

## Replies to My Commentators

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It is a great honor to have this series of responses to my essay on “A Positive Jewish Theology” published in this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*. To put my project of positive Jewish theology most simply, I am attempting to find philosophical resources to make positive assertions and belief claims about God as an independent reality, separate from human thought about God and separate from the world. This enterprise has been called “theological realism” and is to be distinguished from a variety of theological programs that reduce theology to the personal search for meaning, on the one hand, and various forms of pantheism on the other. It is also different from negative and apophatic forms of theology in that it includes the attempt to make positive assertions about God such that God is good and wise. Daniel Rynhold puts the issue simply when he sees my project as an assertion of belief in God. It is a rather traditional theological project in that I am seeking to assert a rational cognitive component to Jewish belief in God, even as elements of love and faith are involved, which might transcend rationality. Given that contemporary Judaism is somewhat anti-theological, anti-metaphysical, and even anti-intellectual, the project with which I am involved is “counter-cultural,” experimental, and controversial. To boil it down most simply, then, my project is a call to Jews (and specifically Jewish philosophers) to join me in exploring ways to understand, celebrate, and philosophically defend Jewish theism as the core of Judaism as a religion. Since I have known him longest, and since it was Peter Ochs with whom founded this journal, I will start my response to my commentators with him.

### **Peter Ochs: A Pragmatic Reading**

Ochs summarizes my early work by reviewing my attempt to develop a four-stage Buberian hermeneutic method in my book *The Text As Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*. In this book, I sought to place Buber's translations and interpretations of Hasidism and the Bible in the context of German “*Verstehen*” hermeneutics, beginning with Dilthey through Heidegger to Gadamer and further developed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Where the German tradition tended to place the humanistic interpretive approach of *Verstehen* (“understanding”) in opposition to *Erklären* (“explaining”), associated with the methods of the sciences, Ricoeur sought to place the two in a mutually enriching dialectic. Thus, I show in my book how historical critical explanations of Hasidic texts of the sort that Scholem developed could serve to compliment Buber's attempt to help us “understand” the life world of Hasidism as a religious revival “that took hold and vitalize(d)” Eastern European Jews. Buber, like Ricoeur, remains in the *Verstehen* school because, for him, the overall goal of his interpretation is not only to “explain” the origin of Hasidism and its development in historicist terms, but to “understand” the “life-world” of Hasidism. As Ochs says, explanation serves as a stage or moment in my four-part Buberian hermeneutic method. Ochs

also shows that what is most important for Buber is the last stage, which Hans-Georg Gadamer's calls "application." In this stage, the interpreter seeks to apply the meaning of a text to the contemporary situation to address its unique needs. In this stage, in Ochs's language, the interpreter joins a community of interpreters to use texts of the past to "repair" present faulty forms of ideation and practice.

Coming from the *Verstehen* tradition of hermeneutics, this last stage of application is where my work most easily intersects with that of Ochs's Peircean semiotics. Therefore, Ochs could view my work like Kadushin's, as a species of Jewish or Rabbinic pragmatism. Together we did much to develop venues and publications to further our shared concern of always keeping the healing and repair of lived Jewish and non-Jewish life as a horizon and end of our work. In his response to my two essays, I see Ochs reminding me of where we started, and I see him pointing out to me that my present move, to focus on a "positive theology," at its best, is a hermeneutical and pragmatic move.

Certainly, it is true that I am motivated by what I see as certain unfortunate developments in contemporary Jewish philosophy, which I summarize as "apophatic theology": a concomitant rejection of rational philosophy and an embrace of political agendas—left and right—over and above the search for truth, the "good," and God. It is also true that what most bothers me is the sense that these contemporary forms of Jewish thought are divorced from and really unable to attend to the religious needs of the Jewish community. My Jewish center of gravity remains Torah study, Jewish synagogue liturgy, and ethical action in the world, and I see philosophy as aiding, enriching, and deepening those practices. My turn to theology—indeed, to God—is a way to say what I have always been trying to say more clearly, more directly, and with greater focus. We can say that academic Jewish studies has been rather obsessively concerned with the canons and rules of scholarly objectivity, with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in its classical German (and Israeli) formulation. From the perspective of the "science of Judaism," theology means the opposite of what the academic study of Judaism is about. We tried to combat this form of academic Jewish studies with our hermeneutics and our pragmatism, but now I am finding it rather invigorating to embrace classical theology in the study of Judaism, to carry on the old fight with new tools and new methods.

Certainly, I hear my friend in his essay warning me that there are old pitfalls, obstacles, and minefields into which I might stumble, especially as I explore medieval theology and analytic philosophy—with its propositional truths, idealist presuppositions, "modernist" logics, and attraction to thinking for itself, as opposed to thinking for the sake of practice and healing the world. But like Ricoeur's use of methods of explanation as a stage or moment in the overall process of interpretation, I am exploring both medieval theology and analytic philosophy to provide new tools to develop and enhance my overall hermeneutical project. I see my work today in medieval metaphysics and theology and analytic philosophy as part of what Ricoeur called a "second naiveté": a retrieval of resources of the past for the present moment.

### **Yehuda Gellman: Theological Realism and Internal Contradiction**

It is indeed an honor and pleasure to have Yehudah (Jerome) Gellman, one of the early pioneers in analytic Jewish theology, respond to my essay. I met Yehudah in the halcyon days of

the Shalom Hartman Institute when it was in a glorious large old villa on Rachel Imenu St. in Jerusalem. We used to all crowd into David Hartman's study for his weekly theology seminar, and Yehudah could always be counted on to calm David down when he was too excited or move him forward when he was repeating himself too much.

One of the things I like most about analytic philosophy is its distinctions. If your mind is sharp enough, and if you know a lot about science and logic and are sensitive and attuned to common language, you can always get out of a philosophical problem by developing a few distinctions. Thus it is that Gellman supplies the example of light as both wave and particle to my contradiction of the "unseen and seen" God—or rather, the God of Absolute Being and God as person. He supplies three helpful distinctions—modal-realism, authority-realism, and functionalist-realism—that serve my overall agenda of developing a theological realism in which positive things can be said about God. In all three cases Gellman argues that there is still something unknowable about God's very nature, or essence, or substance. But God allows us to "know" certain things about him through the modes or functions through which he appears to us, or through our trust of reports of reliable witnesses like the prophets or tzaddikim who provide "warranted assertability" (Dewey) for God's different attributes. These distinctions are most helpful and appreciated, and they do offer very good ways to address not only the contradiction of God of Being and God as person, but also other attributes that contradict, like God's mercy and judgment, transcendence and immanence, etc. These strategies also have the advantage of humbly respecting the grandeur and glory and perfection of God that is beyond us as humans, while also delivering us real avenues to obey and think and pray to God in the actualities of lived Jewish life.

Gellman, however, is critical of two strategies that I employ in the section of my essay on the "unseen and seen God." One is to assert the contradiction as a brute fact to accept in Jewish theology, and the other is to resolve it through Peirce's notion of the "thirdness." Now, first I must acknowledge, as Ochs points out, that my notion of thirdness is different from the one that Peirce settles on, especially in his revised and mature semiotics (see Ochs note 10). There, thirdness refers to "relationality" in signs, to the "interpretant" or the dynamic "condition with respect to which a sign refers to a given object." I am using the term in the more static sense of "the excluded middle" in logic, or a Hegelian synthesis that yet preserves two poles of a dialectic. Theodor Adorno refers to this as a "negative dialectic" in that the synthesis is never fully carried through. One good analogy for this is found in music, when we hear two different notes at the same time, or in perception, when two color patches stand side by side as in a Rothko painting.

This is why I rather like Gellman's notion of "double-mindedness" in Abraham at the Akedah. I like it because it is experiential (perhaps in the sense of "traditional-realism") and also because it is trying to get at a "mind-set," a certain posture of thinking, trick of the imagination, or "frame of mind." I want to suggest, perhaps as part of Maimonides' legacy, that when Jews think of, imagine, and pray to God, they at once think of a disembodied, eternal Being and a personal being. Maybe we just call it a "disembodied person," even as the term is really a contradiction! Elliot Wolfson once used the term "the imaginary" for the whole field of Jewish theology where God is imagined in this way, from the Bible to Kabbalism.

### **Kenneth Seeskin: In Defense of Negative Theology**

Ken Seeskin has been an extremely helpful guide in my attempts to understand Maimonides and medieval theology, so I welcome his restatement of the rational tradition, beginning with Philo, on the problem of assigning attributes to God. Since God is utterly unique, his oneness is a simple oneness admitting of no complexity, and his “knowledge or power” is not just bigger than our limited knowledge, but infinitely bigger, “so that the difference is one of kind not degree.” Seeskin offers a helpful corrective to my suggestion that the source here is Aristotle by showing that it is Plato and ultimately Plotinus that is the source of the medieval notion of God’s simple oneness. His discussion of Kant is also a helpful contribution to positive theology, since, while agreeing that Kant sought to invalidate the traditional proofs for God’s existence, he also sought to make room for faith in God. As Seeskin says, “If a person turns to God it should be the outcome of a choice rather than a deduction.” As we know, Kant’s choice was made out of the needs of practical reason and morality. Kant also argued for the necessity of a notion of freedom as opposed to determinism in nature as a prerequisite for the moral life. This attention to practical reason, which is a kind of pragmatic thinking about the consequences of thought and belief for life and for the “good life,” is remarkable for a rational philosopher like Kant. It shows that he was truly heir to the best of the Western philosophical tradition in carrying forward the enterprise of philosophy as a combination of epistemology, ethics, and politics that, as Seeskin says, “makes room” for God as creator of the world, author of the moral law, and ethical ideal “for us to emulate.” So, even as Kant takes away theology as a series of metaphysical propositions warranted by deductive argument, he gives it back on the sphere where it is perhaps most needed: in practical life. This is what I take away from Seeskin.

As to Seeskin’s final question to me on criteria by which to judge our human experiences of God, I see the same abuses in Judaism in supporting immoral actions in the Torah against sabbath violators, adulterous women, Amalekites, etc. I also see these abuses in contemporary Hasidic Jews who speak of non-Jews as bestial, and in modern Orthodox Jews who speak of Arabs as less than human. Maimonides himself spoke of “divine accommodation” to the intellectual level of the Israelites, all the while looking to a future, more philosophical Judaism. I like what Hermann Cohen does when he suggests that the “Torah corrects the Torah,” as when Ezekiel suggests that the individual should no longer have to pay for his father’s sins.

Seeskin’s recent book on the prophets is remarkable in highlighting the many other corrective moves of the prophets who, after all, remain authoritative “theologians” in the Tanakh, even if too many religious Jews fail to read them *in toto* (beyond what they get in the Haftorot (additional readings) on Shabbat. But where Seeskin focuses almost entirely on ethics to correct failed Jewish teachings, I am enough of a theologian to say that theology should not be limited to ethics. It is obvious to me that the Torah is coming to teach us something crucial in the Akedah of Isaac where, as Kierkegaard says, Abraham is called upon to transcend notions of common ethics for the sake of God.

The Jewish religious life and the enterprise of theology simply cannot be limited to ethics alone. It is easiest to speak of transcending ethics in notions of beauty, love, and truth. However, it is clear that the Torah is neither an ethics book nor a book on the virtues of beauty, love, and truth. It is also a book on the search for knowledge of God and for a life lived in the presence of

God in “the house of God” (b’veit haShem). In another book of mine, I speak of this as the search for holiness. That search certainly includes ethics, but it goes beyond ethics in the dietary and purity laws, in prayers of synagogue liturgy, in blessings that address all moments in life as opportunities for sacralization. The effort to totally rationalize Judaism as an ethical system culminated in various modern attempts to render Judaism into what is often called “ethical monotheism.” While having great sympathy for this form of Judaism, for me it is missing something essential about the religious life that the tradition refers to as *kedushah*, a sacred setting apart, a closing off from the profane life and an entering into the realm of holiness. For me, it is Jewish law that is tasked with closing that circle, protecting it, and holding it in myriad ritual practices that not only maximize holiness in life but serve to exalt God, as the Holy One, Blessed be He.

### **Jim Diamond and Getting Beyond Post-Holocaust Theology**

I should like now to respond to my dear friend and fellow-traveler in theological journeys, Jim Diamond. I take Diamond’s suggestion very seriously that theology must address real practical and moral issues, and that it should use Jewish texts to do so. Indeed, this is why, as I said previously, I call my work “hermeneutical theology” since it involves the interpretation of Jewish texts for the sake of contemporary life. However, what interests me most about this essay is that it develops a framework for a positive Jewish theology. Once we have a framework, an overarching series of presuppositions and some direction on method, we can focus on particular issues.

Certainly, the issue of the “thinking human self,” which was the focus of philosophy and theology since Descartes and Kant with Idealism and Husserlian phenomenology as well as Kierkegaardian existentialism, needs to be criticized for its pretensions to hold the key to all knowledge and spirit. In this regard, Diamond’s exegesis on divine regret, human hubris, and the need for genuine humility is most welcome. However, Diamond’s post-Shoah theology based on Jonas’s use of the Kabbalistic notion of the *tsitsum*, or contraction of God, is, I think, counter-productive for the path to humility. After all, what induces the self to see its finitude, ignorance, and moral failing is the recognition of the power, wisdom, righteousness, and infinite goodness of God. This insight is hard to have when God has absented Godself from the world in an act of original *tsimtsum*. The story as we have it in Diamond’s exposition is that, because we have sinned, God retreats into himself. But God retreating into himself creates precisely the vacuum that human hubris seeks to fill with power and knowledge.

As to the Holocaust that Diamond urges me to address, this is a long-standing plea of Jewish thinkers that goes back to the 1960s in the work of Richard Rubinstein, Elie Wiesel, and Emil Fackenheim. Diamond’s own work on the theology of Rabbi Kalman Shapira from the Warsaw Ghetto is noteworthy for its theological depth and pathos. In the Shoah, the murder of at least 6 million Jews, including 1.5 million children, and the destruction of the major institutions of Jewish religion and culture in Europe had devastating consequences for Jews and Judaism. Thus, the question of theodicy, the justification of God in the face of this evil, is an acute one. As I have said, Diamond points to Jonas’s notion of a *tsitsum*—the contraction of God into himself creating an absence of God in the world—as one creative response to the Shoah. In my

terms, this represents a “negative theological” position that goes beyond medieval negative theology in that it presents the negation not as a lack in human cognition and language, but in the very being and presence of God.

I would like to raise the following points, which are a combination of theological and empirical observations. Certainly, we owe to those who perished and those who survived the Shoah the utmost respect. We need to continue to keep them present in the collective Jewish memory, especially as so many were denied the dignity of a Jewish and humane burial. There is much to learn about the human capacity for evil, antisemitism, and the weakness of human political and social institutions to protect Jews. We need to continue to build up and strengthen the postwar human rights regime that the Shoah inspired. Also, the loss of over one third of the Jewish population and many major institutions of Jewish religion and culture is a trauma that even now, some 80 years later, is still felt.

Yet two central themes of our philosophical and theological tradition make me stop before taking the route of the anti-theology post-Shoah thinkers. The first is the assertion that, despite the giving of the Torah, the world remains unredeemed, and that the Jews and the world in general remain in exile. In the condition of exile, injustice, cruelty, and human moral weakness will naturally result in war and bloodshed, and all that is good and just in the world will be necessarily relative and limited. The second Jewish theological position of import is the view that humans have genuine free will that requires them to take responsibility for their lives and societies. Therefore, for me as for many other thinkers in the wake of the Holocaust, the challenge is better phrased as the problem of anthropodicy than theodicy. That is, the question is not the question we often hear: “How could God let this happen?” The right questions are “How could humans let this happen?” and, more so, “How can humans, Jews and non-Jews, act to prevent further Holocausts and genocides?”

Of course, Jewish theology includes providential promises to the Jewish community that are called into question by the Shoah. Jewish theology, too, has theodical answers that are not appropriate to the Shoah, such that suffering is punishment or that it is a test or purification of the righteous. Here, I agree that theologians need to think deeply to come up with more appropriate responses. Anger at God, calling God to account, challenges to God’s omnipotence and the goodness of the created order, notions of God’s deafness, hiddenness, silence, “eclipse” are all in order. But even as these formulations may appear new, most go back to biblical and rabbinic texts and tropes from the past. Disaster, persecution, and destruction of Jewish life and culture is not a new experience for Jews who have had so many experiences with it and so many resources to respond to it: Jeremiah, Psalms, Job, Purim, Talmudic responses to the destruction of the First and Second Temples, medieval Rabbinic responses to the crusades. To these examples we could add the theology of R. Shapira. But most of the pre-Shoah Jewish responses to suffering and persecutions stop short of the radical “death of God,” “apophatic,” gnostic, and anti-theological theologies that were made famous by the likes of Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Wiesel, Jonas, and others who developed what Zachary Braiterman aptly called “anti-theodicies.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 31ff.

Martin Buber, had it right, I think, when he used the image of the “eclipse of God,” which recalls the biblical “hiddenness of God” as a momentary blockage of the light of God’s presence. Other theologically minded thinkers like Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Berkowitz followed in this vein with formulations and responses that always tried to give expression to the pain and suffering of the Shoah while preserving hope and avenues to continue to believe in God and the future of the Jewish people.

Here, I think that sensitivity to practical intended and unintended consequences of ideas is relevant. I also think that the consequences of post-Holocaust anti-theologies for Judaism and Jewish life have not been particularly good. This is because I do not see how it is possible to build a vibrant Jewish life on the basis of a post-Holocaust theology that declares the death or utter powerlessness of God and focuses on Jewish victimhood, antisemitism, and the sense that the whole world is out to get the Jews. Post-Holocaust theology served a purpose in the face of the trauma of a massive loss of Jewish life. This theology gave expression to the grave sense of hurt, anger, and trauma that the Jewish community experienced either directly or indirectly in the Shoah. But what I object to are the global claims about the uniqueness of the Shoah in all of Jewish and non-Jewish history, which is full of persecutions, exiles and genocides. Certainly there are unique aspects to the Shoah as a modern industrialized form of mass killing, but all mass killings are unique in their own ways, and all have devastating consequences for the communities that experience them. I fail to see the moral and intellectual benefits of insisting that the Holocaust should be set apart from all other genocides in human history. I am also not convinced by the claim made by Fackenheim and others that the Shoah is an “epoch making event” or “beginning of a new era,” when other events like World Wars I and II, Hiroshima, and the Gulags of Stalin and genocides of the Armenians, Chinese, and Cambodians also occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, there is Fackenheim’s claim that philosophy and rational thought “founders” or fails in the face of the Shoah.<sup>2</sup> There is an insistence among post-Holocaust theologians that Jewish theology must be radically restructured after the Holocaust, but these claims, often stated in high-pitched rhetoric rather than careful argument, have not, in my view, been convincingly made.

Although I think that it is impossible to read the will of God into historical events, if the Shoah is deemed evidence of the death or absence of God, what does one make of the contemporary Jewish situation? An objective observer of Jewish history would be hard pressed to find, in the long history of world Jewry, a Jewish community more powerful—militarily, culturally, politically—more free and creative artistically, more vibrant in its diversity, and also more dedicated religiously as we see in the growth and seriousness of Torah study in Yeshivot and the great universities of the world. Certainly, the center of all this is the modern State of Israel, which, despite its many problems, must be a source of pride and should also be seen as a concrete legacy of the Shoah. I am not suggesting in any crude way that Israel is the answer to the Shoah, that God took life away in the Shoah only to give it back in Israel. Here, again, if we are to read God from contemporary Jewish history, the formulation of Irving Greenberg is best. In his words, Israel is not the “resurrection of the dead of the Shoah,” but Israel is “the

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<sup>2</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (NY: Schocken, 1982).

resurrection of hope”<sup>3</sup> in the Jewish people and also in God’s providential promises for the Jewish people.

Jim Diamond is a sensitive reader of contemporary Jewish life and is as aware as anyone that some aspects of post-Holocaust thought have been overdone and that some consequences have been unproductive for the Jewish community. I understand his move to display and comment on the work of Rabbi Shapira as a form of holy work to preserve some deeply perceptive Jewish theology created in the midst of immense suffering and duress in the Warsaw Ghetto. This is not “post-Holocaust” theology; it is theology in the midst of suffering and an attempt to respond creatively and deeply to suffering and death out of all the resources of the Jewish theological tradition. However, I see the project of constructive Jewish theology as replenishing and rebuilding the Jewish theological tradition after a “post-Holocaust” negative theology that has been counterproductive for Jewish thought and life.

Many have said that the Shoah must serve as a warning to all humanity about the evils of modernity and the increase in the human ability to perpetrate genocide. Today, in environmental crisis, we face the threat of massive destruction not only of human but of all forms of life. Even now, whole species are going out of existence, and special habitats for unique forms of life are being destroyed. We are in the situation of Noah, needing to build an ark to preserve as much of the life forms that exist before the deluge. But we need to be clear that the deluge is human making and not of God’s: we, and not God, are responsible for it. Here, I think that Martin Buber was again insightful when he saw many people, in the wake of the modern world wars, turning to apocalyptic scenarios that blamed God and sought to release humans of their responsibility. Buber juxtaposed “apocalyptic thinking” with what he called “prophetic thinking,”<sup>4</sup> which lays the blame for historical disaster squarely on human shoulders and looks to humans and not God to set things aright.

Doubtless there will be those in 30 to 50 years’ time—when temperatures and oceans rise high enough to make significant parts of the world uninhabitable—who will say, “How could God allow this to happen?” “Where is God now?” or “God, why are you silent? Save us, Help us!” If the Shoah is truly a warning, its message must be that human irresponsibility is the source of the environmental disaster, and God is there to insist that humans take responsibility for the world God created for them and act to secure its future.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</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: KTAV, 1977), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, “Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour,” *Pointing the Way*, ed. M. Friedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Here, different aspects of the Jewish tradition come into focus and others recede. For example, aspects of biblical thought during the periods of the monarchies can be retrieved, most notably the prophetic critique of the abuses of power by the monarchy and. Furthermore, Jewish religious political thought, even though often unsystematic and incomplete in rabbinic texts and philosophy, deserve attention. For Jewish theology, even in the diaspora, notions like God as covenantal co-partner with Jews on Jewish destiny are important, as are Jews as prophetic leaders and critics of abuses and corruption in modern societies.

### Daniel Rynhold: Theology and Aesthetics

Daniel Rynhold's work on Maimonides and medieval philosophy and his recent book on Soloveitchik have taught me much, and I am thankful for this and for his response to my essay. Given his serious work in medieval philosophy and theology, Rynhold more than anyone is aware of the problems of propositional Jewish theology in which "paradoxes of omnipotence or the problem of freewill versus omniscience" seem irresolvable. Perhaps he knows the problems too well, but I must admit that I find the problems intellectually stimulating and theologically rich to contemplate.

Rynhold sees two different approaches to the aporias and scope of medieval theology in my essay, which I want to comment upon. As he says, on the one hand, I appear to want to defend the metaphysical and ontological claims of medieval theology such that "God is the fundamental reality and philosophical principle of Judaism" whose "existence provides the ground and sustenance of all other beings." On the other hand, I "equivocate": not only do I not "posit these as attributes in any straight forward way," but I assert that these ideas are "a good starting point for theological debate." Furthermore, Rynhold says that in the later part of my essay on the "unseen and seen" God, I seem to no longer be speaking of metaphysics and ontology but to a "phenomenology of religious experience."

As to the first problem he sees with my failure to fully embrace medieval theological notions as demonstrated propositions, I would say that, like Daniel, I am not fully convinced by these ideas. As a philosophical rendition of my own belief in God and our reliance upon God as creator and sustainer of the world, I do find compelling the metaphysical and ontological claims of the medievals on God as Absolute Being, "foundation of foundations." This seems to be a *prima facie* rendition of what many theists—Jewish, Muslim, Christian—believe when they say they believe in God. And it does include metaphysical and ontological assumptions, yet I would say that it is not Maimonides's deduction or "rational demonstration" that convinced me to have this belief. This belief was arrived at by a combination of thought, experience, and acceptance of Jewish tradition starting with the Torah.

As to the attributes of God asserted by classical Jewish theism and developed by post-Maimonidean philosophers and theologians, my "equivocation" on whether or not we can take them as propositional statements about God is what I call a "soft metaphysics." Here, I mean to agree with the many critics who doubt that attributes of God can be rationally demonstrated, and, like Soloveitchik, I agree that propositions about God are simply not of the same epistemological order of propositions about our everyday reality, such that it is raining, the tree is a maple, and the White House is in Washington D.C. I would reiterate, then, my view that metaphysical assertions about God and God's attributes provide "starting points for theological debate." And I would add that they only acquire some certainty when warranted by scripture, the Jewish tradition, and experience. Here, I rather like the expression of Cardinal Newman, who speaks of a "grammar of assent"<sup>6</sup> to theological beliefs that is won through rational philosophical thought, study of scripture and philosophy, the testimony of tradition, and personal religious experience.

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<sup>6</sup> John Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, 1913).

But to return to my notion of soft metaphysics, I got the idea from rereading Kant following a suggestion from Seeskin.

Although Immanuel Kant presented an important challenge to metaphysics as a series of truths that could be known with the certainty of science, he did assign a place for elements of metaphysics in his system. Early in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he refers to a form of thinking he calls “speculation,” which attracts “all humans” to metaphysics: “As soon as their [human] reason has become ripe for speculation, there has always existed and will always continue to exist some kind of metaphysics”<sup>7</sup> Kant also allows that thought about ultimate reality is possible and must be regarded as genuine thinking, even as it cannot rise for him to the epistemological level of the knowledge of transcendental philosophy and science. However, I would suggest, for instance, that the classical arguments for the existence of God can be regarded as speculation on ultimate reality that makes sense of something we perceive in nature—its lawlike quality, for example. I would also suggest that metaphysical speculation is a response to what many people “sense” and are brought to think about when they contemplate issues of the purpose of life, death, and ultimate reality.

### *Jewish Metaphysical Pluralism*

However, if we grant that metaphysical speculation is genuine thinking, I would suggest that this thinking touches life and finds some certainty not in philosophy and science but precisely in religion. Why is there something rather than nothing? What was there before creation? What will be here afterwards? Why is there order and not chaos? And why am I here, what is my purpose? These are metaphysical or “speculative” questions that religious literature presents and for which it poses answers, and in the Jewish tradition, these answers are often not simple and single but rather complex and highly varied. Indeed, it is precisely the variety of profound questioning and plural answers that attracted me and I believe many others to Judaism in the first place. From the opening chapters of Genesis, to Exodus 3 and 34, to Second Isaiah, to Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs and Job, speculative thought receives a series of penetrating answers that respond deeply to life’s big questions and the nature of God. These texts suggest that metaphysical questioning and questing is to be encouraged by Judaism, even if it may not always receive the definitive answers that humans seek. From biblical texts, the Jew can easily move to Jewish philosophy and theology in its multiple forms, in rabbinic midrash and aggadot (narratives) in Kabbalah and Hasidism.

In pointing to the multiplicity of sources and texts that explore fundamental metaphysical issues in Judaism, it is clear, first, that the tradition takes these issues very seriously, and second, that it expects no final answers and no simple and neat solutions. In the language of philosophy, it projects no circumscribed ontologies and no clear totalities. About metaphysical dilemmas, Judaism demands no final acceptance, presents few absolute doctrines, and allows Jews a remarkable freedom. Given this, one can safely say that when Jewish philosophers like Buber and Levinas criticize metaphysics, they are more often talking about non-Jewish Western

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<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1787), trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Toronto: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), 1.

philosophy and Christian metaphysical theology than those varied and plural metaphysical explorations in their own Jewish tradition. Here, Maimonides could be a target, but a thorough exploration of the full range of Maimonides's works from the *Guide* to the *Mishna Torah* shows a remarkably complex thought that cannot be neatly summarized as a "totality."

So this is my first point about Jewish metaphysics as "soft metaphysics." Jewish metaphysics is "soft" not in the sense that it is easy, or flabby, or confused. It is soft in the sense that it is highly varied and creative and offers few hard certainties, clear truths, and doctrines that Jews must accept in order to be considered religious Jews.<sup>8</sup> What I take from this is that, for Judaism, metaphysical "wonder" in Aristotle's sense is both encouraged and supported.

### *Soft Metaphysics as Practical Metaphysics*

Another way to approach metaphysics as soft metaphysics is to suggest that metaphysics serves the practical religious life. I argue that, far from being removed from the temporal everyday life of Jews, metaphysical ideas serve this life in very concrete ways. As I have already suggested, the ideal character of Jewish theology, as with all idealism, is not meant to undermine life as sinful or evil, but is meant to uplift life with images and principles of life redeemed, sin overcome, and evil vanquished. This is clearly seen in the ways in which Jewish liturgy gives embodied images, metaphors, and symbols to the future messianic world and to historical moments of redemption, such as the exodus, in the past. A theological idea of God's eternity, for instance, becomes real and effective in times of personal and communal strife when life seems flimsy, impermanent, and quickly passing. In these moments, the critique of metaphysics as overly abstract and unconnected to life seems particularly shallow. Thus, we see in rabbinic Judaism and also medieval philosophy that metaphysical beliefs do not stand alone but are supported, developed, and confirmed in religious practices.

### *Rynhold's Aesthetic Theology*

Given Daniel Rynhold's excellent work in medieval philosophy, I find his move to a theology thoroughly based on aesthetics to be somewhat surprising. I agree that what he calls "aesthetics" should be part of any positive and constructive Jewish theology, but I think that we also need to find a way to stress certain metaphysical and ideal aspects of God—either through medieval philosophical or exegetical interpretive moves. Rynhold is correct in picking up on my own attraction to certain elements of his strategy, especially as they relate to an increased sensitivity to the biblical text. In my forthcoming book, I suggest that Jewish theology requires multiple methodologies to be carried out properly. In order to explore the nature of God as revealed in the Bible, I argue that medieval philosophy is unable to give us the appropriate tools. What Rynhold calls an "aesthetic" strategy I refer to as "hermeneutics," and, as I explained above, I employ the whole "*verstehen*" (understanding) tradition from Dilthey to Gadamer and Ricoeur in order to fashion an exegetical theology of the Bible. Where medieval philosophy took a poor view of literary forms like narrative and metaphor, Ricoeur strives to show how literary

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<sup>8</sup> Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Liverpool: Littman Library, 1999).

forms offer avenues to philosophical and theological meaning. Ricoeur also helps us see how different biblical literary genres—narrative, law, hymns, proverbs, apocalyptic and prophetic literatures—each offer different forms for theology. Hermeneutics is also open to multiple interpretations of each biblical verse, and, therefore it can well accommodate Jewish midrash and rabbinic exegesis. And, too, the flexibility of hermeneutics makes it more amenable to what I am calling “soft” and “practical metaphysics,” as well as to contradictions and paradoxes in theology. Indeed, one could say that one of the chief benefits of literary forms for philosophy and theology is that they provide ways to place oppositions in relation, to use narrative temporality to created dynamic tensions that build, wax, wane, and reach resolution in an ending. This kind of openness to development, paradoxes, and dynamism is missing in strict logical forms.

I think that Rynhold shows well how biblical aesthetics accommodates the personal aspects of the biblical God and how this “helps us to relate to God.” As Rynhold argues, God as a “character” in biblical narrative avoids the problems of a “God composed of a true set of propositions” and instead helps to “paint a picture of God that allows us to experience him even in the absence of a metaphysical or moral account.” But it is here that I respectfully part ways with Rynhold on his aesthetic approach to theology. Here, I want to say that metaphysical and moral accounts of God are necessary precisely because an aesthetic and “emotional relationship” to God is not, as in Kierkegaard, the end but the beginning of our relationship to God. For Kierkegaard, the next stages of theology after aesthetics are ethical and religious, wherein we come to question how it is and why it is that God would wish to appear to us as angry, jealous, and even immoral in the Bible. Here, I think that midrash and rabbinic exegesis seek to provide many compelling responses that philosophy often takes up and further develops. Righteous anger, testing of the righteous as in the Akedah, and ultimate mystery are only a few of these.

An aesthetic view of God as a morally ambiguous biblical “character” must be finally transcended, because if God is immoral, this means that the source of a purer form of ethics transcends God either in humans (a dubious proposition) or in some higher ideal realm (pointed to, for example, in Socrates’s Euthyphro dialogue). The other alternative is, of course, that God and ultimate reality are morally dual as in Gnosticism or Manicheanism.

However, the more traditional view that I want to defend is that, ultimately, the ideal and perfect God of the philosophers and the God of the Bible are one. Contradictions and perplexities obviously exist, but the essential substance and nature of God is good. The moral and metaphysical interpretations of the God of the Bible serve to take us deeper into the nature of God as wise and just and holy, so that we can refine and discipline our own anger and immorality to be like God in Godself and not just as he occasionally appears as a “character” in the Bible.

### **Miri Freud-Kandel: Building Blocks to a Contemporary Jewish Theology**

Miri Freud-Kandel is helpful in placing my work in the context of what she calls the “yearning for sacralization” in a post-secular world. She suggests that secularism has failed as a substitute for the meaning-giving function of religion, and, therefore, there is an “urgency for defending the reasonableness of faith.” But given that secularism remains the default structure of modern Western societies, “any claims to certainty are challenged” along with “the types of

religious authority and the truth claims upon which they are built.” In Freud-Kandel’s view, religion in this post-secular world is “expected to adapt in a spiritual marketplace” in which it is “one option among a variety of others.” Judaism, then, like all religions, must put aside claims to certainty and truth; it must have an anti-realist view of God and be satisfied to help Jews develop a sense of meaning by offering them a variety of Jewish rituals to perform. Offering tools for individual meaning-making seems to be Freud-Kandel’s recipe for “constructing a contemporary Jewish theology.”

Although I might agree that Freud-Kandel’s description of religion in the post-secular age has some validity, I would like to see more argument as to why a religion like Judaism should have to adapt to the severe limitations placed upon it by this post-secular situation. As I said at the outset of my essay, the reason why I oppose non-realist views of God is that it reduces God to a function of the human or the world. When God is a function of the world or human, God is not really God but either a projection of human ideation and the fulfillment of human needs or just a part of the world. God is then a secondary or tertiary epiphenomenon, not a reality in God’s own right.

Freud-Kandel’s view seems to be that the non-realist God is important since God is helpful for human psychological development and psychological well-being. Applying the insights of English psychologist Donald Winnicott, Freud-Kandel offers the model of God as a kind of “transitional object.” The notion of transitional objects was developed to help us understand why children develop intense relationships with dolls and toys. Children project life into these objects, and the objects in turn can help to stabilize the self and transition the child to higher forms of self-control and ego-integrity. Similarly, God can function as a transitional object in times of crises for adults, and religious rituals can help adults in life-cycle transitions. Jewish life cycle rituals—circumcisions, naming rituals, B’nei Mitsvah, weddings, mourning rituals—certainly can all be “meaningful” and helpful without needing to stress theology and God. Judaism is a life-affirming religion in which the human body, community, and the natural world is valued, so it is not opposed to certain trends in post-secular culture. I see that an anti-realist view of God in post-secular forms of Judaism is clearly attractive to many Jews, and I also see how a Judaism in which Jews choose to participate in select Jewish rituals works for those who have multiple interest—for instance in hiking, yoga, meditation, hobbies, recreation, etc. Here, as Freud-Kandel suggests, Judaism is just one element in a life where a variety of practices and worldviews are combined and where certainty and consistency is not required.

However, I fail to see how these forms of post-secular Judaism can be considered “theological” in any serious sense of the word. As Gellman puts it, any serious Jewish theology needs to meet an “ultimacy criterion”<sup>9</sup> that makes sense, for instance, of the words of the Shema: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your might.” The Shema, too, states a principle of oneness where the One God demands sole allegiance not shared by multiple gods and multiple meaning systems. Finally, and most importantly for me, theology with God as the highest value and archetype of goodness sets the structure of Judaism as a hierarchy. This means that God stands not only as a source of meaning and psychological well-being but also as a challenger, commander, and even judge of human moral failing. Judaism

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<sup>9</sup> Yehudah Gellman, *God’s Kindness has Overwhelmed Us* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012).

and its hierarchical system of commands and laws, on the model of Jacob's dream, is meant to be a ladder with rungs built by halakhah, upon which the Jew slowly and with care and diligence climbs up to greater and greater moral and spiritual heights. Many of the laws of Judaism are difficult to understand and fulfill, and some require sacrifices that contemporary Jew will find bothersome if not impossible to fulfill. Here, the dietary and Shabbat laws are only a beginning. Jewish theology, however, says that fulfilling the commands and laws of Judaism is the unique Jewish way to God and the meaningful life. If one wants this life, if one wants the moral and spiritual benefits of Judaism, one needs to place oneself under the "yoke" of halakhah. Like yoga and meditation, Judaism offers an entire system for disciplining human behavior for the sake of human transformation and social betterment.

I realize that what I am offering with my theological realism, in which the God of Israel is at center, is frankly too much, too far to travel, for many post-secular Jews. In this sense, what Freud-Kandel offers is more palatable. And perhaps we can say, with Hasidism, that since every mitzvah has immense power, she offers post-secular Jews a start, a beginning in Judaism through ritual practice. If you start with one ritual, one mitzvah, it leads to another, and another, and if post-secular Jews want to learn more about the meaningful life that Judaism offers, they eventually may want to know more about the God to which their Jewish prayers are directed. Then they might want to know something about Jewish views of God as that Being who supports and insures all true meaning-making activity for the self. At that point, my positive Jewish theology, and the project of constructive Jewish theology, may be relevant to them and to the post-secular meaning-giving project for Jewish selfhood. If I could close with one final point, I would offer that a positive Jewish theology means in the end a transcendence of the self. Jewish theology does not wish to deny selfhood, but it suggests, in the words of Buber, that only in relation to another, only "in relation to a you, do I become" a self, a thou. One way of understanding the Jewish theological insistence on God's transcendence is to ensure that other-directedness toward the self, the world and to God, is necessary for the good of the self and the world.

### **Conclusion**

Again, I want to express my thanks to the editors, particularly to Mark James, and to the commentators for their thoughtful and perceptive critiques. As I reread my responses, I see that what I say about Jewish theology may appear somewhat disjointed. I do want to say that in my forthcoming book I attempt to organize a positive Jewish theology through three parts that correlate with the central theological themes of Jewish theology: creation, revelation, and redemption. For each of these I outline a different method and form. Thus, for creation I focus on metaphysics and natural theology, for revelation I focus on hermeneutics, and for redemption I focus on prophetic ethics.

I will conclude by quoting the Psalmist who implores, "Let us sing a new song." The old one of negative theology is not necessarily bad, and certainly it had its purpose and expressed real pain and sorrow in its day, but as Jews taxed with the legacy of Torah, our real job is to praise, glorify, thank, and extoll God, not to cry out with negativity, doubt, and despair. Anfinally there is this: in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis in American and Israeli

democracy, and the serious impending crisis of environmental collapse, optimism about the future is increasingly being challenged. Here, Jewish theology's role must be to unearth sources of hope and optimism, to build trust in humans by building trust in God and God's promises and in the implicit goodness of humankind given by our creation in the image of God.