaning of History... the consolations of a providence or a progress guiding the world toward salvation or perfection.”²⁵³ Eisenstadt writes:

We do not need to think of the Jews murdered at Auschwitz to understand that hope is illusory, nor do we need to think of the Nazis engaged in their murder to understand that hope is dangerous. It is likely, though, that in the wake of Auschwitz these ideas are easiest to grasp – and indeed they are grasped by several thinkers, for instance Theodor Adorno, who writes that after Auschwitz ‘even to think hope forsakes hope and works against it.’²⁵⁴

It is difficult to walk away from a sober engagement with most Shoah literature and art without such a sense of the futility, or even the danger, of hope. Such is certainly the case with Elie Wiesel’s The Trial of God. Wiesel, most famous for Night, his account of his personal experience at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, was inspired to write a play in

²⁵³ Eisenstadt, Oona. “Anti-Utopianism Revisited.” 123

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 124

which several Jews hold a mock trial for God. Though the play takes place in the fictional Eastern European village of Shamgorod in 1649, it was inspired by an event that Wiesel witnessed in Auschwitz: “Inside the kingdom of night,” Wiesel tells us, “I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis – all erudite and pious men – decided one winter evening to indict God for allowing his children to be massacred.”²⁵⁵

The play takes place on the night of Purim, the festival inaugurated by Mordechai in the *Book of Esther*. Three travelling *Purimshpielers* (minstrels; actors) arrive at an inn to put on a festive Purim show, as is customary. Not realizing exactly where they are, they soon learn that they have arrived in Shamgorod, a village which has suffered a pogrom, leaving behind only two Jews: Berish, the innkeeper, and Hannah, his traumatized daughter.

Berish and Hannah are a sort of anti-Mordechai and anti-Esther, or they are what Mordechai and Esther might have become had their plan not succeeded and somehow they alone survived. Berish convinces the erstwhile *Purimshpielers* to help him stage a trial with himself as accuser, the minstrels as judges, and God as defendant. After several interruptions, including the entrance of a Stranger who offers his services as an attorney for the defense and the local Priest who warns the Jews of another imminent pogrom, the trial begins.

The ending is rather cliché. After dredging up responses reminiscent of Job’s “friends” – “who are you to criticize God’s plan?”, etc. – and invoking the doctrine of a God who suffers with the victims, the Stranger fails to assuage Berish’s anger but manages to convince the judges that as God’s sole defender he must be a saint, prophet, miracle maker, or something similar. As the angry mob descends upon the inn the judges

²⁵⁵ Wiesel, Elie. The Trial of God. 1

plead with the Stranger for some kind of miraculous intervention, at which point the Stranger puts on his “Purim” mask, revealing himself to be Satan and cackling “If only you knew, if only you knew...”²⁵⁶

There is no resolution, no grand epiphany. The ending was something we knew, in a sense, before the play began. Wiesel even includes this addition to the scene description at the start of the play: “Hate has won; death has triumphed.”²⁵⁷ Unsatisfying though the ending may be, and however trite of a literary device it employs, one can understand why Wiesel might feel he could not end the play in any other way. It is required, in a way, if we are to find relevance in it after Auschwitz. Anything else would have been beside the point; it would have precluded the possibility of meditation on the problems presented.

Much more intriguing than the ending, I believe, are some of the discussions that take place throughout. Three aspects of the play are of particular interest to me. The first is Berish’s and Mendel’s exchange with the Priest upon hearing of the impending pogrom. Mendel is the elder, wiser, more aloof member of the Purimshpielers. He defends Berish’s decision to reject the Priest’s offer of protection in exchange for conversion, as well as the decision to remain in the inn and stage the trial despite the danger of the pogrom.

Berish, as he prepares to stage a trial against God, refuses the Priest’s offer just as he refuses to flee. He rebuffs the Priest’s claim that God no longer loves the Jews even as he prepares to accuse God of more or less the same crime. Mendel responds to the Priest’s confused question, “Why this sudden loyalty to your God?” by telling him, “Our

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 161

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 1

relations with God are our business – ours alone.” He continues, “there is the people of Israel and there is the God of Israel: Let no one interfere in their affairs.”²⁵⁸

The second matter of interest is the play’s use of the festival of Purim as a literary motif. As already mentioned, Purim is characterized by shows, masks, and other frivolity. Roles become reversed, up becomes down, and, as Berish notes, “on Purim, everything goes.” Purim becomes a sort of ethos for the entire play, which is itself a demonic reversal of the giddiness of a *Purimshpiel*, a traditional Purim play. Berish dismisses the story of *Esther*, however, as the story of “a Jewish beauty who went to bed with an old king,” and scoffs at Mendel’s question, “And God in all this?” Mendel responds, “Do not make fun of God – even if He is making fun of you.”²⁵⁹

A little bit later Berish declares that the judges are all crazy and that “Purim is over. For good.” Mendel responds, “So what! Only madmen know how to pay tribute to Purim! Purim is for madmen!”²⁶⁰ And yet Berish’s justification for the trial is that it is taking place on Purim, when “everything goes,” and that therefore they are free to “utter words no one has ever uttered before... ask questions no one has ever dared ask before... give answers no one has ever had the courage to articulate before... and to accuse the *real* accused.” Mendel responds, saying “Tonight we will be free to say everything. To command, to imagine everything – even our impossible victory.”²⁶¹ Later, Mendel sums up the scene to the Priest thusly: “Outside, Haman’s mob is getting ready, while inside, the Jews went on with their prayers; that was their idea of theater.”²⁶²

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 97

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 24-25

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 37

²⁶¹ Ibid. 56

²⁶² Ibid. 96

The third matter is a discussion between Berish and Mendel that is taken up at various points throughout the play. Early on, in response to a remark by Mendel about his having “learned the art of waiting,” Berish says, “I knew how to wait once... I waited and waited for redemption, and who do you think came? The redeemer? No: the killers.” Mendel responds, “But is that an answer? If so, it means there is an answer. I am not sure there is...” Soon afterward Berish asks Mendel if he shares his anger. Mendel replies, “I do not. But I like it anyway. It implies a question –.”²⁶³ Later on, when the mob is approaching and Mendel asks him if he still refuses to forgive God, Berish proclaims: “I lived as a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I shall die – and it is as a Jew that, with my last breath, I shall shout my protest to God! And because the end is near, I shall shout louder! Because the end is near, I’ll tell Him that He’s more guilty than ever!”²⁶⁴

These three related components of the play are significant because together they flesh out a commentary on our earlier concerns about hope and hopelessness. We would do well to keep the ending as part of our considerations, and we should stress that these components do not present us with a hope against hope, a hope against all odds, a silver lining to a cloud of despair, or anything of the sort. There is no rejection of hopelessness, of the futility of action. As with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, it remains, in Eisenstadt’s words, “*a thought without hope.*”²⁶⁵

Wiesel, through Berish and Mendel, seems to agree with Levinas that all positive projects, such as pleasing others or “mending the world,” even if they enjoy a limited success, inevitably fail. The rejection of hope remains in each instance; there is no likelihood, or even possibility, that any initiative will fully succeed, no matter how

²⁶³ Ibid. 26-27

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 156

²⁶⁵ Eisenstadt, Oona. “Anti-Utopianism Revisited.” 123

righteously motivated or skillfully executed. And furthermore, even when a justice is successfully achieved, it is never without an aspect of injustice. But, as Eisenstadt explains of Levinas, and I believe it applies to Wiesel's characters as well, "he replaces [hope] with something more enduring, something that, in addition, is perhaps more Jewish: in a word, stubbornness."²⁶⁶

Eisenstadt quotes an essay by Levinas entitled "Jewish Thought Today," in which he writes that the modern Jewish rejection of "supernatural salvation," for our purposes, hope, is not so much an "example of pigheadedness," but "supreme lucidity" in which Jews have concluded that "their stiff necks were the most metaphysical part of their anatomy." But, Eisenstadt notes, not only does the stiff neck become a "mark of healthy skepticism," it also, interestingly, can become "the locus of action." And through an exploration of this marriage of skepticism and action we can begin to understand why, for Levinas, it becomes necessary to so explicitly combine Abulafian rupture with the ethical emphasis of Bachya ben Asher, especially after the Shoah.

In harmony with the conversations of Berish and Mendel, Levinas, inspired by a short story by Zvi Kolitz about the last remaining Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto, writes that "to be a Jew means... to swim eternally against the filthy criminal tide of man."²⁶⁷ Eisenstadt adds that this means "to be aware that one will fail again and again; to be therefore a member of 'the most unhappy people on earth'; but also, finally, to be happy [to be] unhappy"²⁶⁷ [clarifying notes in Eisenstadt's text].

In this way hopelessness is not a nihilistic, inactive despair but the grounding for an ethics that is both precarious and powerful. "To slip from the rejection of hope into

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 124

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 124

inactivity, either personal or social,” Eisenstadt writes, is effectively forbidden by Levinas’s thought.” Inactivity remains a temptation, of course, when one is confronted with such conflicting aspects of the human condition, of Levinasian “infinite obligation” and “the inevitability of ethical failure.” But the very stubbornness that unendingly defies injustices on the individual level and structure and order on the political level, despite hopelessness or perhaps because of it, is what defines Judaism. Conversely, Eisenstadt defines the loss of this stubbornness, through despair but also through comfort or acquiescence, for example, to Hegelian historical necessity – read: salvation, progress, theodicy – as “assimilation.”²⁶⁸

The ethics that emerges here is, of course, characterized by an extreme tentativeness that would have pleased Abulafia and R. Bachya, and will remain, by definition, unfulfilled, unsatisfying, and all too aware of the unjust aspect of even the purest forms of justice. As Jews, we must struggle to reconcile such an ethics with the hopelessness that continues to emerge from the Shoah experience – and with our unprecedented capacity for all forms of worldly praxis in the current age.

Ω

Let us conclude by considering the poem, “With a Variable Key,” by Paul Celan:

With a variable key
you unlock the house in which
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.
Always what key you choose
depends on the blood that spurts
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. 125-126

You vary the key, you vary the word
that is free to drift with the flakes.
What snowball will form round the word
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.²⁶⁹

I leave the exegesis to the reader.

²⁶⁹ Celan, Paul. Hamburger, Michael, translator. Poems of Paul Celan. 59

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