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Jewish Death in Jewish Time: The Ontological Shift Required to Understand Torah Judaism's Indigenous Approach to Historical Trauma and Historical Memory

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Abstract: Scholars regularly make the mistake of applying critical analysis to religious traditions without a sensibility that they are often describing one ontology through the lens of another. Just as cultural anthropology attempts to understand indigenous traditions by respecting their unique worldview and minimizing the foreign a priori of the ethnographer, critical scholars of religion need to be mindful of this unconscious bias when studying religious communities from 'outside'. The traditional Jewish experience of death, mourning and historical trauma is a case in point. As such, this essay considers the indigenous ontological a priori of Torah Judaism as contrasted with the a priori of 'Enlightenment' as understood by Foucault. It then applies this hermeneutic to 'Jewish death in Jewish time'.

Keywords: historical trauma; historical memory; Jewish thought; Jewish practice; holocaust; Michel Foucault; J.B. Soloveitchik; Franz Rosenzweig



Citation: Katz, Matthew Mordecai. 2022. Jewish Death in Jewish Time: The Ontological Shift Required to Understand Torah Judaism's Indigenous Approach to Historical Trauma and Historical Memory. *Religions* 13: 1144. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121144>

Academic Editors: Paul Mendes-Flohr and Julie Mell

Received: 30 September 2022

Accepted: 23 November 2022

Published: 24 November 2022

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1. Introduction

In his 1981–1982 public lectures at the College de France, subsequently published as *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Michel Foucault taught that the philosophers of ancient Greece had a regular practice of self-analysis and self-evaluation, which is absent in contemporary culture: "At the apex of all these exercises" he reminded us, there existed for these early thinkers, "a meditation on death, or rather, a training for it." (Foucault et al. 1997). Specifically, he referenced the *melete thanatou*, which was a contemplative practice intended to make the inevitability of one's death imminent in daily life for "it tends to make one live each day as if it were his last." The power of making death such a regular presence in one's daily thinking, as it were, is that it compelled the subject to question her actions and her thoughts, to judge them from the perspective of the end of life and the moral accounting it would bring.

A year or two later, during his tenure at the University of California at Berkeley, Foucault presented a lecture entitled "What is Enlightenment?" (Foucault et al. 2003). This course addressed the question: which aspects of modernity made our present era unique? That is, what is distinct about the Age of Enlightenment as compared to earlier eras of human experience? Foucault answered in part that modernity is "the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the 'heroic' aspect of the present moment." In support of this proposition Foucault referenced Baudelaire (1821–1867), the French art critic and essayist, who held that the modern painter was the one who knew how best to represent modernity. What is more, Baudelaire emphasized, the modern painter knew how to depict the signature symbol of our time—the *dark trench coat*. Ergo,

"[the black trench coat is] the necessary costume of our time," the [modern painter is the] one who knows how to make manifest, in the fashion of the day, the essential, permanent, obsessive relation that our age entertains with death. The dress-coat and frock-coat not only possess their political beauty, which is

an expression of universal equality, but also their poetic beauty, which is an expression of the public soul—an immense cortege of undertaker’s mutes (mutes in love, political mutes, bourgeois mutes). We are each of us celebrating some funeral.” To designate this attitude of modernity, Baudelaire sometimes employs a litotes that is highly significant because it is presented in the form of a precept: “You have no right to despise the present.” (Ibid., p. 49)

This is because, as we have all surely heard many times, modernity, with all its technology and advances in medicine, communication, information technology, et. al., ostensibly stands above the “primitive” and “non-rational” or even “non-scientific” thinking of earlier ages. Consequently, we must celebrate our victories and cherish these prized accomplishments; indeed, no other perspective is admissible, per Baudelaire. Foucault’s entire *oeuvre* might be said to have been a challenge to this presumed truth of Enlightenment superiority, whose mentality he referred to as “the blackmail of the Enlightenment.” The most important fallout of this epistemological programming that Enlightenment thinking meant for us, he asserted, at least in the last stage of his career, was, the “mode of relationship that must be established with oneself.” (Ibid., p. 51). In other words, we were captured by an incessant need to produce ourselves for others and for society at large, to become a unique “dandy” to delight others with.

2. ‘ENLIGHTENMENT’ AS A NEW JEWISH A PRIORI?

Interestingly, Foucault began his “What is Enlightenment” lecture with a reference to Kant and Mendelssohn’s own published responses to this very question of how to define Enlightenment, written in response to this question having been posed by the German newspaper, *Berlinische Monatschriftown*, in 1784. For Mendelssohn, this aperture of enlightened thought meant presenting Judaism to German elites as being, not a foreign entity, but on the contrary that Jewish culture should be seen as superlatively consonant with the new high reason and learned thought of the Enlightenment. Foucault notes that both Mendelssohn and Kant’s similar act of offering answers to the question of *what is Enlightenment* records for posterity an important fact: that they both acknowledged their belonging to a common era and a common history. Jewish history had, as it were, melded with European history. Furthermore, Foucault observed “[...] it is perhaps a way of announcing the acceptance of a common destiny—we now know to what drama that was to lead.” Doubtless, here he meant the Holocaust.

As we know, the 1933–1945 systematic disenfranchisement and subsequent murder of millions of Jews and other peoples started with Germany’s own citizens. Hannah Arendt, at the outset of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, similarly observed that the Holocaust was one pregnant sign that demanded a wakeup call, for it “revealed as mere facade [beliefs] that only a few decades ago we thought were indestructible essences” (Arendt 1973, p. 9). These included, for Arendt, the Enlightenment and its smug claim to hold a privileged position in historiography and an unquestioned access to reason and rational truth—for, “Truth gets lost in the Enlightenment—indeed, no one wants it anymore” (Arendt et al. 2007, p. 4). When the dream was proven a nightmare of the worst sort, the weight of history and the recent horrors was so grave it was to prove crushing given that for far too many souls the remainder of their lives would be mired in myriad pathologies. There was no longer sufficient opportunity to engage in the sobering hermeneutics of *melete thanatou* or any of the other philosophical practices of the ancients as psychotherapeutic remedy. Considering in this light (as Arendt did (Arendt 1973, pp. 270–71)) that the Second World War as a sequel to the First, Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way: “Man, about to hang himself, discovered it is easier to hang others” (Heschel and Heschel 2001, p. 210).

Thus, scientific society, devoid of heart and humility, armored in its trench coats, had at the end of a long and winding road become a scientific genocide. Arendt and Foucault hope(d) to awaken us to the blackmail of the Enlightenment which had alienated us from ourselves by drowning us in the quicksand of its philosophy which taught that we were the benighted possessors of a special kind of reason which earlier times had been denied;

that we have a special and unique opportunity to critique, discern, and judge, not least of all ourselves. Per the Enlightenment, we are the consummate critics, Foucault asserts (Foucault et al. 2003, p. 47). Judgmental to the point of exhaustion, we make ourselves and others miserable with our poised upper lip and condescending look (to say nothing of the tone of our voice). Thus Baudelaire's epitome of the modern painter is Guy Constantin, whose, e.g., "Two Seated Women," with their faces ablaze with judgmental gazes, captures this ethos perfectly.¹ In the face of this asphyxiating state of affairs, Foucault called for a "historical ontology of ourselves" which requires us to realize that the *dandysme* we are impelled to create in Enlightenment times, is nothing less than "a discipline more despotic than the most terrible religions" [...] which "compels man to face the task of producing himself".

3. PREPARATION FOR DEATH AS HERMENEUTIC OF THE SELF

The Greeks' practice to constantly keep the day of one's own death before oneself at all times was a prophylactic against the complaint of Nietzsche's Zarathustra that far too many choose for themselves a "voluntary death" for "how could those who never live at the right time die at the right time? Would that they had never been born! Thus I counsel the superfluous" (Nietzsche 1976, p. 183). Without a zest for life, without a sense of inspired purpose, without what Carl Jung called individuation, or discerning our own unique life mission (McCabe 2018), Nietzsche observed that in an age when fear of God no longer held any ethical pull for the masses, our morality, indeed our very identities, were vulnerable or even up for grabs. Significantly following Nietzsche, Arendt wrote that Eichmann was the emblem of the banality of evil of our times, a banality that infected not only Eichmann, but *all of us*. We no longer have space in our hearts for the death of the millions who died this year or last year due to famine, war, pandemic, et. al., as per this evening's newscast. Heschel similarly wrote that we must not "let modern dictatorship serve as an alibi for our conscience" because in our day "we have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness; as a result we must fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; thus we offered sacrifices on the altar of war." (Heschel and Heschel 2001, p. 210)

Living each day as though it were our last and engaging in daily practices, as did the ancient Greeks, to concretize this mode of being upon on our consciousness, should indeed invoke the sort of ontological reset which today's regularized banal evil, harsh judgmentalism, baseless hatred, and all but regularized depression and anxiety inherent therein abhors. This is because living merely so as to avoid the horrible and thereby accepting "the minor sacrifice" of instead being miserable is not a minor sacrifice. Indeed, not only the Greeks, but well before them the Jewish teachers of Sinaitic learning imparted a similar teaching in the Mishna in *Pirkei Avot*, which observant Jews read many times over the course of many Shabbats from the late spring holiday of *Shavuot* until the new year at *Rosh HaShanah*. Therein we find this teaching:

Akabiah ben Mahalalel said: mark well three things and you will not come into the power of sin: Know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning. From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot. Before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning? Before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he.²

Moreover, Judaism teaches that Shabbat itself is one-sixtieth of the experience of the afterlife. When taking this teaching together with the *halacha* that we are to prepare for Shabbat (the day when all of one's work is to be seen as done) every day of the week leading up to it, that even the day immediately after Shabbat one should begin preparing for the next Shabbat, we can discern a practice similar to *melete thanatou* that trains also our unconscious mind to prepare for the ultimate consummation of our life's work.

4. TISHA B' AV AND PURPOSIVE SUFFERING IN TORAH

There is another important Jewish holiday which asks its faithful to awaken to their own complicity in the hardship of others and thereby also in the destruction of the world, consequently making it uninhabitable for the divine presence. This day is *Tisha b'Av*, the ninth of the Jewish month of *Av*, and “the day upon which all Jewish tragedies occur,” e.g., the Spanish Expulsion, the deportations to Auschwitz, the destruction of the first and second Temples in ancient times, the Biblical incident of the *Meraglim* which banished the Jews to the desert for forty years in lieu of promptly entering the land of Israel, among numerous other Jewish tragedies. On *Tisha b'Av* Jews fast, abstain from washing, from lovemaking, from exchanging greetings or any other joyous behavior, and sit on the floor reading *Kinnot*, poems recounting the horrors of myriad Jewish communities throughout some four millennia of history. The first of these series of poems to describe a tragedy other than that of the destruction of the Holy Temple is *Kinnah* 25, which mourns the sacking of the Jewish communities of Worms, Speyer and Mainz during the First Crusade of 1096. Although these tragedies did not occur even within the month of *Av*, let alone the ninth of that month, their tribute is subsumed within the *Tisha b'Av* holiday. The author of this *Kinnah*, Rabbi Kolynomous ben Yehuda, intimates why, therein:

Place, please, upon your hearts a eulogy that is bitter to compose
because equal is their massacre in deserving mourning and rolling in the dust
to the burning of the house of our God [the ancient Temple]
the Hall and the Sanctuary.
Since [one] may not add a set day [of mourning] over ruin and conflagration,
nor may one [mourn] earlier—but rather delay.
Instead of that, today [on *Tisha b'Av*], my mourning I will arouse
and I will eulogize and I will wail and I will weep with a soul that is bitter,
and my moans are heavy from mourning until evening.

In an article recounting Torah-observant Jewish leaders' opinions regarding the State of Israel's establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day, J.J. Schacter cites the last generation's chief halachic authority, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Schacter 2008). Schacter explains Rabbi Feinstein's opinion as having been informed by the famous Brisker Rav, whose rationale for his ruling was grounded in this *Kinnah* 25. Below is the essential part of Rabbi Feinstein's letter that explains the rationale for his ruling:

With regard to the evil decrees which, because of our many sins, brought death to around six million [Jews] at the hands of the wicked Hitler and his cohorts, may their names be eradicated, it would have seemed appropriate to have established some designated day for fasting and prayer. You wonder why nothing has been done [in this regard].

Behold, in the *kinnot* which all Jews recite on *Tish'a be-Av* it is clearly stated why they did not establish a special day for fasting and mourning (“*yom meyuhad le-tan'anit u-leBekhiya*”) for the tragedies of the Crusades. These massacres occurred in all European countries, where the majority of the Jews lived and where many cities and villages were destroyed. This [tragedy] is known by the name, “The Year 1096.” In Palestine, as well, they killed many Jews. [The reason given for not establishing such a day was] because it is no longer permitted to establish an additional day for fasting and mourning (“*le-ta'anit u-leBekhi*”). It is therefore necessary to mention these tragedies in the elegies that are recited in *Tish'a be-Av* over the destruction of the Holy Temple.

For the very same reason one should also not establish a single special day for the tragedies that occurred in our time. These are included among all the tragedies that occurred during the course of this entire long *galut*.

In addition to *Kinnah* 25 there is another source in Jewish scripture which connects current suffering to past suffering and consolidates their mourning. Chronicles II 35:25 recounts the mourning for the death of Josiah (640–609 BCE) by the prophet Jeremiah and the Judeans: “[...] and all the male and female singers spoke of Josiah in their lamentations until this day, and they made them a statute over Israel, and behold, they are written in the lamentations.” On this verse, the famous Torah commentator, Rashi (1040–1105), writes:

and they made them a statute: When any grief or weeping befalls them, for which they lament and weep, they mention this grief with it. An example is the Ninth of Av, in which we recite lamentations for those slain in the persecutions that occurred in our times. They will similarly bewail the day of Josiah’s death. An example is (Jud. 11:39f.): “and it became a statute in Israel, etc., to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in a year.” (Scherman et al. 2007)

Rashi himself saw the destruction of the yeshiva of his youth in Worms and the murder of his teacher Rabbi Isaac ben Eliezer Halevi by the First Crusade during his lifetime (Rashi n.d.). Despite composing a number of penitential poems to express his own heart-break, Rashi did not propose that a new holiday be established in its memory. Indeed, as he wrote in his commentary on Chronicles II, and as Rabbi Kolynomous wrote in *Kinnah* 25, the archetype of Jewish historical mourning is in the loss of its own foundation stone—the destruction of the Holy Temples in ancient times. The Talmud teaches that the First Temple was destroyed because the Judeans abandoned their tradition and its precepts by engaging in foreign worship, adultery, murder, and for failing to recite a blessing to God before learning Torah (Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications 1982). The Second Temple was destroyed due to the Jews’ baseless hatred of one another. Because the Temple was the situs of God’s direct communion with the Jewish people, its loss was the greatest possible suffering that could befall the nation; because the Jews are commanded by God to be a holy people and to live a life of righteousness, to be a “light unto the nations,” the Jews’ failure to accomplish this mission forestalls the construction of the third and final temple, that of the messianic era.

The Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky (1911–2000), or the *Nesivos Sholom*, (per Jewish custom, so named after the title of his most famous book) explains the importance of *Tisha b’Av* by citing the ancient Midrash: “Israel has never had a festival as the day on which the *Beis Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) was destroyed.” (Ginsberg and Berezovsky 2015, p. 139). Additionally, he cites a verse (Deut. 27:9) that represents the month of *Av* in a number of Jewish texts as encapsulating the reason for the paramount importance of the holiday: “Listen and hear, O Israel, this day you have become a nation to Hashem your God.” In other words, the tradition holds that there is something inherently divine about the Jews’ relationship to historical tragedy, death and destruction in Judaism. What is more, the *Nesivos Sholom* cites a *Gemara* which explains that the two Cherubs enshrined atop the Holy of Holies, whose default posture was to face away from one another, were instead embracing on the day the Temple was destroyed. The Cherubs were a sort of weather vane measuring the connectivity between God and Israel at any given point in their history, and on the day of greatest destruction they exhibited the greatest connection! (Ibid., p. 141). How can this be? The *Nesivos Sholom* explains that *Tisha b’Av* warrants its superlative status over all other Jewish holidays because it is the consummate marker of God’s connection to the Jewish people through history and through the primacy of Jewish life being a covenant with God and her commandments. This covenant is just as binding, perhaps more, in death, as it is in life. In philosophical terms, this is the ontological *priori* of the Jewish people: how Jews die defines how Jews live. This is not to say that life is not embraced. On the contrary, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it during the last year of his life:

And I say to you this morning, that if you have never found something so dear and so precious to you that you will die for it, then you aren’t fit to live. You may be 38 years old as I happen to be, and one day some great opportunity stands before you and calls upon you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause—and you refuse to do it because you are afraid; you refuse

to do it because you want to live longer; you're afraid that you will lose your job, or you're afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot at you or bomb your house, and so you refuse to take the stand. Well you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90! And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. You died when you refused to stand up for right, you died when you refused to stand up for truth, you died when you refused to stand up for justice.³

Herein we denote a concurrent strand of thought across Foucault, Arendt, Nietzsche, the *Nesivos Sholom*, and King: a life lived significantly for one's own self-protection and personal enjoyment is no life at all. What Judaism distinctly calls for is a life committed to holiness in service of God which advances toward a world of beloved communion with one another that is ultimately worthy of the divine presence. This is a life in which the Jew is asked to shed a self-possessed and self-dealing worldview in a manner of *teshuvaa* or return to God—and there is no day in the Jewish calendar more emblematic of this ethos than *Tisha b'Av*. Indeed, on this holiday, after many hours spent in mourning and ascetic self-denial, at midday the Jewish law instructs its adherents to arise from the floor, put away their *kinnos*, don *tallis* and *tefillin*, and progressively ease the restrictions of the day. Moreover, the shift from mourning to hopefulness is so pronounced that we learn that the messiah is born on the afternoon of *Tisha b'Av*.

5. THE 'ETHICS OF MEMORY' IN TORAH JUDAISM

This snapshot of Jewish otherness is a mere intimation of a world of conscious and unconscious thought, belief, feeling, and *being* which is impossible to convey in any comprehensive fashion via language. It must be *lived for years* in order for one to begin to understand its flavor *indigenously* and not as a mere projection of what is understood from a foreign worldview. J.B. Soloveitchik, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Franz Rosenzweig each articulated this truth in different ways, as it relates to Jewish suffering.

For Franz Rosenzweig, "The Crisis of Historicism" as per the title of an essay on Rosenzweig by Paul Mendes-Flohr, meant a break with "the critical science of history" which he saw as "an illness" (Mendes-Flohr 1988). Like Foucault, Rosenzweig reacted almost violently to what he perceived to be the arrogance of positivist social science and its historians' claim to unequivocally discern meaning in history. Worse yet, these academics had written off revelation in history while ostensibly remaining believers in their religious traditions. To wit,

Rosenzweig incisively criticizes modern historical theology for having capitulated to the canons and assumptions of critical scholarship, and having, accordingly, reduced religious teachings and principles to human, historical terms. Behind this exercise to render theology amenable to modern historical sensibility, Rosenzweig discerns a contempt for the concept of revelation. But the elimination of revelation from theology is tantamount to endorsing atheism. To be sure, Rosenzweig observes, if man were self-sufficient and free of self-contradiction he could then "dispense with God." But, alas, "Man now finds himself under the curse of historicity"—he knows himself to be living in unfulfilled time and despairs of history's inner capacity to fulfill itself: "Man is thus unable to eliminate the God to whom by his historic deed [i.e., revelation] the historicity of history is subject." (Ibid., p. 145)

Rosenzweig thoroughly digests the danger inherent in man who is riddled with inner conflict and redundant failure purporting to have access to historical truth while outright dismissing the element of mystery, ambiguity, or the unknowable divine. In contrast, the Jewish people for Rosenzweig exist "outside of time" ever since their defeat by the Romans in 70 C.E. with the destruction of the Second Temple, preserving the same liturgical cycle and an exclusive ethnic community, and praying for the arrival of the messianic age. Indeed,

Israel, Rosenzweig declares, is the Eternal People, for she embodies eternity in time. Both objectively and spiritually, the exiled Israel has anticipated the end of history, eternity; objectively the Jewish nation reconstituted as the Synagogue in the Exile is free of the parochial and invidious claims of geography and politics; spiritually, the liturgy, cult and Law of the Synagogue all serve to propel the Jewish people beyond mundane time into the bosom of eternity. (Ibid., p. 159)

Similarly, in, *Zachor—Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi describes what is in essence an ontological and epistemological distinction in how time and memory are experienced in Judaism versus Western thought (Yerushalmi 1996, p. 6). Indeed, Yerushalmi cites Indian Sanskrit literature as another example of a different approach to history, which “for those reared and educated in the modern West is often hard to grasp.” This is because the notion of history and historical progress is an a priori assumption that, without having been exposed to an alternative approach to time, is almost impossible to grasp. Instead, Yerushalmi writes, in Judaism, “through the repetition of a ritual or the recitation or re-enactment of a myth, historical time is periodically shattered and one can experience again, if only briefly, the true time of the origins and archetypes.” (Ibid., p. 7)⁴ In support for this proposition Yerushalmi cites a midrash in which Rabbi Joshua ben Levi is told he can find the Messiah waiting at the gates of Rome amidst a cohort of poor lepers. There he indeed meets the Messiah who unlike the rest of the lepers, who remove all of their bandages and then replace them, takes one bandage off and puts it back on and then proceeds with the next one—for he thinks “Perhaps I will be summoned. Let me not be delayed.” When Rabbi Joshua approached the Messiah and asked when he would come he answered him “today!” Confused, Rabbi Joshua was set straight by the Prophet Elijah, who explained to him that he would come immediately once the Jews in fact repent and obey God.⁵

Last but not least, Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik in some sense brings all of these prolific voices together in his myriad essays on Jewish history, suffering and mourning, many of which are compiled in two texts: *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways—Reflections on the Tish'ah be'Av Kinnot* (Soloveitchik et al. 2006) and *Out of the Whirlwind—Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition* (Soloveitchik et al. 2003). In one of the essays from the later text, “Historical and Individual Mourning” (*Avelut Yeshanah and Avelut Hadashah*), Soloveitchik cites Bahya ibn Pakuda’s famous *Duties of the Heart* for the proposition that, among the great many demands in the Torah placed upon the religious Jew, one is for him to not “succumb hysterically to emotions, such as love for a person, object, goal or idea which is really unworthy of one’s love and appreciation” but instead to order one’s values and goals and align the emotions so as to be commensurate therewith (Ibid., p. 10).⁶ In support for this proposition Soloveitchik cites both the medieval Torah commentator Ibn Ezra and the physicist and philosopher Blaise Pascal (Soloveitchik et al. 2003). For Ibn Ezra, the peasant will never fall in love with the daughter of the King, for she is an impossibility. For Pascal, the *logique de coeur* or reasoning of the heart was the self-jurisdiction over our heart’s fixations and desires. Mourning in Jewish tradition, Soloveitchik asserts, is carefully ordered so as to permit man to give authentic emotional vent to his particularity while also being informed by the highest ethical values and striving to reach them across the arc of lived time. Accordingly,

Judaism does not want man to rationalize evil or to theologize it away. It challenges him to defy evil and, in case of defeat, to give vent to his distress. Both rationalizing and theologizing harden the human heart and make it insensitive to disaster. Man, Judaism says, must act like a human being. He must cry, weep, despair, grieve and mourn as if he could change the cosmic laws by exhibiting these emotions. In times of distress and sorrow, these emotions are noble even though they express the human protest against iniquity in nature and also pose an unanswerable question concerning justice in the world. The Book of Job was not written in vain. Judaism does not tolerate hypocrisy and unnatural behavior which is contrary to human sensitivity. (Ibid., p. 12)

To this end, the Rav writes, Judaism created “an ethics of memory.” Therein, for example, the Passover seder calls upon each generation to see itself as though it had gone out of slavery in Egypt and to relive it in the preparations for and enactments of the rituals of the seder and the weeks leading up to the holiday and for the eight days of the holiday itself. This is “experiential memory,” says Soloveitchik, which “somehow erases the borderline separating bygone from present experiences”—it is “a unitive time experience” wherein the past and present are lived concurrently (Ibid., p. 15). Like Yerushalmi, Soloveitchik writes that even the word “antiquity” does not exist in Judaism, nor do we have archeology, for “archeology refers to something remote, a dead past of which I am no part. It arouses my curiosity; I am inquisitive to know about the origins.” (Ibid., p. 16). History, however, is different for the Jew, for it “means something living, past integrated into the present and present anticipating the future.” (Ibid., p. 17). Moreover, Tisha b’Av would, he writes, “be a ludicrous institution if we did not have the unitive time consciousness” (Ibid.). for the night of the destruction of the Temple 1900 years ago is also now, for the conditions which brought it about are as alive today as then. The act of passionate mediation on the historical suffering, its causes and their ongoing relevance, direct the heart in a manner so as to be inspired and hopeful toward the future and one’s own ability to be a kinder, gentler person who strives towards healing the world such that similar suffering might abate today and tomorrow.

Finally, in “The Crisis of Human Finitude” Rabbi Soloveitchik contrasts the Western ontology with the Jewish, the “philistine personality so common in *bourgeois* society” and the Jewish ideal of the life journey which seeks to transcend the self in service of God and his kingdom and thereby live in relationship with the divine. (Ibid., p. 152). The former is represented by Job, the self-serving religious personality who brings offerings to God expecting reward, *quid pro quo*. Or there is Kohelet, “the daemonic personality” whose appetite for all things, including knowledge and conquest, technological superiority, is without end. Job and Kohelet’s secular counterpart is the humanistic secular utopia, based upon “an unshakeable faith in the perfectibility of man, in his gradual emergence as an omniscient and omnipotent being.” (Ibid., p. 157). Moreover,

disappointments, handicaps and failures must be expected, since the evolutionary process of emergence is a long one and we have not yet reached the final stages. However, the term “progress” is the shibboleth of these humanistic creeds, and gradually our experience will expand and become more and more consistent and complete.

Of course, it is hard to foresee future developments, but, judging by past experiences, we are impelled to assume that the humanistic approach is wrong and self-deceiving. It is a fraudulent solution. The problem posed by Kohelet has nothing of its poignancy and acuteness, notwithstanding the fact that civilization has covered such an endless distance since the days of that skeptic. Apparently, cultural ascent and scientific achievement do not relieve man of the curse of vanity and incompleteness which presses on his frail shoulders. The restlessness which drove Kohelet to his bold adventures rushes with us in the same direction. (Ibid.)

The religious answer for Soloveitchik is thus to accept that our life is riddled with contradictions, incompleteness, and absurdities, many of which we hardly comprehend. What is more, we do not understand death. We do not understand our own finitude, nor do we properly integrate what it means for our life *today*. Citing both Leibniz and Maimonides, The Rav concludes that our incompleteness represents a *malum metaphysicum*, “a metaphysical evil from which man can never free himself.” (Ibid.). We cannot dispel ourselves of this problem but we can turn away from living a life of illusion *a la*: Foucault’s Enlightenment blackmail, Rosenzweig’s fraudulent historicism, or Nietzsche’s walking dead. We can instead “consecrate our incompleteness as an offering to God, giving up our illusions of grandeur and glory.” (Ibid., p. 158). What is more,

We find dignity and majesty not in the madness of “draining” one conquest “to the dregs” in order to pass on to another, but in self-conquest and self-giving; in the quest for catharsis, for redemption by returning my existence to its Owner; in the heroic sacrifice.

If this singular being called man is caught in the incessant pursuit of the intellectual mirage, he must finally admit defeat. He must turn to God and say, “He who increases knowledge, increases sorrow” (Eccl. 1:18). The more knowledge I accumulate, the more the mystery deepens, the more complex is the problem, the more fascinating is the unknown. I shall restlessly explore, investigate, search and try to comprehend, but I know that the radius of the scientifically charted sectors will grow one-dimensionally. I am not regretting my search for knowledge, but I am renouncing my arrogant desire for a complete cognitive experience, for conquest which is not followed by defeat.

If he happens to be a *homo religiosus*, the person should say: God Almighty, the closer I try to come to You, the greater is the distance that separates me from You; the more troublesome becomes my conscience; the less worthy of communicating with You I find myself. I shall never stop seeking You and clinging to You. However, I must dispel the illusion of possessing You. (Ibid.)

Thus it is only by letting go, by accepting the inherent ambiguity in all matters of faith—be they secular or spiritual, that we might best serve our creator and our fellow created beings.

6. TORAH AS INDIGENOUS A PRIORI

What Rav Soloveitchik describes is the *ontological otherness* inherent in the Jewish experience of time, of memory, and of remembering historical tragedy. It is as impossible to communicate in a short essay as it is to understand by observing *Tisha b'Av* in a one-off experience of one day. It is part in parcel of the Jewish life lived with *yirat Hashem*—awe of God and God’s creations—of inspired service in the observance of the commandments, both of the ritual experience of Torah learning and prayer and of service to the community in acts of loving kindness. It is accessible to the person who spends much of her day immersed in Jewish texts and walks out of the *beis midrash* to observe the glory of God’s creation and to begin preparing for the Shabbos and next festival. Within that *halachic* ontology there also exists a distinct experience of time, of memory, and of history which is felt each day as one reads the “six remembrances” after morning prayers, when observing the Passover seder, and when fasting, crying, and sitting on the floor on the day the Temple was destroyed, on *Tisha b'Av*. There is a magical feeling, a divine feeling that Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rosenzweig, the *Nesivos Shalom* and others describe, when the Jew lives within the ontology of God’s commandments. It is a feeling that indeed makes the past present in one’s life today and imbues one’s person with a sense of selflessness and service that transcends the temporal world. It is wholly distinct from the epistemological and ontological a priori of the Enlightenment and the Occidental academy, despite Moses Mendelsohn’s great effort to find consonance therewith. We might not be able to understand this distinct a priori or even taste it from outside, but we can perhaps appreciate the distinction sufficiently so as to internalize Foucault and Rosenzweig’s critique of the historical philosophy of modernity and its being superlatively germane to the indigenous Jewish perspective, all the more so when called upon to enter time and see the breach between the world of time and the world of the Eternal People.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Guys, Constantin, *Two Seated Women*, n.d., 37.165.94. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337275> (accessed on 28 August 2022).
- ² “Pirke Avos 3:1,” in *The Literature of the Sages. 1: Oral Tora, Halakha, Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, External Tractates*, Compendia Rerum Judaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum/Publ. under the Auspices of the Foundation Compendia Rerum Judaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum, Amsterdam Sect. 2, The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, Vol. 3[a] (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum [u.a.], 1987).
- ³ *King Speech* 1967, n.d. <https://features.apmreports.org/arw/king/e1.html> (accessed on 28 August 2022).
- ⁴ Interestingly, Carl Jung describes the unconscious mind similarly, as being the “mythic land of the dead and of the ancestors,” as Abramovitch notes in his remarkable article, (Abramovitch 2020).
- ⁵ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 23.
- ⁶ Importantly, today’s Cognitive Behavior Therapy, a tremendously successfully evidence-based psychotherapy treatment modality which has helped hundreds of thousands of people recover from depression, anxiety and addiction, holds precisely this. See, e.g., (Wilding 2015).

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