

## Reviewing the Covenant

Eugene B. Borowitz and the  
Postmodern Renewal of Jewish Theology

Peter Ochs, editor,  
with Eugene B. Borowitz

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**“Crossing and Recrossing the Void”:  
A Letter to Gene**

SUSAN HANDELMAN

Dear Gene:

I write this in the form of a letter to you for many reasons. I struggled through many drafts of this essay until I finally realized that it should be a direct address. For one thing, only that form would enact and embody the direct I-thou encounter between persons which is at the cornerstone of your theology of Covenant, community, and revelation. For another, this collection comes to honor you. So far you have been addressed here in the third person, as “Borowitz,” a thinker who put forth a set of ideas open to critique by your colleagues in traditional academic fashion. Taking your ideas so seriously is indeed one way to honor you. And it fits your own credo of engaging in continuous, rational, collective scrutiny of the personal, nonrational sources of your faith, a dialectic that you so eloquently describe in your book. This collective critique also reflects that characteristically generous Borowitzian personal style that those of us who know you have come to cherish: your encouragement of all varieties of Jewish expression, even those that differ radically from your own. So, too, we honor you by wrestling with you, as Jacob wrestled with his angel, wrestled towards a blessing, a wrestle that was also an embrace.

Yet these words of critique and debate which you have sparked still do not seem to me enough. So I would like also to honor you, Gene, with a few words of praise, appreciation, and gratitude: you are, as you describe

in the moving epilogue to your book, well named *Yehiel*, meaning “God will live”: “a prophetic name for an American boy who would grow up wanting to be a Jewish theologian and would spend much of his time explaining that God was not dead.”<sup>1</sup> You have spent your entire career making God live, and so you do also in this book.

Another reason that I am writing in letter form is that unlike the other writers who preceded me here, the task assigned me was not to present another analytical, academic response to your ideas. My mandate was to “meditate” on this entire collective dialogue as it relates to “postmodern Jewish renewal,” on the living consequences for us as Jews, for where we may be going, for what our possibilities are. What kind of style, I asked myself again and again, should this “meditation” be written in? And this question of my own style intersects a larger one: How does the postmodern critique of Enlightenment rationalism that you so persuasively describe also require us to speak and write and teach differently? Many in the field of literary and cultural theory have argued that a postmodern discourse is also a “post-critical” discourse that necessarily reveals its personal commitments and passions. So what models should I look to? Autobiography? Testimony? Midrash? Commentary? Confession? Talmudic pilpul? A collage of quotations?

In the end, I think I incorporated a bit of each. But as I began to meditate on my “meditation,” I was led astray by the connotations this word has in English, which I associated with an act of solitary and silent reflection. Yet one of the main tenets of postmodernism has been called “the linguistic turn” from Wittgenstein to Derrida, the recognition that language mediates our knowledge and experience of the world. Although you, Gene, write that you are ultimately more comfortable with nonverbal experience, and that a notion of a Divine Verbal revelation constrains you, both you and I are searching for ways to construct and protect a specifically Jewish voice in the cacophony of postmodern culture. In writing an academic essay or book, in engaging with the thought and philosophy of the West, how do we do that?

For me, one of the ways is to speak “Hebrew.” That is, to speak through the sanctified voices from our classical Jewish texts in all their stubborn particularity. And also, to speak Hebrew literally: to tease out

the subtle psychological, philosophical, and cultural resonances in the language. For the language is itself a form of thought, or to use Rosenzweig’s term, “speech-thinking.” Yet, at the same time, we also speak the languages of Western thought, and that is an important task.

#### MEDITATING AS HAGUT

Let me begin with the Hebrew word for “meditation,” *hagut*, which comes from the root *hagah*.

הגה In the Bible, the verb *hagah*, *la-hagot*, encompasses several meanings: “to pronounce, speak, utter, articulate, to study, meditate, moan, murmur, coo.”<sup>2</sup> And interesting enough, *hageh deot* means “thinker, philosopher.” From the root *hagah* also comes the word *higayon* meaning “logic,” “rationality,” and “common sense.” So in a sense, *hagut* already implies a “postmodern” notion of thought: To think, to meditate is not to conduct a silent, solitary set of rational deliberations in the Cartesian sense, but to enact a relation to an other. To meditate also means to study a text and, as Jewish law prescribes, study and prayer must be oral, the words must be vocalized, given body, sung out in these matters: *hirbur c’dibbur lo damei*, [הרהור כדבור לא דמא], “thought is not counted as speech.” That is, one does not fulfill one’s duty of Torah study or prayer unless she/he actually utters the words with the lips.<sup>3</sup> “Reading,” as the Hebrew word *kriyah* instructs us, should be a “calling out.” It has been noted that each of Rashi’s first commentaries on the first line of each of the first five books of the Bible expresses the love of God for Israel: and so it is in Rashi’s first comment on the word *va-ikra*, “and He called” which is the first word of the Book of Leviticus. Rashi says, “Before all instances of ‘speak’ [i.e. when God speaks], and before all instances of ‘say,’ and before all instances of ‘command,’ the terms ‘call’ [*kriyah*] preceded; it is an expression of endearment.” *Kriyah*: reading as calling out, as endearment: I want to bear this in mind, for I think we often forget in all our postmodern academic “theories of reading” (“intertextualities,” “semiotic systems,” and “discursive practices”) that our readings should be callings out to God and to each other. So much of postmodern discourse in the humanities is a hermeneutics of suspicion, an attempt to “overcome oppression” by



unmasking hidden ideologies, unconscious desires, and unjust power relations. One of the tasks of a *Jewish* postmodernism is to give a soul back to postmodernism. It is here, Gene, that you and I are allies, that we have a common project.

#### THE SOUL OF POSTMODERNISM

At its best, I would say, postmodernism can be a way for Jews who have passed through the fragmentation and secularization wrought by modernity to renew themselves Jewishly. This is the focus of your book and my central concern here. How can the search for postmodern or postsecular "spirituality" cross the void that modernity opened up? In what ways does it reconnect to and reconfigure a "pre-modern" faith, but one which does not deny or suppress all that we have learned and experienced in modernity? Yet, on the other hand, isn't renewal and return, *teshuva*, the eternal task of the Jewish people? *Teshuva*, as the ancient rabbis said, preceded even the creation of the world. And we are, as Simon Rawidowicz so aptly characterized us, the "ever-dying people." Constantly confronting disasters, catastrophes, the undermining of our foundations: then reconstructing them and renewing ourselves. Even the book of Genesis, from a certain point of view, is a book of collapse, destruction, concealment of God and fragile survival. Let alone the book of Job.

I believe we also need to overcome a certain *hubris* about our generation and its challenges. Indeed, whereas the ideologies of modernism had apocalyptic overtones, there is an ironic self-awareness in postmodernism, a deflation of the self and its pretensions to final understandings, revolutionary upheaval, or what you so aptly call the "human *tzimtzum*." Peter Ochs in his essay "Compassionate Postmodernism" has also characterized postmodernism as "redemptive" of modernity, and that is a distinctively Jewish perspective without which secular postmodernism can degenerate into another form of radical skepticism and irony.<sup>4</sup>

I must pause here, though, and express my discomfort with large categorical statements about what postmodern "is." There are many kinds of postmodernism, from the philosophical intricacies of Deconstruction, to complex global political developments, to certain artistic and cultural practices, down to "MTV." I certainly do not want to engage here in another

abstract debate about what is and isn't postmodernism. It is a mixed genre, as is your own book, which is an unusual combination of personal confession, social observation, and dialogue with thinkers such as Buber, Heschel, Cohen, Kaplan. Since one of your main goals is to safeguard the "freedom and autonomy" of the individual self, Edith Wyschogrod argues that yours is really an existentialist response to modernity rather than one grounded in the work of preeminent postmodern thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Levinas. For these thinkers, postmodernism is defined precisely in opposition to the notion of some personal, coherent, inner individual essence. She is theoretically correct. But I think you also justly reply that none of these thinkers should be given any dogmatic rights to speak of and for what is postmodern.

Nevertheless, the thinkers whom you rely on, and those whom Edith and Yudit Greenberg and I are inspired by—such as Levinas and Rosenzweig—all follow that path of return to Judaism, of "post-assimilation." It is also the path you autobiographically describe, and it is my path too. However we define the self, postmodernism requires us to delineate the location of that self and how it came to be "constructed," to trace the intersection of forces, cultures, languages that give rise to it. In your epilogue, you write of your grandparents, and parents, being a mix of rationalist Litvaks and Hungarian Hasidim. As a native American, your formative Jewish experiences came from an upbringing in Columbus, Ohio in the 1930s, in a very small Jewish community with inadequate institutions. In your studies for the rabbinate at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, you were trained in modern "scientific" historical and philological criticism and imbued with a faith in the university as a redemptive, civilizing force. Now, at the end of a century of barbarous slaughter, you write movingly of your "loss of faith in the intellectual and cultural pretensions of modernity" and in the power of the university. You have become, as you aptly phrase it, "skeptical of skepticism."

Like you, my ancestors were also Litvaks. I am a product of highly assimilated suburban Chicago of the 1950s and 1960s. In one sense, our generational differences are strong. But, in another sense, we are both Jews who keenly feel effects of the Shoah, the failures of modernity, and are skeptical of the university as an arbiter of value and ideals. We both seek a return to the particular Jewish self defined in a binding relation to God, other Jews, and community. We are both engaged in a kind of *teshuva*.



## HALAKHAH

Unlike you, however, I have chosen to be a *halakhic* Jew, and I believe that one of the key unmet tasks of postmodern Jewish thought is to overcome what I would call—forgive me—a secularized theological antinomianism. That is partially a legacy from the German philosophers who also inspired the Jewish *haskalah* and modernist thought. Especially Kant, that great proponent of morality. Kant defined morality as duty observed out of inner conviction through reason and autonomy in contrast to duty observed due to externally commanded law (that is, through authority and heteronomy). In his schema, Judaism becomes an inferior religion of heteronomous law, rightly superseded by a higher Christian religion of inner freedom. Kantian autonomous reason, as Natan Rotenstreich once put it, is an equivalent or transformed version of Protestant grace or “inner illumination.”

When I say that postmodern Jewish thought needs to recover the meaning of law in Judaism, I should insist on using the word *halakhah*, originating in the Hebrew root for “path, or walking.” But I don’t want to rehash worn old arguments between “Orthodox” and “Reform” Judaism—terms I am not comfortable with in any case. I want rather to emphasize here that *halakhah* cannot be understood in terms of modernist categories of “autonomy” and “heteronomy.” As Emile Fackenheim once wrote in *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, Kant did not understand the nature of revealed morality in Judaism because it is outside the realm of both autonomous and heteronomous morality. Its source and life “lies precisely in the togetherness of a divine commanding Presence that never dissipates itself into irrelevance, and a human response that freely appropriates what it receives.”<sup>5</sup>

Postmodernism can help move us beyond the sterile antinomy of autonomy/heteronomy. For one thing, the autonomy/heteronomy dualism presupposes an independent isolated self, a notion which is heavily criticized in postmodern thought. For another, it is a mistake to identify the obligation, the “must” of a *mitzvah* with the “must” of rational propositions and deductive logic. Rosenzweig and Levinas well understood the need for this “third term” beyond the heteronomy/autonomy dualism. The paradigm for their construction of the self is the biblical cry of *hineni*, “Here I am.” These are the words with which Abraham responds to God

before the *akedah*. And with which Moses responds at the burning bush, and which the prophets use when they are called by God. Rosenzweig writes that when God calls out to Abraham in direct address, in all his particularity, then Abraham answers, “all unlocked, all spread-apart, all ready, all-soul: ‘Here I am.’ Here is the I, the individual human I, as yet wholly receptive, as yet only unlocked, only empty, without content, without nature, pure readiness, pure obedience, all ears.”<sup>6</sup>

Or let me quote Peter Pitzele, who eloquently describes what is so difficult for us moderns to understand about Abraham’s “obedience”: “History has given obedience a bad name; too many docile lambs led to the slaughter; too many obedient functionaries murdering the lambs. Whenever we hear of talk of obedience, we are likely to feel ambivalence and fear. And a personal revulsion curdles the word as well. . . . Obedience is a giving over of one’s personal power; it is a loss of control.” But there is another kind of obedience, Pitzele notes:

The word *obey* in English comes from the Latin word meaning “to listen, to hear.” Abram *listens* to the call to leave his native land. And his father’s house. He obeys. He experiences the call as something coming from a God who is felt to be Other and outside him. But this God is also inside him. Deep speaks to deep. . . . Abram is not being obedient to some external dictate, to some chain of command. On the contrary, he breaks with customary conventions. . . . What Abram obeys flashes upon him like a beacon, points a way, then disappears. . . . On each step of his journey he must renew his commitment to his task, for his obedience is voluntary, not compelled.<sup>7</sup>

So often you reiterate that central to your project is the need to protect our integrity in the face of the God who commands. But this is what the interpretive tradition of Oral Torah has always done. The Talmud already voices your concern about an external compulsion which invalidates the revelation at Sinai in the famous passage in *Shabbat* 88a. I want to quote at some length from the Talmud here, for as much as I cherish the personal moments in *Renewing the Covenant*, I also sorely miss in it the embodied texture of classical Jewish discourse—the cacophonous yet melodic weave of voices from different eras and times in the commentaries and super-commentaries, the dialogic voices of Talmud and *midrash*.



The biblical text<sup>8</sup> tells us that the Israelites stood *b'tachit ha bar*—translated idiomatically “at the foot of the mountain,” but having a more literal sense of “at the underside.” Here the Talmud comments:

Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: this teaches us that the Holy One Blessed be He turned the mountain over on them like a cask and said; “If you accept the Torah, all is well; if not, here will be your grave.” Rav Aha bar Jacob said: “Based on this, a major complaint can be lodged against the Torah.” Rava said. “Nevertheless they reaccepted it willingly in the days of Ahasurus, for it is written,<sup>9</sup> “the Jews [*kimu v'kiblu,*] confirmed and accepted.” They confirmed what they had accepted previously.

Rashi explains the nature of this complaint: “for if they were brought to judgment about why they had not fulfilled what they had accepted upon themselves, they could answer that they were compelled by force to accept it.” In other words, it was not of their own free will. Nevertheless, they reaccepted it a thousand years later in their exile in the Persian Kingdom of Ahasurus—“from,” says Rashi, “the love of the miracle that was done for them.”

In other words, what the book of Esther is referring to in verses 9:27 (“the Jews confirmed and accepted upon them and upon all their seed . . . to observe these two days of Purim.”)<sup>9</sup> is not just the Jews’ confirmation and acceptance of Mordecai’s instructions about how to commemorate their miraculous rescue. On a deeper level, they confirmed and accepted what had previously been “forced” upon them a thousand years earlier at Sinai; only *now* they did it out of free will. In “The Temptation of Temptation,” Levinas’ commentary on this passage, he understands this *midrash* on the relation of Sinai and Purim as indicating a “third way” beyond the dualistic alternative freedom/violence or autonomy/heteronomy.<sup>10</sup> It signifies that there is a certain “non-freedom” prior to freedom, one which makes freedom possible—a prior saying of *Na’aseh Ve-Nishma*<sup>11</sup> “we will do and we will hear/obey/understand,” a prior calling to responsibility which is what in fact constructs the self. The self is defined by saying *hineni*, “Here I am for you.” Moreover, Levinas notes, the thousand years of history between Sinai and the Persian exile were filled with the difficult consequences and suffering resulting *from* that first acceptance of the Torah. In re-accepting it at Purim, we do so in full cognizance of its price.

In this light, I also find Rashi’s comment even more poignant: the motivation for reaccepting the Torah was “from love of the miracle.” Acceptance out of love, and in a time of threatened mass annihilation. For Purim is, in its own way, a holiday made for a postmodern sensibility: a holiday of masks, inversions, comic mockery, concealment of God whose name is never even mentioned in the *Megillah*. For the rabbis to make out of this a second Sinai is an act of hermeneutical genius and profound theology.

This is the continuing task of any Jewish theology, of course, to continue Sinai. The great climactic scene at Sinai filled with thunder, lightning, and the Voice from heaven, is followed in the biblical narrative by a seeming let down: the minutiae of law regarding goring oxen, Hebrew bondmen, and so forth. Then come the long seemingly tedious narratives of the building of the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle, descriptions of its boards and nails, the dress of the high priests; and then we proceed on into the book of *VaYikra* (Leviticus) and its elaborate descriptions of the sacrificial system. These are the parts I usually skip when I teach “The Bible as Literature” to my mostly non-Jewish undergraduates. But perhaps this is a mistake. For these are also the parts that are so distinctly Jewish, ways in which the elevated abstractions are brought into the concrete world. This is what *halakhah* is: Second Sinai, the continuation of the voice of God echoing through the voice of human interpretation, and the extension of the revelation into the seemingly most mundane aspects of human life.

For revelation cannot remain an awesome inchoate Presence. It needs to be concretized and brought into the realm of the everyday. A student of mine once made a startling comment about the prosaic ending of the book of Job. After the voice from the Whirlwind, the text returns to a strange, prose episode which matter-of-factly recounts that God restored to Job double what he had lost; Job became wealthy, Job remarried, had many new sons and daughters, lived to a ripe old age and “died, old and full of days.” My students are often offended by this ending. After God has taken everything away and tormented Job unfairly and then made a thundering speech from the Whirlwind, what is this, they ask indignantly? Some kind of attempt at recompense? How could that ever make up for all his suffering? But this one student said: No. One cannot continue to exist on the level of the Voice from the whirlwind. One has to come back into daily life. Remember the Voice, be transformed by it, but come back to living day-to-day in the prosaic rounds of family life. A more “orthodox” way of saying



all this would be to characterize it as the “Will of God.” The divine will must manifest itself and be reflected in the minutiae of daily life. Where else should it manifest itself? Where else do we make a *mishkan*, a holy dwelling for God, if not in those areas of life most central to human finite existence: food, dwelling, clothes, sex, economics?

Our Jewish postmodern world is a post-*shoah*, post-Whirlwind world as well. And the hermeneutic theories of postmodernism have helped us gain a new appreciation of the radicality of rabbinic ways of reading and rereading. These insights fortify me on my own path of *teshuvah*. But it is not just in the realm of *aggadah* that humans are partners with God; that partnership has always been part of the traditional *halakhic* imperative. That is the whole notion of the Oral Torah. It is a caricature to describe the classical notion of “*Torah Mi Sinai*” as something handed down by a dictatorial God who takes away autonomy.

#### THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY: THE SERMON

But somehow, I do not think I have persuaded you. The problem is not so much with these general ideas. It is really, I have a hunch, the notion of authority that bothers you. “Why,” you ask “should thinking Jews consider giving up their self-determination to follow the rulings of decisors who have Jewish learning, but otherwise no greater access to God’s present will than the rest of us posses?”<sup>12</sup>

I may have been sounding as if I were giving a sermon, and as a rabbinical practitioner of that genre yourself, allow me to indulge that impulse even further. (Although I could also justify myself by saying, along with the rhetorical theorist Richard Weaver, that all language, is in a way, sermonic . . . or with Levinas that all language is apologetic . . . an address to the other which attempts to persuade and justify.)

So here is a sermon that comes from my own particularly located Jewish life in Washington, D.C. from my own Rabbi, Barry Freundel of Keshet Israel, the Georgetown Synagogue. One Shabbat, he made an intriguing distinction between “power” and “authority” during one of the winter weeks when we were reading the early parts of Exodus in the cycle of Torah readings. Pharaoh has “power,” he claimed, but no “authority”; Moses has “authority” but not “power.” What does this mean? Pharaoh,

the paradigmatic political authoritarian, speaks the language of “power.” Like contemporary anti-Semites, he has an exaggerated fear of “Jewish power,” far in excess of the reality of Jewish social position and influence. In coming to Pharaoh, Moses does not speak the language of “power,” but asks instead that the Jews be allowed to go to the desert to sacrifice to their God. Rabbi Freundel preached:

It must be understood that the Bible does not take an anti-power stance, nor is it a “meek shall inherit the earth morality,” but it is a recognition that power is not the ultimate good and that when used, power is to be used in service to the true *summum bonum*—a proper relationship to God.

Jewish literature challenges a power-centered ethos—as we are often reminded in the prophetic literature: “not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit,” says God. As a people, we survived for thousands of years without land and traditional kinds of power, and this makes us seem inversely magically powerful to those who only worship power. (Needless to say, I must add that, with the rise of the State of Israel, one of the primary challenges for Jews today is how to deal with power. Some of our post-modern Jewish disorientation is caused by the loss of the image of Israel as vulnerable, agricultural, pioneer state, and the disintegration of the 100 year-old ideology of pioneer Zionism. Israeli culture today is undergoing its own radical questioning of all its traditional norms. And the Israel of 1996 is a highly industrialized, high-tech, global competitor. That old icon of the kibbutz in shorts and peaked cap should be updated by sticking a cellular phone in his ear.)

But the key part of Rabbi Freundel’s drasha related to the redefinition of power and authority: “Today in many circles,” he said, “everything—politics, religion, literature, the family—is discussed only in terms of the power relationships involved. Hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and so forth, . . . is all about the language of power. . . . What has been lost is, first, the Jewish opposition to seeing the world only in terms of the dynamics of power. Second we have lost the distinction between power and authority.” Citing Eric Fromm, he defined authority not as a quality one has, but “an interpersonal relationship in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him. Put another way, while power is a quality that flows from the top down and carries with it coercion and



tyranny, authority comes from the bottom up and begins with the acceptance of something larger and better.” This dynamic is modeled in the relation between Sinai and Purim: When the Jews at Mt. Sinai say “We will do and we will obey” and re-confirm their acceptance of it in the days of Esther, they establish God’s authority. In other words, “God’s authority begins from those in a position of less authority accepting that something special exists in the higher authority. That legitimacy does not depend on power as superior strength but conveying of authority.” I move from my modern Orthodox rabbi to the contemporary Quaker educational theorist Parker Palmer, who has some eloquent and strikingly similar things to say about the relations among knowing, freedom, and obeying—and what it means to teach and to learn. Noting that the English word “obedience” does not mean slavish adherence, but comes from the Latin root *audire* which means to “listen,” Palmer writes:

At its root, the word “obedience” means not only “to listen” but “to listen from below.” How fascinating that this is also the common sense meaning of the word “understand,” which suggests that we know something by “standing under” it. Both obedience and understanding imply submitting ourselves to something larger than any one of us, something on which we all depend. Both imply subjecting us to the communal bonds of truth. The objectivist will doubtless argue that the personalist mode of knowing is dangerously subjective. But the complex of word and images I am exploring here opens up a new sense of what “subjective” knowledge might mean—for that word also means “to place under.” In that sense of the words, I *am* arguing for a subjective conception of truth, a truth to which we must subject our selves. Truth calls us to submit ourselves, to the community of which we are a part, to fidelity to those bonds of truth in which our truth resides.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, “truth is troth,” and Palmer uses the image of covenant to express this:

The English word “truth” comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to our word “troth,” as in the ancient vow, “I pledge thee my troth.” With this word, one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin the new knowing what our minds have put asunder. To know in truth is to become betrothed . . .<sup>14</sup>

I find in these words a wonderful “Quaker” dash on the rabbinic interpretation in *Shabbat 88a* of the Jews standing “at the underside of the mountain.” And they are words which echo your concern for Covenant. But I do not think that Covenant, as a binding over to the other, and the kind of “sacrificial ethic” you want to construct can find a firm basis in your model as you describe it in a crucial passage:

Here the “law” (*nomos*) arises from what freely passes between two fully dignified selves, neither subordinate to the other, each making its claim on the other simply by the act of relating. . . . What, then does God “reveal” if not a detailed teaching that legend says has been kept in Heaven since before the creation? God makes known just what we make known in a relationship: self, or more familiarly, presence.<sup>15</sup>

Yes, as you say, the parameters of the Covenant have to emerge out of the relationship. But there are symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. This was part of Levinas’ dispute with Buber over the nature of the “I-Thou” relation. For Levinas, the primary relation to the other is asymmetrical and modeled on the Jews’ proclamation at Sinai, *na’aseh ve-nishmah*, “We will do and we will hear.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, I am *first* called by and bound over to the other; only after (and as a result) of that primary binding do I then become the “equal” of the other, in a symmetrical relation. Otherwise, there’s ultimately an eternal war of competing “I”s, of power interests. The other is not just my friend, lover, partner, but also my Teacher. One who calls to me from a height. Or as, Parker Palmer says “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.”<sup>17</sup> Which leads me to my next section.

#### RAV-TALMID

Let me restate your question again: “Why,” you ask “should thinking Jews consider giving up their self-determination to follow the rulings of decisors who have Jewish learning but otherwise no greater access to God’s present will than the rest of us possess?”<sup>18</sup> What, indeed, is Jewish learning? “This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but you should meditate on it day and night”<sup>19</sup> *Ve-hagita bo yomam VaLila*.



[ההגשטה בו ייחוס ולידה]. Jewish learning is also the Jewish path to God. As Levinas notes, the end of the *aggadic* discussion of the scene at Sinai and the *na'aseh ve-nishma* in *Shabbat 88a* has a sectarian mocking the sage Rava whom he observes buried in study, holding his fingers beneath his foot so tightly that blood spurted from it. The sectarian mocks the sage for belonging to a people whose mouth was too quick to speak and accept the Torah: first, he says, you should have listened to see if you could accept and fulfill, not the obverse. As Levinas interprets it, study, the forceful exercise of intellect—so forceful that blood is spurting from Rava's fingers in his intense concentration—comes after and as result of the *na'aseh*, the “we will do,” the primary acceptance of obligation.<sup>20</sup>

But true Jewish “learning” is not something one possesses like an exterior piece of property. Not a list of publications on a CV. The true teacher is not simply a repository of knowledge, but an embodiment and performer of that knowledge (and this parallels a postmodern definition of knowledge as performative relation). Perhaps this is why the rabbis talk about the importance of *shimush hakham* [שמורש חכם]—attending to, or serving one's teacher: “Who is ignorant [*am ha-aretz*]. He who has studied scriptures and mishna, but has not attended or served the scholars.”<sup>21</sup> This is not a slavish, mindless act, but a way of learning by attending to the personhood of the Rav. Torah cannot be obtained only from books or by oneself or through one's “inner light.” It is not a “knowledge” in that sense, as I have argued elsewhere. “Greater than the learning of Torah is the attending upon Torah scholar” *Gdolah shimush ha Torah yoter mi-limudah* [גדולה שמורש התורה יותר מלימודה].<sup>22</sup>

And, of course, there is the famous talmudic story of R. Akiva who followed his teacher Rav Yehoshua into the bathroom, and Rav Kahana who hid under the bed of his teacher Rav. Asked how they dared to observe such private activities, they answered, “It [his deeds] are Torah, and I must learn.”<sup>23</sup>

In all our academic discussions of the hermeneutics of Oral Torah, we tend to forget that ultimately it is also the word made personal by being mediated through another: through the living voice, face, and being of the teacher. Not the assertion of absolutist authority, but the recognition that knowledge has a face. We are not the People of the Book; we are the People of the *mouth*. It was the Muslims who dubbed us the “People of the Book.” That is a mistake and misnomer. Books are fixed,

rigid. For us, The Oral Torah illumines, breathes voice and life and personal presence into the Written Torah through the collective voices of the teachers and their students through the generations whose dialogues and debates it records. And with whom we converse and add our voice every time we pick up a Talmud or Mishna or Mikraot Gedolot and study. (I often feel that the most appropriate rhetorical form for my “Jewish voice” would be as commentary on classical Jewish texts, commentary which retains its orality.) After all, the root meaning of Torah is “teaching.” In the *Sefat Emet*, Yehuda Arie Leib, the Rebbe of Ger, comments as follows on the phrase from the “Woman of Valor” hymn in Proverbs 31:13: “She seeks out wool and flax to work willingly with her hands”: the image of the woman creating a great tapestry out of simple materials parallels the Jewish people who are like a silk-worm that spins exquisite strands of silk from its mouth. That is the Torah *she b'al peh*—the Torah “of the mouth”—the thoughts that Jewish scholars of all generations will generate from their mouth.

I think one of the paradigms we need to develop further for a Jewish postmodernism is not the Buberian “I-Thou” but rather the Rav-Talmid (Teacher-Disciple) relation. This constructs the kind of “authority” that is granted by those “below” to those “above” in recognition of some superior quality. Moses, after all is not referred to as “Moses our Prophet,” but “Moses, our Teacher,” Moshe Rabbeinu. The Rav-Talmid relation is also a bond of love. Thus do Maimonides and Bertinoro comment on the famous line from *Pirke Avot*, 5:16; “Any love that depends on a specific consideration, when the consideration vanishes, the love ceases; but if it is not dependent on a specific consideration—it will never cease.” What love is that?—the love between student and teacher because it is based on the wisdom of Torah. It is striking that the great Torah teachers do not seem to be solitary monologists. They come paired with disciples. There is always a Rav and Talmid together: Moses and Joshua; Elijah and Elisha; the Ari and Rav Chaim Vital; Rabbi Nachman and Rav Nosson (maybe even Ruth and Naomi). They are defined by the one they are bound to. There is here a mutuality, there is a co-creation. Teacher and disciple, as Rabbi Nachman said, are like the form of the letter aleph [א]—two *yuds*, one above and one below connected by a *vav*. And teacher and disciple are shifting roles into which every Jew is constantly cycling. Again *Pirke Avot* 6:3: “He who learns from his companion even one chapter, one rule, one



verse, one word, or even one letter is obliged to treat him with respect. David, the king of Israel, only learned two things from Achitophel and yet called him master, guide, friend.”

But somehow I feel as if we are still going over old issues. You will probably say that I have given a very idealized description. You could easily point to rigid notions of authority and *halakhah* that have led to oppressive and mindless fundamentalisms. So could I. And, of course, there is the difficult experience of Jews in Israel where rabbinic authority has become allied to power politics and created a kind of religious coercion from which we Diaspora Jews do not suffer.

But perhaps we can understand this fundamentalist reaction as itself a shadow creature of modernity, part of that old “modernist” debate between heteronomy and autonomy that we need desperately to move beyond. Let me try to explain. The kinds of scholarly tools your seminary teachers taught to you to apply to Jewish texts, with all their emphasis on “empirical fact,” “critical-scientific approaches,” “accurate historical reconstruction” of religious texts: all that is itself a kind of literalist mentality which sparks a flip side—an equally literalist fundamentalist, defensive response.

As the brilliant rhetorical theorist Chaim Perelman has observed, the skeptic and fanatic are flip sides of the same coin; they both hold that the only criteria for truth are those which are “absolute and indubitable.” The skeptic thinks that no one can fulfill the criteria: whereas the fanatic thinks he or she indeed has done so. When truth is defined differently—postmoderns might say “contextually” or “rhetorically,” or as a function of the dynamic between community, text, and interpreter, or perhaps kabbalistically as beyond all ontologies of presence and absence—then one can begin to escape that dire binary opposition and come to new affirmations. Or as you put it so well, being postmodern means to become “skeptical of skepticism.” And this is the path some of the most interesting twentieth-century Jewish thinkers have taken. For example, the extraordinary first chief rabbi of Israel, mystic, poet, and theologian, Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook, who wrote that all the forces of secular modernity have a holy source and come to purify the crude materialization of faith:

The fact that we conceive of religious faith in a distorted form, petty and dark, is responsible for atheism’s rise to influence. This is the reason that the

providential pattern of building the world includes a place for atheism, and its related notions. It is to stir to life the vitality of faith in every heart, so that religious faith be brought to its highest levels . . . by including the good that is embraced in the theoretical conceptions of atheism, religious faith reaches its fullest perfection.<sup>24</sup>

#### TZIMTZUM—CROSSING THE VOID

I reread what I have written. From the confusion of my beginnings, I see a pattern has emerged, and that I have been more or less following the traditional Jewish exegetical path of the four levels of interpretation: *peshat*, *remez*, *drash*, *sod*—from the literal, to the intertextual, to the homiletic. Rav Kook now leads me to the last level, *sod*, the *mystical*.

For is it only postmodernism that has taught us about ruptures, radical reinterpretation, alternative epistemologies and ontologies, the need for revealing a new face to the Torah? Wasn’t that also the project of Kabbalah and Chassidut? As Arthur Green has argued, we err greatly by restricting study of Jewish responses to modernity only to the line of thinkers who came from and reacted to the heritage of German philosophy—figures such as Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, Levinas, Scholem, and others. Of course, Kabbalah and Chassidism played a key role in modernist Jewish revival—in Buber’s retellings of the Chassidic tales, in Scholem’s academic investigations of Jewish mysticism, and so forth. But as Edith Wyschogrod has pointed out, this was a Chassidism formed in the image of German romantic reaction to modernity. And it is time for a “postmodern reappropriation of Chassidic texts. One which understands their deep roots in kabbalistic ways of thinking about God’s withdrawals and absences, about fragmentation, shattering of the vessels, exile and repair.”<sup>25</sup> For these are indeed tales and teachings which speak to a post-*shoah* world. Yet the discourse of Chassidism is all too often characterized as “pre-modern.” Yehuda Mirsky makes a fine distinction when he says that thinkers like Rav Kook and the author of the *Sefat Emet*, spoke to the felt “experience of” modernity, although they did not speak the “language of” modernity.

It is interesting to me, Gene, that you use one of the fundamental kabbalistic metaphors, that of the *tzimtzum*, to describe one of your central “postmodern” moves:



I am setting forth the postmodern, yet rabbinic position that a determinedly self-reliant self can never become properly human. We need to have a certain realism about our limits if only so that we can appreciate how individuality implies community, not only with other people but with G-d. Acknowledging this would allow for a reverse *tzimtzum*, a sufficient contraction of our human self-importance that would leave room in our lives for our community and for God's presence.<sup>26</sup>

The *tzimtzum* is the kabbalistic notion of God's primordial self-contraction in order to open up a space, a void, *halal panui*, in which the finite universe could be created. (I find it interesting that the "Ari," Rav Isaac Luria developed this notion in sixteenth century Tzfat coincident with the rise of early modern Europe. The modernist focus on the self seems to here already have its postmodern counter-echo in the Ari.) I am using "postmodernism" here not only to specify a certain historical or cultural moment—which it is—but also a certain sensibility. The Vacated space of Kabbalah becomes for me another metaphor for modernity's shattering of the vessels, absence of God, withdrawal, fragmentation. A Jewish postmodernism would come to help repair those vessels, but recognize that can only be done by first inhabiting the cracks, ruptures, fissures. And that ultimate repair belongs to a horizon beyond all our conceptual systems.

You, too, propose a "reverse *tzimtzum*" as a necessary step for that *tikkun*, an emptying out of the self on the model of God's emptying out of himself in order to create a world. What, then, is the content of that self? Or as we might ask in contemporary literary theory, "How is subjectivity constructed?" A Chassidic interpretation notes that the letters that compose the Hebrew word for "I" [אני] *aleph, nun, yud*, when rearranged, spell "nothingness" [אין] *ayin, yud, nun*. If modernism gazes into the self and finds an abyss that terrifies, postmodernism accepts with equanimity that lack and seeks to turn that void inside out, so to speak. To cross and recross it. Without the voice of God, though, that emptied, contracted self can become the cynical laugh of a character from Beckett or a self trying to fill itself through games of power and sexuality as in Foucault. But if Divine selfhood is itself manifested in *tzimtzum*, self-contraction, then the void becomes the source of ethics, an emptying out of self to give to the other.

Among those Chassidic masters who knew how to inhabit that void,

spoke from it, and tried to cross and recross, was the inimitable Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. As I move here to the level of *sod*, the "mystical" meaning, I find myself again dealing with those same texts about Exodus and Sinai that have been presenting themselves to me throughout my meditation. Rabbi Nachman has an extraordinary teaching in his *Likkutei Moharan*, #64 on "*Bo el Paroah*." God tells Moses in Exodus 10:1–3, 24: "Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and his servants' hearts, so that I may place these, my signs, in their midst; and that you may tell your son and your son's son how I made sport of Egypt, and my signs that I performed among them; that you may know that I am God." Rabbi Nachman's exposition is quite complex, and I can here give only a small piece of it. He interprets the word "Pharaoh" to refer precisely to the Vacated space, the *halal* created by the *tzimtzum*. The word *paroah* [פֶּרַח], he says, comes from a root meaning "annihilation" and "removal" as in Exodus 5:4, where the Pharaoh says to Moses "You have removed (*tafriu*) the people from their work." And it is also related to the root meaning "uncovering and revealing."

So, says Rabbi Nachman, in the Vacated space, from which God has withdrawn, there arise all the philosophical questions which have no answer, which pain, and confuse us . . . and in which our hearts become hardened. But Rabbi Nachman then interprets the name "*Hebrew*" [עברי]—*ivri*—in a reparative sense as coming from the root *iver* [עבר]. In this sense, it means "to cross over, or ford some space," thus signifying that the Jews, the Hebrews—*ivri'im*—have the task and power to cross the void created by the *tzimtzum*, the empty space where God is absent. And that is also why God is called in Exodus 5:3. "God of the Hebrews." The root also yields the word *ever* [עבר] meaning the "sides" of a river. In the Lurianic notion of the *tzimtzum*, the empty space is created by the image of God contracting his light to the "sides."

The notion of this Vacated space, an absence where there is also yet a presence of God, is an epistemological and ontological paradox, unsolvable in terms of human intellect. Needless to say, a postmodern world, a post-Shoah world, is one in which we seem to be in an empty place from which God is withdrawn and absent. Postmodernism in its deconstructive modes leads us right into this emptiness: this undoing of the notion of solid being, this vision of flickering presence in absence. The key question is, How do we find God there? Rabbi Nachman reminds us that somehow God is still "there" in the void ; for without some trace of the



divine creative power to give it “life,” even the Void could not exist. This, too, is a paradox unresolvable through human reason. For Rabbi Nachman, only the great *tzaddikim*, the most holy and righteous ones, can fully enter that Void and cross over without falling into confusion, doubt, and heresy. And so, Moses has to *come to Pharaoh, to the place* where God cannot be found, to ford the void, cross to the other side.

In the confusion of the Vacated space, there is silence, a level of thought that is beyond words. And this silence is the meaning of Moses’ experience as related in the Talmud, *Menachot 29b*, in the story of Moses’ anachronistically witnessing a vision of the death of Rabi Akiva and questioning God in anguish: “Is this the Torah and its reward?” The response: “Be silent, so it was conceived in thought.” Moses, as he describes himself in Exodus 4:10, is *chavad peh u-chavad lashon*, “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” In Rabbi Nachman’s interpretation, this relates to the level of silence beyond speech. It is a kind of silence necessary to be able to “Come to Pharaoh,” to come into the Vacated space. For he has to find in that space the traces, the signs, the letters, the fragments that will enable creation. And this, too, is the task and power of Israel, the *Ivri’im*, who through their *emunah*, their faith, cross the void. On this level, beyond speech, Moses comes to song, for every form of wisdom according to Rabbi Nachman has its own song and melody. And the song of *emunah* that crosses the Vacated space is the meaning of the Song Moses sings in Exodus 15 after the Jews crossed the Red Sea.

And here Rabbi Nachman gives an extraordinary interpretation of *machloket*—dispute, argument, rabbinic debate—which he says, enacts the same process of Creation. In the *tzimtzum*, God withdraws light to the sides and creates the Vacant space; only in this way can a finite creation occur without being absorbed and nullified by God’s infinite light. Similarly, through dispute, the sages separate and “go to the sides,” forming a Vacated space. The words of their disputes then enter this space and become part of the act of Creation. Rabbi Nachman’s “proof-text” is a creative re-reading of Isaiah 51:16: “I have placed my words in your mouth . . . that I may plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth, and say to Zion you are my people *ami* [עמי].” The Zohar (introduction 5a) says, “Read the word not as *ami* “my people” but *imi* “with me,” meaning to be a collaborator with Me; just as I can create heaven and earth through my Words, so can you.”

## WHERE DOES IT ALL LEAD

Rabbi Nachman’s ideas on debate, language, song, silence, Vacated space take up all the themes I have been preoccupied with in my meditation. I look back and see that I have been arguing for the need for postmodern Jewish thought to reconstruct the shattered vessels of authority, *halakhah*, faith. It often happens that friends and readers of my academic work are surprised when they hear me speak in these terms. They assume that a person who wrote books about deconstruction and who is a contemporary Jewish woman would seek to “deconstruct *halakhah*,” or practice the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and write critiques of modern Judaism in terms of gender, class, race, not quote Rabbi Nachman or argue that Chassidut is postmodern. The academic forms of postmodernism I encounter in contemporary literary and cultural theory generally value “transgression, subversion, interrogation”; these, too, are moves into the Vacated space, ways of clearing space, but they do not take that next step; they do not help me cross the Void, give me a song.

So how, I ask myself, is the way in which I quote and learn from Rabbi Nachman different from that of a “pre-modern” reader? In the end, I find all these labels ill-fitting and outmoded: “Orthodox/non-Orthodox; *Halakhah/Aggadah*; Heteronomy/Autonomy.” The postmodern sensibility is skeptical of Grand Ideologies, and to use its jargon, “essentialist identities.” “History” itself is no longer seen as a unitary, progressive, linear narrative, but a shifting constellation of relations between past and present, events and their interpretations. All the great totalizing systems of the nineteenth century have broken apart: Communism, Socialism, even Zionism. (I am amused to read that in China today, the weekly *Computer News* sells more copies than the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party.) Yet in contemporary culture, the dissolution of Grand Ideology has also engendered a severe backlash, a regression to the most primitive forms of ethnic and nationalist self-assertion, untouched by any postmodern ironic self-consciousness or epistemological skepticism.

So let me rephrase my question to myself: With what accent or intonation does a postmodern speak? What is the song? An accent is a certain pattern of stress in the sound of the voice. A sound that gives the voice a different melody, a different rhythm. The postmodern accent may place



its stresses more on points of rupture and try to construct its melody out of fragments and pieces; it, too, is self-contracted. For Rabbi Nachman, only those of the stature of Moses, the paradigm of the great *tzaddik*, could safely enter the Void. But we ordinary postmodern Jews have already been thrust into it. Each of us is also called to “come to Pharaoh”; and each of us is also “slow of speech” like Moses. We stutter in the Vacated space, yet we do not seek prematurely to fill or negate it. Nevertheless, we need to remember that we are *Ivriim*, that we must cross and re-cross that void. We do so not only with the complex words of our academic debates and disputes, but also with our silence and our *emunah*. For there is something of the “pre-modern” in both of us, Gene: in the way we both understand that there is indeed a wisdom of faith in Israel, in a certain song and melody beyond words. How else can one articulate the *En Sof*, the endless Infinite One beyond all representation, ideology, who somehow yet surrounds the world, and can be traced in the Vacant space?

So I deeply respond to those moments in your book when you speak of your *emunah* in simple terms. And to the conditions in which it was sparked . . . a moment in a Manhattan fast food restaurant when the *halakhic* prescription to saying a blessing over a sandwich causes a flickering transfiguration of a mundane reality.<sup>27</sup> As you write:

As an adult, I have been conscious of the Transcendent coming directly into my life. Sometimes it has been fairly clear and definite; mostly it has been general and unspecific; always, as I have reflected on it, it has been unspectacular and ordinary. Often my awareness has come as a result of study, observance, prayer, or interaction with people; but mostly, my direct, personal exposure to Divinity has helped me grasp the spiritual depth of these somewhat indirect experiences rather than the other way around.<sup>28</sup>

And as you so eloquently say, an idea of God for Jews “must make a life with God possible . . . not just in their lives as members of corporate Israel but as individual Jews and persons as well. Life with God means a life of personal piety, in which we see all our experiences, our failures as well as our activism, in divine perspective. . . . It means a life of prayer in which we can speak to God out of the fullness of what we are and long for . . .”<sup>29</sup>

I also respond to the wish so poignantly expressed towards the end of

your book: “High on my list of things I wish for in Jewish life today is the existence of Jews who regularly share ordinary intimacy with God. The simplicity of these encounters will refresh the appreciation of the genius of the prophets, psalmists, and other biblical authors whose spirituality could not borrow, as ours does, from the prior experience of millennia.”<sup>30</sup> So now I ask myself, after all the time and energy I have spent writing this, how do all these issues, finally, relate to *amcha*? To the mass of our fellow Jews who have never read Cohen, Derrida, Levinas, Rosenzweig, Buber, or heard of Deconstruction, or post-Zionism or Shevirat Ha-Kelim? And to the mass of non-Jews, who as you rightly point out, also have the covenant of Noah with God?

I am struck forcefully by the great “spiritual thirst” in American culture. I see it in my students, the adults I teach in Jewish education classes, even in the bestseller lists. I see and hear it almost everywhere, in quite unexpected and startling everyday encounters. I go pick up a package at the front desk of my apartment building and engage the African-American woman who works there in a casual conversation. I know she lives with her ailing mother and ask how her mother’s diabetes is, and somehow she begins talking to me about how throughout all her own hardships, she has “learned to trust God, that even in what seems to be the darkness, God is there.” I go to my health club and see the soft-spoken fiftyish, carefully coifed and made up blonde woman with the Texas accent who has recently started working out. I have had a few casual conversations with her and I try to persuade her not to drive herself so hard in her workouts since she does not seem to be enjoying them. “You’re a very determined person, I see. You don’t give up.” She responds, “That is the only way I’ve gotten through the hard times.” She tells me of a husband who left after thirty-seven years of marriage and a son who died of brain cancer at the age of ten. Her face is pained; suddenly she says, “God got me through it. It’s only in the desert that you find out what you are made of, not on the mountaintop.” And she tells me how she begins her day reading the Bible, how much that helps her.

I have similar unexpected encounters with the hairdresser, the boutique manager, the taxicab driver, the secretary in my office. These are all non-Jews; their sense of God is strong and intimate, something many of my Jewish friends, even the learned ones, lack. I learn much from these people, as much as I learn from my academic colleagues who are engaged in talk



about epistemological skepticism and bent on “demystifying” and “unmasking” oppressive ideologies. I do not consider the people I encounter in my daily rounds mystified, or oppressed. Each of them crosses their own void.

Today, people are looking desperately for God and for a communal and personal expression of that connection. We jostle against one another in this postmodern, multicultural world, which is secular only on the surface. This is what “fundamentalists” do not understand; they are still fighting a “modernity” that has already exhausted itself. But “postmodern” thinkers also need to be equally carefully not to negate the deep spiritual resources in what seems to be “pre-modern” but is only so on the surface. The Divine light is refracted through many prisms. And any postmodern Jewish thought must be able to address common human experiences of pain, loneliness, confusion, yearning, sorrow. A postmodern Judaism must be open to the voice of the other.

Two years ago, when I was on sabbatical in Jerusalem waiting at a bus stop in one of the more religious neighborhoods, a young boy of about eight, dressed in black, with peyot and yarmulke saw me reading an Israeli secular newspaper. “*Asur*” he said to me (Forbidden). He had been taught that the world “outside” was threatening, profane, forbidden. We take this to be a “pre-modern,” fundamentalist attitude. At first, I was rather irritated; then I thought about it some more and remembered one of my favorite quotes from a famous writer whose life encompassed the breakdown of the traditional Eastern-European world of Jewish piety in the late nineteenth century, and lived long through its aftermath: “In our home,” wrote I. B. Singer, “the ‘world’ itself was *treif*. Many years were to pass before I began to sense how much sense there was in this attitude.”

#### CONCLUSION

R. Yohanan said: “Anyone who reads without a melody or repeats Mishnah without a song, of him Scripture says, ‘And also I have given them bitter laws.’”<sup>31</sup> *Megillah 32a*

Hezekiah should have been the Messiah, but since he did not say *shira* after he had been miraculously saved, he was not worthy to be the Messiah. *Sanhedrin 94a*

A song for the Sabbath day.  
It is good to thank God  
and to sing praise to your Name, Most high  
To proclaim Your kindness at daybreak,  
and your faithfulness each night.  
Upon a ten-stringed instrument and lute  
in meditation [*higayyon*] upon the harp.<sup>32</sup>

But only in the Torah of God is his desire,  
And in his Torah he meditates [*yehegeh*] day and night.<sup>33</sup>

Rava said that at the beginning of this verse, the Torah was called after the name of the Holy One Blessed be He [Torah of God]. But at the end of the verse, it is called “his Torah,” that is, after the name of the student who has studied it.<sup>34</sup>

This, then, is my Torah. I wanted my *hagut*, my “meditation” to fully comprehend all the subtle senses and interconnections of the Hebrew word: to connect the head to the mouth, logic to liturgy, speech to song, thought to prayers. But how could I do all that in a written essay? I would have had to write a *midrash*, or a prayer, or like Rabbi Nachman compose a *niggun* or a tale.

For, finally, to write an essay is to have an audience. But an audience is not the same thing as a community. Jewish reading comes out of Jewish being together and that means so many things. Among them, the doing of *mitzvot* together, and the singing of the *davenning* together, and the eating of the Sabbath and holiday meals together . . . the consolations of friends in times of trouble, and the exultation of friends in times of joy.

Universities call themselves “communities,” but they are so only in a very superficial sense. Our academic discourse, even our sophisticated postmodern theories of discourse are so soundless, missing so many dimensions of language. Phillis Levin, a colleague and distinguished poet, once told my students that reading a poem out loud and hearing the rhythm are often what give you the understanding of the things you can’t figure out. Perhaps this is also what Rosenzweig understood so well with his claim that the Song of Songs is the focal book of revelation. The “meanings” of a song cannot be gotten just from reading the lyrics on the



page; they are often flat and senseless; one has to hear the song performed; meaning comes as much from the rhythms, the crying out of the singer, the *krivah*.

The *halakhot* of writing *shira* (song) as part of a sacred text such as a *sefer Torah* require that the *shiroth* be written with large spaces between the phrases. Every phrase is distanced from another by a certain kind of space, “a space on top of a brick” as the Talmud describes it. For every phrase written, one leaves a blank space parallel to it. These blanks take me back to the *halal*, the Vacated space: the place where our frameworks, conceptions, ontologies, epistemologies, all our “isms” fail us. These are the gaps, the blanks, the fissures we live with in a postmodern world. We bridge them only with a certain kind of *emunah*, or we at least imagine what crossing and recrossing those spaces might be, if only in the sounds without words. The Hebrew root for *emunah*, *aleph, mem, nun* [אמנ] signifies “confidence, trust,” and in the verbal forms, can mean “to train or educate” “foster, nurse, bring up”; in the noun forms, *aman* means artist; *uman* “craftsman.” This philology teaches us that *emunah*, faith, is also not “blind”; it is a craft, a skill and it needs to be educated, trained, nursed.

Academic systems of thought and theories of discourse come and go . . . and fairly quickly. There will, no doubt, soon be a “post-postmodernism,” which will probably be called the “New . . . X.” (The eminent literary and cultural theorist, Frederic Jameson, has already announced that we are beyond “postmodernism.”) And the blindnesses of our own work will be incisively analyzed by those who will come later, in the same way that we at present critique the blindnesses of “modernist” thought. I think you sense this as much as I, Gene. Your own postmodernism, like mine, is provisional and instrumental; may we both continue to sanctify it in the service of renewing the Jewish people’s Covenant with God.

The following story is told of the Rebbe of Mezritch: A stranger once came and knocked on his front door. The Rebbe asked, “Who is there?” The response was, “I.” The Rebbe was shocked that a Jew could utter “I” so easily. “I? How can you say such a thing?” The Rebbe opened the door and invited the stranger inside. He asked if he had eaten yet and, upon receiving an answer in the negative, told the guest, “Go to such-and-such a place, a certain distance from here, and eat there.” Since the Rebbe had instructed him thus, the Jew went on his way. The road was long and tiring,

and he walked and walked, becoming covered with dust along the way. After a hard journey he arrived at the place, filthy and exhausted. A wedding was just about to begin in the village and, as was the custom, a festive meal was offered at the site for the poor. The man joined the poor guests and ate with them. At the end of the meal it was discovered that a silver spoon was missing. Immediately, all suspicion was focused on this Jew, since he was the only stranger, and everyone turned to him accusingly: “You stole!” The Jew replied, “Not I!” They continued to torment him and accuse him, and he steadfastly repeated, “Not I! Not I!” Eventually he managed to escape from them, and started his journey back towards the Rebbe, wondering all the way what the Rebbe’s reason could have been for sending him to that place. He arrived at the Rebbe’s house, knocked on the door, and once again the Rebbe asked, “Who is there?” The Jew was about to answer “I,” as he had been accustomed to do, but suddenly he caught himself and answered, “Not I.” Only through suffering and pain had the message penetrated his consciousness—now he knew that he was “not I.” There is only one “I”—and that is . . .

## NOTES

1. Eugene B. Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), p. 301.
2. E.g.: Isa. 31; 33:18; 38:14; 90:9; Ps. 19:15; 37:30; 35:28; 63:5,7; 71:24; 77:13; 92:3,4; 115:7; see Rashi on Josh. 1:8–9; Ps. 1:2; 63:7; 37:30.
3. *Berachot* 20b; *Eruvin* 54a; *Shulkhan Aruch* Ha-Rav, Orach Chayim 62:3.
4. Referring to P. Ochs, “Compassionate Postmodernism: An Introduction to Rabbinic Semiotics,” *Soundings* 76.1 (Spring, 1993): 139–52.
5. Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant*, p. 44.
6. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 2nd ed. 1930, Trans. William Hallo (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), p. 176.
7. Peter Pitzele, *Our Father’s Wells: A Personal Encounter with the Myth of Genesis* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995), pp. 90–91.
8. Ex. 19:17.
9. Esth. 9:27.
10. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 30–50.