

# Jewish Theology in North America: Notes on Two Decades

by ARNOLD EISEN

IF THERE IS ONE POINT OF AGREEMENT among students and practitioners of Jewish theology in North America, it is that not much creative work has been forthcoming over the last two decades. Eugene Borowitz, reflecting on "the Form of a Jewish Theology" at the start of the period under review here, wondered whether systematic Jewish thought could even be attempted in our time. "Holism" was essential, he argued, but it was perhaps unavailable.<sup>1</sup> Neil Gillman, for that very reason, titled his book, issued in 1990, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Fragments were all we had at this point in the history of Judaism, he maintained. As a result, theology could not simply be written, it had to be "recovered."<sup>2</sup> This sentiment is widespread. Few would disagree with Emil Fackenheim's pointed lament in 1982 that "in the realm of purely theoretical Jewish thought, and despite claims in this or that quarter to having 'gone beyond' Buber and Rosenzweig, the main characteristic of more recent Jewish thought is, by comparison, its low level. . . . The consequence is that the pioneering work then accomplished still waits for adequate successors."<sup>3</sup>

Our first task in this overview of the Jewish theology produced in America since Lou Silberman's *Year Book* survey in 1969,<sup>4</sup> then, will be to join practitioners of the craft in wondering why their number and productivity have remained so limited. To be sure, there has been a prodigious amount of Jewish religious reflection in America. Homilies, topical essays, halakhic opinions, guides for laymen, ideological statements, and prayerbook revisions abound.<sup>5</sup> But the theological forms known to us from past eras in the

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Borowitz, "The Problem of the Form of a Jewish Theology," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vols. 40-41, 1969-70, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup>Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. xv-xxvii. For a brief review of Gillman's work, and of others which figure in the present essay, see David Ellenson, "The Continued Renewal of North American Jewish Theology: Some Recent Works," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Winter 1991, pp. 1-16.

<sup>3</sup>Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Lou H. Silberman, "Concerning Jewish Theology: Some Notes on a Decade," *AJYB* 1969, vol. 70, pp. 37-58.

<sup>5</sup>For accounts of this outpouring in recent years, see Jack Wertheimer, "Recent Trends in

history of Judaism have largely been absent in the United States, particularly in recent decades. Understanding why that is so provides invaluable insight into the theological literature that has been produced—and tells us a great deal about the religious community that has produced it.

Our second task will be an interpretive sketch of the existing literature, focusing on the major figures and trends. Two issues clearly occupy center stage: the attempt to refine the “covenant theology” characteristic of much 20th-century Jewish thought;<sup>6</sup> and the confrontation with the Holocaust that, as Silberman predicted, has received far more attention in the period than any other subject. This review completed, there will be an opportunity to consider the trends emerging in the 1990s and to reflect on what they portend for the decades to come. The outlook is not entirely bleak, but no responsible observer could possibly call it bright.

### *Theology and Its Practitioners*

A word of definition is in order at the outset. As used here, the term “theology” refers to thought (1) of a relatively systematic character that (2) is informed by serious philosophical competence and (3) evinces real grounding in Jewish history and tradition. Most articles published in most Jewish journals by most scholars and rabbis in the past two decades are beyond the purview of this essay because they tend, in the nature of the case, to be occasional pieces, often homiletic, generally topical, and aimed at a fairly wide readership. Theology, by contrast, is an elitist pursuit directed at a limited audience, even if its impact on the mass of believers is far from inconsequential. In America today—by far the most egalitarian society in which Jews have lived—concern with theology is perhaps rarer than ever before.

Several thinkers, seeking to understand why this is the case, have pointed to the Christian connotations of “theology.”<sup>7</sup> Most normative Jewish thought, after all, has shunned the question of God’s nature, believing it

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American Judaism,” *AJYB* 1989, vol. 89, pp. 63–162; and Arnold Eisen, “American Judaism: Changing Patterns in Denominational Self-Definition,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 8, 1991 (forthcoming). For more general overviews of American Jewish thought in recent decades, see Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington, 1983); and Robert G. Goldy, *The Emergence of Jewish Theology in America* (Bloomington, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>See Arnold Eisen, “Covenant,” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York, 1987), pp. 107–112. An accessible account of how the idea of covenant figures in seminal modern thinkers is Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide* (New York, 1983).

<sup>7</sup>Cf. the definition of theology as “the study of God and the relation between God and the universe.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (Cleveland, 1958), p. 1511.

inaccessible to human understanding. All but the kabbalists have preferred to examine God's interaction with and intentions for Israel and the world. Modern Jewish thinkers, for somewhat different reasons, have paid relatively little attention to God's role as creator, and only slightly more to the divine activity of redemption.<sup>8</sup> The focus has instead been on revelation—what God wants Jews to do, and how we know what God wants.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a widespread sense that the term "theology" bespeaks a systematic form rarely adopted in Judaism, even when—as with biblical and rabbinic thought—one finds a wide range of issues addressed in more or less coherent fashion. If "theology" means form rather than content, Jews have rarely engaged in the enterprise, preferring other genres such as commentary, legal code, or responsa, or—in the modern period—the essay. Still, the form is amply represented in the history of Judaism, and the presence of systematic presentations of content in every period is striking. Jews have engaged in theology in the past, and indeed they continue to do so. The question is why it has not been more evident on the American Jewish scene in recent decades.

#### WHY NO THEOLOGY?

One is tempted to ascribe the lacuna to an alleged American proclivity toward praxis rather than theory.<sup>10</sup> American Protestantism, after all, has also not generated the outpouring of theology produced in Germany. But neither has Protestant theology been utterly absent here. From the Puritan divines through Jonathan Edwards to Horace Bushnell to Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs, America has developed a rich theological library.<sup>11</sup> One gets closer to the mark with the observation that this library has not grown significantly in the past 20 years, anymore than American Judaism has found successors to Abraham Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchik. The suspicion arises that something in the social and intellectual context of America in this half-century, rather than America per se, has militated against the

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<sup>8</sup>The principal exception to this generalization is Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, tr. William Hallo (Boston, 1985)—but even Rosenzweig has far more to say about revelation and redemption than creation.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*, p. xx, and Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York, 1983), p. xiii.

<sup>10</sup>The argument is made, for example, by Robert Gordis, long an intellectual leader of the Conservative movement, who writes that "in its pragmatic approach and its distrust of abstract theory, [Conservative Judaism] is characteristically American in spirit." See Robert Gordis, *Conservative Judaism: An American Philosophy* (New York, 1945), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>For two surveys of these developments, see Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), particularly chs. 18–19, 37–38, 55–56; and William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah, eds., *Religion in America* (Boston, 1968).

creation of theology. Three possible components of that something come immediately to mind.

First, theology is inherently particularistic.<sup>12</sup> It primarily concerns a single faith community and its unique relationship to God. Theology arises when belief and practice are challenged from outside, the challenge being so serious, and internalized to such a degree, that it cannot be ignored. It proceeds by elaborating upon the distinctiveness of the inside path, and usually involves reaffirmation of the insiders' special claim to truth. American Jews, seeking integration in America denied them elsewhere, have tended to emphasize what could readily be projected outwards. They have sought to be a part rather than apart, and so have downplayed or reinterpreted key theological ideas, such as chosenness, which might have proven offensive to others. In this they have not been alone.<sup>13</sup> In short, pluralism and egalitarianism have exacted their toll in terms of the articulation of difference. One cannot imagine a Rosenzweig writing in America that Judaism is the fire which burns at the core of the Star of Redemption, Christianity its rays; that we stand at the goal, while they are ever on the way.<sup>14</sup> At most one finds a Soloveitchik averring that no individual and no community is in a position to judge the God-relationship of any other. We regard our faith as true; about the others, within certain bounds of acceptability, we cannot judge.<sup>15</sup> More than this probably cannot be said in America. Yet, saying less is generally not productive of theology.

A second factor militating against Jewish theology on these shores has been the lack of Jews qualified to practice the discipline or to appreciate its products. Note the apparent prerequisites for the craft: (1) firm grounding in Jewish sources of various periods—halakhic and aggadic, philosophical and mystical, from the Bible to the present (meaning, increasingly, competence in the secondary literature devoted to the texts and their contexts); (2) serious acquaintance with modern philosophy (Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger seem basic, if we accept as normative the knowledge base assumed by the 20th-century Jewish corpus from Cohen to Fackenheim); and (3) some sense of how Christian thinkers in the modern period have responded to very similar challenges (recall Heschel's use of Barth or Soloveitchik's of Kierkegaard). As we approach century's end, some understanding of social and literary theory has probably also become essential. This combination of talents is indeed a formidable demand.

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<sup>12</sup>Here I expand upon the analysis in Arnold Eisen, "Theology, Sociology, Ideology," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 2, 1982, pp. 98–102.

<sup>13</sup>See John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York, 1978); and Arthur Hertzberg, "America Is Different," in Arthur Hertzberg, Martin E. Marty, and Joseph N. Moody, *The Outbursts That Await Us* (New York, 1963), pp. 121–81; and Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America* (New York, 1989), pp. 350–88.

<sup>14</sup>Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, pp. 298–379.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition*, Winter 1964, pp. 18–23.

Even if a given individual possesses it, however, he or she may well lack a fourth apparent prerequisite for the production of theology—a faith community on which to meditate. Theology in Judaism has meant both Halakhah—“life lived,” as Jacob Neusner has put it—and Aggadah—life reflected upon.<sup>16</sup> If American Jews have rarely done theology, it is perhaps because they by and large lack both Halakhah and Aggadah in this sense. Outside of Orthodoxy there is no defined faith community within which a distinct life is lived, and which may be reflected upon. Christian thinkers, too, suffer from the absence of such communities, but the problem is if anything more troubling for Jews, precisely because Jewish theology has tended not to inquire into the nature of God but rather to probe the way Jews are meant to behave, collectively, in God’s presence. Without a visible community in which covenantal commitments are enacted, the meaning of the covenant becomes more difficult to articulate.

Theologians also suffer from an acute shortage of potential readers. Previous generations of theologians wrote either for each other (a problem today, when the number of active practitioners is so small) or for congregational rabbis (probably still the primary consumers of Jewish theology) or for colleagues at the university (who today are less and less inclined to take religious belief seriously) or for educated lay people (the number of whom has declined precipitously of late). Judaism is a leisure-time activity for most American Jews, and even the most committed religiously are far less concerned with systematic belief or observance than with appropriating selected elements of the tradition in their lives. They are better served by the sort of occasional (or introductory) literature produced in abundance than they would be by systematic work which they could not read and could not easily apply. The seminaries, meanwhile—and most theologians and potential theologians are still employed by them—often focus on denominational needs: new editions of the *siddur*, revised statements of principles, reflection on the altered status of Halakhah, and so on. In this realm American Judaism has been absolutely prolific, never more so than in the past two decades.<sup>17</sup> Explanations of what differentiates the several move-

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<sup>16</sup>Jacob Neusner, “The Tasks of Theology in Judaism: A Humanistic Program,” *Journal of Religion*, vol. 59, no. 1, Jan. 1979, pp. 71–82.

<sup>17</sup>That is not to say, of course, that American Jews have not engaged in religious reflection of very high quality. They have. But this reflection has taken shape within genres—essays, legal responsa, homilies, and historical research—which demand analyses of a different sort. For one such analysis, see Eisen, “American Judaism” (cited in note 5). *Tradition* (published by the organization of modern Orthodox rabbis) often features sophisticated legal responsa and philosophical reflection on the nature and validity of Jewish law, while *Conservative Judaism* and the *Journal of Reform Judaism* tend to favor aggadic essays, debates on topical issues such as feminism or homosexuality, and analyses of Judaism in terms of disciplines such as anthropology and literary criticism. The Conservative movement has also given rise to impressive reflection on the nature (and legitimate revision) of Halakhah. See, for example, Elliot Dorff and Arthur Rosett, *A Living Tree: The Roots and Growth of Jewish Law* (Albany, 1988); Joel

ments are a far cry from theology, particularly when, as is often the case, they bear all the marks of authorship by committee.

The final obstacle in the path of Jewish theology in the United States is the doubly problematic character of contemporary Jewish belief. Van Harvey, writing about American Protestant theology at the same time that Silberman did his survey, gave eloquent expression to the dilemmas of what he called "the alienated theologian." Harvey described a Christian thinker "concerned with the articulation of the faith of the Christian community" but "himself as much a doubter as a believer." The doubt had been evident in Protestant thought throughout the modern period, Harvey argued, but it had emerged with particular force in the 1960s, posing "fundamental questions for the church concerning the future of theology itself."<sup>18</sup> In this respect Jews have perhaps had a certain advantage. The Protestant, losing faith, may well leave the Church. The Jew may nonetheless retain a primordial commitment to the Jewish people. Still, the parallel with Christianity is rather exact. Modern Judaism is beleaguered by the same forces as modern Christianity (and often influenced by the latter in its modes of defense);<sup>19</sup> it is also under siege of late from a new source of doubt, which has come to be known in theological shorthand as "Auschwitz." Religious *ideology*—partial in character, relying more heavily on images than concepts—can perhaps survive the twin doubts posed by modernity and the Holocaust far better than theology, which in the nature of the case must strive for system.

Still, some Jews continue to require theology. Hence the literature which we are about to survey. Borowitz, while all too aware of the dilemmas just recounted, has concluded that "it is difficult to see how one can escape the holistic question altogether."<sup>20</sup> Fackenheim, writing eloquently on the im-

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Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (New York, 1986); and David Novak, *Law and Theology in Judaism* (New York, 1974). For a comparable work by a leading modern Orthodox thinker, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha* (New York, 1983). I would call attention, finally, to Simon Greenberg's collection of essays, *A Jewish Philosophy and Pattern of Life* (New York, 1981), which—along with two volumes published previously, *Foundations of a Faith* (1967) and *The Ethical in the Jewish and American Heritage* (1977)—constitutes the most sustained attempt by an American rabbi since Mordecai Kaplan to provide a philosophy of Jewish living in America. Efforts such as these are probably far more influential on American Jewish belief and observance than the theological works analyzed in the present essay—but they will not be treated here, for reasons which I hope I have made clear.

<sup>18</sup>Van A. Harvey, "The Alienated Theologian," *McCormick Quarterly*, vol. 23, May 1970, pp. 234–65.

<sup>19</sup>On this issue, see Arnold Eisen, "Secularization, 'Spirit,' and the Strategies of Modern Jewish Faith," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1987), pp. 283–316; and Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, 1980).

<sup>20</sup>Borowitz, "Problem of Form," p. 391.

possibility of “systems” in our time, has nonetheless sought—relatively systematically—to lay the “foundations of future Jewish thought.”<sup>21</sup> Gillman has given us “fragments” artfully combined into a fairly systematic whole.<sup>22</sup> All, in short, have proclaimed that a “new Jewish theology” is imperative, and have reached for syntheses which have eluded their grasp and that of their generation as a whole. We turn now to their imperfect, but nonetheless substantial, achievement.

### *Covenant: The Commanding Presence*

A sizable portion of American Jewish theological literature of the last two decades has been focused on redefinition of the covenant relationship binding the Jewish people with God. In this respect American Jewish thinkers have carried on the line of inquiry that has preoccupied their predecessors throughout the modern period. The attractions of the covenant model for modern thinkers, and its pitfalls, are equally apparent. On the one hand, Jews seek ultimate purpose for their identity, ultimate authority for their observances, and personal relation to their Creator, and the covenant promises all three. On the other hand, the “suzerainty” paradigm of covenant (in which the sovereign binds his vassals to a set of obligations that he defines, in return promising his protection) has run afoul of the Kantian concern with autonomy and the related reluctance by many modern Jews to bear any “yoke of obligation” imposed by their religion. Commandments from on high, according to liberal thinkers, compromise human dignity and insult human reason. In short, the authority of the King of Kings has not emerged unscathed from the assault on all earthly monarchies.

The “parity treaty” model of covenant (which stipulates reciprocal obligations) has proven somewhat more attractive to modern Jews because it stresses mutuality of obligation and emphasizes partnership and relation rather than subordination and command. But the modern period has seen a lessening of personal religious experience among Jews, and a falling away from religious observance. Moreover, even before the Holocaust, Jews displayed an increasing disinclination to view history as the arena in which God rewards or punishes them for covenantal fidelity or betrayal. The fabric of the putative partnership has, as it were, frayed at both ends, and even been torn right down the middle. Jewish thinkers have found themselves drawn more and more to a theological concept which—given what they do and do not believe about revelation, commandment, and the historicity of the biblical narrative—has become less and less theologically defensible.

American Jewish theologians in recent decades have had to wrestle with

<sup>21</sup>Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup>Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*.

all these problems, plus others. Thus, they have come to recognize that Jewish religious knowledge, practice, and experience can no longer be assumed. The leading thinkers of the previous generation (e.g., Heschel and Soloveitchik) grew up in European settings of traditional practice and belief. Neither the current generation of thinkers nor their readers can call upon such experience. Much of the effort by current thinkers, in fact—one thinks especially of Borowitz's *New Jewish Theology in the Making* (1968), *How Can a Jew Speak of Faith Today* (1969), and *The Mask Jews Wear* (1973)—has been devoted to the question of whether American Jews can be brought to any degree of Jewishly authentic faith or observance. Borowitz, more than any other contemporary theologian, has been intimately involved with lay believers, through his work in the Reform movement.<sup>23</sup> It is telling that he has consistently articulated the alienation of the theologian from his or her fellow Jews most clearly, even as he has relied more heavily than any other thinker on the concept of Israel's covenant with God. Giving meaning to the covenant in the American setting is never without pathos.

#### EUGENE BOROWITZ

Borowitz's systematic exposition of *Liberal Judaism* (1984), addressed explicitly to the lay audience, is a case in point. The title conveys fidelity to the German liberal tradition rather than to the far more radical bent of American Reform. The organization of the book follows the traditional triad of Israel, God, and Torah. Borowitz is uncompromising in his insistence that God is real and is involved with our world. God's age-old covenant with Israel is still binding. In fact, a good Jew is defined as one who has "a living relationship with God as part of the people of Israel and therefore lives a life of Torah." Prescribed duties—both ethical and ritual—flow from this relationship. So does involvement in the life of the Jewish people as a whole and with the State of Israel: "The Covenant, being a collective endeavor, can best be lived as part of a self-governing Jewish community on the Land of Israel. A good Jew will seriously consider the possibility of *aliyah*. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

Borowitz knows, however, that the vast majority of Reform readers will not give that option serious consideration, any more than they will assume their covenantal duties in more than rudimentary fashion. What is more, he himself cannot accept the Torah (written or oral) as divine revelation,

<sup>23</sup>He is, for example, the author of the movement's most recent statement of principles and of an accompanying text of explanation. See Eugene Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today* (New York, 1978). Lawrence Hoffman calls Borowitz the principal theological influence upon the new Reform *siddur*, *Gates of Prayer* (New York, 1975). See Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *Gates of Understanding* (New York, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup>Eugene Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism* (New York, 1984), pp. 129–36.

and is unwilling to compromise his commitment to the autonomy of each individual believer. The author emphasizes that he makes “no special claims to ‘authority,’ ” hoping only to persuade. He can suggest appropriate behavior but he cannot guide, let alone command. If each Jew decides how to live the covenant out of the depth of knowledge and in terms of his/her own deepest commitment, Borowitz avers, “whatever we choose from the past or create for the present should rest upon us with the full force of commandment.”<sup>25</sup>

One notes that ethics remains the heart of *mitzvah* in Borowitz’s liberal Judaism, although ritual is highlighted to a degree still unusual in American Reform. But the force of both sets of obligations is not clear. Halakhah is rejected on principle, and normative communities—in practice nonexistent—would be objectionable if they did exist because of their infringement on individual autonomy. What authority remains? Borowitz seems to rely (as did Kant and Buber, in differing ways) on an inborn sense of duty or conscience that summons each and every human being. He relies, too, on his Jewish readers’ unwillingness to sever the ties linking them to their parents, grandparents, and the Jewish past more generally, however much they might strain these ties to the breaking point. Conservative colleagues wrestling with the same issues—and appealing to “*mitzvah*” and “tradition” rather than “covenant” and “ethics”—find themselves in a similar sociological situation, with similar theological results.<sup>26</sup>

#### IRVING GREENBERG

One sees these same dynamics at work in the notion of “the voluntary covenant” developed by Orthodox thinker Irving Greenberg. Once more the appeal of the idea is clear: just as the rabbis had reassumed and reinterpreted the covenant with God following the destruction of the Temple, so today’s Jews must undertake the more radical reinterpretation and re-assumption of covenantal responsibilities mandated by the more radical destruction accomplished by the Nazis. Prophecy was gone even by the rabbis’ day. Their focus on study of God’s word shifted the weight of the Jewish role from passive reception of commands given on high to active partnership, often initiated from below. In another favored rabbinic metaphor, Jews enjoyed a marriage bond with God and carried it on with full devotion.<sup>27</sup> The word “voluntary” is crucial to Greenberg. It emphasizes that the initiative—now, more than ever—is on the human side rather than on

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>26</sup>On the Conservative dilemmas, see Eisen, “American Judaism,” as well as the classic treatment by Marshall Sklare in *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York, 1972).

<sup>27</sup>Irving Greenberg, *The Voluntary Covenant* (New York, 1982).

God's. It suggests that *we* will be faithful, *we* will uphold the covenant, even if God in the Holocaust did not—precisely the reverse of what the prophets said to Israel in the wake of Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.E. Issues of heteronomy and sovereignty fall away. Activism, freedom, the rescue of dignity from degradation are pronounced. "By every right, Jews should have questioned or rejected the covenant" after Auschwitz, Greenberg writes. Instead,

the bulk of Jews, observant and non-observant alike, acted to recreate the greatest Biblical symbol validating the covenant, the State of Israel. . . . [I]n the ultimate test of the Jews' faithfulness to the covenant, the Jewish people, regardless of ritual observance level, responded with a reacceptance of the covenant, out of free will and love. For some, it was love of God; for others, love of the covenant and the goal; for others, love of the people or of the memories of the covenantal way. In truth, it hardly matters because the three are inseparable in walking the covenantal way.<sup>28</sup>

Greenberg builds daringly on Soloveitchik's idea of the twofold covenant of fate and destiny, the former involuntary and symbolized by Pharoah (or Hitler), the latter involving free acceptance of the yoke of the commandments, and symbolized by Sinai. The "voluntary covenant" also extends Soloveitchik's teaching that the Jewish people, committing itself to the covenant of destiny at Sinai, "had committed their very being . . . the covenant turned out to be a covenant of being, not doing."<sup>29</sup> In Greenberg's reading, the commitment to "being" after the Holocaust is virtually equivalent to the "doing" of commandments. One wonders, however, whether he means it to include existence a hair's breadth away from assimilation. Is it really true that "it does not matter," that any Jewish commitment inevitably carries with it all the others? Greenberg exaggerates, I believe, to make the important points that in our generation any and all Jewish commitment is remarkable, and that such commitment often takes the form of caring for the Jewish people (Israel, Ethiopian Jews, Operation Exodus) rather than *shul*-going or observance of the commandments. But a price is paid for this exaggeration: the concept of covenant is strained to the breaking point.

MICHAEL WYSCHOGROD

In *The Body of Faith* (1983), Orthodox thinker Michael Wyschogrod challenges the reigning theological paradigm of voluntarism and its accommodation to the realities of American Judaism. Where Jewish thought since Mendelssohn has stressed human adequacy and brought religion before reason's stern bar of judgment, Wyschogrod pictures a humanity largely in

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 16–28.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

the dark, its reason blocked at every crucial turn. Only a few shafts of light guide our way—and Torah is the brightest.<sup>30</sup> Where most modern Jewish thinkers, particularly in America, have apologized for the idea of Jewish chosenness, universalizing it to include all righteous Gentiles and interpreting it to stress fulfillment of covenantal obligation, Wyschogrod writes that “the election of the people of Israel as the people of God constitutes the sanctification of a natural family.” God did not choose according to a spiritual criterion. “He chose the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. . . . The election of Israel is therefore a corporeal election.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, where thinkers such as Borowitz have affirmed autonomy, Wyschogrod argues that “the ethical is not autonomous in Judaism. It is rooted in the being and command of God, without which no obligation is conceivable.”<sup>32</sup>

Most recent Jewish thought in America has skirted the issue of God, preferring when it does speak of God to employ the rationalist discourse of “spirit” or “intelligence.” Wyschogrod (with brilliant use of both the Bible and Heidegger) argues the necessity of a personal God whom he calls by His personal name—“Hashem,” literally, “The Name.” The argument, briefly,<sup>33</sup> is that Heidegger was correct in claiming that beyond Being there can be only Non-Being. Identification of God with being, in the manner of Spinoza, cannot avoid the threat posed to the meaning of all human endeavor by the encompassing power of non-being. Only a God beyond both being and non-being can satisfy our demand for ultimate meaning and ultimate grounding. Only Hashem can conquer death and create life: “On the one side there is being and thought, the enterprise of Heidegger. On the other side is Hashem and faith, the enterprise of Judaism. And then there is man, who attempts to understand himself in the setting provided by these concepts and in light of the tensions generated by them.” Where rational language must fall silent in its search for description of the Lord of Being, unable to transcend the limits of our world, “the power of Hashem acts through the language of revelation,” the Bible, and gives us the power of speech. “Hope conquers the despair of silence,” Wyschogrod asserts.<sup>34</sup>

Wyschogrod’s argument is Jewishly and philosophically learned, captivating in its break with the conventional givens of American Jewish theology—and, of course, not without serious problems. For one, the magnificent interpretive freedom derived from Wyschogrod’s refusal to demythologize the Bible’s descriptions of God depends on the belief that the text is somehow divine. That belief is never argued in the book, let alone justi-

<sup>30</sup>Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith*, ch. 1.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, chs. 4–5.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 144, 172.

fied. Unless Moses really did write the text in accord with divine instruction, it is hard to see how we can resist reason's demand for reinterpretation of the text's descriptions of God.

Second, and no less important, the conviction that Israel's is a "corporeal election" transmitted from generation to generation by the organs of generation rather than a "spiritual election" dependent upon observance of the covenant raises obvious empirical and moral dilemmas. Are Jews really one race? Are non-Jews so utterly beyond the covenant? Wyschogrod observes: "What, now, of those not elected? Those not elected cannot be expected not to be hurt by not being of the seed of Abraham, whom God loves above all others. The Bible depicts clearly the suffering of Esau. . . . The consolation of the gentiles is the knowledge that God also stands in relationship with them in the recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness."<sup>35</sup> Wyschogrod has preferred the minority view of election in Judaism—associated with Yehudah Halevi, the Maharal of Prague, and the Kabbalah—over the predominant stream represented by Maimonides and Mendelssohn. It is as if he wants to shout to the Jews described (and accommodated) by Borowitz: You are bound, like it or not, to an eternal covenant. Its mark is imprinted on your flesh. You cannot escape it. There is no meaning to your life—or being itself—outside the reach of Hashem. Embrace your destiny! Any other option—all the options preferred by reason and recommended on grounds of social acceptability—means suicide.

DAVID HARTMAN

The polar opposite to Wyschogrod's book in virtually every respect except the shared centrality of covenant is David Hartman's *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (1985). Hartman, now an Israeli, writes that his attempt to articulate a "covenantal anthropology" stressing human freedom and adequacy grew out of his experience of American pluralism, his graduate work among the Jesuits at Fordham, and his conviction that secularism can be the framework for meaningful life and rigorous ethical commitment. It also emerged from the reality of Israeli society—a feature that separates him from all the other theologians considered in the present article.<sup>36</sup> Hartman has "Halakhah" and "Aggadah" in the sense discussed earlier: a communal reality in which to live and on which to reflect. That reality has affected his thinking decisively.

One should note, before considering his views, that the subject of Is-

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>36</sup>David Hartman, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (New York, 1985), p. 12.

rael is virtually absent from American Jewish theology.<sup>37</sup> That is not to say that the state does not matter, and matter deeply, to American Jews, including the theologians. Israel's existence, however, has had no major impact on Jewish religious life here. Some synagogues celebrate Israel Independence Day, and many recite a prayer for the state; sermons, now as before, are full of Israel's troubles and achievements. But Israel has not seriously altered religious observance and is not a topic for American Jewish thought except (as we will see below) in the context of the Holocaust. The sacredness of space—a prominent theme in current Israeli thought—is an alien notion to American thinkers content with Heschel's dictum that Judaism sanctifies time and not space. The possibility that our time is witnessing the first footsteps of the Messiah—as some in Israel forcefully contend—tends to frighten American Jewish thinkers rather than to receive serious consideration.

Hartman sets out to counter both the excessive zealotry of the Israeli messianists and the ethereal quality of much Diaspora thought with a call to collective covenantal responsibility. Sinai, not Exodus, is his paradigmatic event, and Sinai is interpreted as a divine "invitation" to partnership and intimacy rather than as an act of dictatorial command. Hartman's favored metaphor, in fact, is neither the suzerainty covenant nor the parity treaty but the marriage vow. God and Israel need each other. Only their partnership can bring *mitzvot* into the world. The covenant, far from precluding human initiative, creativity, and freedom, presumes it at every turn. Tradition does not merely allow innovation, it demands it. God counts on Israel's participation in the building of His kingdom. Jews freely accept this invitation because they love God and appreciate the meaningfulness of the life shaped by God's commandments.<sup>38</sup>

Hartman's thrust is twofold. First, he is carrying forward a theological agenda begun in our era by Soloveitchik and the Israeli thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz, both of them inspired by Hartman's principal teacher: Maimonides. The stress falls on human activism, the centrality of human reason, the role of human initiative and creativity, the dignity of halakhic observance—all this in contrast to Christian (and classical Reform Jewish) depictions of the Halakhah as rote behavior under a burdensome yoke. Hartman rejects Soloveitchik's call for a degree of submissiveness and resignation in the face of divine decrees. Covenantal activism, he writes, enabled the rabbis (and enables us) to counter and contain the experience of life's tragedy and

<sup>37</sup>On this matter, see Arnold Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 156–74.

<sup>38</sup>Hartman, *Living Covenant*, pp. 1–8, 22–59.

terror.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Hartman adopts Leibowitz's call for halakhic creativity while rejecting his restriction of the covenant to halakhic observance. The total human being is required, Hartman writes—precisely as he or she is required in a marriage.<sup>40</sup> Nothing less will do. Eloquently and with characteristic passion, Hartman argues the case for human adequacy, human reason, and Jewish openness to the wider world.

This points to the second task undertaken in the book: the attempt to redirect the religious understanding of Israeli society. On the one hand, Hartman seeks to break down the dichotomy between *dati* (religious) and *lo dati* (secular), not by the creation of a middle ground but by the encouragement of mutual respect. Secular readers are brought to see a halakhic life which insists upon innovation and open-mindedness. Religious readers are challenged in their assumption that faith and it alone can provide a foundation for ethics or a life of ultimate meaning. Hartman offers *a* covenant, not *the* covenant. He urges his readers, religious and secular alike, to see their shared history not as Exodus, i.e., divine manipulation, but as Sinai: an opportunity to actualize the covenant in an entire community. Borowitz, in the American context, can speak of ethics and ritual; Orthodox colleagues in America can call for greater halakhic observance; Hartman, as an Israeli, can discuss a Jewish society and culture. A thinker who does “not wish to divide my world into two separate realms, one of which is characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm and the other by anticipation of and dependence upon divine intervention” requires an arena in which human beings can “unite the two realms and exercise autonomous action.”<sup>41</sup> Israel is that realm.

One wonders whether the split between *dati* and *lo dati* can be overcome in this manner, even on the level of theory. If God really is present in our world, how ignore that presence with impunity? If God really did command Israel at Sinai, how can disobedience to His commands be taken as morally neutral? And if both these claims are in fact delusions, their consequences pernicious, how could one possibly remain placid or indifferent? Hartman's generosity, like his equanimity, seems difficult to maintain. He purchases them by robbing both secularism and faith of potent energies, and not a little profundity.

There is a related problem with Hartman's model that seems even more intractable. As we have seen, he rejects the division of his world into one realm “characterized by autonomous action based upon human understanding of the divine norm” and a second realm in which human beings await, in dependence, the “divine intervention.” Hartman rather “prefers

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., chs. 3–4.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., ch. 5.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 232–33. See also p. 148.

to see God's will . . . as channeled exclusively through the efforts of the Jewish community to achieve the aims of the Torah given at Sinai."<sup>42</sup> But what happens when the awesome realities of God's presence intrude uninvited upon personal and collective life? What are we to do with the human failure and self-destructiveness which so often preclude fulfillment of covenantal responsibility? The effort to keep fear and trembling outside the bounds of covenant may be futile; moreover, it may rob the life of *mitzvah* of much pathos and passion. Hartman's model of covenant is adequate to some portion of human and Jewish experience, but not to the rest, in which darkness is pervasive and human adequacy far from unquestioned.

Each model of covenant proposed in the past two decades has the disadvantages of its own virtues. All attest to the difficulties which modernity has cast up before traditional belief. No less, they demonstrate the continuing resiliency of the covenant idea, despite and because of the fact that most Jews no longer feel bound by its traditional stipulations, the commandments. It seems likely that autonomy will remain precious to Jewish believers, and commandment fundamental. Covenant will therefore continue to feature prominently in Jewish theology, even as it continues to risk degeneration into cant—a traditional trope deprived of all traditional content. Like the bodily wounding which most symbolizes it, covenant will hold Jews, in large part, through the power of their own ambivalence.

### *God's Saving Presence—and Its Absence*

American Jewish theology concerning the Holocaust falls broadly into two categories. Either the Holocaust was a unique event in human history which makes all the difference in the world to Jewish reflection—or it was not, and does not. The former claim can likewise be of two sorts: that of Richard Rubenstein, who holds that "after Auschwitz" the God of history, the God of the covenant, can no longer be affirmed, that Jewish existence is an absurd given, no more and no less meaningful than the existence of any other group of mortals in a senseless universe;<sup>43</sup> or one can hold, with Irving Greenberg, Emil Fackenheim, and Arthur Cohen,<sup>44</sup> that theological business as usual cannot continue, that existing models have been ruptured, that a "caesura" has opened in human thought and history dividing before

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 232–33.

<sup>43</sup>Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, 1966).

<sup>44</sup>Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* ed. Eva Fleischner (New York, 1977), pp. 7–55; Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York, 1970) and *To Mend the World*; Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York, 1981).

from after Auschwitz—but that Judaism can and must go on, somehow. This latter version of the claim that the Holocaust makes all the difference borders so closely on the claim that it does not make all the difference as to make the two, to my mind at least, virtually indistinguishable. The two views are separated by a process of thought rather than its end-point; or, rather, one group insists on making the process explicit and devising new language to describe it, while the other regards the process as highly traditional and, therefore, not worthy of extended discussion. Eliezer Berkovits argues that the Holocaust is not unique, places it against the background of millennial persecution, cites the bewilderment of Job and the anger of Psalm 44—and claims that nothing has changed.<sup>45</sup> Fackenheim, Greenberg, and Cohen argue that everything has changed and devote many pages to explaining how, but end, like Berkovits, with the affirmation that Jewish life, Jewish obligation, the study of Torah, the service of God, must continue.

Not surprisingly, then, theological concentration on the subject has diminished of late. The point, after all, is “*To Mend the World*” (Fackenheim), not just to document its rupture; to “build a bridge over the abyss” (Cohen), not just to face up to “*The Tremendum*.” As Rosenzweig, the crucial mentor of both Cohen and Fackenheim, put it at the close of *The Star of Redemption*: “into life.”<sup>46</sup>

#### RICHARD RUBENSTEIN

Rubenstein, in an eloquent critique of Cohen’s book, summarized his own point of view most concisely. “The Holocaust renders faith in either the God of classical theism or the God of classical covenant theology exceedingly difficult,” if not impossible. “Judaism makes the fundamental claim that God is uniquely concerned with the history and destiny of Israel,” meaning that “the classical and logically inescapable mode of interpreting a monumental national catastrophe such as the Holocaust is that of divine punishment of a sinful people.” This view of the Holocaust, Rubenstein writes, is unacceptable. Covenantal affirmation is thus precluded, and Jewish movements which strive to get around the problem are all of them unsatisfactory. Reconstructionism, proposing what Rubenstein calls “ethnic religion,” fails to offer “a compelling rationale for maintaining Jewish religious identity.” Zionism fails to attract most Diaspora Jews. All attempts to detach Judaism from belief in the Lord of History inevitably involve departure from the “Jewish religious mainstream.” In short, Jews

<sup>45</sup>Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York, 1973) and *With God in Hell* (New York, 1979).

<sup>46</sup>Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 424.

must choose between a God who is absent from history, "functionally irrelevant," or regard Hitler as "the instrument of an all-powerful and righteous God of history. I wish there were a credible way out of the dilemma. In the thirty years that I have spent reflecting on the Holocaust, I have yet to find it."<sup>47</sup>

One should note that for Rubenstein the Holocaust is not unique—far from it; its importance lies in the quandaries that it makes unavoidable in our time. In fact, Rubenstein argues, terms such as "the tremendum" are attempts to "mystify a phenomenon that can be fully comprehended in terms of the normal categories of history, social science, demography, political theory, and economics."<sup>48</sup> Rubenstein does not move from the Holocaust to an altered theology, therefore. He leaves God behind altogether and focuses the inquiry on the human decisions which led one group of people to persecute and then murder another. In this respect, ironically, Rubenstein is closer to Berkovits—who likewise denies the Holocaust's uniqueness, and likewise places the blame squarely on human evil rather than divine indifference—than to the theologians for whom, as for him, the Holocaust mandates a radical response.

#### EMIL FACKENHEIM

Fackenheim is perhaps the best example of the latter. His earliest essays, collected in *Quest for Past and Future* (1968) and *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (1973), sought to establish that the tenets of traditional faith, revelation first of all, were still philosophically respectable options. One expected, on the basis of these works, that he would proceed to a species of covenant theology more traditional than Borowitz's but, unlike Hartman's, non-halakhic. (It has in fact recently appeared, in popular form: *What Is Judaism?* [1987]). Instead, there came a break—presaging the claim that such a break is inevitable in contemporary Jewish faith as such. *God's Presence in History* (1970) laid the groundwork for Fackenheim's new direction by setting forth the two categories of "root experiences": historical events in which Jewish faith originated and "epoch-making events" that make a "new claim upon Jewish faith," testing it in light of historical experience. Exodus and Sinai are examples—probably the only ones—of the former; the destruction of the Temples, the Maccabean revolt, the expulsion from Spain, and now the Holocaust, are examples of the latter. Jewish faith had to remain open to the incursions of history if

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<sup>47</sup>Richard Rubenstein, "Naming the Unnameable; Thinking the Unthinkable (A Review Essay of Arthur Cohen's *The Tremendum*)," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, vol. 31, Spring 1984, pp. 43–49.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 51–54.

it were to remain vital, alive, true. Yet what faith could emerge from Auschwitz?<sup>49</sup>

In this book Fackenheim had only one reply: the "614th commandment." Jews were forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. For secular Jews to abandon their people, or religious Jews their faith, would be to aid and abet the Nazis. Secular Israelis knew well what Fackenheim wished to teach: that "after the death camps, we are left only one supreme value: existence."<sup>50</sup> Fackenheim carried this lesson forward—particularly regarding the importance of the Jewish state—in *The Jewish Return into History* (1978). His most coherent statement, however—and his finest work of theology to date—came in *To Mend the World* (1982). The book is striking on two counts. First, it perceptively situates itself in the history of modern Jewish theology, so as to lay the "foundations for future Jewish Thought." Recognizing that one cannot do everything, Fackenheim focuses on key thinkers (Spinoza, Buber, and Rosenzweig) and confronts them with philosophical (Hegel, Heidegger) and historical (modernity, Holocaust, Israel) challenges. As Fackenheim puts it, "It is clearly necessary for Jewish thought (and not for it alone) to go to school with life."<sup>51</sup> Theology had to catch up with what history had wrought, and item number one in the curriculum was of course the Holocaust.

The second striking feature of the book is indeed Fackenheim's treatment of the Holocaust. Unrelentingly, and always thoughtfully, Fackenheim looks at the awful face of the facts and in that context asks "the central question of our whole inquiry . . . how Jewish (and also Christian and philosophical) thought can both expose itself to the Holocaust and survive." The ability to survive should not, he insists, be taken for granted. Fackenheim concedes that his previous, Kantian, confidence that "we can do what we ought to do" was a lapse into "unconscious glibness."<sup>52</sup>

Some 200 pages later, after situating Rosenzweig opposite Spinoza and Hegel, after confronting the challenge of Heidegger's philosophy and the conundrum of his support for the Nazis, and (less satisfactorily) after a highly judgmental survey of "Unauthentic Thought After the Holocaust," Fackenheim arrives at the effort of repair or *tikkun*. Resistance to Auschwitz, repair of Auschwitz, is possible now because it occurred then. German philosophers in the name of their philosophical convictions opposed the Nazis, on pain of death. Christian martyrs opposed Hitler in the name of Christianity. Jews defied him in Warsaw and elsewhere—and out of the ashes of the Holocaust created the single most important *tikkun* in the

<sup>49</sup>Fackenheim, *God's Presence*, pp. 3–31.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 79–98.

<sup>51</sup>Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 24, 200.

world today, the State of Israel. "The Tikkun which for the post-Holocaust Jew is a moral necessity is a possibility because during the Holocaust itself a Jewish Tikkun was already actual. This simple but enormous, nay, world-historical truth is the rock on which rests any authentic Jewish future, and any authentic future Jewish identity." Israel, the Jews' emergence from powerlessness, "has been and continues to be a moral achievement of world-historical import."<sup>53</sup>

The principal problem with the work, as Cohen noted in a review, is that the depiction of rupture is so convincing that the promise of repair lacks all credibility. The book, he wrote, "utterly collapses" this side of the Holocaust.<sup>54</sup> It is not so much that one can do what one ought to do, as that one ends up doing what one must do, what one knew all along one would do. *Tikkun* must be possible or there is no foundation of future Jewish thought, and Rubenstein's answer to Auschwitz is decisive. Fackenheim had to cross the abyss—or violate the 614th commandment. The question was never whether, but only how, he could cross. But if that is the case, if the circle of covenant must remain unbroken, how is Fackenheim different from Berkovits?

It seems that in *To Mend the World* Fackenheim has backed off somewhat from earlier unequivocal claims about the Holocaust's uniqueness. After devoting a page to a brief statement of five arguments for that uniqueness—"a complex subject that will require much space in the present work"—Fackenheim writes that "all this is by no means to deny the existence of other catastrophes equally unprecedented, and endowed with unique characteristics of their own."<sup>55</sup> Still, Fackenheim does not proceed from the repair of one rupture to the depiction and repair of the others. Auschwitz matters in a way Hiroshima does not because Fackenheim believes in the Hegelian notion that some peoples and events are of "world-historical" significance while others are not. In the Holocaust fully one-third of the people most associated with the God of the Bible were destroyed by the people most associated in the modern period with the project of philosophy, the crowning achievement of the human spirit.<sup>56</sup> That claim, outside the Hegelian framework, is difficult to defend. Even inside it, however, Cohen's charge that the rupture cannot be so speedily repaired requires an answer which Fackenheim does not provide.

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 300–304.

<sup>54</sup>Arthur A. Cohen, "On Emil Fackenheim's *To Mend the World: A Review Essay*," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 3, May 1983, pp. 231–35.

<sup>55</sup>Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>56</sup>I owe this insight to Michael Morgan—but bear full responsibility for its formulation.

IRVING GREENBERG

Greenberg's argument, very similar to Fackenheim's, is best expressed in an essay entitled "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity After the Holocaust" (1977). He convincingly lays out the damage done to traditional notions of covenant and redemption, argues that "the Holocaust challenges the claims of all the standards that compete for modern man's loyalties" and allows no "simple, clear or definitive solutions," and then propounds one definitive principle. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children." Greenberg proposes a "dialectical faith" which holds fast to the disbelief in divine redemption occasioned by Auschwitz but is also open to "moments when the reality of the Exodus is reenacted and present." The Holocaust challenges prevailing secular conceptions no less than it does religious faith; it teaches us to recognize the dangers of powerlessness as well as of power. "The cloud of smoke of the bodies by day and the pillar of fire of the crematoria by night"—powerful relocations to Auschwitz of the biblical marks of God's presence in the wilderness—"may yet guide humanity to a goal and a day when human beings are attached to each other; and have so much shared each other's pain, and have so purified and criticized themselves, that never again will a Holocaust be possible."<sup>57</sup> In the meantime, Greenberg counsels return to *The Jewish Way* (1988) entailed by the covenant—apparently finding it not only credible but necessary in the face of "burning children."

ARTHUR COHEN

Cohen's premise is more radical; he assumes, in effect, that nothing whatsoever is credible by that criterion. The question must be refocused, moved from religious observance to the classical ground of theology: the nature of God.

My interest—first, last and always—is about the God who created the world, not the God who provided the occasion for religion. What Jews do about their religious life . . . of the conferred and optional requirements of living as Jews I can hardly speak. . . . I might almost assert as a first principle of any modern Jewish theology that it should begin by thinking without Jews in mind.

Cohen finds it necessary to undertake this effort—to engage in theology despite the fact that "there is virtually no modern Jewish theology"—because the Holocaust marked a novum, "the election of the Chosen People to be the first people in human history to be systematically an-

<sup>57</sup>Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke." The quotation is found on p. 55.

nihilated. . . . Such a theological novum entails theological response."<sup>58</sup>

Cohen's response is as follows.<sup>59</sup> One must not deny either God's presence in the world or the reality of evil. God must be seen as related to every aspect of creation. God confronts us then, first of all, not as Father or King but (borrowing Rudolph Otto's classic term) as the Tremendum—a Power both awesome and mysterious. We cannot return after Auschwitz to the classic categories of Western philosophical theism. There has been a rupture, a "caesura." To repair or at least cross it, Cohen turns from the rabbis to the Kabbalah, which penetrated Western philosophy, reaching Rosenzweig and then Cohen, through the person of Schelling. "The human affect," Schelling taught,

is toward the overflowing, the loving in God; his containment, however, the abyss of his nature, is as crucial as is his abundance and plenitude. These are the fundamental antitheses of the divine essence . . . the quiet God is as indispensable as the revealing God, the abyss as much as the plenitude, the constrained, self-contained, deep divinity as the plenteous and generous.<sup>60</sup>

God had made room in the divine plenitude for human beings endowed with freedom and speech. The space in which we abide, in which God gives us leave to abide, is therefore full to overflowing with our "enduring strife and tension, enlarged and made threatening by our finitude," enhanced and made more dangerous by our freedom.<sup>61</sup>

Cohen is not seeking language adequate to God's nature. We do not have it, he believes, for reasons that his theology helps to clarify. He seeks only to be adequate to the caesura, and this he may well have achieved—at the cost of belief in the covenant as traditionally (that is, nonmystically) understood. Like the rabbis, and without explanation, Cohen affirms the unique connection between the being of the Jewish people and the being of God. There can be no explanation of that connection, he avers. We will understand the nature of "Jewish being, Jewish history, and the meaning of God's self-narration" only "when it is done and past or else completed in the last minute of redemption."<sup>62</sup> As Rosenzweig put it, "not yet"; the meaning is present, but not yet apparent. "Redemption" is, significantly, the final word of the book. The covenant may be broken theologically, but its observance continues despite and because of the caesura.

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<sup>58</sup>Arthur A. Cohen, "On Theological Method: A Response on Behalf of *The Tremendum*," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, vol. 31, Spring 1984, pp. 56–63.

<sup>59</sup>Cohen, *The Tremendum*. See especially chs. 3–4.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 92–94.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

Silberman, concluding his survey of American Jewish theology two decades ago, wrote that confrontation with *hurban* (destruction) was the inescapable task of Jewish theology. Jewish thought could ignore Auschwitz only at its own peril.<sup>63</sup> Two decades later one can say that the task of confronting Auschwitz has probably been undertaken as thoroughly as possible at this juncture, and that the refusal to make the move of repair linking Cohen, Fackenheim, and Greenberg to Berkovits is to present no less a peril than the other to future Jewish thought. Survival, the 614th commandment, demands an answer to the question: survival for what, in what faith, with what obligation? Survival, if it is to be continuous with the Jewish past, entails some relationship to the 613 commandments which, according to the 614th, Jews are forbidden to abandon. The next generation of Jewish thinkers, while not entirely ignoring the Holocaust, will likely move on to efforts—dialectical or otherwise—to make sense of Jewish life, the previous generation having focused, perhaps necessarily, on the threat posed to Judaism by unprecedented Jewish death. That effort, in fact, is already under way, informed by recent currents in American society and undertaken by a new generation of theologians. We turn now to two of its most noteworthy exemplars.

### *Experience, Tradition, Community*

It is doubtful that either of the two themes that have preoccupied American Jewish theology for the past 20 years will continue to hold center stage in the next 20. A new generation of theologians is now at work, and it has announced its intention (as did the previous generation) to reorient theological discourse rather substantially. Two reasons for that reorientation have already been noted: the problems besetting covenant theology in the absence of either a satisfactory notion of revelation or a community intent on covenantal observance; and the need—articulated even by those for whom the Holocaust has been central—to move from (or through) confrontation with the “rupture” or “caesura” of Auschwitz to *tikkun*: renewed Jewish commitment. The question becomes what sort of commitment, grounded in what authority, inside what sort of community? The answers emerging from a variety of quarters come in terms which have not loomed large in recent decades but which have a venerable theological history in Judaism as in other faiths: experience, tradition, and community. I will illustrate this emerging trend with the work of two thinkers who will, I expect, assume increasing importance as the decade unfolds.

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<sup>63</sup>Silberman, “Jewish Theology,” p. 58.

ARTHUR GREEN

The first is Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and as such the intellectual leader of Reconstructionism. Green is trying to take his movement, and American Judaism as a whole, in a new theological direction centered on the renewed religious experience of the individual believer. Green's approach was adumbrated in a 1976 address before Conservative rabbis<sup>64</sup> and further elaborated (albeit implicitly) in his masterly biography of Nachman of Bratslav, *Tormented Master* (1979). It has received its fullest expression to date in a programmatic essay entitled "Rethinking Theology: Language, Experience and Reality" (1988), the subtitle of which offers a précis of Green's argument.

First, the matter of religious language. Green begins with "one of the great tragedies of Judaism in modern times"—the widespread perception that Judaism is "empty of, or even opposed to, the depths of individual religious experience." In fact, Green argues, Kabbalah and Hassidism have bequeathed "a rich vocabulary . . . for discussion of religious states"; the problem is that that vocabulary (as we have seen in the present essay) rarely figures in contemporary Jewish discourse. Green aims to reintroduce it, thereby helping to create "a religious language that will speak both profoundly and honestly to Jews in our time."<sup>65</sup> Honesty, to Green, demands that Jews admit their distance from traditional symbols and beliefs. We are necessarily both insiders and outsiders to our inheritance. Profundity connotes the effort to penetrate to the wellspring of faith deep inside every human being. We should, like Hassidism, seek "spiritual wakefulness and awareness . . . cultivation of the inner life." Judaism does not so much demand leaps of faith as intensity of vision. The path does not lie in more adequate theories of revelation, but more penetrating searchings of the soul.<sup>66</sup>

The key, in other words, is experience. All human beings know transcendence at some moments of their lives. Religion exists to "make constant, or at least regular, [the] level of insight that has already existed in moments of spontaneous flash," and to design ways of life appropriate to the illuminations that transcendence provides.<sup>67</sup> Like his teacher Abraham Heschel (albeit in language more attuned to the counterculture of the 1960s), Green begins with wonder, awe, transcendence—"we praise before we prove," as Heschel put it—and only then moves to God, whom Heschel regarded as

<sup>64</sup>Arthur Green, "The Role of Jewish Mysticism in a Contemporary Theology of Judaism," *Conservative Judaism*, Summer 1976, pp. 10–23.

<sup>65</sup>Arthur Green, "Rethinking Theology: Language, Experience and Reality," *The Reconstructionist*, Sept. 1988, pp. 8–9.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

the only satisfactory “answer” to the “questions” made imperative by our wonder. Green’s understanding of God, however, diverges from Heschel considerably and—ironically enough, given the Hassidic language in which it is couched—brings Green remarkably close to the teaching of Mordecai Kaplan. “YHWH is, in short, all of being, but so unified and concentrated as to become Being.” God is “the universe . . . so utterly transformed by integration and unity as to appear to us as indeed ‘other,’ a mirror of the universe’s self that becomes Universal Self.” God is “none ‘other’ than we ourselves and the world in which we live, transformed as part of the transcendent vision.”<sup>68</sup> Kaplan, I think, could have assented to all of these formulations, and certainly to Green’s caveat that “the figure of God imaged by most religion is a human projection.”<sup>69</sup>

Where the two thinkers would differ, perhaps, is on Green’s belief that human beings need to pray to God, that psychology should not be employed to explain away “supernaturalism” but rather to underline its importance as a mode of expression. In his words, “‘God’ is in that sense a symbol, a human creation that we need to use in order to illuminate for ourselves, however inadequately, some tiny portion of the infinite mystery.” And, besides, “our imagination, we should always remember, is itself a figment of divinity.”<sup>70</sup>

It is clear from the quotations just cited that Green’s God is far from the real personal God encountered by Heschel or Buber. Green’s notion of *mitzvot* must therefore be different as well; the idea of divine covenant is utterly inapplicable. *Mitzvot* enter Green’s Judaism from two directions. “The religious life is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness [of relation to the transcendent] and in response to the demands made by it.” And we turn to Judaism for the pattern of that striving and response, “not because it is the superior religion, and certainly not because it is God’s single will, but because it is our own . . . our spiritual home.” Green prefers the “tradition in its most whole and authentic form” because “traditions work best when they are least diluted. . . . Serious Judaism means serious engagement with *mitzvot*.”<sup>71</sup>

This statement of the Jewish religious situation is, I would suggest, remarkable in more ways than one—not least in its adaptation of Kaplan to the very different cultural milieu of the 1990s. “Such a religious viewpoint” is indeed, as Green claims, “that of mystic and naturalist at once.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., pp. 10–11. For Heschel’s view, see particularly *Man Is Not Alone* (New York, 1951), chs. 1–9; for Kaplan’s, see *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (New York, 1962) and Eisen, *Chosen People in America*, ch. 4.

<sup>69</sup>Green, “Rethinking Theology,” p. 11.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., pp. 10, 13.

Moreover, Green may well articulate the assumptions of a large number of contemporary American Jews (particularly intellectuals), just as Kaplan did for the generation of the 1930s. Note that the vision starts and ends with self: the experience of transcendence, the search for God leading “through our deepest and most pained emotional selves,”<sup>72</sup> the turn to tradition because it fulfills that quest in a “whole” and “authentic” form. This is not to accuse Green of narcissism. Quite the opposite. He has simply worked with, and for, the prevailing reality of Jewish life which Kaplan urged upon his readers over half a century ago: namely, that Judaism will either be a palpable source of meaning, enriching life in tangible ways, or Jews will not choose to accord it a central place in their lives. Moreover, like Kaplan, Green has sought to encourage that move to Judaism by couching it in language which does not challenge prevailing conceptions of reality and by deemphasizing claims of guilt or obligation. *Mitzvot* deepen life, heighten awareness, proffer the authenticity available only (or most readily) in one’s natural “spiritual home”—and necessitate community. One discovers the self, and so God, when one joins with other searchers who share one’s language, one’s “spiritual home,” one’s life. “Our ‘liberal’ views should not serve as a cloak for cavalier desertion or disdain of our traditions,” Green writes.<sup>74</sup> The force of that “should not” bears attention: not because God has willed it, nor even because our ancestors have covenanted with God in a way which binds us, but because what we seek in and for ourselves is achievable through no other route than “serious engagement with *mitzvot*.”

#### JUDITH PLASKOW

A similar appeal to experience, grounded still more powerfully in the life of a particular community of Jews, underlies Judith Plaskow’s groundbreaking effort to formulate a feminist Jewish theology. If the history of Judaism written to date largely ignores the role played by women; if the tradition’s classical texts were written by and for men, according little space to female characters and evincing little interest in female consciousness; if the founding moment of the Jewish people, the covenant at Sinai described in Exodus 19, excluded women entirely (the injunction “do not go near a woman” seems to indicate that “Moses addresses the community only as men”)—then, asks Plaskow, where is a woman to find entrée to this tradition? How is she to appropriate it, carry it forward? Jewish women can either “choose to accept our absence from Sinai, in which case we allow the male text to define us and our relationship to the tradition,” or they can

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

“stand on the ground of our experience, on the certainty of our membership in our own people.”<sup>75</sup>

Note that the authority invoked to correct and supplement the “partial record of the ‘God wrestling’ of part of the Jewish people”—Plaskow’s understanding of Torah<sup>76</sup>—is experience: Plaskow’s, her community’s, and that of the readers to whom she appeals. Accepting that authority, one can “begin the journey toward the creation of a feminist Judaism.” All interpretation relies upon experience to some degree, of course. One reads the text into and out of the world as one has come to know it. One adapts tradition to reality and reality to tradition. In Plaskow’s work, however, the role of experience is necessarily greater—because of the perceived lack of female consciousness and presence in the tradition that she wishes to adapt.

Plaskow’s book *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990) draws upon efforts by Jewish feminists over the past two decades to create new midrash, design new rituals, and explore areas of Jewish history previously untouched, weaving them into the first systematic effort at feminist Jewish theology. After a quite sophisticated methodological introduction, Plaskow proceeds to take up each of the three topics in the classic triad—Torah, Israel, and God, adding a fourth discussion (sexuality), which is apparently central to feminist theology but which seems far less accomplished than the others. We shall focus here on several points which seem to presage the emergence of a new orientation for American Jewish theology.

First, already noted, the appeal to experience—here, in the feminist context, an experience neither purely personal nor purely human but rather gender-specific and communal. Plaskow is sophisticated enough methodologically to avoid the trap of appeal to a putative feminine mind or sensibility unified in itself and easily distinct from the masculine. She relies instead on the reasonable claim that women’s experiences, however diverse they may be, have found little expression in Judaism thus far. The few women present in classical texts are either condemned outright or given short shrift; this has given rise in recent decades to a widespread feminist experience of exclusion from the tradition, suspicion of it, disenchantment with it. Plaskow also can point, however, to powerful experiences of transcendence—her own and those of others—which have engendered deep connection to the tradition. The community of feminists in which those experiences occurred becomes, for Plaskow, a point of reference in deciding the direction of feminist Judaism; it becomes, in a word, her authority.

To say that this community is my central source of authority is not to deny the range of ideas or disagreements within it, or the other communities of which I am part. It is simply to say that I have been formed in important ways by Jewish

<sup>75</sup>Judith Plaskow, “Standing Again at Sinai: Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective,” *Tikkun*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1986, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

feminism; without it I could not see the things that I see. It is to say that my most important experiences of God have come through this community, and that it has given me the language with which to express them. To name this community my authority is to call it the primary community to which I am accountable.<sup>77</sup>

Buber said that one carries forward that part of the tradition which speaks to one with "inner power." Kaplan stressed the role of the Jewish people in constantly redefining Judaism in accord with their highest ideals. Plaskow is less subjective than Buber, less universal than Kaplan, but like them she has dispensed with the need for revealed authority, in the belief that it is nowhere to be found. Community is all one has. It is, in fact, all one needs. "The experience of God in community is both the measure of the adequacy of traditional language and the norm in terms of which new images must be fashioned."<sup>78</sup>

Plaskow realizes that "to locate authority in particular communities of interpreters is admittedly to make a circular appeal."<sup>79</sup> Group X of Jews defines Torah as it does, on the grounds that—Group X has experienced it this way. Yet this circularity "has always been the case. . . . When the rabbis said that rabbinic modes of interpretation were given at Sinai, they were claiming authority for their own community—just as other groups had before them, just as feminists do today."<sup>80</sup> This claim of similarity to the rabbis, the second to which I wish to draw attention, features prominently throughout the book. It links Plaskow's work to a principal current both in recent Jewish theology and in philosophy more generally, namely: the argument that quests for objective authority will always be futile; that there is no ultimate foundation for any worldview or ethical system; that the most one can hope for is a community committed to certain norms and the view of reality that undergirds them; that one must define and fashion tradition as one goes. Time and again Plaskow argues that no other authority than one's community is available—and never was.

Hence her use of the rabbis as a role model, horrified as they might have been by the comparison. They too, after all, "expanded Scripture to make it relevant to their own times," they too "brought to the Bible their own questions and found answers that showed the eternal relevance of biblical truth."<sup>81</sup> The issue of revelation, which has so bedeviled Jewish theology in the modern period, is sidestepped entirely here. One need not ask what is true, but only what authentically carries on the tradition. One leaves the answer to the decision of Jewish communities.

The thrust here, as one would expect in a feminist theology, is radically

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<sup>77</sup>Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, 1990), pp. 19–21.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., pp. 35, 53.

egalitarian. Plaskow expresses even more discomfort with the idea of the chosen people than Kaplan had, and no inclination whatever to sneak the doctrine in with euphemisms such as mission or vocation. Plaskow utterly rejects "Judaism's long history of conceptualizing difference in terms of hierarchical separations,"<sup>82</sup> and her suspicion of hierarchy extends not only horizontally (Israel's relation to the nations) but vertically (its relation to God). She rejects the "image of God as dominating Other," criticizing a "relationship [that] is never balanced," in which "the intimacy of the 'you' addressed to a listening other is overshadowed by the image of the lord and king of the universe who is absolute ruler on a cosmic plane." Plaskow goes so far as to claim that "such images of God's dominance give rise to the terrible irony that the symbols Jews have used to talk about God as ultimate good have helped generate and justify the evils from which we hope God will save us." She prefers feminine or gender-neutral images of bountiful nature, of community, of "God as lover and friend."<sup>83</sup> The chapter on God concludes as follows: "In speaking of the moving, changing ground and source, our companion and our lover, we name toward the God known in community that cherishes diversity within and without, even as that diversity has its warrant in the God of myriad names."<sup>84</sup>

It would appear that more than feminist antagonism to "patriarchalism" is at work here. Plaskow is carrying forward the democratization of "God talk" evident throughout the modern period, never more so than in America in recent decades. The redefinitions of covenant surveyed earlier represent an attempt to reconcile traditional belief in the "master of the universe" with the growing self-importance of humanity in the age of science. Soloveitchik, in his famous essay "The Lonely Man of Faith" (1965), correctly saw the Adam I of majesty and honor standing in tension with the Adam II of covenantal relationship;<sup>85</sup> Borowitz only testified further to the tension with his reinterpretation of the covenant so as to make ample room for autonomy, and Hartman provided still more evidence with his reconception of the covenant as an egalitarian marriage bond (not at all like the marriage bonds pictured in, say, Hosea!). Recent Jewish theology, in short, seems content to imagine God as all of Being (Green), and is eager to reconnect alienated modern selves with that Being within and without them. But there is growing evidence of a disinclination to accept a God who has mastery over individual or collective life, who stands over against us as a real, personal deity demanding obedience—and having the right to it, because God is God, and we are not. Only Wyschogrod in the 1980s ventured the

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., pp. 128–69.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>85</sup>Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, Summer 1965, pp. 5–67.

claim. One suspects that it will find few exponents in the 1990s, barring an Orthodox successor to the theological mantle of Soloveitchik.

### *Conclusion*

There is reason to believe that Jewish theologians in the coming decades—whatever their denominational affiliation—will be more likely to engage in a combination of the strategies evinced by Green and Plaskow. They will probably move away from personalist conceptions of God in favor of neo-mystical formulations that ring true to contemporary experience of the transcendent. Cohen's turn to Kabbalah is a case in point. Efforts to demonstrate God's presence in history will continue unavailing; convincing answers to why "bad things happen to good people"<sup>86</sup> now, as ever, will continue unavailable. Revelation will not be easily reconceived. The authority for covenant, more and more, will probably be the experience of meaning which the covenant provides. "Voluntarism" and "creativity" will be paramount concerns. Authority will reside within the subcommunity of Jews with which one identifies, rather than in any given, objective set of norms binding the Jewish people, ever and always, as a whole.<sup>87</sup>

If the experience of personal transcendence within such subcommunities is powerful enough to resist dismissal as illusion, higher authority than this may well prove unnecessary, at least in the short run. Jews will likely continue in their present tendency of seeking tradition rather than faith—"sacred fragments" of meaning rather than entire systems of truth. If theologians find meaning in engagement with texts no matter whether they are divinely authored or even inspired, and find transcendence in rituals no matter how literal their status as divine commandment, they are unlikely to devote serious effort to proving the authority of text or ritual. It will be enough to demonstrate their profundity, their groundedness in what Gillman would call Jewish myth, their centrality to what Green would call Jews' spiritual home, their place in the lived experience of a community such as Plaskow's. It will be enough to postulate some reality underlying the various images we have of God, some link between the life we lead as Jews and the nature of ultimate reality. More than this may not be required, and so it will not be forthcoming.

The extent of this tendency should not be exaggerated. Theologians may reject Green's theology as they did Kaplan's, preferring to work with more traditional terms even if they cannot assent to them entirely. They may

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<sup>86</sup>Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York, 1983).

<sup>87</sup>For a Conservative statement of this position, see Elliot Dorff, *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to Our Descendants* (New York, 1977), and "Towards a Legal Theory of Conservative Judaism," *Conservative Judaism*, Summer 1973, pp. 76-77.

prove suspicious of the appeal to experience, particularly when religious experience among the highly rationalist, upper-middle-class American Jewish community is if anything even rarer than belief. There is no doubt, however, that appeal to "tradition" (rather than, say, "ethics" or "Halakhah") is now widespread, from moderate Reform on the "left" to modern Orthodoxy on the "right," and no doubt either that the entrance of women into the center of Jewish religious activity—ordained as rabbis, fashioning new rituals, composing new liturgy, and now writing new theology—presages a major shift in the character of American Jewish thought. Given the waning of focus on the Holocaust and the problems besetting covenant theology, the sheer energy underlying feminist theology and the existence of a substantial readership for that theology mean that its role in American Jewish theology as a whole will only increase in coming decades, and will probably increase dramatically.

If in conclusion we were to pose for the next two decades the question that Borowitz asked 20 years ago—the "problem of the form of a Jewish theology"—the answer would seem to be that American thinkers are likely to follow the example of Irving Greenberg's *The Jewish Way* or the acclaimed collection of essays *Back to the Sources* (1986), edited by Barry Holtz. They are likely, that is, to prefer exposition of the meaning to be found in the cycle of the Jewish year over systematic statement of the truth or essence of Judaism; they will turn to modern midrash, examples of how to read traditional texts, with no reading claiming exclusive truth or correctness, rather than to interpretations that claim to give the authoritative account of "Judaism for the modern Jew." The advantage of the former approaches is apparent. One circumvents the problems of revelation that no theologian in the modern period has yet managed to solve, at the same time as one provides what readers, lay and theologically sophisticated, both seem to want. One does not argue for Jewish commitment, at least openly, but rather presumes it—and then suggests content for that commitment. The work of theology takes its place alongside literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and so forth, much as Rashi greets us on a page of *Mikra'ot Gedolot* alongside Ramban and Ibn Ezra.<sup>88</sup>

The project of going "beyond Buber and Rosenzweig," then, may well lead American Jewish thinkers to explicit embrace—without apology—of the fragmentary forms which their immediate predecessors had seemed to

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<sup>88</sup>These features of the "market" for Jewish thought in America probably account for the prevalence of introductory volumes such as Emil Fackenheim's *What Is Judaism?* (New York, 1988), Borowitz's *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, or even Gillman's *Sacred Fragments*—which concludes with a chapter entitled "Doing Your Own Theology." That is possible for the average reader, of course, only given an understanding of the enterprise radically at variance with the one assumed in the present essay.

adopt of necessity: responsa and commentary, essay and homily; fragments of Halakhah—Jewish “life lived,” and of Aggadah—Jewish life reflected upon. They will offer *divrei torah*, words of Torah, along with designs for communities in which these words can be heard. And they will hope, somehow, that it will be enough to carry Jews forward to a time when acts of faith once again come more wholly and more easily.