Waiting for God: A Hasidic View

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"...in all letters, sacred and profane, the topic of human misery has been insisted on with the most pathetic eloquence that sorrow and melancholy could inspire."

- Philo, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Hume)

I

Every philosopher and theologian, at least in the Western tradition of that discourse, has been exposed to the arguments concerning the existence and nature of God. S/he has been exposed to those foundational arguments also with reference to what they entail for our evaluation of human experience, and what we may conclude about the nature of God from that experience. Ontological and cosmological arguments as well as the argument from design have remained the focus of protracted disputation, generally with reference to the tension between those of empiricist and rationalist comportment, or with reference to that instruction given by Kant which places us beyond any reconciliation of that tension as we seem compelled to concede before an insuperable antinomy of reason. The distinction of "postulate" of pure reason and "demonstration" comes sharply to the fore as we consider what we can "think" and "hope" but cannot "know." In the aftermath of that discovery of finitude to human knowledge, philosophy and theology suffered from the Nietzschean subversion of Platonism and Christianity. Both disciplines continue to experience — and continue to come to some settled existence amidst — the aftershocks of "the death of God" and the indictment of the narrative of that history as one of "error," indeed as one of "fable."

If we are compelled by the Nietzschean critique of the metaphysical foundations of Western history, then we also abandon the traditional formulations of the problem of evil in what that formula says concerning both the existence and the nature of God. But, suppose one is compelled to think otherwise, as well one may. One may be moved, after all, to suspect and then find in that
critique yet another circumscribed locution, to wit: ‘I, Nietzsche, am the truth.’ In this moment of thinking otherwise, one may then see disclosed an opportunity to engage again the problem of evil in its traditional formulation, though now to be engaged in an awareness of a philosophy and theology stumbling about and seeking their way beyond the “eyfelspell” cast in the last century. At a time in which the metaphysics of presence yields before the post-metaphysical thinking of difference, of disclosure and concealment/withdrawal, we recall not only the Heraclitean dictum that “Being loves to hide” (φυσις κρυπτεσθαι φιλει), but also that — as it were — God hides.

Thus, it is as if the discourse on the death of God points to a problem Western humanity has been unable either to understand or to accept, viz., that of a deus absconditus. Does not Nietzsche tacitly, or even in his oblique irony, point to this in the laughing, yet essentially serious, question those in the marketplace ask “the madman” who announces that he seeks God? “Why... is he hiding?” they ask. The laughter which the madman’s question occasions is a mask for an unspoken, even repressed, agony, that agony which can see no way to reconciliation, to atonement, with a deus absconditus: One cannot — one refuses to — believe in a God who hides. Or, if one grants that God exists, then one cannot but speak of such a hidden God as malevolent or impotent: If God is omniscient, so the argument goes in all its pathos, then He must know of the evil in our world. Further, if God is omnipotent, then He must be able to remove the evil that is in the world. Moreover, if God is omnibenevolent, then He must desire the removal of this evil. But, alas, God does not remove the evil that is in the world. The presence of evil in the world is evidence that God does not exist or that God is either malevolent or impotent.1 Alas... — in that one word is concentrated the pathos of despair and agony, even rage against the cold sting of abandonment. Laughter, even an uneasy laughter such as that found in the marketplace, is preferable to an otherwise inviolate silence.

II

It has been remarked often enough since the middle of the century that ours is a “post-Christian culture,” a culture for which God is dead.2 Ours is a time of “No-saying.” Yet, it has been
noted that "The great No-sayers are those who have suffered most profoundly." T.J.J. Altizer rightly noted that "Few, if any, thinkers have known the sheer horror of existence which Nietzsche unveiled. Casting aside every fixed source of meaning and value, Nietzsche passed through an interior dissolution of an established form of consciousness and selfhood and resurrected a chaos of meaninglessness lying deeply buried within the psyche of Western man." Indeed, Nietzsche's "No-saying" to the narrative of Western history, to its central idea and reality of the transcendent God, bespeaks a profound suffering, viz., his own suffering. "Why atheism today?" asks Nietzsche. "The father' in God has been thoroughly refuted; ditto, 'the judge', 'the rewardeer'. Also his 'free will': he does not hear — and if he heard he still would not know how to help. Worst of all: he seems incapable of clear communication; is he unclear?" Thus, Nietzsche's Fursprache is the veil of a pathetic eloquence. God does not hear; God does not reward; God does not manifest his justice; God is deficient in that knowledge with which he might help the suffering human being; God is silent; God does not "father" either as one expects or as one hopes. Thus, one has no choice but to sacrifice God himself — "sacrifice for once whatever is comforting, holy, healing; all hope, all faith in hidden harmony, in future blisses and justices."

Notwithstanding his sacrifice of God, Nietzsche's is a suffering which would liberate itself from vengeance, even as the ressentiiment of this suffering steeps the individual into a madness within which s/he may seek God while confessing his/her guilt. Contra Nietzsche, but for Nietzsche, we need not be the advocates of Zarathustra's Yes-saying, in whose "radically profane vision" αρχη and τελος, Α and Ω, are abandoned for the doctrine of eternal recurrence. From the beginning of his inquiry and onward to the end of his power to inquire, Nietzsche sought both demonstration and consolation: "Faith," he said, "does not offer the least support for a proof of objective truth...if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire..." It is in inquiry that one demonstrates one's virtue; and in Nietzsche it is this virtue which becomes for him both addiction and catastrophe: "I love him who loves his virtue, for virtue is the will to go under and an arrow of longing...I love him who makes his virtue his addiction and his
The signature of Nietzsche’s unforfeited search for the *deus absconditus*, the signature of his “deep want” for eternity, is the madness into which both thinker and man are driven. It is in this surrender to the claim of madness that Nietzsche preserves the possibility which human reason and human experience cannot but deny in the absence of “demonstration” and “consolation.”

Camus, in his essential connection to the word of Nietzsche, in his pain before an absurd existence, was correct (and remains correct) in his statement that the problem of evil and human suffering is ever “the insurmountable barrier” to belief in the God of Christianity. The “desperate formulation” of the question, asked by orthodox theologian, philosopher, and layman alike, remains: “how can God, who is the source of the good, wear the mask of evil? Why has God hidden himself behind the ‘screen’ of creation, so that we can love him only in the form of the ‘inconsolable bitterness’ of his absence?” The usual evasive answers to “the mystery of iniquity” will no longer do, i.e., to say (a) that we must “shy away from questions about suffering on the grounds that we have no right to put impious questions to the holy God”; (b) that evil is ontologically impossible; (c) that “we are not asked to understand, but only to fight evil”; (d) that “God is the source of all, good and evil alike, and this is what it means to affirm the divinity of God, and if we don’t like it we don’t need to affirm him.” These answers have always been evasions and, so, have never satisfied either the pious or the infidel, each of whom is at one time or another incredulous before the scandal of iniquity. In our day, especially after that human yet inhuman experience which is identified by the name Auschwitz, it is not Elijah but the prophets of Baal who stand to win the hearts of those who experience a radical doubt but have deep want ofernity.

Not only will the evasive answers of the past not do. We also cannot accept readily the more contemporary answer of “lordship as humiliation”; in which the suffering Jesus transforms our conception of divinity: “it is God withdrawing from all claims to power and authority and sovereignty.” Neither can we accept the different but related contemporary answer which concludes that “there can no longer be either a truly contemporary movement to transcendence or an active living faith in the transcendent...
God," on the grounds that "the movement of the Incarnation has now become manifest in every human mind and face, dissolving even the memory of God's original transcendent life and redemptive power."\textsuperscript{13}

In the experience of Auschwitz, and especially after Auschwitz, many feel compelled to entreat the transcendent God, articulating the fear of radical doubt that arises in an "inconsolable bitterness": "Make haste, you must save the children of Israel, they cannot hold out any longer. If you do not save them as Jews, you will have to redeem them as pagans!"\textsuperscript{14} That a Jew should become a pagan, that this human being, chosen by God, who was once a believer should have to be redeemed as pagan — this is one possible outcome of the Jew standing before a silent God. Here one must consider what it means for both Jew and Christian to become pagan, and to become pagan after the scandalous iniquity of Auschwitz. For, the God who is said to have died at Auschwitz is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so the God of both Jew and Christian. Both Jew and Christian have had to suffer the long silence of their hidden God, and together they are bound by the same anguished question: "Master of the Universe, how do you permit such a thing to happen?"\textsuperscript{15} Thus they speak to the hidden God... — and still God does not answer. The question remains without answer, suspended as if in an infinite void. Alas...

\textit{Elohi! Elohi! L'mah sh'vaktani?} \textsuperscript{16} This is ever the first and final utterance of the believer. It is spoken by the human being at the uttermost moment of proximity to death, even as Jesus cried out thus from the cross. This final utterance of Jesus speaks prophetically those words which were to be spoken by Western humanity in that moment of profound suffering in which he experiences the death of God; that moment in which he can anticipate his own death, the death of the human spirit. Truly to experience the death of God is to see oneself at the door which is death, thus to see life from the vantage point of death, and thus to seek meaning for a life lived always in the unexplained presence of iniquity. It is at this point, however, that the silent God can be heard in the word spoken in allegory. There is a story told in the Talmud of a king who had a son who had gone astray. "Return to me," the king said to his son. "I cannot," replied the son, "for I have gone
too far.” “Return as far as you can,” said the king to his son, “and I will come the rest of the way.”

III

Western humanity, even “Christianized” Western humanity, has gone astray. Western humanity is defined, characterized, and identified first and foremost by his essential quest to know — and to know with a demand that is satisfied ultimately with nothing less than apodictic certainty. In this quest Western humanity manifests the essential concern of its word, its thought, and its deed, viz., the human mind. And, in the entirety of its essential history it is this “mind” which is developed to that extreme point of a rationality in which all things natural, all things artificial, and all things human are given over and subjected to a cold, calculating, and impersonal governance. Simone Weil understood this in speaking of contemporary humanity according to “the model of the slave” rather than in terms of the hero or the martyr:

The slave emerges as the model of affliction in a technological society whose blind mechanism makes both heroism and martyrdom meaningless as human possibilities...By a law of compensation, suffering is necessarily converted into either violence or hatred.

Significantly, however, for Weil “the dark night of God’s absence is itself the soul’s contact with God”: “to suffer evil, is our contact with God.” With this one may agree. Yet, one need not accept Weil’s conclusion: “we have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything except that he does not exist.” We need not conclude also that God is impotent in the face of evil. Steeped in silence the human being must, indeed, seek from within herself the answers to her questions. In that silence she cannot but confront her deepest affliction. Insofar as she would “know herself,” in that quest answering to an admonition given in a time antiquitous, she cannot but know herself in and through that affliction. It is in the deepest, most critical moment of her affliction that she will be confronted with two alternatives: that of rebellion pouring forth its agonized rage and enraged agony, or a liberation which attains to a settled peace in the preserve of that silence which refuses to answer. It may well be, as Elie Wiesel put it, that “At the end of every experience, including suffering,
there is gratitude. What is man? A cry of gratitude.\textsuperscript{19}

Of course, it is not "mere faith" that the Western mind wants. It seeks understanding, and even that as a condition \textit{sine qua non}. Such understanding requires of itself either an immediate intu-

ition or a demonstration having apodictic certainty. Even a wager (e.g., that of Pascal) is unacceptable. It is this mind which espe-

cially experiences the tremble of radical doubt, since faith alone is ever insufficient. The Western mind must have its "proof" of God's existence, and with equally efficacious rationality speak without contradiction about the nature of that God. To be con-

fronted with the death of God is, for the Western mind (as Nietzsche understood), to experience the absence of ground and, so, to tumble directionless through a dark, cold, and silent uni-

verse: \textit{No \ TIM }\textit{no EOSAON}, all tumbling motion without rest, no final \textit{Shabbos} with God. In this tremble of doubt this Western mind knows the terror of a corollary: "man's rationality is unable finally to comprehend his own actual existence."\textsuperscript{20}

IV

Can we today, we who live after Nietzsche, provide an alto-

gether novel insight into the problem of evil without speaking in either cavil or sophism, such as Hume's skepticism would require of any theist? If we cannot, then we seem compelled to assent to the assertion of Cleanthes that "the only method of supporting divine benevolence...is to deny absolutely the misery and wicked-

ness of man," or, alternatively, "we must forever find it impossi-

ble to reconcile any mixture of evil in the universe with infinite attributes."\textsuperscript{21} These alternatives are the alternatives of self-decep-

tion and resignation before the inviolate silence.

The former alternative denies human experience even at the "origin" (as spoken of by the sacred texts). The human being, at the origin, chose "knowledge" of good and evil, and so con-

demned him/herself to "know" and to experience, even to endure, the good and the evil in nature, as well as the good and evil which s/he her/himself would disclose inevitably in word, in thought, and in deed. The human being, prompted by the Satan, would become as God, knowing good and evil. "'Where the tree of knowledge stands, there is always Paradise': thus speak the old-
est and youngest serpents."\textsuperscript{22} In taking up that belief, that "per-
spective," the human being took his first step away from God, and a step in the direction of "perspective" and away from "truth": "The devil has the broadest perspectives for God; therefore he keeps so far away from God — the devil being the most ancient friend of wisdom." So far would the human being stray that s/he would come to know "the scandal of human existence" even at the extreme point of confessing that word, that thought, and that deed, the magnitude of which could not but overwhelm him. Unable to endure the deus absconditus, Western humanity would conceive that deed beyond which no greater deed could be conceived: man would murder God. In his confession of guilt for such an incomparable deed Western humanity nevertheless retains his affection for the murdered God: The murderer speaks both his lamentation and his eulogy in his requiem aeternum deo. Thereafter, self-deception relinquishes the possibility of atonement. Resignation before the inviolate silence — therein is the only "rest" the human being can have. Henceforth life is to be lived "joyfully" — let us not talk of our "life-enhancing fictions".

Therein is the Nietzschean resolution of the problem of evil. But, inasmuch as it can be assented to only through the deployment of a cohort of life-enhancing fictions, nothing really is resolved. So, we must think again, contra Nietzsche but for Nietzsche (and hopefully in such a way that we do not "transgress grievously" against his pride).

The "solution" to the problem of evil which I wish to advance here is indebted to the inspiring and always thought-provoking historical fiction of Chaim Potok, specifically his well-known novel, The Chosen. In this work we are introduced to Daniel Saunders, son of Reb Saunders, the latter a Hasidic rabbi and a father who is "more than rabbi," a man who in the eyes of his followers is a tzaddik, a "righteous one," and thus "a bridge between his followers and God." The same destiny is expected of Daniel, insofar as he would inherit the dynasty after his father.

Daniel is himself a "phenomenon" of mental ability. His mind seeks to know more than what the Torah and Talmud together make available to him, so great is his "hunger for knowledge." Secular works (literature, psychology) provide Daniel a certain excitement not to be found in the Torah and Talmud, the latter get-
ting "a little boring after a while." Daniel believes in God; he believes that man was created by God and that Jews have a mission in life, which is to obey God. Notwithstanding, "Sometimes," he remarks at one point, "I'm not sure I know what God wants, though." So he speaks to his friend Reuven as he looks out from a window at the people scurrying about on the street below: "Look at all those people," he says. "They look like ants. Sometimes I get the feeling that's all we are — ants." Indeed...what is man, and what does God want of him?

Daniel is brought up by his father in silence — "They never talk...except when they study Talmud." Daniel does not understand his father's silence, and he does not hate his father for maintaining that silence, such is his respect and trust in his father's righteous will. Only in the final pages of the novel do we come to understand, as does Daniel, the wisdom according to which Daniel is raised in silence. Speaking from the treasure of his tradition, Reb Saunders understands what Western humanity does not:

A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure, it must be nurtured, it must be fanned into flame. It must learn to seek out other sparks, it must dominate the shell. Anything can be a shell...Anything. Indifference, laziness, brutality, and genius. Yes, even a great mind can be a shell and choke the spark.

Even a great mind can be a shell and choke the spark of goodness. Western humanity exemplifies a hunger for knowledge so great, that it never leaves him in peace. Like Maimon, of whom Reb Saunders speaks, Western humanity's experience is a life of constant wandering, a life never satisfied, "never finding roots anywhere," and certainly not rooted in the word of God given in the Torah. What kind of mind does Western humanity disclose in our century? Reb Saunders spoke of his brother's mind thus: "It was a cold mind, Reuven, almost cruel, untouched by his soul. It was proud, haughty, impatient with less brilliant minds, grasping in its search for knowledge the way a conqueror grasps for power. It could not understand pain, it was indifferent to and impatient with suffering." Such is a judicious characterization of Western
humanity in essential history, in the manifest rationality of this history. At the end of this history, the search for knowledge transmogrifies itself into a conqueror’s grasp for power. Hence is our day characterized essentially by the proposition that “knowledge is power,” that (as Lord H.B. Acton put it) power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. In this experience of absolute power one finds ready evidence of a mind untouched by the soul.

Auschwitz is the singular experience in this century of the madness which human reason can engender. In this experience of madness a Jew can easily see fit no longer to wait for God, for the Messiah. Such are the David Malters who, as orthodox Jews in contrast to a Hasidic Jew such as Reb Saunders, advance the cause of religious Zionism, not satisfied with the Hasidic declaration that we must “accept God’s will”: “We cannot wait for God. If there is an answer, we must make it ourselves...Six million of our people have been slaughtered...It is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning. We cannot wait for God.”

“...It is Malter who, perhaps, expresses Potok’s position on the question of meaning in human life in the face of suffering evil:

Human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye, if we measure our lives against eternity. So it may be asked what value is there to a human life. There is so much pain in the world. What does it mean to have to suffer so much if our lives are nothing more than a blink of an eye?...I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. Do you understand what I am saying? A man must fill his life with meaning, meaning is not automatically given to life.

The Jewish Zionist cannot wait for God, cannot wait for the Messiah. But, in the eyes of a Hasidic Jew such as Reb Saunders, “A secular Jewish state...is a sacrilege, a violation of Torah”: “And where is the Messiah? Tell me, we should forget completely about the Messiah? For this six million of our people were slaughtered? That we should forget completely about the Messiah, that we should forget completely about the Master of the Universe?...True Jews do not say such a thing!”

David Malter and Reb Saunders, two Jews, one orthodox one
Hasidic, each faced with the pain of the world, each faced with the silence of God, two different answers, each answer having its place after Auschwitz. Yes, sometimes, as Daniel said, sometimes we are not sure we know what God wants. If only God would speak unequivocally, if only the Master of the Universe would break the silence he has imposed...

I would like to suggest that it is in the relationship between Daniel and Reb Saunders that we find a clue to answering our perennial question and understanding the problem of a *deus absconditus*. Daniel learns what he must learn from the silence imposed by his father:

You can listen to silence, Reuven. I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own. It talks to me sometimes. I feel myself alive in it. It talks. And I can hear it... You have to want to listen to it, and then you can hear it. It has a strange, beautiful texture. It doesn't always talk. Sometimes — sometimes it cries, and you can hear the pain of the world in it. It hurts to listen to it then. But you have to.31

Silence, as Reb Saunders knows, is a way of rearing a child. It was, as Potok informs us, practiced in Europe by some few Hasidic families. To what end? — to teach a child compassion. Daniel's experience with silence leads him to hear the silence. To hear silence is to "feel the burden of the world" upon one's shoulders. Such, I believe, is the way the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob raises his Jewish and Christian children, the way he has chosen to raise especially that child whose mind is Western, seeking to satiate a hunger for knowledge beyond what is given in the Torah, and whose self-understanding is defined with reference to the mind rather than the soul.

Reb Saunders is a Jew who "believes the soul is as important as the mind, if not more so." He is himself a suffering servant of his followers. "There are," after all, "Hasidic groups who believe their leaders should take upon themselves the sufferings of the Jewish people," for "They believe that their sufferings would be unendurable if their leaders did not somehow absorb these sufferings into themselves."32 Such a man was Reb Saunders. And Daniel? What was his promise as a child?
Reuven, the Master of the Universe blessed me with a brilliant son. And he cursed me with all the problems of raising him. Ah, what it is to have a brilliant son! Not a smart son, Reuven, but a brilliant son, a Daniel, a boy with a mind like a jewel. Ah, what a curse it is, what an anguish it is to have a Daniel, whose mind is like a pearl, like a sun...[My] four-year old Daniel...was a mind in a body without a soul...I...cried to the Master of the Universe, 'What have you done to me? A mind like this I need for a son? A heart I need for a son, a soul I need for a son, compassion I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, that I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!'"
another person’s suffering? How will I do this and not lose my son...How will I do this and not cause my son, God forbid, to abandon the Master of the Universe and his Commandments?...I did not want to drive my son away from God, but I did not want him to grow up a mind without a soul...Ah, what it is to be a mind without a soul, what ugliness it is...."

Like Daniel suffering for years his father’s silence, so we stand in our suffering before the silent God, our Father. Insofar as we ask the questions we ask of God concerning the presence of evil in this world, then — as in the silence between Daniel and his father — then in the silence between us and God we begin to hear the world crying. To hear silence thus, to hear this silence, is to experience the positive dimension of God’s silence, different as it is from the negative silence of God, i.e., that of reproof or anger in the face of the human transgression of a covenant relationship. To understand God’s silence as positive is to understand what is spoken in 1 Kings 19:2, i.e., “the authentic revelatory voice of the true God is to be found in kol damamah dakkah, the ‘thin voice of silence’.”

Thus, the material fact of suffering is not the end of the matter. In the end suffering yields a tzaddik, and only one whose character/soul is so formed can rightfully be entrusted with the work of eternity, that work which begins as the millenial work of one who is king (thus hasid) and also priest (thus tzaddik) [Ex. 19:6 and Rev.1:6]. God speaks the first (A) and the last word (Ω), in between maintaining his silence. Yet, God breaks that silence as God himself suffers, and so discloses thereby the essence of the human imitatio Dei, i.e., the suffering servant. To wait on God is to await the Ω, that last word which is the promise of a God who will yet speak to his chosen from out of the fullness of his silence. Just as between election and redemption there is suffering, so between the A and the Ω there is silence. But, silence and absence have the promise of the full measure of God’s presence, for it is in attaining to the righteousness (tzedakah) of the tzaddik that one sees the face of God (Ps. 17:15).

So, if Western humanity can live now beyond hatred and rebellion, beyond vengeance and sustained ressentiment, tossing aside its life-enhancing fictions, then Western humanity can live in this present world in that depth of soul which waits for God, waits on the Messiah. For then we understand that “the world

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needs a tzaddik,” now, especially now, and each of us must be a tzaddik for the world, contributing thereby to tikkun ha’olom, to the mending of the world. Each of us must be a soul and not just a mind; a heart and not just a mind; each of us having that strength of soul which not only can suffer and carry pain, but which wants to take on another’s suffering. Knowledge and grace, justice and mercy — this is what must become character in the human being, even as God is both hasid and tzaddik.*

To say that God is both hasid and tzaddik is to understand that God created the world in justice and in mercy: “...said the Holy One, blessed be He, ‘If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can the world last? Behold, I will create it with both attributes; would that it might endure!’” (Gen. R. XII, 15)

Thus, the human being was “formed in great weakness,” but so formed that this one being may be “a cup to hold God’s grace.”

Even Nietzsche, despite his critique of the “Christian” practice and dogma of his day, held out such a possibility insofar as he gave due respect to the depth of the soul that was to be found in the Jew, thus giving due place to the “discipline” of great suffering. This holds true even and especially after Auschwitz; for, as Joshua O. Haberman remarked, “The Holocaust experience reinforces the realization that Israel cannot stand alone in its devotion to Torah. The innocent cannot survive in a world of wickedness. Righteousness must be universalized.”

God’s creation is “very good” — only “good” in the absence of the human creature, “very good” with the human included — but it is not created holy (kodesh). The human being is not created holy, though the human being can become holy. It is the will of God that every human being make the transition “beyond good and evil” to the holy. It is never sufficient for life, for eternal life, to know the good and the evil; it is necessary that one be holy. Holiness is beyond good and evil.

Thus, even in the face of Auschwitz, and especially as one confronts the silence of God in the experience of Auschwitz, one must beware “the demonic voice” that speaks in that silence of the death of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “Israel’s faith has always centered about the saving acts of God: the election, the
Exodus, the Temple and the Messiah...The God of Israel is a redeeming God...There is no salvation to be extracted from the Holocaust...If there is hope after the Holocaust, it is because to those who believe, the voices of the Prophets speak more loudly than did Hitler, and because the divine promise sweeps over the crematoria and silences the voice of Auschwitz,” i.e., that demonic voice which speaks to have us defy and/or deny the transcendent God.44

Silence... “It is, perhaps, the only way to raise a tzaddik”45 — the only way, perhaps, even for God.

V

It has been argued (and argued, I think, in a compelling way) by D.A. Conway that talk of “versions” of the problem of evil is spurious, i.e., the tendency to distinguish between a “logical (deductive)” and an “evidential” version.46 There is a problem of evil, however, says Conway, and it is a philosophical rather than a mathematical or scientific problem. Conway states the essence of the problem of evil in noting that “the theological problem arises because there exist evils that it appears a being of a certain specific ability could prevent without thereby preventing the occurrence of an equal or greater good.”47 At issue here is not the presence of any evil whatever or some quantity of evil, but superfluous, unnecessary, or “omni-preventable” evil, i.e., evil which an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being “can prevent without thereby preventing the occurrence of an equal or greater good.” The claim here is that the existence of God and the existence of omni-preventable evil is a contradiction. A God such as is conceived by the theism of Judaism and Christianity is expected to create “the best possible world.”48 Yet, as Conway put it, “If there were reason to believe that all of the evils in this world are necessary parts of the best of all possible worlds, then no evil would count at all against the existence of God.” It appears to us there is no reason to believe that all of the evils in this world are necessary parts of the best of all possible worlds. In the absence of such reason, God cannot but be considered unjust or malevolent — if, indeed, he exists and is omnipotent.

The central consideration in the foregoing, it seems to me, is twofold in issue: (a) whether one is correct in expecting God to
have created the best of all possible worlds, and (b) whether one understands God's creative act itself rightly. In both issues there is operative an assumption of what I call the cognitive sufficiency of the human understanding in the very moment that it takes up the problem of evil both to consider it and to resolve it. Yet, as Garth Hallet rightly points out, "the problem of evil is as much a problem about our understanding as it is about evil"; and surely the human being "is not in a position to estimate the extent of its non-understanding." The simple fact of the matter is that we sometimes need to be reminded of our fallibility, especially so whenever we think ourselves to be in that "epistemic condition" which ostensibly understands the ways of God. Precisely here the Western mind manifests its hubris; for the transcendent God has his prophet Isaiah (55:9) say: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts [higher] than your thoughts"; and, indeed, not only are God's ways and thoughts "higher," but (as v. 8 puts it) God's thoughts are not human thoughts nor his ways human ways. Reasoning from analogy — as we do about the problem of evil on the expectation that God thinks and acts as we do and as we would — is already problematic. Thus, the choice of word is all the more significant concerning that which is called omni-preventable evil: it appears to us that there is no reason to believe that all of the evils in this world are necessary parts of the best of all possible worlds. Yet, surely one can answer here — and answer reasonably — that the question is undecidable precisely in view of our cognitive insufficiency. To speak of omni-preventable evil, it seems to me, "betray[s] unfounded confidence in [our] cognitive condition" (to use Hallet's words here).

The foregoing point can be gainfully supplemented also by considering that the question about omni-preventable evil is semantically a why-question — in our case, viz., "why does God permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?" We presume to comprehend the logic of the question without accounting for the fact that the question is often asked both with a "normal intonation contour" and with an "emphatic stress" that has varying implicatures. One may thereby ask: To which question do we seek an answer? Here I comment in parallel to the discussion of the semantics of why-questions undertaken by Bas van Fraasen

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol38/iss38/4
and Sylvain Bromberger. The question, "Why does God permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?" can be uttered with normal intonation contour as well as with emphatic stress, thus:

(a) Why does God permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?
(b) Why does GOD permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?
(c) Why does God PERMIT the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?
(d) Why does God permit the NAZI GENOCIDE (HOLOCAUST) of the Jews?
(e) Why does God permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the JEWS?

Questions (b) through (e) have "different implicatures." Question (b) implicates that some being other than God (e.g., the Satan) might have permitted such evil but God could not, would not, and should not do so. Question (c) implicates that God might have acted in some way other than to permit such evil but did not (e.g., he might have forbade it). Question (d) implicates that God might have permitted an evil different from Nazi genocide (e.g., he might have permitted an evil in quantity and quality less than genocide). Question (e) implicates that God might have permitted such an evil for a people other than his chosen Jews (e.g., he might have chosen Muslims then in Europe). The point here (again, following van Fraassen and Bromberger) is twofold: (1) Questions (b) through (e) do not "express different ways of construing" Question (a); (2) "different placement of emphatic stress imposes different conditions on what counts as an answer.” Each of the why-questions has presuppositions, “propositional presuppositions”; and to know that any one of these Questions (a) through (e) is sound we must somehow “know that its propositional presupposition is true.” More important, we are in the situation of “not knowing what [we] must find out in order to know whether there is anything to know at all!” And here is the burden of our ignorance before the question, “Why does God permit the Nazi genocide (Holocaust) of the Jews?” We do not know the conditions under which an answer to the question is true even had we an answer.

With this now in mind, we can reflect upon the discussion of
Sections I through IV above. The interpretation that I have advanced through Section IV allows for both a meaningful and a plausible theistic response to the skeptic. It is a response articulated, for the most part, as an intuitive thinking, speaking an edifying rather than a demonstrably propositional discourse. Consistent with the Hasidic comportment, it offers “provocative hints” — sometimes only intuitions afford the requisite access to the unresolved questions of human existence.

The interpretation given here understands God’s creation as allowing for the presence of evil even at “the beginning,” i.e., in the distinction of “good,” “very good,” and “holy,” God’s creation being “actually” good and even “actually” very good, but only “potentially” holy. The foregoing interpretation also understands suffering as something essentially good for the human being insofar as the goal is one of formation of soul/character, which, in the case of a being with free will, requires time. The interpretation given here, then, is that God has a good reason for permitting evil and human suffering. One can say this not deductively, not inductively, but only tentatively and defeasibly, even reluctantly. One cannot say this without shuddering in the very moment of its utterance. Yet, in that shudder one acknowledges, concedes, to God the mystery of his ways. Therein is a piety that makes no room for the hubris of a merely human cognitive potency, for a merely human epistemic confidence. Here is fear and trembling, indeed, for here the individual soul is at risk: S/he may transmute the shudder into a violent, discordant and defiant rage or settle it in the preserve of silence. The former accuses from the distance of sustained agony; the latter, abandoning the vengeance of its interrogation, takes hold of the possibility of devequt (“intimate attachment to God”) and moves devotionally from qatnut to gadlut. There, even in the midst of Auschwitz, an “empty vessel” — empty of distinctions such as life and death — may “receive the light from above,” and thus become testament to the reality of hiyyut, the reality of the divine life.

Yes, one shudders. The thought that God has a good reason for permitting evil and human suffering is at once estranging and beckoning — and here is the first distinction to be overcome in the ascent to gadlut. Auschwitz has its walls, like a monolithic labyrinth separating the human from the divine, and so hiding
God all the more. Yet, it takes but a single word of prayer to topple all these walls and to disclose the otherwise hidden God.\textsuperscript{53} Estranged from the material world, those in the death camps had the unique opportunity — one shudders — to overcome the spiritual estrangement which those steeped in the material world suffer all too unwittingly. Auschwitz cannot be the name of a "gratuitously inflationary" example of death as it bears upon the problem of evil. The good from this suffering (we dare not say 'good' yet dare to say it) is disclosed perhaps, as the Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav might say, in the fact that “In working with people to bring them to themselves, one must work at great depth, a depth scarcely imaginable.” All too starkly, “Auschwitz” sets the body aflame; but the Jew who had erstwhile prayed had long before set his/her heart aflame. And though the smoke from the ovens at “Auschwitz” rose into the expanse of sky, yet a purer smoke had long before ascended in the word of faith: It was “not the words themselves that ascend[ed],” but rather “the burning desire” of the human heart that rose like smoke toward heaven.\textsuperscript{54} Here in the devotional ascent to gadlut, the human heart manifests its kavannah, an “intentionality” which is at once outward in attending to the cry of the world and upward in attending to “the transcendent aspects of existence.”\textsuperscript{55} Here is the true evidence of shoah.

In the Nazi genocide we are able to see clearly the singularity that belongs to each individual’s death. “Auschwitz” qua the technological rationality that issues in mass death, is not distinguished by this mass phenomenon. It is rather distinguished by the singularity of death which such technological rationality would otherwise cover over. We look upon Auschwitz as an event, as something we can explain. Ultimately it is inexplicable. Our modern objectivist “knowing” frame of mind arrogates to itself an epistemic confidence to “give account.” Yet, precisely in clarifying the singularity of death, Auschwitz halts this epistemic move. Here indeed, for this reason especially, it cannot be said that the use of Auschwitz is a gratuitously inflationary example of the problem of evil. ‘Death’ here is surely understood in its biological signification. But it is a mistake \textit{a priori} and \textit{a posteriori} to exclude other significations. The biological signification speaks of ‘end,’ ‘completion,’ an entity in its “totality,” and so we
can and do speak of our experiencing the death of others. In the “respectful solicitude” of our mourning and commemoration, we acknowledge a loss, an absence. It behooves us to consider: “Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-being as such which the dying man ‘suffers’. The dying of Others is not something we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just ‘there alongside’.” And yet, this phenomenological description falls short. The death of a single individual all too often invites explanation, a rational account, and it is readily given. But the countless deaths of a chosen people — this “event” permits no rational accounting, no calculative thinking, no measure of gain or loss. Thinking is halted. Mass death calls for silence. And in that silence, in this moment of being dumbfounded, those who yield their lives are emptied of all self-assertion, emptied for “the thin voice” of the God who then speaks in that silence. To be emptied, as the hasid knows, is to become attuned to that voice. Only the Jew, chosen according to transcendent purpose precisely because of his/her depth of soul, could endure such suffering.

It is of capital significance that so many of the victims of the Nazi genocide were from Eastern European Jewry. Here was the home of Hasidism, of the hasid who was taught to internalize the spiritual teaching of the Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) and the Rabbi Elimelekh. “Sadness and self-pity,” the Besht taught, “distance us from the Holy Source.” “...[You] ought to intend,” taught Rabbi Elimelekh, “that if all the nations of the world would inflict the greatest pains on you and skin you alive in order to bring about your denial of His Blessed Unity, you would much rather suffer all these pains than, God forbid, accede to them.” Here was the hasid who, foreswearing sadness and self-pity, intending the greatest pains if need be, had his/her faith put to the gravest challenge; for, in the death camps the spiritual task was not merely to transform the mundane into the sacred but, indeed, to achieve that transformation in the midst of a profane existence. In dying the hasid had to bear witness to the divine power to transform even the profane. His and her’s is a redemptive act, for we who remain stand to be uplifted in this life even as he and she have been uplifted in death. Though we, who remain, shudder as
we come face to face with the manner in which they gave their lives, yet we dare not therefore deprecate their sanctification of the Name. The hasid knew that s/he had “to be ‘constant holocausts’ before God in order to gain merit for their fellow Jews.” They gave in the full measure of devotion that we might be uplifted, and in so yielding their lives, they show themselves to be the most “pious” souls indeed. God has a great longing for the tzaddik, taught Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, just as the tzaddik yearns to return and come close to God. If we who remain — and who remain in the dumbfounded silence of attunement (devequt) — listen to the “thin voice of silence” that speaks from the death camps, then ours can be a “cry of gratitude”: They are the vehicle of our return. True to the Hasidic devotional quest, those who died at “Auschwitz” disclose in that act their true legacy — “there is no higher act than that of helping another to discover the presence of God within his or her own soul.”58 Theirs has been a mortal sacrifice; ours must be a living sacrifice. Our task is to move beyond the shudder of that encounter, beyond our empathy with the supplicants of the death camps, to “recover from our identification” with them, and to disclose (albeit intuitively) and transmit the pertinent insights. Only then will their redemptive act have potency for us who yet live by the grace of God to take instruction.

And what of the children who died in the death camps? They, too, are part of the evil that is necessary? Here especially one shudders and closes one’s eyes, for here the “good” attaches not to the child’s soul which in its ignorance and innocence fathoms not the chaos into which it is immersed. No, here the good attaches to an admonitory revelation for us the living: The technological rationality of Western political modernity is Janus-faced, one face of which is the ancient god Molech to whom children are sacrificed in the fire. It is to the shame of Western modernity that this evil has been necessary to penetrate and reprove our stone-hearted sensibility. Precisely here, we the living are called to lay claim to Torah, and even to universalize the righteousness of YHWH Elohim over against the modern insurrections of Molech. Today, unavoidably, we are immersed in a quarrel between Athens and Jerusalem, torn between the dispensations of reason and the dispensations of faith. We dare not again ignore the
admonition and yet current plea of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 8:1 ff.) against choosing a human king and to acknowledge YHWH Elohim alone as melek ha olam va ha aretz.

VI

To conclude, then: The existence of God and the existence of evil — even so called omni-preventable evil — are consistent. That is, on the view given here one does not want to assert that the existence of God and the presence of evil are “explicitly contradictory.” It is not “necessarily true” or even “contingently true” that “an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being will prevent the occurrence of any evil whatever.”

The absence of evil would depend on a creation sine malum; our reasoning being that the best of all possible worlds is a world in which there is no evil whatever. But, God has not chosen to create thus. His is not a “holy” (kodesh) creation. The “beginning” is not a beginning sine malum. The creation at this beginning is already “subject to corruption” — not by God, but by the agency of “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12); i.e., the “evil” that is intrinsic to the Satan as a being with free will, as a being who is himself through that agency the efficient cause of universal corruption. God does charge angels with error (Job 4:18). At that “beginning” of which the scriptural record speaks, God’s creation is a re-creation, a renewal (Ps. 104:30); the creation had become tohu and bohu, had become “formless” and “empty,” in the “war in heaven” that followed the rebellion of the angels. In this sense, then, there may be something pertinent to Plantinga’s view that “it is possible that the best world available to God to create was a world with free creatures and evil.” But, even here one needs to be careful of a tacit assumption, viz., that God’s creative act is completed and that we are the sorry participants of a failed creative act.

According to the interpretation I have advanced here, what is essential in the raising of a human being is formation of soul/character and not only or even primarily presence of mind/intellect. The human creature is a mortal living being, created “a little lower” than the angels, all of whom are immortal creatures. It is in the power of God to create both mortal and immortal beings. But, the mere presence of the attribute of immortality does not
ensure the presence of righteousness, indeed the presence of righteousness such as God has. The Satan, as the fallen Lucifer, is evidence of that fact (insofar as one accepts the testimony of the scriptural record). The attribute of righteousness is formed; it is a forming of the soul in its fullness. In the case of the human being it is the forming of his/her soul. God’s work, in short, is ongoing — it did not “end” in his “Sabbath rest.” The human being has knowledge of the good and the evil, even as does God; but, the human being lacks the unfailing discernment between the good and the evil, such as God has. Formation of the human soul is in the service of that unfailing discernment. Only that which has such discernment chooses the good and, thus, is itself holy. Holiness of the human being, participation in the divine nature, such is the goal according to which there is the formation of the human soul in suffering. The human being is being formed not just for immortality, but for immortality and holiness. It is through the latter that the human being can be made higher than the angelic host. God’s silence is not without good reason. Thus, like Elie Wiesel who gives expression to the unique suffering experienced at Auschwitz, we can say, and believe: Ani maamin beviat ha-Mashiach — I believe in the coming of the Messiah.

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NOTES


4. Ibid., p. 31


6. Ibid., p. 69

8. Ibid., p. 127
11. Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein, for example, asks: "How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz?" He answers that Jews can no longer believe in such a God. See his After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966)
12. Hamilton, p. 279
16. Mark 15:3 — "My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?"
18. Ibid., p. 111
19. Wiesel, The Oath, p. 175
22. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, p. 90
23. Ibid., p. 87
24. The choice of Potok here is in part acknowledgement of Potok's authority to speak to us on the issues. Potok is himself both a trained philosopher and an ordained rabbi. I take The Chosen to manifest some of the best of Jewish philosophical expression in literature. The choice of Potok is also deliberately designed to be discordant with the authors cited heretofore, again to emphasize the relevance of Potok's literary representations as they bear upon the problem of evil. His is the singularly apt voice among those who are my interlocutors here.
25. Potok (1967), p. 79
26. Ibid., p. 263. The distinction here of mind and soul is somewhat different from the Western conception given in the writings of Plato and Aristotle and then by Augustine and Aquinas in their formulations of the Christian doctrine of the soul. In the Hasidic view expressed here, the soul is not simply "that element that imparts to the body its vitality." Nor is it simply the rational element of a psychophysical unity. Rather, the soul (nephesh) as spirit (ruach) is that which is given by God in purity (Eccles. 12:7), that which is the heavenly
substance (*neshamah*) by which the human is *imago Dei* (*tzelem Elohim*). See Cohen, op. cit., pp. 76 ff., and also Joseph Dan, “*Imago Dei,*” in Cohen & Mendes-Flohr, op. cit., pp. 73-78.

27. Ibid., p. 26

28. Ibid., p. 182. For both secular and religious Zionism, “Jewish vulnerability can and ought [to] be avoided through human action and political enterprise.” Selengut, op. cit., p. 2

29. Potok, p. 20

30. Ibid., p. 187. It is noteworthy that “According to Zionist ideology, traditional Judaism was supposed to disappear in a modern Jewish state.” Selengut, op. cit.

31. Potok, p. 29

32. Ibid., p. 105

33. Ibid., p. 263

34. Ibid., p. 265

35. Ibid., p. 265

36. Ibid., p. 266


39. Selengut, op. cit., p. 238. The Hasidic belief is that an individual “can infuse holiness into the mundane world and transform human existence,” thereby contributing to “an ultimate messianic redemption.”

40. This understanding of the relation of suffering to an individual’s depth of soul cannot be assessed simply in terms of either the usual conceptions of collective quietism or collective activism vis-a-vis “the world.”


42. The words are part of the lyrics to a hymn, entitled “We Are God’s People,” composed by Bryan Jeffrey Leech, published in *Hymnal: Worldwide Church of God* (Pasadena: Worldwide Church of God, 1993), p. 112


45. Potok (1967), p. 269


47. Ibid., p. 40

48. J. Cornman and K. Lehrer, in their *Philosophical Problems and Arguments,* 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 197), p. 398, put it this way: “If you were all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, you were going to create a uni-
verse in which there are sentient beings — beings that are happy and sad; enjoy pleasure; feel pain; express love, anger, pity, hatred — what kind of world would you create?...Would it be like the one which actually does exist, this world we live in?"


50. See Bas C. van Fraasen, The Scientific Image (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), Chapter 5, Section 2. Also see Sylvain Bromberger, On What We Know We Don’t Know (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Chapter 7, “What We Don’t Know When We Don’t Know Why.”

51. Bromberger, op. cit., p. 168

52. See A. Green and B. Holz, eds., Your Word is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 10-12: “There are two types of prayer-state generally described in Hasidic sources. Qatnut, the “lesser” or ordinary state in which one generally begins to pray, is opposed to gadlut, the “greater” or expanded state of mystical consciousness...While the simple devotions of the qatnut state are highly valued, the true goal of the worshiper is to enter that world where “one may come to transcend time,” where “distinctions between ‘life’ and ‘death,’ ‘land’ and ‘sea,’ have lost their meaning. The worshiper seeks to “concentrate so fully on prayer that one no longer is aware of the self...to step outside the body’s limits...The seeker has to shift his eye from external reality, where diversity and multiplicity seem to reign, to the inner truth, where nought but the ever-flowing hiyyut, or divine life, is real.”


57. Schachter & Hoffman, op. cit., pp. 70-71

58. Green & Holz, op. cit., p. 5

59. Conway, op. cit.

60. Ibid., p. 37