The Song of Songs – God and Israel as Lovers

A kiss may have many meanings – as a greeting or a sign of welcome or empathy, a farewell, or even a mark of betrayal. But a lover's kiss, long and deep, is a promise – opening, penetrating, sealing – a foretaste of further joys, so a natural symbol of caring. We can see, then, why the Song of Songs opens with longing for such a kiss – and why the ancient Sages read the Song as emblematic of God's love affair with Israel. What one hears, as R. Judah taught, may be forgotten; but a kiss endures. He was speaking, of course, of the Torah. For a lover's kiss is a promise of commitment, as different from peremptory peck as a contract is from a covenant.[1]

The Song of Songs flows with passion. Even its poetry evokes love. Rabbi Akiva, who so prized the Torah that he was said to have found wisdom even the crowns that ornament its letters, forthrightly declared: "All the ages are not more precious than the day Israel received the Song of Songs. All the Scriptures are Holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (Mishnah Yadaim 3.5). The great rabbinic rationalist[2] was playing on the work's title, so familiar now as to make his words sound like little more than a parsing of its syntax. But the title, announced in the poem's opening line, may only link the songs that paint its scenes – the dream sequences, lines of dialogue, soliloquy, and choric responses. To call this work the Holy of Holies is to expect much more of it than snatches of old love songs.

If the kiss that the poet finds sweeter than wine is indeed a metaphor, we must read it and the imagery in its train in keeping with the ways of metaphor: calling one thing by another's name but claiming truth by the aptness of fit. The art of a metaphor lies in its self-awareness. So its implicit comparisons do not resolve to their referents but resonate between the signified and the signifier. Even as they make their comparison they point to the comparison itself. Consider Gertrude Stein's much misunderstood "A rose is a rose is a rose." She was saying that 'a rose is a rose' is no mere tautology but is itself a rose. A live metaphor is only half about its object. The other half is a mirror reflecting on itself.

So there are two ways of ruining a poet's work: taking a figure literally, missing its object; or killing its art by reducing it to prose of pretended equal value. Chana and Ariel Bloch's reductive reading of the Song of Songs, while richly rendering the images, succumbs to the first of these temptations. Eager to find erotics in the Bible, the modern couple almost forget to ask what a love lyric is doing there:

> The Song of Songs is a poem about the sexual awakening of a young woman and her lover.... But sex is no sin in the Old Testament.... The biblical narratives openly acknowledge the role of sexuality in human existence.

Is this a discovery? If so, why do these talented translators fall back on the conventional dichotomy of which they've just found the Torah innocent? They continue:

> Readers today often ask, with some puzzlement, how the Song ever managed to "get into" the canon.... Most people assume that the criteria for canonization were strictly religious, and that they reflected an orthodox point of view. We tend to think of Holy Scripture as a single volume soberly bound in black. In fact the Hebrew Bible, an anthology of works composed over a period of nearly a millennium, is a very

> heterogeneous collection.... It may be that the attribution to Solomon in the title (1:1) was a factor for admission to the canon.... On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the allegorical interpretation and the final imprimatur of the rabbis came after the Song had already attracted a popular following. We know that secular or even pagan customs of holidays like Passover or Christmas were often sacralized....

Keen to demonstrate that the couple of the Song have consummated their love,[3] the Blochs seem uninterested in finding a meaning for such love. Its depiction is presumed sufficient; the meaning, evident. Perhaps that's what the Blochs intend by calling the Song "emphatically secular." They quote Akiva's praises, but only as evidence of some forgotten controversy over the work's canonization. But Akiva stressed: "No Israelite ever contested the status of the Song of Songs" and underscores the point with an emphatic "God forbid!" Are we to credit his admiration but deny his testimony? If the work celebrates love, as it clearly does, one still should ask why and in what way rather than simply offer a knowing smile, as if to say, We all know what sex is and what it's all about, even if the pious won't acknowledge it.

Poles apart from a literalist reduction or redaction of the poem is the bandaging of its imagery in concealing allegories. The bowdlerization reaches a low point of sorts in the abortus of "this highly emotional, seemingly sensuous song" that the Art Scroll editors have clapped between the pages of their popular Siddur, *ad usum delphinum*. So much more prudent than Akiva! Perhaps these current sages feared that readers would thumb through their black-bound prayerbooks for the juicy parts the way sixth-graders when I was a child dog eared a few key pages in *Peyton Place* and didn't bother with the rest. Or perhaps they hoped that no one of a Friday night would be tempted to read the English they hung out to dry in their siddur in lieu of a translation: "a literal translation," they wrote, "would be misleading – even false – because it would not convey the meaning intended by King Solomon."[4] So we're treated to the following:

> If you do not know where to graze, O fairest of nations, follow the footsteps of the sheep – your forefathers who traced a straight, unswerving path.... While the King was yet at Sinai my malodorous deed gave forth its scent as my Golden Calf defiled the covenant... The righteous blossoms are seen in the land.... Show Me your prayerful gaze, let Me hear your supplicating voice.... Until my sin blows His friendship away and sears me like the midday sun.... As stately as the Tower of David is the Site of your Sanhedrin.... Moses and Aaron, your two sustainers, are like two fawns, twins of the gazelle, who graze their sheep in roselike bounty..." and so forth.

No breasts are visible here, and no kisses felt. Awkward words displace the poetry: "Communicate Your inmost wisdom to me again in loving closeness." Evidently, these rabbis share the Blochs' opinion that piety sits uncomfortably with love and is properly insensitive to it.

But the Tannaim did not agree. Glossing the words of his friend Rabbi Akiva, Elazar ben Azariah said: "Suppose a king brought a peck of wheat to the baker and said, "Sift me out so much fine

flour, so much whole wheat, so much bran, and from it all weigh me out one cup of the finest and best. Just so are all the Scriptures Holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. For all of it is Awe of Heaven and welcome of His Yoke." Love of God here becomes the great theme of the Song, and the intensity of human love between a woman and a man is not its rival, or even a stepping stone toward it, as in Plato's *Symposium*, but its counterpart and symbol.

Any words we humans use in reaching out toward God court failure. So prophetic language, as the Rambam wrote, demands a certain audacity. How else could a finite mind address the infinitely transcendent in the often homely and perforce familiar terms that the prophets use. Hence the Sages' words: "How bold of prophets to liken creature to Creator!"[5] The Rabbis, the Rambam adds, freely enter into the tropes of the prophetic idiom: "when an image is used consistently, as when God is likened to a king who ordains and forbids, punishes and rewards the people of his land, who has servants and ministers to execute his decree and carry out his will, the Sages too sustain the conceit in every context... confident that this will cause no misunderstanding or confusion."[6]

So the Rabbis' appropriation of the Song of Songs is no surprise. What's striking in their construal is not its bold earthiness but that they, Akiva foremost among them, and with good biblical precedent, found no loftier terms in which to proclaim God's bond to Israel than the language of love. Are we not told to love God with all our hearts and souls and might – the words Akiva glossed as he died? And where is human love more powerful or single minded than the sincere love between a man and woman? The Sages' reading elevates that love even as it brings our quest for God down to earth. Rabbi Joh.anan finds one reason why: "In all other songs God praises Israel or Israel praises God.... But here they praise each other."[7]

Rashi, who collates the views of the ancient rabbis, has a saner approach to Rabbinic tropes than either of the reductive readings we've considered – the one that ignores Rabbinic exegeses and the other that mocks them. His readings are open textured – a kaleidoscope of colors, but always grounded in the *peshat* – which means not the literal or literal minded but simply the unembellished. *Always* so grounded, I say. So Rashi is no more hobbled by a self-important sobriety than by smug secularity. His hermeneutic rule, prefaced to his exegesis, cites prooftexts from the Psalms and the Talmud:

> "*Once did God speak, twice did I hear it*. A single text may hold multiple meanings."[8] But in the end you won't see Scripture departing from its plain sense.[9] Even when the prophets speak allegorically one must go back to the core sense and the logic of the imagery. I've seen a number of homilies on this book. Some cast the whole book as one parable, some split it up into separate allegories, ignoring the thread and continuity of the narrative. I decided to follow the sequence of the text: explain it step by step and then add the homilies of our Rabbis point for point.[10]

I want to stress my claim that the ancient Rabbis saw no higher symbol than human love, the love

of a woman and a man for one another, to represent the connection of God and Israel to one another – just as the medieval philosophers who read the Song as an allegory of the Flight of the alone to the Alone could conceive of no higher symbol for their intimate and private spiritual quest.[11] José Faur, reading the Tanakh through the eyes of Coleridge, and Borges, helps us see why. Boldly construing the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis not as a myth but as a dream, Faur writes:

> "If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), "and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found the flower in his hand when he awoke..." The first man to have dreamt, so the Hebrew Scripture tells us, was Adam. Some time after discovering that he was unlike any other animal, God put him "in a deep sleep" (*tardemah*), and Adam dreamt that Eve was made bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh." He also dreamt that he had welcomed her and loved her and God blessed them both, and they were "one flesh," and for her sake he sinned and lost Paradise. Later, when he awoke, he opened his hand and – lo and behold! there it was: the flower that God had presented him in Paradise! And Adam "knew" (*yada*^{c}) – in the sense of 'recognizing' – "his wife, Eve" for what she really was: the pledge of having been in the presence of God and visited Paradise![12]

The small, as symbol of the large, the finite standing in for the infinite, momentary joy for the absoluteness of all that is eternal.

No one, any longer, the Blochs tell us, takes seriously the Song's attribution to King Solomon. The Art Scroll rabbis might be a bit surprised to hear that. But if the attribution of ancient texts to biblical figures is itself a literary device, there might be a difference between taking an attribution seriously and taking it literally. Perhaps what's gotten at by ascribing, say, the book of Job to Moses is the idea that Job adds crucial corollaries to the promises and threats of the Pentateuch. For it's clear that not everyone who keeps God's law wins the blessings promised there, and not everyone who flouts it suffers the chastisements it so graphically describes. Wickedness may self-destruct, as the Psalmist hopes (Psalm 92:8) – but not always. Systemic evil is surer to undermine itself, but rarely rapidly enough to prevent or heal the harm that makes it evil. Granted there's no substitute for integrity. In morals, as in science, the more ground we cover the more opens up before us. But to appreciate that the reward of mitzvot fulfilled is the gift of more mitzvot and the power to fulfill them, we need to rise beyond supposing that worldly punishments and rewards suffice, and that pains and pleasures are the proper coin in which worth is to be measured. Much in the spirit of al-Farabi, the Rambam reads the biblical promises and threats as pedagogical inducements scaled to the intellectual and moral immaturity of a childlike Israel, who may not yet know the true measure of intrinsic worth.[13]

As for Solomon, the Rabbis have no trouble hearing the voice of a young poet in the Song of Songs, a counterpoint to scripture's darker passages. As Judah ben Rabbi says, the Song is the

finishing touch, the silver studs that set off Scripture's gold (1:11).[14] A young man, Rabbi Jonathan says, writes poetry, an older man makes sententious remarks – like those of Proverbs; an old man reflects on the vanity of things – in the world-weary tones of Ecclesiastes.[15] But the Rabbis are hardly naive about the view that the Song is Solomon's work. They say the *Shelomo* of the opening line is God, "the King to whom all Peace belongs"; and they take "the king" in this text, to be "the community of Israel."[16]

Rashi likes that view but freely conflates it with thoughts of Solomon's inspired authorship:[17]

> Through the Holy Spirit Solomon saw that Israel would be exiled again and again and suffer desolation upon desolation, taunted in exile with their former glory. Recalling the early love that once favored them above all nations, they would say, *I will return to my first husband. It was better then for me than now* (Hosea 2:9). They would remember His love, *how faithlessly they had acted* (Leviticus 26:40), and the favors He had promised them at the end of days. So, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he wrote this book in the voice of a woman, forlorn and bereft (cf. 2 Samuel 20:3), yearning for her husband, longing for her sweetheart, remembering her young love of him and confessing her wrongs. But her lover suffers with her (cf. Isaiah 63:9), recalling her youthful grace, her charms, and the fair actions that bound him in love to her in days gone by. He never meant to make her suffer (cf. Jeremiah 3:33). In fact, he says, she was never actually divorced (cf. Isaiah 50:1) but remains his wife, and he her husband (cf. Hosea 2:4). He will yet come back to her.

The love Rashi pictures here is recalled in a revery: Israel remembers the days of her youth from a remote distance. The joyous optimism of those early days is lost. But if prophetic promises can be trusted, the intimacy once so taken for granted is still to be regained.

A love song, unlike love itself, gains intensity with distance, recalling a vanished love rather than trying to hold fast fleeting glimpses of the moments of consummation. We can see that clearly in romantic poetry – not least in the *nasīb* of the preislamic Arabic *qas.īdah*. But the Rabbis' hermeneutic brings more than poignancy. It renders the ancient Song existential, communal, historic: Israel is the sometime lover, now forlorn and bereft. But God shares her loss. For He too was fulfilled in their union. If Israel lives celibate, as Rashi's echoes from Second Samuel (20:3) imply, and has lost her constant intercourse with God, so too is God bereft. The praises that once marked their union, after all, were mutual – a reciprocity highlighted in the poetry ascribed to David: ^{c}*im h.asid tih.sad*, (2 Samuel 22:26) if you love, I'll love you back, God says – He loves those who love Him. That's not an exchange of the sort pilloried in Plato's *Euthyphro* and disvalued in Aristotle's scale of friendships – or in Levinas' scorn for merely economic interactions with the ultimate Other.[18] It's an existential complementarity rightly imaged in the interlacing and interlocking of lovers, an intimacy that allows David boldly to return God's blessings in language now repeated daily in the liturgy (1 Chronicles 29:10-13), setting the pattern of every Hebrew blessing.[19] The mutuality affirms that the parting too affects both

parties.

Yet, even as remembrance intensifies the sense of loss, temporality opens visions of a future restoration. So just as Halevi will transform the topos of the abandoned campsite of the Arabic *nasīb* into an emblem of the ruined Temple, the midrash will hear echoes in the Song of Songs of Akiva's triumphant laughter on viewing those very ruins. For Akiva, always ready to see more than meets the eye, sees in the very foxes running through those ruins vindication of Israel's mission and the vision of the prophets: If their warnings of desolation have come true, so will their promises of redemption.[20]

The locus of agency matters immensely here: It is not time or fate that has sundered the lovers whose delight in one another the Song of Songs celebrates. Israel's faithlessness is the fault, as Rashi and the Rabbis at his back will argue.[21] But if a moral and spiritual fault provoked the estrangement, the promise of restoration rings true: What was lost through faithlessness can be restored through reconciliation.

In finding in the Song of Songs a window opening on scenes of joy and the momentary torments of intense of elusive love, Rashi cites Hosea and Jeremiah's hermeneutic, where God addresses Israel as an abandoned husband who still cannot forget the sacrifices made for him long ago by his young bride: *I remember your youthful devotion* (h.esed ne[c]urayikh)*, your love as a bride, how you walked after me through the desert, a land unsown* (Jeremiah 2:2; cf. 3:4, 4:1-2). God condemns Israel's foes, the ravening beasts that tore her body: *Israel was sacred to the Lord, His first harvest. All who ate of it are trespassers and will be punished. The Lord's word on that!* (2:3). But alongside God's sentence come His complaints against Israel: She fell to those foes by her own doings. Again in the persona of a wronged husband, God asks: *What fault did your fathers find in me that they left me, to pursue worthlessness – and void their own worth?* (2:5; cf. 20-36).

In Rashi, as in the Rabbis and Jeremiah, the covenant survives betrayal. There's too much history here for a final divorce. Crimes against Israel remain crimes and will be requited by the stern decree of history. But the estrangement that subjected Israel to savaging by the nations came from her own foolish choices, some made long ago. Wiser choices even now can heal the rift. If a bride allowed herself to be deluded by empty promises, taking tinsel for substance and dumbshow for devotion, she can yet correct her error. God is there for her. His constancy is the true test of worth, so unlike the emptiness (*hevel*) of false gods and delusory ideals. The unsevered bond of *h.esed* backs up the promise. Parties to some mere contract or arrangement may test each other constantly. Perhaps it's prudent that they should. But for lovers trust replaces testing. A breach can be mended by understanding and forgiveness.

H.esed, the devotion anchoring David's sense of divine-human rapport, in human interactions simply means kindness. So in patriarchal times Abraham's servant asks Laban and Bethuel if they will deal kindly and fairly with his master (*[c]im yeshkhem [c]osim h.esed ve-emet et adoni –*

Genesis 24:49; cf. Joshua 2:14); and Jacob asks Joseph for the favor (*h.esed*) of burial with his ancestors (*ᶜasita ᶜimadi h.esed* – Genesis 47:29). In God's acts, *h.esed* means grace, favor beyond all desert.[22] Thus God describes Himself in the Decalogue as beneficent thousandsfold to those who love Him and keep his precepts (Exodus 20:6).[23] In the epiphany to Moses, God reveals Himself, verbally not visually, as abundant in favor and truth – that is, grace and justice – extending love to many thousands (Exodus 34:6-7; cf. Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 5:10).

Since it entails supererogation, beyond what's strictly due, *h.esed* becomes the Hebrew word for piety. We can see it taking on that sense in Micah (6:8, 7:18), its semantic evolution clearly consummated by the time the Rabbis come to speak of the ethos of piety (*middat h.asidut*),[24] a concept articulated by Nahmanides (ad Deut. 6:18), who takes a kindly and generous demeanor to be mandated by the spirit of the Law beyond observance of its letter.[25] There is, of course, another expression for piety in Hebrew, *yir'at Shamayim*. But in *h.esed* the moral gravamen is never absent (cf. Micah 7:2), lest its practice be emptied of material content. *H.esed* never becomes merely attitudinal or doxastic.[26]

It's easy to assume that passionate love asks more than generosity – placing self-sacrifice, even martyrdom among its demands. But that view is not borne out by the sources. "'Heroism,' and 'heroic action," José Faur writes, "are pagan concepts." Only consider how the personality of Moses is not allowed to dominate the story of the Exodus – his name, all but unmentioned in the Haggadah of Pesach, and his keenest virtue biblically named not as courage or insight but humility (Numbers 12:3). Or, in biblical narratives where personalities and personal relationships emerge more fully from the shadows and are seen in sharper relief, consider David's threnody for Saul and Jonathan, with its mournful tone: There is no triumph here in death and no sense of glory: Saul was head and shoulders above his fellows (1 Samuel 9:2), and Jonathan loved David as he loved his own being (1 Samuel 1:18, as James Diamond translates the phrase) and gave up his father's throne for David's sake (1 Samuel 20, esp. v. 17), but David's "Bow Song" is all grief, as he pictures Israel's glory lying dead on the heights: *How have the mighty fallen. Tell it not in Gath... Let there be no dew or rain on you, ye hills of Gilboa... They were swifter than eagles, bolder than lions. Weep for Saul, daughters of Jerusalem... How have the mighty fallen in the thick of battle – Jonathan, slaughtered on the heights you held. I ache for you, Jonathan, my brother, so dear to me, so wonderful your love, more than the love of women* (2 Samuel 1:17-26).

Faur's rejection of the heroic ideal so familiar to us from Homer or the Norse epics, is confirmed by Ben Zoma's Mishnaic inversion of triumphalist ideas of heroism: "Who is a hero?" – a *gibbor* – "One who conquers his own bent!"[27] Martyrdom merges with heroism in Christian tales of the harrowing of Hell and in the stoicizing paradox that real victories are won in defeat. But rather than admire death "for the sake of a belief or ideal," Faur writes, "What Scripture applauds is a high level of magnanimity and virtuous *behavior* toward fellow human beings."[28] Actions speak louder than ideology. Thus, Maimonides in the "Eight Chapters," uses the Arabic word *fād.il*, virtuous, for what his Hebrew translator will call a *h.asid*. Love of God, is shown not by the upturned eyes of Byzantine mosaics but by a way of living. Mortification of the flesh is an

untoward emulation of gentile mores. The Torah's mandate is moderation.[29]

Maimonides presses the point in his earliest rabbinic essay, the Letter on Apostasy. Denouncing a rabbi's call to martyrdom in the face of the Almohad persecution, he angrily rebuts the charge that once a forced convert has uttered the *shahādah*, the Islamic confession of faith, his every mitzvah becomes a sin. The Rambam's adversary had held up the example of Christians who chose death rather than call Muh.ammad a prophet. The young Rambam replies: "*Is there no God in Israel?* (2 Kings 1:3, 6) – that we must learn our faith from Ishmaelites and Christians?"[30] He acknowledges the saintly mitzvah of dying *ᶜal kiddush ha-Shem*. But to make such a death a goal smacks of arrogance, and to offer one's life when not demanded by the Law is sinful.[31] The greater mitzvah, as the Rabbis taught, is to live in ways that sanctify God's name.[32]

Martyrdom is called for rabbinically only in cases of idolatry, sexual violations, and murder. But even in matters of worship, those who act under duress or out of wrongful upbringing are not punished.[33] To this Maimonides adds codicils insisting on the legitimacy of mental reservations to a forced confession of faith and on the exemption from punishment of acts or professions performed under duress. Wilful apostasy is quite another matter.[34] To broaden the mandate of martyrdom, he argues, wrongly places piety on a slippery slope: If boundless fervor were the mark of love, he writes, echoing Halevi, what would stop us from immolating ourselves and our children in God's service, as pagans did in ancient times?[35] His own counsel: the course his family took, to choose exile rather than violate the precepts of the Torah.[36]

The medieval authors, rooted in the rabbinic tradition – itself anchored in prophetic sensibilities – expect Israel to accept responsibility for her fate at the hands of the nations. The aggressors are not exempted. There's no blaming of the victim in that sense. Nor will the Rambam accept the rabbinic doctrine of the sufferings of love, which Saadiah had adopted. The notion that God gratuitously brings sufferings on his elect so as to warrant enhancing their reward in the hereafter is vehemently rejected by the Rambam as unbiblical and untrue, since it conflicts with the axiom of God's justice.[37] Nor is Maimonides entranced by the rabbinic chiasmus that expects the principal due as a reward or retribution for human righteousness or sin to be held over to the next world and only the interest to be accorded or exacted in this life. He rejects the rationale for that view and the Epicurean premise Saadiah had adopted from Rāzī in support of it: that evils outweigh goods in this world.

Life is good, the Rambam insists, and the world is commodious. Birth defects are rare; and, even in wartime, sufferings are the exception, not the rule.[38] Nonetheless, Maimonides accepts the rabbinic view that "There is no death without sin and no suffering without guilt."[39] Even in the heat of his polemic against views he deems wrongheaded and rash, he avoids complacency and self-pity. "God knows," he writes, "and He is our witness.... We're not arguing in our own behalf, not in the least. We say only *Let us lie down in our own shame; let our disgrace envelop us. For we have sinned against the Lord, we and our fathers* (Jeremiah 3:25).... *We admit our wickedness, Lord, and the iniquity of our fathers. For we have sinned against you* (Jeremiah

14:20).” The confession here is both personal and communal. The Rambam seeks no exemption, but like Jeremiah, asks only forgiveness.

The sensibility expressed here antedates the era of scientific racism and scientific socialism – and the technologies that served them. The challenge faced by ancient and medieval Jews was the demand to give up their Judaism. But in the Shoah and the Gulag the threat was to an identity that could not be shed or dissembled, even by those who might long to do so; and the exile that the Rambam counseled, and that so many through the ages found forced upon them, was forcibly denied in our own day to many times more. Was Israel still beloved of God, even when no pathway opened through the sea and no land route offered a rough passage to freedom? The Rambam’s letter eschews complacency.[40] It finds no guilt in the dissembling that allowed escape from the Almohad sword and no Kantian duty of sincerity to the those who offered the choice of Islam or death. Insincerity in this case was the badge of authenticity. But Maimonides still confesses a guiltiness before God. There *has* been a sin, although hardly freely chosen.

But in our own age history looks darker, even as self-confidence burns brighter. Perhaps that helps explain how it is that our foolish choices now burn more deeply into the flesh.[41] Technology extends and improves human life, as Maimonides hoped it would.[42] But the powers of destruction too are vastly increased. Guilt is eclipsed by the horror of even greater guilt; and even guilt feelings, we are urged (by the not so still not so small voice of hawkers in the marketplace), should be exorcized, as if sin itself had been abolished. Bahya counseled that in ignorance of our own powers we should maximize our moral and spiritual charge and minimize our worldly self-demand, avidity, remorse, and complaint.[43] But the just the opposite tendency looms on this side of the mountain. We demand much of ourselves in worldly affairs but plead every sort of excuse in extenuation of our moral and spiritual shortcomings – need or genes, hormones or neurones. Ignorance is asked to make us innocent, even as we plead our superior sophistication in support of our skepticism and cynicism.

The problem of evil now becomes sufficient reason for denying any covenantal link between God and nature generally, and between God and Israel in particular. So moderns read the book of Job as though it offered no response to human suffering. There’s no shortage of little foxes. Not just atheists and agnostics but theologians read Job that way, if they hope to be heard as honest thinkers. Theodicy becomes a dirty word. The only answer to Job, we’re told, is that there is no answer – as if the very offer of an answer meant duplicity or biblical naivete. For the Bible here is read as a primitive document – or a primitive and contradictory bundle of documents with no large theme or enduring truth to relate. Disasters may be called biblical, but prophetic writers are deemed innocent of the depths of human suffering – as though sensitivity, were a modern invention. Plainly there must be contradictions in the Bible, if the same canon that pictures havoc and chaos so graphically voices hope in the face of destruction, exile, and death.

How then shall we confront the enormities of human and natural evil? Is the bond of love that the Song of Songs celebrates now permanently ruptured, leaving only alienation in its place?

Disaffection is clearly a large theme within the stance that calls itself modernity, as if to reject a childish past. Voltaire writes of the Lisbon earthquake as though such a disaster had never before been seen or suffered. The posturing matters and is widely mimicked: Secularity cannot take the bit between its teeth until everyone knows that only atheists are humanists, that piety is uncaring – at once too comforting and too callous, a strategy of denial. Isn't all faith bad faith? as Sartre will put it. A legion of authors write, in disillusionment, of the Great War. Others write of the Shoah, as though human evil were a new invention, rather than the techniques of its implementation and promulgation. False preachers try to wring parochial profit from the Boxing Day Tsunami or the AIDS epidemic. Like Dante damning his best enemies to the choicest parts of Hell, they choose the sins they say provoked God's mercy. Secularists cite the same tsunami, and what they call religious wars in their briefs against a God whose reality they reject. Each critic vies to seem more caring, more responsible or responsive than the rest. But none is very sensitive to the reasoning Maimonides extracts from Galen: that we're deluded if we expect an animal composed as we are never to die or feel pain.[44] For the embodiment we revel in and make the base of our awareness also makes us vulnerable.

Against the gloomy backdrop of despair and despond, two realities stand forth: First, as the holocaust, if nothing earlier, has taught us: Despite the sayisms of the lost generation, there is a real and objective difference between right and wrong, love and hate, light and darkness. Second, a profound if elemental truth taught by our ancient texts and the homilies and philosophies that thematized and theorized them: Evil would not be evil were there not some prior and larger good. Harm would not be harm, injury would not be injury, even pain would not be pain, were there not some prior claim to life and light, some prior good for it to prey upon. The very notion of evil is parasitic on the idea of good, and the theology of complaint that parades its sensitivity in the name of humanity or fideism, reform or revolution, boastful self-assertion or pathetic self-surrender, draws upon the same resources it declares to be exhausted.

It's here that the wisdom of the ancient texts shines most vividly, starting with creation. The world is contingent, and its nature is contingent. It needn't have come to be at all – and we now know, with far greater evidence than our intellectually courageous forebears knew, that the world did come to be. Nor need it have taken the course it has taken. There is a covenant with nature. Its emblem, biblically, is the rainbow, the seeming purity and unity of light refracted to the array of colors we can see and even beyond the reach of human visibility. We may complain of uncaring nature and of human weaknesses and vices. But nature's invariance is the hallmark of God's constancy: *Seedtime and harvest, heat and cold, summer and winter, night and day shall not cease* (Genesis 8:22). That too is God's promise. Hence the wisdom of the Psalmist's prayer: *Limnot yameinu keyn hoda*[c] *ve-navi' levav h.okhma* – We really need God to teach us how to count the days we have. That would bring us the wisdom of an insightful heart.

Turning, as the book of Genesis does, from the cosmos to Israel, we return to our question about the status of our marriage contract: It's true we suffer, but we also flourish. "We have been the conscience and the cause for conscience," as my mother wrote in one of her poems, "May we

never be less." If we're to come to terms with the holocaust and the centuries of oppression and persecution that set the stage for it, and the renewed calls for genocide against us even after that holocaust – if coming to terms with enormity is not an oxymoron – then we need to find an alternative to blaming God on the one hand and blaming the victims on the other.

Those who blame God ask where He was at Auschwitz, as if God were not present when one dying victim reached out to help another.[45] Those who blame the victims inhale the sheep-to-the-slaughter calumny linked with Hannah Arendt's scurrilous notion of the banality of evil. The first of these two lies makes the victims complicit in their own suffering and death, as if there was no Warsaw Ghetto, no hand of resistance or voice of protest. As for the banality of evil, that lie seeks to render evil ordinary and thus set every human being on all fours with the most fiendish and avid perpetrators.[46] There are enough guilty parties in the Shoah, as in any genocide – from the planners and executors to the facilitators and enablers, and the unwilling non-samaritans who raised no outcry and offered no aid but slammed the doors in the victims' faces and actively denied of the news of what was underway.[47] One needn't extend the guilt to the victims, or to the God who gave the SS freedom to negate their own humanity.

The passage I'm seeking between these false extremes – blaming the victim and blaming God – is one that our classic texts can help us find. For if there's any meaning to the idea of a classic it lies in the possibility that some insights retain their worth and wisdom beyond the moment of their first inspiration. If I couch the alternative I'm reaching for as a middle ground, it comes across as a question: Was there anything we might have done differently? Or, since what's done is done, and the causes that conspire to bring about events grow ever more determinate as the present nears: *Is* there anything *today* that we should be doing differently? I think, the answer is very clear.

The intellectual founders of Zionism spoke prophetically of the anomaly of a nation without a home. We've long known just how hard that kind of life can be. Today we know it far more clearly, from far more massive death and loss and pain. We were called upon to fight a war with the world's most technically advanced, culturally integrated enemy, and to fight that war without an army, without a land base, without a tax base, without military leadership, allies, or equipment. We lost. The miracle is that we survived at all. The moral is summed up in Netanyahu's words to a joint session of the U. S. Congress: "When we say 'Never again,' we *mean* NEVER AGAIN!" But that moral is not a negative. It means that we must have our land, in secure and defensible borders, an army to defend it, an economy to make the land sing, bonds of friendship with other nations, and *unity* among ourselves. If we forget those lessons we risk defeat once more. For if there's any lesson at the place where Deuteronomy intersects the Song of Songs, it's this: God's love is unconditional. But God's promises are contingent.

There's an image in the Song of Songs that's peculiarly apposite to that theme or need for unity. For the unity of Israel does not come chiefly from the land, or from history alone, or ethnicity. It comes from an idea. The image I have in mind is framed in one of the dream sequences that lend

a sense of drama to our ancient poem, reflecting the elusiveness of a beloved who may seem so remote as to render even his existence doubtful. In search of her lover, the young girl of the Song recalls desperately hunting him in the city's darkened streets. Stopped by the night patrol, she questions them, too frantic to let them question her, begging for any glimpse of her beloved. Later the night watch will rough her up, but here she breaks free of them:

> *Hardly had I left them*
> *Than I found my soul's beloved,*
> *Caught him and would not let him go,*
> *Til I'd brought him to my mother's house,*
> *To the room where she conceived me.*

Caught him and would not let him go... to my mother's house, to the room where she conceived me. The lines bring to mind an episode from the early part of the twentieth century. Let me explain why. In 1929, Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger engaged in a public debate at the Hotel Belvedere in Davos. The ostensible topic was the future of philosophy – and of Kantian philosophy in particular. The real issue was the human condition. Cassirer, tall, white haired and stately, was the established philosopher, a leading disciple of Hermann Cohen, the great Kantian, the sage of Marburg, the first Jew to hold a major academic chair in Germany, and a professor whose students and friends included Nicolai Hartmann, Viktor Adler, Kurt Eisner, Eduard Bernstein, Ortega y Gasset, Boris Pasternak, Rudolf Bultmann, and Karl Barth. Cohen's three-volume magnum opus, had been published by Ernst Cassirer's cousin Bruno, who also published the ten-volume collected works of Kant (Berlin, 1912-1923), which Ernst Cassirer had edited, in collaboration with Cohen and others. Heidegger, combative where Cassirer was stately and statesmanlike, had only recently published *Being and Time* (1927) and took the role of the young rebel, eager to challenge established verities, even if that meant turning the powerful philosophy of Kant inside out. Among those who had come to Davos to witness the philosophical titans in battle was the young Emmanuel Levinas. In later years, almost in an act of penance and certainly in a confession of faith and commitment to moral truth, he would struggle philosophically to exorcize the "anti-humanism" of Heidegger by reversing Heidegger's rejection of ethics and setting ethics in the mercyseat of first philosophy.[48]

Cohen had sought to complete and restore Kant's work by arguing that the human understanding – and the demands of scientific understanding specifically – played a critical role even in constructing the idea of things in themselves. He had also seriously and systematically explored the ethical and religious ideas of the classical Jewish texts, finding in Mosaic monotheism the epitome of the moral life that Kant had missed there. Cassirer, the scion of a prosperous German-Jewish family, was a brilliant philosopher and intellectual historian, well versed and deeply committed to the humanities and the arts but also a champion of the Enlightenment, entranced by anthropology and the burgeoning study of mythology. Despite the discrimination that every Jew in Germany faced, he had been named Professor of Philosophy at the new University of Hamburg in 1919. His books included works on epistemology, Einstein's Theory of

Relativity, and the magisterial intellectual biography of Kant (1918) that capped his 10-volume edition of Kant's writings. He had already published the first two volumes of his magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*; the final volume was in press.[49] He was elected Rector of the University of Hamburg in 1929.

Heidegger, the upstart, came from a Catholic family of modest means in the Black Forest region. He had given up plans to enter the priesthood, drawn to philosophy, at first that of Brentano and then that of Husserl. He became a professor at Marburg at an early age in 1923 and published *Being and Time* (still incomplete) in 1927. His meteoric rise was marked by his move to Freiburg in 1929. There he would enthusiastically join the Nazi Party in 1933 and accept an invitation to become Rector of the university.[50]

It was as a man on the make that Heidegger came to Davos, aiming to expose Kantian philosophy and the entire Western tradition from which it sprung as an acknowledged failure, now to be replaced with his own work, centered in his appraisal of *Dasein*: Man's condition, as Heidegger described it, was one of *Geworfenheit*, "thrownness": We find ourselves in a world not of our own choosing. Efforts to contend with life intellectually are evasions and denials. Truth is the stripping away of such delusions with the recognition of one's finitude and the ultimacy of death.

Cassirer's was a gentler, brighter message: Seeking to generalize on Kant's architectonic, he saw the work of human spontaneity and creativity in every facet of experience – in science, morals, and aesthetics, where Kant had found the clue to rationality in the very structures the mind must use, but even in myth, where Aristotle had noted the first stirrings of curiosity and synthetic intelligence, and where Cassirer saw yet more underlying, if fluid and flexible structures. Four years after Davos, Cassirer, like every Jewish academic, was forced from his academic post. He lost his chair, his rectorship, and his country. Heidegger, as rector at Freiburg, was systematically banning every document of Jewish thinking, lending the name and authority that his new philosophy to what he would call "the inner truth and greatness of National Socialism."[51]

This is not the place to recount the blow-by-blow of the Cassirer-Heidegger encounter. That's been done expertly in Peter Gordon's history. Doubtless I'll have more to say about the debates between the two men elsewhere. But one point is critical here. Cassirer was a secular Jew, hardly a believer. Heidegger was a post-Christian. His abject notion of thrownness vividly projects what death looks like to a Christian absent the eschaton. Cassirer's celebration of spontaneity and creativity, by contrast, looks far beyond its Kantian horizon. It's about life and the self-affirmation of the human spirit, seeking understanding and pursuing the good. Something has caught Cassirer and will not let him go. There's a slight reversal here, as in that black bit of Jewish humor where the little boy hollers: "'Papa, papa, I've caught a cossack!'– 'For God's sake let him go!' – 'I can't, he's holding on!'"

There's something that won't let go of Ernst Cassirer, not until he, or those who read him, have found their way back to their mother's house, to the place where she conceived them. I think of

the lines the Rambam cites from Isaiah: *Listen to me, if you're pursuing righteousness and seeking the Lord: Look to the rock whence ye were hewn and the hollow of the pit whence ye were quarried: Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you!* (Isaiah 51:1). A rock or a quarry, of course, does not give guidance or direction. 'Rock' here, the Rambam writes, means the source or basis of a thing[52] – here, a principle or idea, one that's older, deeper, and firmer even than Kant, longer lasting, although diverse philosophers will always try to articulate its meaning in the terms apposite for their age.[53]

Cassirer came late to an appreciation of Jewish ideas. He came to it partly through a need to face a tension in his own thought: Mythology, which he supposed ought to have been left behind by history, seemed to have revived itself in monstrous form in the Nazi Reich, as he recognized in *The Myth of the State*. But the much older myths of his own people, whose destruction the Nazis had made a paramount goal of their state and the war it fomented – the myths of monotheism – now stood forth as the antithesis of Nazi violence. Here's what Cassirer wrote in a Jewish periodical in 1944:

> In our life, in the life of a modern Jew, there is no room left for any sort of joy or complacency, let alone exultation or triumph. All this has gone forever. No Jew whatsoever can and will ever overcome the terrible ordeal of these last years. The victims of this ordeal cannot be forgotten; the wounds inflicted upon us are incurable. Yet amidst all these horrors and miseries there is, at least, one relief. We may be firmly convinced that all these sacrifices have not been made in vain. What the modern Jew had to defend in this combat was not only his physical existence or the preservation of the Jewish race... We had to represent all those ethical ideals that had been brought into being by Judaism and found their way into general human culture, into the life of all civilized nations.... These ideals are not destroyed and cannot be destroyed. They have stood their ground in these critical days. If Judaism has contributed to break the power of the modern political myths, it has done its duty, having once more fulfilled its historical and religious mission.[54]

If Heidegger's theme is death and fatality, Cassirer's is creativity and spontaneity. Even bereft of God, Cassirer holds fast to life and love. And the love of life turns him toward the God he's lost – as it drew Levinas, through his painful rediscovery of the primacy of ethics. God had never let go of Jewish consciousness – the infinite longing glimpsed in a human face, the cheeks of the beloved, the spangled hoops that catch a young man's eyes (4:9). We can see why the ancient sages liked to ascribe Proverbs and the Song of Songs to the same wise and royal author who knew so well what it meant to love a woman. Despite the differences in style and poetic voice, the kinship is plain when Wisdom makes her plea in Proverbs:

> It's Wisdom calling... I'm calling you, people –
> My voice is meant for everyone!

> Get some subtlety, simpletons,
> Use your mind, don't be thick!...
> God got me at the start,
> First of his ancient works...
> When the deep was not yet dug,
> When there were no springs welling up with water...
> When He set out the heavens I was there...
> When He gave the sea its bounds...
> Fixed the footings of the earth,
> I was with Him, ever faithful,
> A delight, day by day,
> Playing constantly before Him,
> Playing with his world, the earth.
> And my delight was in his humans.
> So listen, children,
> You'll be happy if you mind my ways,
> Heed my teaching, wisely,
> Do not spurn it...
> For he who finds me finds life...
> And all who hate me love death! (Proverbs 8)

God cautioned us, through the prophecy of Amos, that others besides Israel have been liberated – the Ethiopians of Cush, the Philistines of Caphtor, the Aramaeans of Kir (Amos 9:7). The same prophet, our first to leave a record after Moses, recalls how God brought history's judgment on Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab (Amos 1:3-2:3). Even twenty-eight centuries ago we were not unique in every way. In living memory we have witnessed genocide in Cambodia, Ruanda, Sudan, the Balkans – not to mention the Soviet Union and China and their satellites, or the earlier genocide against the Armenians. If we're to speak of covenants, we need to speak not only of the special covenant that Israel accepted from her God but also of the covenant God gave all the descendants of Noah, and nature at large, in the wake of Noah's flood. Jewish philosophy is not the philosophy of Judaism alone. The fate and destiny of the land and people of Israel are not its only theme. Our purview, like that of the great Jewish philosophers and visionaries of the past, is all of being – the cosmos, life itself, and the human condition. Our brief is metaphysics, ethics, epistemology and logic, psyche and society, history and aesthetics. If we hear no distinctive Jewish voice or theme in all these areas, contributing to the chorus of other voices and responsive to them, that can only be because we've not been listening hard enough but have trapped ourselves in the Pauline contrast of the Judaic with the universal, or allowed ourselves to be cowed by the ghettoizing notion that a Jew can do mainstream philosophy only by submersion in seemingly homogeneous and indeed homogenizing currents.

So let me end by turning back to a larger and more upbeat note, as our *haftarot* do when dark warnings threaten to cloud our Shabbat joy – by referring once more to God's covenant with

nature.

The flow of energy into the bosom of matter that makes life possible, and the evolutionary advance that made way for our own pride as thinking and expressive beings – our freedom and creativity, our autonomy and choice of our own paths and purposes – need not have been. Theists vault from here to the Transcendent: Finite beauty, they say, a single ravishing glance, a single bead, can betoken infinite love. Fideists may call that kind of intellectual and moral acrobatics a leap of faith. But it's not a leap in the dark. The faith that warrants the extrapolation is not a groundless willfulness but a moral faith that life is good – and not because we call it such. It's also a faith, much of a piece with the faith of science that the patterns we discern in nature are invariant beyond anything we've seen, the rational faith that reality makes sense, that human understanding is possible, not because we made the world or continuously remake it, but because our wisdom, fragmented as it may be, reflects a higher wisdom far beyond our ken.

What evidence do we have that would warrant extrapolation to infinite Goodness from the determinate world we live in and the bounded life we know? The Torah proposes the act of creation in this role, anchoring its thesis in the contingency of finite existence and the generosity of the gift. Nineteenth century thinkers argued from the progress they could see around them: The amelioration of the human condition permitted them, as Arthur Lovejoy put it, to temporalize the Great Chain of Being. But there's further and stabler evidence for us, in the facts of fecundity, creativity – and, yes, spontaneity – the openings life itself affords for insight and invention, for the creation of beauty and access to truth with the awakening of consciousness, the possibilities for growth and birth and self-transcendence – all beginning with a kiss.

Notes

1. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah, 1.2.4, tr. Maurice Simon, pp. 25-26. Ken Seeskin makes the point that contracts too are important. One might even say sacred. He's thinking of the social contract, of course. But contracts contain an element of contigency where a covenant involves or invokes existential commitments meant to be everlasting. The social contract idea played a vital role in dethroning the fiction of the divine right of kings. Contracts are emblematic of mutual agreement, be it social, economic, or political. But, as I've argued pretty extensively in the past, the consent that contracts are meant to solemnize, be they written or oral, historical or virtual, while a critical *index* of legitimacy, are neither necessary nor sufficient to the establishment of justice. See Goodman, *On Justice* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2008) viii-x, xvi-xvii, 14-31, 41, 55-58.

2. Ken Seeskin wonders at my calling Rabbi Akiva a rationalist, since the Talmud pictures Moses uncomprehending when allowed an advanced view of Akiva's exegesis of the Law. The point of the story, however, is not that Akiva's teachings are obscure but that Torah study has advanced so far since the days of Moses and ramified so broadly that even its terms and categories would be unfamiliar to the first and greatest recipient of the Law. A rationalist, as I understand the term, is one who is committed to the idea that things make sense. Akiva was a rationalist about the Torah, as committed to its intelligibility as scientists are to the intelligibility of nature. Hence the hyperbolic remark that he made sense even of the crowns that decorate some of its letters. Moses, as the rabbinic story relates, was reassured by the affirmation that what Akiva was expounding was in fact Sinaitic law.

3. They cite 1:13-14, 5:1, 6:12, 7:12-13.

4. Nosson Scherman, ed., *The ArtScroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah, Rabbinical Council of America, second edition, 1990) 298.

5. Maimonides, *Guide* I 46, citing Genesis Rabbah 27.

6. Loc. cit.

7. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1.1.11, tr. after Maurice Simon, 19.

8. Abaye at Sanhedrin 34a, citing Psalms 62:12. The Gemara continues: "It was taught in the school of R. Ishmael: [*Is not my word so, like fire, says the Lord*], *or like a maul that shatters rock!* [Jeremiah 23:29]. Just as rock splinters, so may a single text bear several meanings."

9. Yevamot 24a.

10. The translations from Song of Songs and from Rashi's commentary used here are from the draft translation that Rabbi Saul Strosberg and I have in hand.

11. For the Song as an allegory of the personal mystic quest, see Menachem Kellner's translator's introduction to Gersonides' *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) xvi, where the individualist reading is traced to an innovation of Maimonides.

12. José Faur, *The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2007) xiii. Faur continues: "To commemorate this primordial dream the rabbis instituted seven blessings at the wedding ceremony, evoking the joy shared by the first parents of humanity. Praying that God should 'bring forth happiness to this loving pair, as Thou [hast] brought happiness formerly to Thy creatures in Paradise.' That primordial joy is in fact the matrix, only to the human faith in "God, ruler of the Universe and Creator of humans in His image," but also of "bliss, and happiness, bridegroom and bride, love, brotherhood, elation and jubilation, peace and fellowship." In a word, of all those basic feelings that make an individual a part of humanity." Faur goes on to compare God's covenant with Abraham, also solemnized in a deep sleep and signified by rite of circumcision. He identifies the Torah as the "great wealth" Israel was promised on her liberation Egyptian bondage and speaks of God Himself as being fulfilled through Israel's recognition.

13. Maimonides, Introduction to Perek H.elek, in M. D. Rabinowitz, ed., *Hakdamot le-Perush ha-Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1961) 113-16.

14. Song of Songs Rabbah 1.11.1, tr. M. Simon, p. 77.

15. Song of Songs Rabbah 1.1.10, tr. Maurice Simon, 17.

16. Song of Songs Rabbah 1.1.11, tr. Maurice Simon, 20.

17. Rashi ad loc.; cf. Song of Songs Rabbah 1.1.8, tr. Maurice Simon, 9.

18. Levinas writes: "Absurdity does not lie in non-sense but in the isolation of countless significations, the absence of a sense that orients them... the symphony were all senses become song, the song of songs.... This loss of unity was proclaimed – and consecrated in reverse – by the much touted, now hackneyed, death of God. So in the contemporary world the crisis of sense is experienced as a crisis of monotheism. A god intervened in history... supernatural, or transcendent, but his intervention took place in a system of reciprocities and exchanges.... The god who transcended the world remained united to the world by the unity of an economy.... a god one comes to as a beggar... counted on and even influenced, like the effects of other wills and forces..." *Humanism of the Other*, tr. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 24; essay first published in

Revue de métaphysique et de morale, 1968.

19. Can intimacy ever be communal? The question, on one level, answers itself. For a community without intimacy (*philia*) among its members is a failed community. But what of the tighter intimacy rightly symbolized as love? One goal of the Torah is the building of bonds of love between God and Israel. Thus the *mitzvot* may be voiced in the plural, addressing the people as a whole, but often they address the conscience of the individual, seeking to cement the private bonds of love that will conduce to the ethos of the people as a people across the generations.

20. For Akiva's laughter see Song of Songs Rabbah...... ; cf. B. Makkot 24b, citing Micah 3:12 and Zechariah 8:4.

21. See, e.g. Song of Songs Rabbah 1.4.2, citing Exodus 33:3-4.

22. See Maimonides, *Guide* III 53.

23. Ros Weiss astutely parses the *thousandsfold* here as an expression of God's justice, since grace in this case is shed upon those who love God and keep his commandments. Justice, But on Weiss' reading is measured and knowable in principle, whereas mercy may prove inscrutable. But that reading must be set alongside the litany of Psalm 136, where the repeated refrain *ki li-*[c]*olam h.asdo* seems to carry the force of an affirmation that God's grace is boundless.

24. B. Bava Metzia 52b, H.ullin 130b.

25. See Goodman, *Love Thy Neighbor* 60-61.

26. Cf. Spinoza on *pietas* and *humanitas*.

27. Mishnah Avot 4.1.

28. Faur, *The Horizontal Society*, 132.

29. Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 4, with its trenchant gloss of Psalms 19:8.

30. Maimonides, *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, in *Igrot ha-Rambam*, ed. Itzhak Shailat (third ed., Jerusalem: Shailat, 5755) 2.33; tr. Abraham Halkin as "The Epistle on Martyrdom," in Halkin and David Hartman's *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1985)17.

31. Faur, 134.

32. Maimonides, *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, citing Ezekiel 23:2, ed. Shailat, 49-51; tr. Halkin,

26-28; *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah 5.10-11: "Whoever refrains from committing a transgression or performs a mitzvah for no worldly aim – not from fear or trepidation or in quest of honor but for God's sake, as when Joseph resisted the advances of his master's wife – that sanctifies God's name. And (beyond overt transgression) other things are in principle profanations of God's name – as when a person who is a great Torah scholar of reputed piety does things that lead people to talk about him, although they are not actually forbidden – that too profanes God's name. For example, if he make a purchase and does not pay for it promptly, although he can afford to, but puts off the sellers when asked for payment. Similarly, when he overindulges in frivolity, eating, or drinking before vulgar people or along with them, or does not treat others kindly or warmly but quarrelsomely or irascibly. The wise must be strict with themselves. They must act as befits their stature and ask more of themselves than the strict letter of the law requires." See B. H.ullin 86a; cf. Maimonides' commentary on Mishnah Makkot 3.17.

33. Maimonides, citing Sifra Leviticus 10 in *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, ed. Shailat, 51-52; tr. Halkin, 29.

34. *Iggeret ha-Shemad* ed. Shailat, 41-42, 53; tr. Halkin, 20-21, 30. provides the precious historical evidence that the Muslim authorities charged with implementing the Almohad demand for pronunciation of the *shahādah* "fully understand that we do not mean it at all and are simply deceiving the ruler." tr. Halkin, 20. This, presumably, during the lull that seems to have occurred during the reign (1163-84) of Abū Ya^{c}qūb Yūsuf, whose son Mans.ūr (r. 1184-99) restored the Almohad policy of forced (and enforced!) conversions with renewed vigor. See my introduction to Ibn Tufayl's *H.ayy Ibn Yaqz.ān* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) xi-xiii.

35. *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, echoing the words of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* 3.23. James Diamond asks if piety does not reach a pinnacle in martyrdom. Don't Akiva's words as he dies a martyr show that, when he says that only now does he see what it means to love God with all one's heart and soul *and might* (uve-khol me'odekha – Deuteronomy 6:5). On the contrary, I think the story is meant not to glorify martyrdom and still less to make it an intrinsic good but rather to typify Akiva's searching intellect, as he discovers in bitter experience the ultimate meaning of a rare word: *me'od* as used here, so familiar from its constant repetition in the twice daily recitation of the *Shema*^{c}, has no obvious sense and recurs only once in the Tanakh, in a passage echoing the present one, at 2 Kings 23:25. An agonizing death taught the great rabbi, ostensively, as it were, just what that word could mean, what lengths of total devotion God's love might demand. But Akiva, be it remembered, came to the support of Bar Kokhva's revolt against Rome. He was a "spear bearer" of the great rebel, as Maimonides puts it (*MT*, *Laws of Kings* 11.3). Death was not his highest goal.

36. *Iggeret ha-Shemad*, ed. Shailat, 55-56; tr. Halkin, 31-32.

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37. See Maimonides, *Guide* III 24, citing Deuteronomy 32:4: *A God of faithfulness and without injustice*.

38. Maimonides, *Guide* III 12.

39. B. Shabbat 55a, cited at *Guide* III 17 and 24. The Rambam's reading of the rabbinic dictum here, as I interpret it, takes the "overstepping" in this case to include the encroachment of any living being on its surroundings, an encroachment that will inevitably be requited, on much the lines that Rāzī, following Epicurean reasoning, had presumed in inferring that every organism must die.

40. One can readily see why the book of Job must be written as a fictional account of an everyman figure: Not only is it necessary to premise as a given that Job was innocent of crimes that would warrant his sufferings, and indeed to eavesdrop on his colloquies with God and with his friends, but also it is necessary to avoid even the appearance of special pleading in the premise of an individual suffering innocent.

41. Faur speaks with the intensity of grief and anger at this juncture (*The Horizontal Society*, 17), singling out Edmund Husserl as an author who epitomizes foolish choices. Blame is sometimes cast on Mendelssohn for his founding role in the Enlightenment and then for the loss to Israel of his brilliant descendants; or, on Cohen, for his reduction of Judaism to a mere religion, rejecting Zion and Israel's peoplehood and embracing Kantian ethics as the epitome of the Torah's message (and indeed the true meaning of German culture) rather than recognize the shallow roots of Kant in German soil, and confess that the liberal social philosophy that he himself had fathered on Kant was a distillate denatured in the very process of its fractional distillation, by Kant and others, including Cohen, thinkers often eager to deny its parentage, even as Cohen himself betrayed the ethnic and linguistic, *bodily* roots of the tradition, failing to see the fragility of an ethos without an ethnos. In Husserl's case, Faur sees the heart of the error encapsulated in the phrase *europaischen Menschentums*. To him those words, which he almost spits onto the page, seem to sum up all that is false and deceptive in the seduction of Jewish thinkers by what was wise and best and beautiful in Western civilization, *at the expense* of surrendering (as if it were mere parochialism) what was and remains most distinctive in the moral truths and spiritual ideals of Israel. Marx and Freud would no doubt join the parade of error and resulting terror. Wittgenstein gets a pass, given the penetration and isolation of his insights. But Faur's disappointment focuses on Husserl, perhaps intensified by the sense that here was a man who should have known better than to pursue a seductive culture that would, before long, betray not only him (condemned as a Jew by his disciple, Heidegger) but also betray the very humanism and humanitarianism that he had meant to praise – and betray, indeed, humanity itself, for false ethnic gods. Israel's ethos without the ethnos that sustains it and the intuitions that steer and stabilize it, Faur seems to be saying, is a driven leaf before the winds of history. The European ethnos without the ethos so long enriched

by secularized (and thus deracinated) biblical inspiration, is sheer horror and terror – the horror of the holocaust and the terror of its aftershocks, which today threaten even further cataclysms and deeper wounds.

42. See Maimonides' Introduction to Perek H.elek, ed. Rabinowitz, 131.

43. See Bah.yā, *K. al-Hidāyah ilā Farā'id. al Qulūb*, ed. A. S. Yahuda, 211-13; tr. M. Mansoor, as *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, 163-65; cf. Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age*, 68-88.

44. Maimonides, *Guide* III 12, citing Galen, *De Usu Partium* III 10.

45. God, Faur writes, is never manifest. God is hidden, proverbially, in the Book of Esther, but also even in Genesis, in the account of creation. The third person, Faur remarks, is called *nistar*, absent (or better, unseen) in Hebrew. And the essence of monotheism can be distilled from the recognition that none of God's creations adequately contains Him. All only point towards Him, as Faur argues, continuing: "This fundamental doctrine was taught by King Solomon. In his address celebrating the inauguration of the Temple, he proclaimed: 'Behold the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain you – and surely not this house which I have built.' (1 Kings 8:27). Neither the Temple in Jerusalem nor the Universe nor the Tora that He created can manifest God" *The Horizontal Society*, 18. What we call the problem of evil is an inevitable consequence of the disproportion between finitude and the Infinite. For, as Saadiah explains, to *know* our lives as challenge and a test, to know that in a way that dissolves all doubt, would trivialize life and rob it of meaning. See *The Book of Theodicy*, tr. Goodman, p. 91, etc.

46. New evidence shows that Eichmann *was* an eager Nazi and no mere bureaucrat. His only regret, he later confessed, was that he did not kill more Jews. As for Arendt, she was absent from the fiend's cross examination....

47. The British SIS, as MI6 was known officially, as newly declassified documents reveal, used commandos to set limpet mines on the vessels that were to bring Jewish refugees to Palestine – in clandestine enforcement on the White Paper limiting such Jewish immigration.

48. Levinas, in fact played the part of Cassirer in a student skit at the time, with both philosophers in attendance. Levinas had written the dialogue between the two and doused his black mane with white powder to simulate Cassirer's "noble gray coiffeur," "hair like an ice cream cone," as he later recalled, "too easy to mimic." Mocking Heidegger's etymological pretensions, he had the stage Heidegger, for instance, take *interpretari* to mean "turning something on its head." Cassirer's irenic posture in the debate was lampooned by his character's repeatedly responding to his adversary's provocations: "I am a pacifist." Cassirer's lifelong distaste for self-dramatization is a powerful contrast,

typified in Cassirer's words about Kant's recognition of the magnitude of his task in laying out the system of critical philosophy: "The phrase *de nobis ipsis silemus*, which he takes from Bacon to serve as the motto for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, gathers more and more force. The more definitely and clearly Kant conceives his great objective, the more laconic he becomes about everything concerning his own person." (tr. James Haden, Yale University Press, 1981, p. 9). Cassirer was deeply hurt by the indignity of the Levinas skit. But no one present could realize how swiftly swiftly the scenes could shift from seemingly innocent ridicule to a grim reality. Cassirer, like every other Jewish academic in Germany was exiled in 1933. His teacher Hermann Cohen's widow Martha would die in Theresienstadt in 1942. Levinas would survive the holocaust as a prisoner of war. But his family were among the six million murdered by the Nazis for being Jews. Visiting Johns Hopkins in 1973, Levinas told visiting philosophers from Vermont that he had always hoped if he came to the United States to find Cassirer's widow and apologize for the shameful role he had played as a graduate student still under Heidegger's spell. But Toni Casssirer had died in 1961. See Peter E. Gordon, *The Continental Divide: Heidegger - Cassirer - Davos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) 326-27.

49. Gordon, 11-12.

50. Gordon, 24-25.

51. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen, 1953) 152. As Leo Strauss noted, the lectures Heidegger published here were given in 1935, "but, as stated in the Preface 'errors have been removed'," prior to their publication. Heidegger also refers, on p. 36 of the text to the recent "cleansing" of German universities. See Strauss' preface to the English edition of his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965) 4.

52. Maimonides, *Guide* I 16.

53. One can hardly overlook the fact that Heidegger and Cassirer each had a female disciple. Hannah Arendt, Heidegger's disciple, was a Jew whose ambivalence about her Jewishness leaked out not only in her journalism about Eichman but also in her affair with the Nazi philosopher. Langer, of German-American parentage, was Cassirer's disciple intellectually, although Whitehead oversaw her dissertation. Like Cassirer, she saw the roots of human creativity in metaphor, calling one thing by another's name and seeing one thing in terms of another. In *Mind: An Essay in Feeling* and in her philosophical best seller *Philosophy in a New Key* (an early mass market paperback) she saw the creative work of symbol making and pattern forming as the essence of human experience – generating meaning rather than denying or denouncing it.

54. Ernst Cassirer, "Judaism and Modern Political Myths," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7.2 (1944) 115-26; repr. in Verene, *Symbol, Myth and Culture* 233-41; quoted here, p. 241;

quoted from Gordon, 317-18.