

CHAPTER 5

Divine Hiddenness and Human Input: The Potential Contribution of a Postmodern View of Revelation to Yitz Greenberg's Holocaust Theology

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The challenges that biblical criticism and the atrocities of the Holocaust pose, respectively, to traditional notions of revelation and theodicy are arguably the two greatest obstacles of our age to commonly accepted notions of Orthodox Jewish belief. Both involve the confrontation of metaphysical assertions with contrary empiric evidence of such scope or magnitude that all the usual tactics of religious apologetics appear inadequate. In the following essay, I would like to point to certain commonalities between an approach that I have been developing to the first issue and the response that Greenberg has been developing with regard to the second. I will then propose that some shortcomings in Greenberg's position (which he himself acknowledges) might be overcome if he were to adopt the implications of this parallelism in full.

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Revelation has conventionally been understood in Judaism as the eruption of a transcendent God into the historic reality in order to convey a timeless message for humanity at large and the Jewish people in particular. The significance of this picture of revelation as emanating from an all-knowing God that stands over and above human weaknesses and fallibilities has been to bestow absolute authority to the way of life that has been developed on the basis of His original message.

Jewish thought has always provided some qualifications and nuances to an overliteral understanding of this statement, which left room for acknowledging the influence of shifting historical circumstances and subjective human input.¹ Loyalty to the system, however, especially in times of perceived threat, appears to mandate tying on our ideological loincloths more tightly. It is at such times that we most often hear strident statements of faith dogmatically professing commitment to an eternal and unchanging Torah with exhaustively predefined parameters.²

The latest instance of this dynamic can be perceived in the sharply dogmatic turn that Orthodox Judaism has taken since the nineteenth century. Previous to this, premodern Jewish society was secure in its unquestioning acceptance of tradition as no less a primary source of authority than its canonized texts. The more relaxed, pragmatic, and nonideological religious climate that then prevailed still characterizes traditional Sephardic Jewish communities less affected by modernity. In contrast, today's Orthodoxy represents a deliberate response both to a historicist approach, which views Judaism as shaped by external events and influences, and to the threat that the forces of modernity and its values have posed to the authority of halakhah.

Admittedly, Orthodox Judaism is not all of one ilk—in our day it encompasses segments continuing the legacy of Hungarian ultra-Orthodoxy, eastern European Hasidism and Mitnagdism, and German neo-Orthodoxy, as well as native American Orthodoxy of various stripes, Israeli religious Zionists,

1 For an extensive collection of sources substantiating this claim, see Yoshi Fargeon, "Wisdom and Science Is Granted unto Thee," in *Be-einei Elohim ve-Adam: He-Adam Ha-maamin u-Mehkar ha-Mikra*, ed. Yehuda Brandes, Tova Ganzel, and Hayuta Deutsch (Jerusalem: Bet Morasha, 2015), 17–162.

2 Jay Michael Harris has written a masterly historical survey of this dynamic: *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

etc. But, uniting all these groups, despite their differences, is the shift from traditionalism to modernity. The conscious, self-reflexive, conservative formulation of Judaism that constitutes Orthodoxy is—even in its anti-modernist formulations—a uniquely modern phenomenon.³ Precisely because of this shift, it has come about that, especially since the nineteenth century, Orthodox spokesmen have typically promoted a view of revelation as the transmission of a rigid and static body of content, impervious to outside influences and considerations.

While a maximalist view of revelation was originally voiced only by the most extreme elements of Orthodoxy and eschewed by most learned traditionalists as oversimplified and, in some instances, simply false, at present it enjoys widespread support in more popular renditions of ultra-Orthodox ideology. This view has also been advanced in more moderate form even within the ranks of modern Orthodoxy, particularly as articulated in the United States. Thus we are told by Rabbi David Bleich, a Rosh Yeshiva at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) and a prominent exponent of Centrist Orthodox ideology: “Normative Judaism teaches that Halakhah is not derived from any temporal ‘worldview’ or ‘social situation’ but expresses the transcendental worldview of the divine Lawgiver.”⁴ Because the Torah is not bound to any contemporary ethos, it “possesses an enduring validity which, while applicable to changing circumstances, is not subject to change by lobbying or by the exertion of pressure in any guise or form. Nor may independently held convictions, however sincere, be allowed to influence our interpretation of Halakhah.”⁵

The widespread acceptance of this stance can be attributed largely to the powerful influence of the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In a unique amalgam of “the Brisker method” founded by his grandfather, which viewed the development of the Oral law as a self-contained system shaped exclusively by its own internal logic and procedural rules, and neo-Kantian philosophy, which regards science as the product of a humanly formed system of categories, R. Soloveitchik understood the abstract concepts of Brisk as ideal categories

3 Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1994), 26n4; see also Jacob Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 2, 3–6; Moshe S. Samet, “The Beginnings of Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* 8 (1988): 249–69.

4 David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*, vol. 1 (New York: Ktav, 1977), 83.

5 Ibid.

that serve as the only legitimate methodological tool for approaching the inner spiritual reality that halakhah is meant to render concrete. As in mathematics, these categories have a priori status. Their definitions are absolute, eternal, and not to be equated with historic, ideological, or moral interpretations that have accrued to them. Nor do they come to serve any value external to themselves. In subjugating himself to the norms of halakhah, “Halakhic Man” (the title of Soloveitchik’s famous essay on this topic)⁶ discovers and internalizes the ideal values and principles that are embedded in the Torah and realizes them to the best of his ability in the imperfect universe he inhabits. As R. Soloveitchik’s son, Professor Haym Soloveitchik, concludes: “If law is conceived of as religious law must be, as a revelation of the divine will, then any attempt to align that will with human wants, any attempt to have reality control rather than to be itself controlled by the divine norm, is an act of blasphemy and is inconceivable to a God-fearing man.”⁷

Such a pristine view of revelation breeds an ethos of unquestioning obedience to those elements of the Torah that are preordained and absolute. The ideal of religious behavior is epitomized most succinctly in the model of the *Akedah*, according to which Abraham unquestioningly subjected his natural human desires to the objectified standards of the divine will. This view comports with the assumption of rigid and stable notions of truth that are capable of being supported by a universal, neutral, and objective rationality that serves as their justification, an assumption that has characterized modernist thinking since the age of the Enlightenment.

II

The Soloveitchikian understanding of divine revelation has encountered increasing challenges over the past few decades, with the growing exposure of a younger generation of modern Orthodox students and scholars to the findings of biblical criticism. Critical readings of the biblical text are, of course, not unique to our times. Nevertheless, the intensity and depth of the problems these raise have increased exponentially in the wake of recent developments in science, technology, literary analysis, epistemology, and hermeneutic theory. Beyond the usual difficulties (erroneous or fallible content, questionable

6 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

7 Haym Soloveitchik, “Religious Law and Change,” *AJS Review: The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies* 12, no. 8 (Fall 1987): 205.

morality, and textual evidence of evolutionary historical development), the postmodern contention that all knowledge is “situated” (i.e., framed by the observer’s prior values, expectations, and standards)—as evidenced, for example, in the feminist critique—has most recently problematized the very notion of divine revelation as verbal communication, given that language itself now appears to be so pervasively rooted in a particular perspective and cultural bias.⁸

While circles emanating from Yeshiva University that regard themselves as continuing the Soloveitchikian legacy have been overwhelmingly opposed to addressing such issues, the climate of discourse among religious academicians and even some of the more liberal Yeshiva circles in Israel has been more hospitable to efforts at candid confrontation.⁹ This has partly to do with some obvious political differences between the situation of Orthodoxy in Israel and that of the Diaspora. For example, as opposed to Modern Orthodoxy in North America, its counterpart in Israel is more clearly demarcated from ultra-Orthodox circles and therefore less affected by its opinions. Moreover, official Orthodoxy in Israel is characterized by a weak rabbinate facing a religious literate laity that has greater confidence in its ability to make independent judgments. Another factor is the lack of urgency in Israel to create ideological borders between the Conservative and Reform movements. But a final element that might contribute to this openness is the difference between the submissive theocentric temper of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s theology of divine–human relations that has dominated the American scene, and a more nuanced variety of monotheism promoted by Rabbi A. I. Kook, whose general worldview has had a dominant influence on the ideological orientation of religious Zionist circles in Israel.

Many elements in R. Kook’s theology revive the more fluid views of revelation that were developed in premodern times. His immersion in the mystic tradition and its panentheistic image of God discourages positing God and His word as distinct from the flow of history and natural morality.¹⁰ It also leads him to a view of truth which is remarkably sympathetic to the postmodern critique of sterile, fixed, and universal truths that purport to reflect a neutral and objective view “from nowhere,” and to the celebration of conflict as a trigger to

8 For further elaboration, see Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 139–42, 184–7.

9 As exemplified by *Be-einei Elohim ve-Adam*, and some publications produced by educators associated with Yeshivat Har Etzion.

10 See Ross, *Expanding the Palace*, 205–7.

spiritual advancement.¹¹ Such factors arguably place him in a better position when contending with the findings of biblical criticism and postmodern epistemology. While R. Kook did not set out these elements of his thought in the form of a systematic theology of revelation, a response that resonates various strands of his thought has greater chance of success in an age of increasing awareness of the human and fallible character of what is purportedly a divine text.

III

In some of my own writing, I have attempted to develop the bare bones of such a response.¹² Such a project, I suggest, involves two stages:

1. At the first stage, when viewing revelation from within tradition, we must try to achieve an understanding that is as coherent as possible on its own terms. This is accomplished by breaking down the distinction between divine speech and the natural historic process and recognizing that God does not speak through vocal chords but through the orchestration of history and the evolution of human understanding that develops in its wake. Aside from avoiding gross anthropomorphisms, if we are to understand God's word as conveying a message for all generations, its transmission cannot be limited to a one-time event, but must be understood as a process. This process began with the formal canonization of the Torah and its acceptance by the Jewish people as the primary filter through which the authorized beliefs and practices of Judaism are determined. It continues, however, with the cumulative interpretations that accrue to this text, inevitably informing and altering its meaning in light of the ever-changing historical contexts in which it is read. Viewed religiously, these contexts—no less than the original text—may likewise be regarded as an ongoing revelation of the divine word, constantly refining its meaning in light

11 Tamar Ross, "The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Claims: Rabbi A. I. Kook and Post-modernism," in *Hazon Nahum: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Norman Lamm* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), 479–527.

12 See Tamar Ross, "Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Biblical Criticism: Some Reflections on the Importance of Asking the Right Question," available in English at <http://thetorah.com/the-challenge-of-biblical-criticism>, and in Hebrew in *Be-einei Elohim ve-Adam*, 242–88. An abbreviated version of this article was published in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 14, no. 1 (March 2015): 6–26. For explication of this approach in a feminist context, see Ross, *Expanding the Palace*, 193–224.

of new surrounding circumstances. As a result, the Torah can be understood as all human (in terms of its literary and historical genesis) and all divine (in terms of its origin, value, and significance) at one and the same time.

Orthodox believers generally recoil from historical, sociological, anthropological, or psychological explanations of key customs and tenets. In their eyes, any suggestion of the influence of historical circumstances or comparison with surrounding cultures of the times is anathema. Yet this view of revelation through history manages to turn the reductionist conclusions of historicism and the external observer on their head, as if to say: “Of course revelation is influenced by history and the evolution of ideas (even when such ideas or their parallels are to be found in non-Jewish sources), but history and the evolution of ideas themselves are also the tools of revelation!”

As opposed to the more common attitude within Orthodoxy, R. Kook’s acknowledgment of the influence of historical circumstances on Judaism takes into account not only the need to struggle against negative aspects of culture at large but also the absorption and refinement of whatever positive elements it has to offer. Indeed, a hallmark of R. Kook’s positive attitude to secularism is the understanding that revolutionary and ostensibly destructive developments in the world of ideas are the most significant tools of all, for these are a clear indication that humanity has outgrown more primitive forms of spirituality and is ready for a new, more sublime level.¹³ Taken in this spirit, we might conclude that even the challenges of biblical criticism in our day can be regarded as a rare privilege and a new revelation of the divine will. Divine providence itself has orchestrated the rise of serious problems with Torah as history so as to lead us, and all of humankind with us, to a new and more subtle understanding of the relationship between divine intent and human interpretation, which acknowledges the decisive role of human input. We do not doubt God when we walk through this threshold. We are listening to God as we go forward, for this too was from God.¹⁴

13 This idea appears in many of his writings. See, for example, A. I. Kook, *Orot ha-Emunah* (Brooklyn, NY: Langsam Associates, 1985), 48, 74–5.

14 History as a medium of revelation is a dominant theme in R. Kook’s thought. For one example of contemporary writing, beyond my own, which builds on this view, see Daniel Shalit, *Ohr Shivat Yamim* (Jerusalem: Sifriyat Beit El, 1998). Although Shalit, a returnee to

2. Viewing our internal religious talk from a more universal perspective, however, leads to a second, more radical, stage in the development of a contemporary theology of revelation. Appropriating some of the insights of postmodern theory regarding language and its uses, we understand that equating professions of belief in divine revelation with factual descriptions entails a misconception of the role of such statements in the religious context. It is this misconception that has led to the bankruptcy of a modernist *Torah u-madda* approach, which regards religion as a rival source of knowledge vying with science. Instead, we now understand that the primary concern of such statements is not to discuss facts or establish history, but rather to function on an entirely different plane—appropriating a system of symbols and “picture” of reality that legitimate our most basic patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, and signaling to our coreligionists that we share the same ultimate loyalties.

Despite his staunch traditionalism, this revolutionary shift from the conventional understanding of truth as corresponding to some objective reality “out there” also has significant parallels in R. Kook’s writings, which reveal a remarkably tentative attitude to religious truth claims. R. Kook’s skepticism is founded on the mystic’s presumption of a built-in contradiction between finite human perceptions and God’s monolithic all-encompassing infinity that transcends all definitions and distinctions.¹⁵

There is, admittedly, a deep divide between the mystic’s call for epistemological modesty and a modern or postmodern rejection of metaphysics altogether. In R. Kook’s thought, such modesty relates to a modern school of Kabbalah, known as the allegorical interpreters of the doctrine of *zimzum* (contraction), whose core idea provides an essential key to his entire worldview and

Orthodox observance, hardly mentions R. Kook explicitly, the intricate historic scheme which lies at the heart of his thesis reveals the pervasive influence of Kook’s view of history and its application to feminism. See also Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *This Was from God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016), whose response to the historicist critique of biblical accuracy similarly reflects the influence of Kook’s theology, capitalizing on the revelatory properties of history and on assumption of divine accommodationalism as important avenues of rapprochement with the critical insights of modernity.

15 A. I. Kook, “Suffering Cleanses,” in *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963), 124–5.

its remarkably pantheistic thrust.¹⁶ According to these latter-day mystics, the Lurianic assumption of God's need to contract His infinite being, in order to make space for a finite world that is other than He, is not to be understood literally, as an actual physical displacement and creation of a void. Instead, it should be taken as a metaphor for the concealment of an aspect of God's all-pervasive unity, thereby enabling an illusory realm of appearance. This understanding brings R. Kook to regard all truth claims as inadequate in principle and ultimately false, leaving them to be judged by a pragmatic spiritual standard that is very reminiscent of postmodern instrumentalism.¹⁷

While R. Kook employs the metaphysical language of tradition, the authority of revelation does not derive on his formulation from the "fact" that God gave us the Torah, but rather on strength of *kabbalat ha-umma*, which means the willingness of the Jewish people to accept it as such,¹⁸ and the obvious spiritual benefits of this acceptance.¹⁹ Even the notion of divine providence in the sense of an almighty God controlling affairs from above appears to be a "necessary truth,"²⁰ useful for developing our urge for perfection, rather than a "true truth" that exists independently of human needs. The realization that even such partial glimpses of the divine are encompassed in its infinite totality and provide us with indispensable tools for breaking down distinctions between the godly and the human, the holy and the profane, lends them their validity.²¹

16 For further elaboration, see Tamar Ross, "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook—Part I" [in Hebrew], *Daat* 8 (Summer 1982): 109–28; "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook—Part II" [in Hebrew], *Daat* (Winter 1983): 39–70; and "The Place of the Lurianic Doctrine of Zimzum in the Thought of Harav Kook" [in Hebrew], in *Mechkarim b'Hagut Yehudit*, ed. Moshe Idel and Sarah Heller-Wilensky (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), 159–72.

17 Ross, "The Cognitive Value."

18 A. I. Kook, *Eder ha-Yakar* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 39; *Iggerot ha-Ra'yah I* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 193–4; see also *Arpelei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Hamachon al shem Harav Zvi Yehuda Kook, 1983), 78, for a more essentialist twist to this argument.

19 A. I. Kook, *Iggerot ha-Ra'yah I* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 48–9.

20 *Iggerot ha-Ra'yah I*, 106–7. For explication of Kook's understanding of necessary truths, see Ross, "The Cognitive Value," 491–6.

21 *Orot*, 124–5; *Iggrot Ha-Reayah I*, 47–8.

IV

Although Greenberg occasionally alludes to the challenge of historicism and biblical criticism,²² the bulk of his thought is far more focused on the challenge to religious belief as epitomized by the Holocaust. The main question that he asks is not whether the Torah account of revelation as a divine message can be true in light of its human imprints, but rather: Can we still believe in the existence of a God who is omnipotent, benign, and just after the massive genocide conducted by the Nazis?

As Greenberg is well aware, post-Holocaust theology has produced a huge literature on the subject, ranging from the attempt to justify even the enormity of this evil as retribution for some deserved sin to foregoing any attempt at response, appealing to the limitations of human understanding.²³ Despite their virtuosity, each of these classic answers has evoked penetrating criticism.

Greenberg's ultimate solution to the problem appears to combine a notion of God's deliberate silence with the idea that such curtailment is the necessary means for a greater good. Similarly to David Hartman,²⁴ Greenberg suggests that God's abdication of responsibility in the case of the Holocaust signifies a critical rupture of His original covenant with the Jews. According to that covenant, God was committed to preserving the Jewish destiny in return for our commitment to observe His mitzvot as a means for progressing towards *tikkun olam*, liberation and redemption. However, Greenberg notes, ever since the original agreement established at Sinai, God's role has gradually diminished, shifting greater responsibility to the people of Israel in perfecting the world.

22 See, for example, Irving (Yitzhak) Greenberg, "Two Doors Rabbi Soloveitchik Walked Through but Did Not Open: The Future of Modern Orthodoxy," in *Rav ba-Olam ha-Hadash: Iyunnim be-hashpa'ato shel ha-Rav Soloveitchik al Tarbut, al Hinukh, ve-al Mahshava Yehudit*, ed. Avinoam Rosenak and Naftali Rothenberg (Jerusalem: Magnes/Van Leer, 2010), 245–77, available in English typescript at <http://rabbiirvinggreenberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Two-Doors-reduced.pdf>.

23 For two anthologies surveying the range of theological responses, see: *Holocaust Theology A Reader*, comp. and ed. Dan Cohn-Shertok (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002); *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust*, ed. Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

24 See David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), particularly 256–77. For a brief discussion of the similarities and differences between Greenberg's and Hartman's views regarding various stages in the development of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, see Ehud Luz, "Zionism, History, and Demythologization," in *Mehuyavut Yehudit Mithadeshet: al Olamo ve-Haguto shel David Hartman*, vol. I, ed. Avi Sagi and Tzvi Zohar, 337–8.

Instead of understanding God's *hester panim* as a temporary punishment, it should now be understood as a necessary means for ensuring human freedom; our autonomy grows in direct proportion to God's hiding.²⁵

In light of this claim, Greenberg traces the development of Jewish independence throughout history from the biblical era, in which God functions as the senior partner who responds directly to our behavior in terms of punishment or reward, to the withdrawal of divine intervention with the destruction of the Second Temple and the concomitant cessation of prophecy, and finally to the stage where God's absolute hiddenness shifts all responsibility for the destiny of creation to human initiative and freedom of choice. The Holocaust marks the culmination of this process. Now that God's presence has become totally hidden, the Jewish people must undertake full responsibility for the realization of history's Messianic goals. Such gradualism is manifested even in the nature of the Jewish festivals, which began with commemoration of the miraculous events of the desert, but morphed into celebration of the more naturalistic victories of Hanukkah and Purim, leading finally to the more "secular" accomplishments of Yom Ha-atzmaut and the founding of the Jewish state.²⁶

V

Despite the difference in focus, some striking parallels arise from this initial sketch of Greenberg's treatment of the Holocaust and the approach I have suggested for resolving modern and postmodern challenges to the belief in divine revelation. In both cases, the solution appears to lie at the outset in dissolving the sharp dichotomy between the divine and the human by acknowledging the expanding role of human input. And in both cases, the form and degree of God's revelation appear to calibrate in accordance with the nature and pace of human maturation. Indeed, Greenberg's account of the various stages in the

25 See Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1977), 7–55, 441–6; "The Third Great Cycle in Jewish History," in *Perspectives* (New York: Clal-National Jewish Resource Center, September 1981); "Voluntary Covenant," in *Perspectives* (New York: Clal-National Jewish Resource Center, September 1982); republished in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*, ed. Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 499–523, 523–43, and 543–55, respectively.

26 Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Touchstone, 1988).

development of Jewish autonomy shares several features with a comparable periodization of Jewish history central to R. Kook's thought.²⁷

Such resemblances testify to common ground between us with regard to my first move, in acknowledging the critical role that historical process and shifting contexts play in the effort of determining what the divine will is. However, I find it difficult to determine from Greenberg's current phrasing of the matter to what extent we continue to be in sync with regard to the second, more radical move that I make when attempting to view this internal religious narrative through more universal spectacles. In other words, I am not quite sure of the degree to which Greenberg regards his theological account (which views the gradual move from the supernatural to the natural as a deliberate, divinely initiated pedagogical device) as the unequivocal reflection of an inescapable, objective metaphysical truth, or as an optional narrative that *we*, as religious believers, are now free to develop in order to make some sense of it all.

Greenberg certainly does not appropriate the second, more radical, step of attributing his God-talk solely to human perceptions explicitly. In this connection, however, it is worth noting that Greenberg's notion of God's recession from history has undergone several revisions over the years. Initially (as formulated in "Cloud of Smoke") he characterized the status of his more conventional religious belief in God's omnipresence as "moment faith."²⁸ This was because his ability to sustain the traditional confidence in God's manifest presence in history and His fulfillment of the Messianic promise of redemption still functioned at least part of the time, although it was challenged by other moments in which this position no longer seemed credible.

The second stage of his thought (as evidenced in "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History" and in "Voluntary Covenant")²⁹ was marked by a shift to the notion of voluntary covenant. At this point, Greenberg regarded God's nonintervention during the Holocaust more provocatively, as a blatant breach of His covenant with the Jewish people which released them from the obligation to uphold their share of the bargain. This led him to view continued operation of

27 See, for example, R. Kook, "Regarding the Ideational Development of Israel," *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963), 102–18; and *Orot ha-Emunah*, ed. Moshe Gurevitz (Jerusalem: Me-Alef ve-ad Taf and Langsam, 1985), 66–7, in which he views the historical development of Judaism as moving from submission motivated by fear of punishment to self-motivation and worship out of love. See a parallel development of this theme in Greenberg's *Triumph of Life*.

28 Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke," 27, 33.

29 *Supra*, n25.

the broken covenant as merely a function of the Jewish people's willingness to voluntarily take over God's responsibility for preserving the Jewish future via their struggle to establish an independent Jewish state.

A third level of understanding comes to the fore in Greenberg's more recent thought, as developed during the past two decades in *Partnership for Life* and *The Triumph of Life*.³⁰ Instead of regarding God's nonintervention during the Holocaust as an inexplicable violation of His promise, he now regards God's original formulation of the covenant, as well as His subsequent behavior, more charitably—as an intentionally staged mechanism whose ultimate goal from the very beginning was to lead the Jewish people to a level of maturity that would allow them to assume full responsibility for *tikkun olam* (world repair) on their own. Such commitment from the human end would no longer be driven by hope of reward or fear of punishment. Divine retribution, as evidenced in the early period of our national history and typified by miraculous intervention on Israel's behalf, or even in later stages when such intervention was less obvious and concealed by convergence with natural causes, was—much like that of a benevolent parent—simply a pedagogic tool to wean His children off dependence and train them to be more active and mature in determining their destiny. Ultimately, the object of this exercise was to lead to Israel's assumption of full responsibility for their fate and for redemption of the world at large.³¹ Such commitment would now be driven not by narrow calculations of self-interest, but rather by the nobler motive of love.

The point that strikes me most in Greenberg's theological trajectory is his painful awareness of some measure of inadequacy in each of his suggested solutions. Indeed, the tortured attempt of most Holocaust theologians to cover all bases has always conjured up for me the proverbial tale of the tailor, who responded to the complaint of his customer that the right sleeve of the suit he had ordered was too short by suggesting that he raise his left shoulder. When that resulted in exposure of the waist, the customer was advised hunch his back,

30 These two works, still in manuscript form, are currently being prepared for publication.

31 It is worth noting that similar ideas regarding the evolution from evident to hidden miracle as an educational device leading towards a more refined form of religiosity might be implied in Nachmanides's distinction between *nes galui*, *nes mefursam*, and *nes nistar*—see his commentary to Numbers 26:11, Exodus 13:16. (For further elaboration of this position, see Tamar Ross, "Miracle as an Added Dimension in Maharal's Thought," *Daat* [Summer 1986]: 84.) According to Nachmanides, however, the final lesson to be learned from the passage from blatant miracle to conduct of the world that is more compatible with natural law is not the obligation of humans to take independent control of their destiny, but rather that God lies even behind the ostensibly mundane and ordinary.

and so on. Eventually, when the customer left the shop, passersby whispered to each other: “Look at the beautiful suit the tailor produced. What a pity the customer is crippled!”

In a similar vein, the wish to avoid such contortions appears to move Greenberg to still retain something of his original notion of moment theology, even as he continues to fine-tune his earlier responses. On his own admission, the percentages he allocates to each type of moment belief shift from stage to stage.³² Even in his most recent formulations, Greenberg can never bring himself to commit to one solution as comprehensive and absolute.³³ In retrospect, “the insight of the Holocaust taken at full blast” drives him to now generalize and conclude that “*all* truths are moment truths”³⁴ (emphasis mine), and that all the “human-implicated Absolutes” that typify the grandiose assumptions of modernity must now be reduced and made partial, or “broken.”³⁵ But does this stance of epistemological modesty indicate a readiness on Greenberg’s part to disassociate his theology from ontology altogether, and to link his commitment to its covenantal demands to a more “ironic” (in the Rortian sense)³⁶ view of their ultimate truth value?

bVI

Some support for the latter possibility may be teased out of a passage in Greenberg’s introduction to his new book, *Partnership for Life*, where he makes a telling statement regarding a transformation that he underwent in his understanding of the value of ideas in general and religious doctrine in particular, once he left academia and entered the “real” world:

For the first time in my life, I had to meet a payroll. I was stunned to discover how many brilliant ideas lost their luster in the daylight of reality. After a while, I concluded that a key measure of a truly great idea was how

32 Irving Greenberg, “Theology after the Shoah: The Transformation of the Core Paradigm,” *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 26, no. 3 (October 2006): 228.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 227.

35 Ibid., 218.

36 See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). An ironic stance in this sense does not imply cynicism, but rather a rejection of the understanding of truth claims as the mental mirroring of a mind-external world, preferring to view them in pragmatic terms.

it worked in real life. ... I began to revise my criteria for judging the value of ideas.

When this insight became central to my understanding, I finally grasped that the Torah was not a book of intellectual reflections. Nor was it a law code or a set of doctrines. At its core, the Torah offers a vision of a paradise on Earth—and how to go about perfecting the real world in order to get there.³⁷

Such reflections led Greenberg to conclude that “the message of the Jewish narrative is best described as a *hope*.” Ultimately, the test of its “truth” is pragmatic:

A hope is judged by whether it is realized and how it works in the reality. ... Thus [Judaism] ... showed great courage by stipulating that its truth or falsity, its success or failure, would be judged by whether humanity actually achieved the predicted goal.³⁸

Greenberg then proceeds to apply this understanding to the concept of covenant, which he came to appreciate as the central idea in achieving the transformation of *tikkun olam*.

Stronger basis for assuming common ground between Greenberg and myself with regard to the questionable ontological status of our religious truth claims might, at first blush, be indicated by the fact that in his latest works³⁹ he too appropriates the classical notion of *zimzum* for his theological purposes. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the use we make of this concept is different. Following R. Kook and other latter-day kabbalists, I appropriate this paradigm in its metaphoric sense in order to identify the ultimate goal of our God-talk with a level of being which transcends the conventional division between realism and non-realism, or theology and ontology, and renders it superfluous. Greenberg, by contrast, employs the image of *zimzum* in its literal

37 Irving Greenberg, *Partnership for Life* (forthcoming).

38 *Ibid.*, 6. This pragmatic turn is also evident in Greenberg’s statement (in private communication—March 3, 2016) that instead of trying to explain suffering, he now prefers to stress the Soloveitchikian idea that our main response to evil must be to do something about it. Hence, the importance of restoring life and restoring the image of God (*tzelem elokim*) within us. “Upgrading the status of women and other marginalized groups, reformulating halakhah in order to remove discrimination, stereotyping, degradation and hatred, are more important than coming to an understanding.”

39 See *Partnership for Life* and *The Triumph of Life*.

sense, in order to provide added gravitas to his shift from the notion of broken covenant and voluntary commitment to the notion of human autonomy as the pinnacle of a deliberately staged plan. This is done by relating the image of God's *actual* withdrawal in the act of creation to his understanding of covenant as the continuation of God's voluntary curtailment of His absolute power, gradually receding further and further from visible intervention in human affairs in a process leading us to full autonomy.

Despite this difference, Greenberg does seem to be groping for a more tentative understanding of faith claims that will take the postmodern critique of modernist absolutism and its confidence in universal meta-narratives into serious account. In the first instance, this leads him to assert that religion is not just about God, but rather about a divine-human partnership, as exhibited in the covenantal relationship. To the extent that the ultimate goal of this relationship is full acceptance of human freedom, its final form is inextricably bound by the degree and nature of human input. This leads him, even in some of his earlier work, to express sentiments faintly echoing the implicit pantheism of the allegorical interpreters of *zimzum* in his call to blur the distinction between the holy and the secular. On this understanding, the link between divine hiddenness and God's omnipresence can already be found in the "secularization insight" of the rabbis and their expansion of the realm of the holy through halakhic adjudication.⁴⁰ Paradoxically, it is precisely when the level of God's hiddenness reaches its highest level that the limitations of His transcendence as the ultimate "Other" are overcome and His presence inheres in all. Thus

40 "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History" (*Wrestling with God*, 534–9). See also "Voluntary Covenant" (*Wrestling with God*, 554–5). The connection between divine hiddenness and a more encompassing religious life and its pantheistic overtones is again explicated (in private communication to me on March 3, 2016) as follows: "Although God is hidden, He is more present in the outcome of human actions—halakhah expands bringing holiness and the divine presence everywhere ... Since God is totally hidden, God is everywhere. The religious is in the secular—but you have to drill to the right depth to encounter God and understand this process. Religion is not relating to a transcendent Other—as it is much more mysticism and God is in the all-in-all." It is worth noting here that Greenberg appears to be conflating the notion of *zimzum* as it first appeared in Talmudic sources with its later usage in the mystic tradition. While the Rabbis employed this term with reference to God's need to distill an aspect of His vastness in concentrated form, so that His presence, the Shekinah, could enter into a finite space *outside* of Himself (see *Bereshit Rabba* [Vilna edition], on *Bereshit, parsha 5, simman 7*; *Vayikra Rabba* [Vilna edition], on *Tzav, parsha 10, simman 9*), Lurianic kabbalists understood it in terms of God's need to contract and *withdraw* from a central point of His infinite being in order to make space *within* Himself for the creation of a finite being that is other than He.

one might conclude that so-called “ultimate truth” is achieved only when left entirely in the hands of humans.

In a later essay published in 2006,⁴¹ Greenberg grasps the epistemological bull by the horns and grapples with the truth value of human formulations more directly. At this point, Greenberg expresses disillusion with the faith of modernism in the power of our inherited conceptual and ideological categories of thought to substantiate a religious worldview. As he puts it, “When the Holocaust is recognized as a touchstone, then the test of the validity of theologies is not just the criteria of intellectual and moral coherence but whether the position is credible in the presence of the Holocaust or in light of the implications of the event.”⁴² The difficulty that the Holocaust poses in upholding assumptions regarding “the essential goodness of human nature or that sickness and suffering are providentially inflicted on people because they sin ... leads to a transformation of the categories that themselves are used to judge and to incorporate religious responses.”⁴³ Rather than reject any previous paradigm outright, Greenberg’s major response now appears to be recognizing the necessity for acknowledging “the brokenness of all worldviews and value systems.”⁴⁴ Recognizing that “all narratives are grounded in specific groups (and that their authority is grounded in that factor),”⁴⁵ all “human-implicated Absolutes ... ideas, values and forces” must be taken as partial.⁴⁶ Limits must be set in order to curtail cultural hegemony and moral centralization.⁴⁷

Greenberg describes the alternative that he proposes to absolutism (i.e., setting limits and checks on the range of validity of any particular formulation of truth) as pluralism, rather than relativism (i.e., denial of objective truth completely).⁴⁸ On this understanding, “the drive to reach objective truth and to establish the existence of absolute values is not surrendered. It is only given its just limits and thereby protected against potential excesses.”⁴⁹ This version of pluralism liberates Greenberg from his former existential torment, which rendered him torn between conflicting truths, and allowed him only “moment

41 Greenberg, “Theology after the Shoah,” 213–39.

42 Irving Greenberg, “Theology after the Holocaust: The Transformation of the Core Paradigm,” *A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 26, no. 3 (October 2006): 214.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 215.

45 Ibid., 222.

46 Ibid., 218–19.

47 Ibid., 222.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

faith.” Instead of yearning for some global method of resolution between the memory of divine redemption in the Exodus and the divine indifference exhibited in the Holocaust, he now understands that until the coming of the Messiah, *all* truths are moment truths,⁵⁰ all must be balanced against each other, accompanied by the understanding that “insistence on certainty represents [a futile] nostalgia for restoration to a pre-expulsion, pre-Shoah Eden.”⁵¹ But the assumption that there *are* “objective truths and absolute values” still serves as the driving force behind the balancing process.

VII

Greenberg’s latest tweaks to his theological response to the Holocaust are laudable and significant. On a moral plane, his advocacy of greater epistemological modesty certainly puts a damper on the perils of simplistic faith or any form of ideological fanaticism. But I believe that Greenberg would do well to take the implications of his *zimzum* paradigm one step further, and apply it (as I have, in developing the second stage of my response to biblical criticism) to his broader account of Jewish history as well.⁵² This would involve abandoning the view of covenantal theology as an objective factual description of God and His intentions, and recasting it as a metaphysical narrative born of more pragmatic spiritual concerns, such as the need to grant life meaning or to deliberately cultivate human responsibility and an urge for the sublime.

I believe that this move, which stems from a general skepticism regarding the ontological status of all metaphysical claims, is as necessary for Greenberg’s Holocaust theology, as it is for any contemporary Orthodox understanding of divine revelation. This is so, because any theological response to the Holo-

50 Ibid., 227, explicated in greater nuance on 238n64.

51 Ibid., 227.

52 In a lengthy footnote (“Theology after the Holocaust,” 238n64) Greenberg comes very close to making this move with respect to revelation, when he suggests not only that “absolutist claims do not do justice to the dynamic relationship of the components of truth or to the interaction between the Divine and the human” (stage one of my theory of revelation) but “contrary to the claims of timeless truth, to the extent that revelation and Torah enter into human culture and discourse and into this broken world, they become moment (e.g., bounded) truths.” But even at this stage, Greenberg still refers to truth as incorporating some reference to an “objective factuality,” rather than as attempting to capture a preverbal undefined state of affairs in which the distinction between truth and reality is obliterated. And, more importantly, he does not examine the implications of this more nuanced view of truth for his Holocaust theology as well.

caust must take into account the same postmodern recognition of the role that human categories of thought play in the interpretation of events and phenomena that problematizes our understanding of revelation as the eruption of an external force into our historic reality.

Given the postmodern critique of absolutism, for example, can we accept Greenberg's sharp distinction between events of the past as "divine interference" and current events as *hester panim* as objective truth? Is there no place to attribute the difference between biblical and modern renditions of reality simply to the eyes of the beholders, and their differing views regarding the nature of the possible? That is to say, had we been part of the desert generation, would this have precluded our freedom in principle to view the miracles of that time as simply a "chance" convening of natural events? And if that generation were living in our day, would they not be equally prone to viewing the establishment of the State of Israel, along with its subsequent triumphs and setbacks as repeat performances of God's "repentance of the evil that He had inflicted,"⁵³ or as heaven-sent wake-up calls to the perils of hubris when "Jeshurun waxes fat"?⁵⁴ If so, the entire theory of God's gradually diminishing involvement in history loses its force as an indisputable statement of fact.

Over and above this objection, however, persisting with the claim of God's deliberately diminished presence leaves the theodicy question of the Holocaust unresolved. Even if we were to accept the notion that without evil, some positive values—such as autonomy and freedom of choice (as well as repentance, long-suffering, and empathy with the suffering of others)—cannot be maintained, not all instances of evil can be justified in this manner. Sometimes evil is so extreme, that no positive value in the world, even in the future, can compensate for the suffering it brings in the present. Was not the cry of six million worthy of penetrating the threshold of divine resolve? Moreover, even in purely practical terms, what value could there be to greater human autonomy, if this entails the possibility that no more players will be left on the field to maintain it? If humanity passes an unacceptable measure of destruction, will God never again intervene actively in history? Will a mother training her child to cross the street independently remain passive, even when he is about to be hit by a car?

Aside from the question whether declaring God's increasing abstention from intervention in human affairs intentional is the most hopeful message to be elicited from the Holocaust (although this may be so), leaving Greenberg's

53 As in Jeremiah 42:10–12.

54 As in Deuteronomy 32:15.

theory to stand alone, without the support of the mystic's ultimate safety net that all talk of divinely initiated human autonomy is in the last resort a provisional attempt to devise a plausible rather than necessary explanation from our human point of view, renders it wanting.

The mystic tradition, when functioning in accordance with its deepest premises, does not support an understanding of God's revelation in history as the eruption of a transcendent force into a reality that is other than itself. It is rather the culmination of a new constellation of forces *from within that reality*. According to the mystic tradition, God is not a person or an object that exercises agency on the world from without. Our personalist understanding is not to be belittled; it is a necessary pointer to that which in essence leaves no room for distinction between subject and object, or perceiver and the object of his perception.⁵⁵ Hence, revelation is a genuine vision of that totality as grasped by one of its aspects in a particular light. But because that totality is infinite, the potential meaning of revelation is also infinite, varying from generation to generation, building on and modifying previous understandings in accordance with the never-ending give and take between its seemingly discrete elements.

By the same token, so long as we experience ourselves as separate, independent beings and some measure of the personalist talk (i.e., talking about God as if divinity were a person) must be maintained, we speak—according to the mystic—*as if* God made a covenant and then rescinded. But while holding onto this picture for practical purposes, the realization that even this meta-narrative is not the full story allows us to understand that ultimately the theodicy problem is a non-issue. God cannot be held responsible for evil, for in an infinite monolithic reality where, in the words of R. Kook, “all that is imagined or capable of being imagined already exists” (כל המצויר והמדומה והאפשר להיות בצויר באמת מצוי),⁵⁶ the category of justice is meaningless. This understanding is not to be equated with the view that our justice and God's are measured in different terms. Rather, the very category of justice makes sense only for created beings who live in a world of lack.⁵⁷

55 A. I. Kook, “The Comprehensive Divine View,” in *Orot ha-kodesh* II (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), 399–401; see also Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav me-Eliyahu* III (London: Honig and Sons, 1955), 256–7.

56 A. I. Kook, *Arpelei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Hamachon al shem Harav Zvi Yehuda Kook, 1983), 5.

57 A. I. Kook, “The Ideal General Good,” *Orot ha-Kodesh* II, 453: “The ideal world of the spirit does not recognize division at all, it recognizes only generality and unity; it surveys every detail only as part of the whole ... Thus it comes to recognize that there is no general existence to evil. ... It is corporeal matter that divides between objects in reality, and thereby also creates the distinctions between them” (translation mine).

Such a dissolution of the theodicy problem is not to be regarded as an excuse for belittling human suffering and promoting quietist resignation to whatever befalls us. Evil is real enough in our finite reality and needs to be eliminated.⁵⁸ But we are inspired by the believer who, like Job, though tormented by his experience, is willing to sing *Ani Maamin* (“I believe [in the Messiah’s coming]”) while being led to the gas chambers, or to worry about the minutiae of *hilkhot shehita* (the laws of animal slaughtering) under threat of his own slaughter, not because his affirmation of God is more *correct* than that of the Jew who now casts off his faith (or even worse, displays indifference), but because in this act he reinforces for us a response that bears promise of making sense of it all *from our point of view*.⁵⁹

The conclusion we must now reach is that the meaning and significance of the belief in revelation, divine accommodation, and all religious doctrine making metaphysical claims, is best understood in light of its function in the life of the believer. The “truth” of such beliefs is substantiated not by appeal to external evidence or reinterpretation, but on the basis of their ability to inculcate spiritually meaningful attitudes and values, reinforcing the particular form of life on which such attitudes and values are predicated.

VIII

I am well aware that such blurring of distinctions between the divine and the human, and the justification of belief in revelation and divine providence in strictly pragmatic terms, are not without their own difficulties, at least on the psychological plane. Yet in medieval times, rationalist philosophers—as epitomized by Maimonides—generated an equally radical and problematic about-face from the biblical concept of God that nevertheless nurtures Jewish theology until the present day. I believe that contemporary Judaism, in confronting the turn from modernist to postmodern notions of truth, may now be on the brink of a comparable revolution in Jewish thought. While Orthodox theology has not yet caught up with these developments, popular grassroots initiatives—particularly among a younger generation of secular and religious Israelis—have

58 The same conclusion is drawn by Kook, *ibid.*

59 Kook makes a similar move when attempting to address the teleological question: the motive for creation—see *Orot ha-kodesh* II, “The Lack of Good and Its Purpose,” 481–2.

already begun demonstrating the need to qualify a strictly heteronomous definition of Jewish spirituality and the naively objectivist approach that it has endorsed in the response to modernity. Such initiatives suggest that it may now be the task of the mystics to bridge the gap between religion and philosophy, and to teach us how to translate our new postmodern understandings into more profoundly experiential terms that will link us more firmly to our premodern roots.