SUSAN HANDELMAN

"Torments of an Ancient Word": Edmond Jabès and the Rabbinic Tradition

First I thought I was a writer. Then I realized I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished the writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word. (*RB*, 195)

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled with him a man until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. And he said: "Let me go, for the day breaketh." And he said: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." And he said unto him: "What is thy name?" And he said: "Jacob." And he said: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel [i.e., he who strives with God]; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." (Gen. 32: 24–28)

At the origin, at the beginning of a people's collective memory and definition of itself, is an enigmatic struggle with a stranger of night. Henceforth, the people will be called by this name of struggle; the wounds of wrestling with God will be their history and their fate. And this name, according to the Genesis text, is a blessing: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel (i.e., "the face of God"): for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30). To see God is to court death, but to risk the perilous encounter and survive the struggle is to be blessed.

Maurice Blanchot in his brilliant essay "Être Juif" interprets Jacob's

struggle with the stranger as a paradigm of man's encounter with the Other—both the human and divine Other. For the human presence itself is "no less inaccessible, separate, and distant, than the Invisible Himself; [it] also confirms what is terrible about such a meeting whose outcome could only be agreement or death. Who sees God is in danger of dying. Who encounters the Other can relate himself to him by mortal violence or by the gift of the word."[1]

This struggle with God as Other, its violence, wounds, terror, is one of the central themes in the work of Edmond Jabès. Like the Biblical patriarch Jacob, Jabès has also tried to wrest from this dark encounter some word of blessing; his victory, if it can be said that he has one, is in the word wrested from God—his agony and defeat as well.

Jabès's struggle with exile, language, and the void, and his obsession with the place of that encounter—the Book—place him within the post-modern tradition. What is so striking about his work from *The Book of Questions* on, however, is his insistent identification of the situation of the modern writer with that of the Jew, as in the oft-cited quotation: "I talked to you about the difficulty of being Jewish, which is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same wearing out" (*BQ*, 122). Other writers, certainly, have alluded to the parallels between the condition of the Jew and that of the modern writer, but none has so strongly affirmed their fundamental identity.

The identification of Jew and writer is not, for Jabès, merely a convenient analogy or apt metaphor; it is the essence of his vision. In a godless and secular century stunned by its glimpse of the void, Jabès uncovers the haunting ghosts of theology long thought to have been laid to rest. Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God over a century ago, but Jabès's work testifies that it was the death only of a certain God, a classical God—or perhaps it would be better to say a certain aspect of God, the luminous, assuring guarantor of meaning. But with the demise of the "God of the philosophers," the other side of God, the shadow side, the enigmatic attacking stranger of night, has emerged to unsettle and struggle with man. Man, in turn, must now contend with both his bereavement over the death of the comforting God and the onslaughts of this "negative" side of God. And obviously, for the Jew after the Holocaust, this issue is not merely academic.

Is this predicament, however, solely modern? Most critics understand Jabès's identification of Jew and writer in light of the Jew's situation as exile, alien, wanderer in history, comforted only by his sacred text and his retreat into the world of the word, which become his only refuge and hope. The writer in the modern era, that is, has come to share the Jew's historic condition. Of course this is true, but it does not go far enough in explaining Jabès's work. For it is not only history that creates the refuge of the Text—the Sacred Text itself also creates and define's the Jew's history. Even in pre-exile times, the Jew is a wanderer and a nomad who finds his truth in wilderness and desert, who encounters the Other as absence and alienation, who struggles with God through language, dialogue, dispute, and questioning—from Abraham to Job.[2] That is to say, an important reason why Jabès so heavily leans on the language and vision of the Bible and the rabbis is his perception of the Jew's special relation to the word, to language, to truth, a relation that reaches beyond any relative historic condition, beyond even religious dogma—and that can instruct even the post-modern writer; both writer and Jew struggle with the "torments of an ancient word."

What, then, is this specifically Jewish concept of word and truth?

"And You Shall Be in the Book"

> Do I know, in my exile, what has driven me back through tears and time, back to the wells of the desert where my ancestors had ventured? There is nothing at the threshold of the open page, it seems, but this wound of a race born of the book, whose order and disorder are roads of suffering. Nothing but this pain, whose past and whose permanence is also that of writing. (*BQ*, 25–26)

> I will evoke the book and provoke the questions.
>
> If God is, it is because He is in the book. If sages, saints, and prophets exist, if scholars and poets, men and insects exist, it is because their names are found in the book. The world exists because the book does. (*BQ*, 31)

> "There is the Book of God, through which God questions himself. And there is the book of man. It is on the scale of God's."
>
> —Reb Rida (*BQ*, 20)

It is commonplace to describe the Jews as the "People of the Book," but

the Jewish conception of "the Book" is not often well understood, or is assimilated to a general notion of sacred books thought to be shared by most Western religions. Of course, one of the central contributions of the Jews to Western culture is this notion of a Divine Scripture, a text holy in all its details, the source of ultimate truth.[3] But there is a unique Jewish conception of the Divine Text, even though all our concepts of the "book" in the West are in some way related to the "Book of Books."[4]

First, the Hebrew word used most often to describe the sacred scripture of the Jews, "Torah," is not the equivalent of "Book," "Text," "Scripture," or "Bible." While encompassing all these meanings, it translates more accurately as "teaching" (from the root *ohr*—"light," and the verb *leharot*—"to illumine"). This word, Torah, obviously has different connotations from the others; it is more open-ended and flexible, more process than product. Moreover, for the Jew, Torah in its most profound sense means not only what is commonly accepted as the "Bible" but also all the rabbinic commentary attached to it. "Attached," however, is a misleading verb—for in what is certainly one of the most interesting and radical aspects of the Jewish concept of the Torah, all the later massive rabbinic commentary, debate, questioning, and reinterpretation of the Bible are also considered to be divinely given at Sinai: "All that a faithful disciple will expound in the future in front of his master was already given to Moses at Sinai" (Yer. Peah 6:2).

To make this concept clearer, we need to understand further that for Jewish tradition, the Torah is divided into two parts: Written and Oral. The *Written Torah* is that part conventionally thought of as the "Bible": the Five Books of Moses, the prophets, psalms, wisdom writings. The *Oral Torah* is the part that includes traditions and laws considered to be handed down from Sinai but not explicitly written into the Books of Moses—and the rabbis' interpretations and amplifications of Biblical laws and stories, their debates over these interpretations, the commentaries on these debates, the commentaries on the commentaries, and so on. This material was at first not written down but taught orally from generation to generation. Later, however, due to the difficult situation of the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. and the fear that this oral teaching might be lost, it was finally committed to writing. The *Mishnah,* compiled in the second century C.E., was a codification of the oral rabbinic law that supplemented biblical teaching. The interpretations and further debates over the meanings of the Mishnah which occurred over the next three centuries were called the *Gemara.* In broad terms, the Mishnah plus the Gemara constitute the *Talmud,* a word whose root *lamad* means to learn or teach and roughly translates as "the study," "the learning/ teaching of" the Torah.

The form Jabès chooses of a shifting, seemingly displaced colloquy of disparate voices trying to create a story that never quite gets told and yet seems to already have been told strongly parallels the format of the text of the Talmud. A given page of Talmud will present a statement of law from the Mishnah, and several rabbis will question it, reinterpret it, probe its possible meanings, question one another's interpretations. Commentators from different centuries and continents will enter the discourse, replying to each other as if all were contemporaries. In the world of the Talmud, rigid temporal and spatial distinctions collapse. And in the course of the discussion, there will be stories, digressions, tales, remembrances which appear to stray far from the original topic at hand. As with Jabès, the discourse is a mixed one containing philosophy, parable, aphorism, argument, dialogue, history, liturgy, and so forth. The edition of the Talmud's two-and-a-half million words that became its standard format was printed in 1520 in Venice: the Mishnah and Gemara were placed in a central column, with the commentaries, notes, emendations, appendices, cross-references surrounding and juxtaposed to each other in different sizes and type faces.

Like the scroll of the Torah, the text of the Talmud is not punctuated.[5] One already has to know the text and its peculiar way of speaking, its style and its shorthand, in order to read it. Despite the profusion of texts and interpretations, the rabbinic commentators of both Bible and Talmud held the mass of the Torah in their minds and assumed a similar familiarity on the part of their disciples. Thus they speak (as do the disjointed voices of Jabès) in a special kind of abbreviated, fragmented code language, where one or two words or a phrase suffices to indicate a whole train of thought. The story is already known without having to retell it, and yet problematic enough that it has to be constantly restudied and rethought—and also so revered that it must always be retold. Thus the world of the Torah and the books of Jabès are

profoundly "intertextual," to use a contemporary term, and both are not products but processes.[6] In fact, the first page of each tractate of the Talmud is numbered "2," never "1"—in order to teach, as one rabbinic interpretation goes, that no matter how much one has learned, he has never really begun.

In addition to Mishnah and Gemara, there was another major category of rabbinic interpretation called *Midrash,* from a root word meaning "to seek, inquire, search, investigate." While Mishnah was legal material independent of the biblical text, Midrash was exacting rabbinic exegesis of the biblical text itself and encompassed both legal and nonlegal material. Midrash intensively scans the rhetoric of the text; fragments it, takes it apart piece by piece and often word by word; plays with words, numerology, grammar, variant readings; fills in the lacunae. Midrash, for example, will supply motives and explanations where the text is ambiguous—such as reasons why the serpent tempted Eve, or what Cain and Abel quarreled over, or what kind of fruit it was that Adam and Eve ate.[7] Again, legend, history, parable, sermon, anecdote will be used, and varying conflicting interpretations will be juxtaposed without the concern the Talmud has for reconciling them. The relation of Midrashic interpolations to the original text range from very close to freely associative.

Scholars trace the beginnings of Midrash to the return of Ezra and his followers from the first Babylonian exile—a generation after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E.—when Ezra had to reinterpret and reestablish the centrality of the Torah for a people who had grown up in a strange land. Interpretation here is clearly connected to exile—though other scholars claim that Midrash is found already within the Bible. The Book of Deuteronomy, for instance, may be seen as an incipient Midrash on the first four books of Moses.[8]

The Talmud, in sum, is a vast compendium of law, folklore, legend, history, commentary, debate, and advice about every aspect of life; it is the heart of rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud is Oral Torah in its most general sense, and the activity of debating, commenting on, and questioning the text of the Talmud continues to this day. The extraordinary assertion of rabbinic thought is that this process of human interpretation is also from Sinai, is part of Torah as a divine, sacred, and authoritative teaching, not a secondary appendage. The relation between text

and commentary here, as in Jabès and contemporary literary theory, is not conventional; commentary is not neatly separated from and subordinated to text but rather asserts itself as a primary text of equal status and authority.

It follows, of course, that this stance gives the interpreter an immensely powerful and creative role. In place of a hierarchy of pronouncements is a colloquy of voices, whose dialogue, arguments, and commentaries subsume the original text. There is thus an inevitable tension between primary and secondary, creator and interpreter, decree and debate, command and question.

The Opening of the Book

> Man does not exist alone. God does not exist. The world alone exists through God and man in the open book. (*RB,* 236)

In the rabbinic view, then, the Written Torah is only a partial revelation. The "Book of Books" is fragmentary, enigmatic, incomplete, and meant to be accompanied by the Oral Torah, without which it is incomprehensible. At the same time, however, the Written Torah is considered to be utterly authoritative and divine. This paradox makes it at once perfect and incomplete, full of meaning and lacking meaning, venerated and yet manipulated. The interesting assumption here is that ambiguity, contradiction, enigma are, so to speak, intentionally built into the Written Torah; they allow for the opening of interpretation and for the coding of secrets within secrets.

Modern literary critics have also noted this characteristic of biblical narrative. In a famous essay in his masterwork *Mimesis,* Erich Auerbach finds that unlike Homeric narrative, the Bible is indeterminate and contingent: motives and purposes are unexpressed, time and space are undetermined. Biblical narrative, in his phrase, is "fraught with background," full of lacunae and multilayered conflicting depths. The Bible seeks not to "represent" reality or tell a simple story, but to subsume it. It is intentionally mysterious, demanding subtle interpretation and claiming an absolute authority.[9] Robert Alter, in his recent work on

Biblical narrative, describes Biblical technique in terms that also well apply to Jabès:

> An essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology. . . . Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a process, requiring continual revision—both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again—continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided.[10]

This concept of indeterminate meaning paradoxically supports the claim that a book given in one time and place can be valid for all time and place. For Jabès, the question is, how can a book encompass all reality? Unless it is continually revised and changed, the book would not be able to keep up with the flux of phenomena, the contradictions of experience. The Book of Books would either have to be completely closed or completely open. If it is in the constant process, continually recreated, it is also continually destroyed. If it is completely closed, then it is entirely literal, fixed, and thus dead. The remarkable achievement of the rabbis—which is so important for Jabès—is to make the Book at once closed and open, already finished yet still to be begun, an open process and yet a graven law. The Book includes within itself mechanisms to incorporate the changes of time. For both Jabès and the rabbis, the very ambiguities, gaps, disruptions, uncertainties, and contradictions of scripture are the secret of its power. They are, so to speak, the open spaces that generate questions and interpretations in an endless ongoing process, and so make the Book universally valid, a Book of Books. The Oral Torah comes to fill, explain, question, uncover, apply; the Written Torah thus becomes an inexhaustible source of meaning through its very gaps. In Jabès's terms, there is a "book within the book" constantly recreating the book, a book already written yet still in process: "'I have mastered the mutinous waves of the page'—Reb Dodah. 'What book do you mean?' 'I mean the book within the book.' 'Is there another book hidden in what I read?' 'The book you are writing'—Reb Haoud."

For both Jabès and the rabbis, the Book within the Book is also something primordial, a Book not dependent on physical letters, ink,

pages, and binding. Claim the rabbis: "The Torah preceded the world" (Shabb. 88b). If the world of space and time did not yet exist, however, what form had this Torah? "It was written with letters of black fire upon a background of white fire" (Yer. Shek. 13b; Rashi on Deuto. 33:2). This Torah, the rabbis assert, was the blueprint of creation: "God looked into the Torah and created the world" (Ber. Rabb. 1:1). The entire universe, then, is a product of the Torah. The Torah does not consist of speculation about the world; it constitutes its very essence and contains all its secrets. Nothing is outside its scope. As Derrida or Barthes would say: "There is nothing outside the Text," and Jabès, too, dreams of this all-encompassing Book.

The all-encompassing Torah also encompasses contradictions, allows conflicting interpretations to coexist, even interpretations that conflict with heavenly voices. While the rabbis claim that the Torah preceded the world, they also say, "The Torah is not in heaven" but is revealed, remade, and given over to the judges and sages of each generation. A famous Talmudic story recounts Rabbi Eliezer's dispute with the other sages about a question of ritual impurity of an oven:

> On that day R. Eliezer brought forth every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: "If the law agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place—others affirm four hundred cubits. "No proof can be brought from a carob tree" they retorted. Again he said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. "No proof can be brought from a stream of water" they rejoined. . . . Again he said to them: "If the law agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the law agrees with him!" But R. Joshua rose and exclaimed: "It is not in Heaven." What did he mean by this? Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mt. Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou has long since written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai, after the majority must one incline.
>
> R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?—He laughed, he replied, saying, "My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me." (B. Metzia 50 a & b)

The rabbis contradict even a heavenly voice in justifying their own authority to interpret and create the Book, and God, so it seems, goes

along, having given over this power to them, enabling them to "defeat" him. The tension of this relationship is masked by the rabbis' account of "God's laughter," but the opening affirmed here for human interpretation is extraordinary. This opening is adduced from the Torah itself—the book is read "against the book' so to speak. The next question is obvious: when do interpretation and commentary become subversion and displacement? What are the limits of these openings of the Book? To what extent can the text be read against itself and still remain Torah? How does one remain within the book while reading against the book, outside the book? When does the openness of interpretation edge over into heresy?

This opening of the Book is precisely where Jabès situates himself; and he, too, is precariously balanced between faith and heresy, probing the heresy within faith, and the faith within heresy. For Jabès as well, the essential issue is the struggle between the Book of God and the Book of man: "The Book is the place of the power of God and also the place where God loses power: the place of His omnipotence and his humiliating capitulation" (*LR,* 1). For the rabbis, too, God gives the supernal Torah, but this giving to is also a giving over. In giving he abandons some of his power and authority—not even a voice from heaven will change the rabbis' minds. Jabès: "God, the Master of the wind, Master of the sand, Master of the birds, Master of the fishes, expected from man the book, which man expected from man. The one, in order to be finally God, the other, in order to be finally man. The book of the order of the elements, the unity of the universe, of God, and of man" (*LQ,* 172).

God is not fully God without man's book. The relation of God and man in the book is not only one of struggle but also one of mutual yearning. Forcing this concept to its ultimate conclusion, one of Jabès's imaginary rabbis says: "There is no Book of God outside the book of man . . . it is your own book that you read in that of God. Didn't Reb Hakim write: We search to read the book of God and from the first words, we perceive that it is our book that God invites to decipher" (*SD,* 31).

The Jewish mystical tradition, to which Jabès so frequently alludes, extends the concept of God's withdrawal and this opening of interpretation to their utmost extreme, and we shall discuss this tradition shortly. Suffice it to say here that even within "normative" Judaism, the opening of interpretation is extraordinary. As Jabès perceives, this

opening is abyss and freedom—the secret of the text's compelling power, and its eternity. For the openness is already within the Book. Or, perhaps, where the lines between "inside" and "outside" grow unclear.

The rabbinic word remains ever open, unfulfilled, in process. Yet there is great risk here; this inner dynamic accounts for both the creativity of Judaism and its own inversions and undoing. Where is the line between interpretation and subversion? When does subversion become antithetical? I have elsewhere called this a "heretic hermeneutic," which is a complex of identification with the Text and its displacement.[11] Jabès's book is precisely this identification with the Sacred Book and its displacement. The Book is now opened to include even its own inversions. (Displacement and reversal constitute a hallmark of Jabès's style in sentences such as these: "[The Jew has] for centuries questioned his truth which has become the truth of questioning"; "For the law of the book is a law of abysses, and the book which transmits it the abyss of the law.")

Jabès affirms this radical Jewish opening of interpretation and the Book and connects it to the essence of writing:

> The Jew of the Book is not the faithful, but the unfaithful, the rebel, the exiled; he for whom the Book is each time another risk of being no longer. (*EL,* 48)

> I assert that writing is a revolutionary act, a scrupulously Jewish act, for it consists in taking up the pen in that place where God withdrew Himself from His words; it consists indefinitely in pursuing a utopian work in the manner of God who was the Totality of the Text of which nothing subsists. (*SD,* 138–40)

Simon Rawidowicz describes the radical nature of rabbinist interpretation as a "revolution from within" and a model for interpretation in general. The rabbis' battles, he maintains, like every interpreter's, were born of the struggle between continuity and rebellion, attachment to the text and alienation from it. The rabbis teach man how to "uproot and stabilize simultaneously, to reject and preserve in one breath, to break up and build inside, from within, casting a new layer on a previous layer and welding them into one mold (which later became the great problem of Jewish thought and being.)"[12] The problem, however, is how to prevent the revolution from collapsing the

Text entirely. Especially for modern Jews such as Jabès, how does one open the Book to the sorrows of Jewish history and the contemporary experience of meaninglessness and void without nihilistically destroying everything?

To "uproot from within" is also known by the fashionable name of "deconstruction," and though some see deconstruction as nihilistic, its main proponent, Derrida, does not. Jabès also speaks of his "deconstruction of the Book" as a mode of assuring the Book's survival; that is, the book must constantly destroy itself in favor of another book which will prolong it (I). Thus Jabès's texts are constantly interrupted, fragmented, broken up on every level—including that of the word itself (in a Midrashic mode). He and his most perceptive commentators, Blanchot and Derrida, associate this fragmentation with Moses' destruction of the first set of the tablets of the law. In forcing Moses to break God's word, the Jews gave Moses a crucial lesson in reading, says Jabès: "It was necessary for Moses to break the book in order for the book to become human. . . . This is what we do as well. We destroy the book when we read it in order to make it into another book. The book is always born from a broken book. And the word, too, is born from a broken word" (I).[13] (Interestingly, the rabbis use the same imagery to describe their own work: " 'Is not My word like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?' [Jer. 23:29]—as the hammer causes numerous sparks to flash forth, so is a scriptural verse capable of many interpretations" [Sanh. 34a]).

The fragmented forms of Jabès's texts, then, both continue, subvert, and displace the rabbis—yet all the time remaining within "the Book": "Revelation is always departure. We go from doubt to doubt, farther and farther from reality. . . . So where can the book blossom except in the book? The sacred is within us, deeply anchored" (*BY*, 133). "Writing a poem has always been a religious act for me. I have tried to be the word of the book, for the past and future of the book" (*BY*, 134). For Jabès and the rabbis, the Book is one's only home in exile—what creates them as well as what they create, their sanctuary and desert, their refuge and torment—and truth. As Jabès comments in his interview, "The questioning of the book for the Jew is a search for truth. And this truth is also the writer's truth. When the writer questions the book, it is solely in order to enter the truth of the book, which is his truth." (I).[14] A conventional understanding of the sacred book

would *prohibit* questioning it, would rather insist on absolute assent and conformity to its words, would zealously protect it from challenges. Questions break and violate the text.

In the rabbinic tradition upon which Jabès draws, however, the opening of the book is precisely where the Book demands its own interrogation—and only in the labor of arduous questioning can the truth of the Book emerge from the gaps, blanks, silences. Jabès:

> "It is in questions that the Alliance is renewed," wrote Assim.
>
> "Interpreting the Law is our daily task. Questioning, the pledge of our truth in God."
>
> And Reb Adlan: "The wings of the word are questions." (*BY*, 198)

This truth is not only what fills the gaps but the very rupture and break itself—as much the *activity* of questioning as the attempt at answering.

> Dialogue, within me, with the other. Reflection. All thinking is a quest of a question.
>
> —Reb Ivel (*BY*, 52)

> In my dialogues there are no answers. But sometimes a question is the flash of an answer. . . . And Yukel said:
>
> "If an answer were possible death would not travel alongside life, life would not have a shadow. The universe would be light." (*RB*, 179)
>
> Truth is in the movement toward it. It is also in the coming of a counter-truth wrapped in mystery.
>
> It depends on our progress if truth seems dark or bright, absurd or pathetic. (*RB*, 153)

> God is a questioning of God.
>
> —Reb Arwas (*BQ*, 138)

Jabès joins the ongoing dialogue and questioning of the Talmudic rabbis with that of his own imaginary rabbis. In *The Book of Questions*, their questioning and commentary surrounds, fills, is juxtaposed to the love story of Sarah and Yukel, itself fragmented and tormented by the Holocaust, and a kind of inverted Song of Songs. The rupture of the Holocaust, its explosion of Jewish history and community, its voiding of all previous meaning is made continuous and discontinuous with the ancient and imaginary rabbis' own struggle with an ambiguous Sacred

Text and enigmatic God. Their questioning voices are elongated into a scream, and the scream into silence, and within the silence the broken word is heard again. The questioning of God is visceral: "It is the whole truth I wanted to express. And truth is a scream, a stubborn, ineradicable image which pulls us out of our torpor. An image which overwhelms or nauseates us." (*BQ,* 122). "And Yukel continued and said that God's scream was the book." (*BY,* 127). Sarah, whose madness and death result from her experience in the Holocaust, writes in her journal: "My vision of God is horrible: blind, deaf, one-armed without legs" (*BY,* 73). She compares God to a centipede, scorpion, grasshopper.

All these visions, questions, answers, words, screams, silences torment each other. But there is no final sense made of the colloquy of voices and narratives. In the second trilogy, *Yaël, Elya,* and *Aély,* the rabbis' voices are more muted and less frequently heard, but they return again in force in the last trilogy, *The Book of Resemblances.* ("Ya" and "El" are, however, among the ancient Semitic words for God: even with the rabbis' withdrawal, the obsession with "God-language" continues.)

Yukel and Sarah's story, Yaël and Elya's story, the rabbis' stories, the stories of the Jews in their various wanderings have been woven together, yet the narrative is not smooth. What holds them together are the open spaces of the Book, which can somehow accommodate them all; they are undergirded by Nothing.

"The Abyss Is the Good"

One day shortly before his death Rabbi Schneur Zalman asked his grandson: "Do you see anything?" The boy looked at him in astonishment. Then the Rabbi said: "All I can see is the divine nothingness which gives life to the world."[15]

This openness as inner Nothing is a hole, gap, disjunction. It paradoxically joins and disjoins at the same time—is the source of the Book's constant process and growth, and its destruction. This open space or Nothing is also part of the shadow side of language and the divine word. The enigmas and gaps open up the play of interpretation, but they also point to the continuing problem of God's silence, absence, and withdrawal. There are many different kinds of silence in the Bible; André Neher, for example, has studied them brilliantly in his book *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz.* There is a silence within the word, words fold on words, a dark core at the center.

This silent barren place is the theme of the desert in Jabès . . . a desert which is void, yet an open place to which one returns in order to breathe and find space, a space which the writer needs to preserve (*SD,* 56). The Torah as well is connected to the desert, given in the wilderness of Sinai to a people who, like Jabès, had to make their exodus from Egypt, and whose soul is formed in their desert wanderings and tribulations.

"The desert" replied Reb Goetz, "is the soul's awakening, and sky, its envy. . . . The garden means speaking, the desert, writing. In every grain of sand, a sign surprises us." (*BQ,* 148–49)

In the desert no thought takes the lead, no dream. The Void carries the Void on its shoulders as the blind man carries the lame. The abyss is the good. (*RB,* 153)

"The scholar inherited the night, the Jew the desert."

—Reb Sedbe

("No matter how solidly you build your house," said Reb Alken, "it will always rest on sand.") (*BY,* 101)

Though a vast openness, the desert is obdurate and inhospitable—save to those who accommodate themselves to it. And though obdurate, it is no source of stability: its sands shift; its routes are circuitous, like the circuitous routes of writing, like the indirections of God.

Reb Jacob, who was my first teacher, believed in the virtue of the lie because, so he said, there is no writing without lies. And writing is the way of God. . . .

The divine utterance is silenced as soon as it is pronounced. But we cling to its resonant rings, our inspired words.

Eloquence is created by the absence of a divine word. (*BQ,* 85)

For Jabès, the book of God and the Book of Man are of this absence, desert, void, and they tell of a solitary, nomadic truth. The God of the Jews, of course, was distinguished from the gods of the pagans because

He was not fixed to any definite place. He moved through the desert with His people; He was everywhere and nowhere—not even grounded in the Being of the Greek philosophers. The Jewish God was utterly separated from the world, Other, withdrawn, absent. As a result of Greek ontology, Western religion has become so invested with the notion of God as being and presence that God as absence is unthinkable. For the contemporary mind, the experience of the absence of God has become so overwhelming that God has been declared dead.

Robert Scharlemann, in the wake of Heidegger and Derrida's "deconstruction of Greek onto-theology," maintains that "in the theological tradition, the otherness of God (the being of God when God is not being God, or the freedom of God to be and not to be) has remained unthought and conceptually forgotten." The task is to incorporate time and negation into the deity, to construct a concept of deity that "transgresses the affirmations of theism and embraces atheistic negations as well."[16] This assessment, however, itself neglects and forgets Jewish tradition, which has always been immersed in the sense of God as Other and absent. I would maintain, moreover, that Jabès has already accomplished what Scharlemann sets as the task of contemporary theology.

In this discussion of Jabès's struggles with God as absent Other, it is helpful to pause briefly here to cite the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who also has "deconstructed theology" from a Jewish perspective. Levinas has been very influential in France, especially on Derrida; he writes a specifically post-Holocaust Jewish philosophy where the experience of God's absence and otherness is central. This concern is especially evident in his essay, "To Love the Torah More Than God,"[17] which has important affinities with the work of Jabès. The title of the essay has its source in the famous statement found in the Midrash and Talmud where God says, "So should it be that you would forsake me, but keep my Torah" (Yer. Hag. 1:7; Lam. Ber. Rab. intro.). The tension between God and his Book is again striking, and one can say that Jabès, in his attenuated and displaced way, has done precisely that: forsaken God but kept the Book. For Levinas as well, the issue is how and why one should keep the Torah when God is so absent and seems to have forsaken the Jewish people in the Holocaust.

For Levinas, the God who obscures His face, the God of negation and abyss and otherness, becomes, paradoxically, the condition of Jewish

belief. The loss of a consolatory childish heaven, the moment when God withdraws from the world, is the moment which calls for what Levinas describes as an "adult" faith, where the adult can triumph only in his own conscience and suffering, a suffering that is no "mystic expiation of the sins of the world" but an ordeal of an adult, responsible man, "a suffering of the just for a justice without triumph, [which] is lived as Judaism."[18] In the relation of man and God in Judaism, "the spiritual does not present itself as a tenable substance but, rather, through its absence; God is made real, not through incarnation but, rather, through the Law."[19]

In his commentary on this essay, Richard Sugarman makes the important point that in Levinas, absent justice does not mean that justice is nonexistent, and goes on to say: "This decisive metaphysical distinction between the phenomenon of absence and that of nonexistence, so long obscured in the history of philosophy, is central to Levinas' analysis and needs to be made more explicit."[20] The crucial point is that absence does not equal nonexistence. Absence, silence, withdrawal are decisive realities.

For Jabès, the absence of God as a void *within* God is a central insight. It might appear that here Jabès and the rabbis part company, and Derrida in his essay on Jabès emphasizes what he considers to be the unalterable difference between the autonomy of the poet and the heteronomy of the Jew. To Derrida, this poetic autonomy depends on the negativity in God taken to its extreme as complete freedom from the word of God. This poetic freedom, says Derrida, is represented by the broken tablets of the Mosaic Law. Between the shattered fragments, "the poem grows and the right to speak takes root. Once more begins the adventure of the text as weed, as outlaw, far from 'the fatherland of the Jews,' which is, a 'sacred text surrounded by commentaries.'"[21] Thus Derrida calls for Jabès to move beyond the epoch of the Book to the "radical illegibility of the trace."[22]

Jabès, however, has a different understanding of Jewish tradition. He perceives that the sacred text already has the abyss *within*. The Sacred Book is not only fatherland; it is also desert. God is not just word, presence, law; He is also silence, absence, void. Derrida, too, alludes in his essay to this idea of negativity in God, especially as found in Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. He notes it as an aside, however, as if to indicate its peripheral status to normative Jewish

thought. It is a common misconception that God's absence is not central to Jewish thought, and one that the great contemporary authority on Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, spent a lifetime of scholarship trying to correct.

Kabbalah is one of the most important Jewish sources of Jabès's work, especially its concept of the negativity in God. We need, then, to pause and discuss Kabbalah as a radical emergence of the voids, negations, and silences of rabbinic tradition.

The Hebrew word *kabbalah* literally translates as "received tradition" (from the root *kibel*—"to receive"). Kabbalah comprises a large body of mystical teaching and speculation, collected over thousands of years and considered by its students to be the revelation of the hidden inner mysteries of the Torah. Kabbalah itself was long hidden and taught only to a spiritual elite. In every generation, a select few learned and transmitted it.

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Kabbalah again took root in Safed in Palestine, where its chief exponent was Isaac Luria. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the doctrines of Kabbalah began to be more openly preached by the emerging Hassidic movement. This was opposed by many rabbinic authorities for several reasons, among which was the debacle of the false messiah Shabbatai Sevi, who had based his claim on many distorted Kabbalistic ideas. Nevertheless, the Hassidic movement spread through Europe and held sway until the destruction of European Jewry in World War II. In the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the Jews from the ghettos and their entry into European life, many Jewish academics sought to discredit Kabbalah and Hassidism because of their mystical, mythical, messianic, and irrational aspects. These scholars tried to present Judaism as a religion of reason acceptable to secular Western culture.

Gershom Scholem, born to an assimilated German-Jewish family, reacted against the "reformed" Judaism of the academics and historians, and restored Kabbalah to its place of honor in Jewish thought. (Of course, within the Hassidic community and certain orthodox circles, Kabbalah had never fallen into disrepute; Scholem's accomplishment affected mainly the secularized Jewish community and awakened many secularized Jewish intellectuals—Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin, and others—to an interest in Kabbalah's profound theology and philosophy of language.) Scholem maintains that Kabbalah inte-

grated mythic, Gnostic, and subversive elements into Judaism, thereby revitalizing and transforming Jewish tradition. At the same time, however, he asserts that Kabbalah is the extreme *extension* of the rabbinic freedom with the text. Thus Kabbalah is deeply a part of tradition—as well as a subtle subversion of it.[23]

We return here, then, to the question: How far does the opening of the Book extend? Scholem believes that the Kabbalists' relentless investigations into the meaning of the tradition unwittingly opened the way for potential heresy and anarchy (though they themselves were of the utmost piety), partly because of their meditations on the nature of the divine language that constitutes the Written Torah. The Kabbalists concluded that the language of the Written Torah was itself *already mediated*. While we cannot investigate the complexities of the Kabbalistic view of language here,[24] the main point is the Kabbalistic concept that the essence of the divine language is the mystical "Name of God" encoded into the text of the Written Torah. The actual text of scripture is considered to be composed of the various permutations and combinations of this Name.

Scholem understands this mystical Name of God as somehow equivalent to His essence; it is an emanation or creative power beyond any human language or grammar. Though itself "above" meaning—"meaningless," in Scholem's word—this Name is nevertheless the inexhaustible source of all meaning and thus opens out into infinite interpretation. The words of Scripture unfold and interpret this mystical Name, but the Name nevertheless remains beyond interpretation and incomprehensible. The radical consequence, finally, is that there is "no such thing as Written Torah in the sense of an immediate revelation of the divine word."[25] The Written Torah is itself already mediated; there is *only Oral Torah,* interpretation that opens out into endless interpretations. Scholem claims that the Kabbalists veil this radical consequence for fear of its leading to heresy. For it ultimately means that "there is no immediate undialectic application of the divine word. If there were, it would be destructive."[26] All we have, then, are the human interpretations in an open unending commentary. Who can know the meaning of the ultimate meaningless word—the silence at the heart of language?

The ultimate meaningless word is paradoxically full of meaning. Harold Bloom makes a perceptive comment about this paradox and the

relation of the Kabbalistic theory of language and contemporary deconstructionist thought:

> Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called Deconstruction. But these two ways turn into one another at their outward limits. . . . Is there a difference between an absolute randomness of language and the Kabbalistic magical absolute, in which language is totally over-determined?[27]

All of Jabès's work implicitly asks the same question. Pushed to the extreme, Kabbalah and Deconstruction exchange identities.

Kabbalah pushes rabbinic thought to its limits in other ways important for Jabès, especially in its notions of God's absence from the world. Jabès's meditations on the absence of and within God draw heavily on "Lurianic" Kabbalah. Luria, mentioned above as the center of a prominent Kabbalistic circle in Palestine in the sixteenth century, articulated one of the most interesting and radical theories of the way God created the world. Luria envisioned the act of creation not as an outpouring or expansive act but rather as a *withdrawal* and *contraction* of God into Himself (*tsimtsum*). The problem that the concept of *tsimtsum* addresses is how a finite, material, differentiated universe could have been created by an infinite God? If God fills all, is infinite and omnipresent, where then is there "room," so to speak, for the world? One can have creation *ex nihilo* only where there first is a "nothing," a space opened for creation.

Hence God withdrew and contracted Himself to create a void or "empty place" (*makom panui, chlal*). There was, however, a debate among Kabbalists about the nature of this void. Is the void an actual, literal emptiness? Or is it rather a *concealment* of God: He is "there" but hidden, and concealed only in relation to the perception of finite creations, not in relation to Himself. For to say that there is a literal void implies that God has somehow abandoned part of the universe, and this obviously opens up all manner of difficulty.

We do not have time here to examine in detail the complicated Kabbalistic theory of creation, but one of its striking insights is that every creative act requires negativity, withdrawal, absence. In the Lurianic

scheme, many more *tsimtsumim* are required at each succeeding stage of creation. In rough outline, after the first radical act of *tsimtsum,* God projected a "ray" or "point" (i.e., concentrated divine emanation) into the void.[28]

Jabès, of course, has many references to this idea. In *Elya,* for example, he tells the story of a sage who dips his pen into ink and draws a small circle on the corner of his blotter:

> "This circle," he said, "which the blotter has made into a black point invaded by night, is God."
>
> "Why did you want the circle to turn into a black point? And why should this stain among so many others on your blotter be God?" the disciple asked.
>
> "Your question is that of the Lord," replied the sage.
>
> "If my question is that of the Lord," said the disciple, "I know now that God has created me in this image." (*Et,* 30)

El, ou le dernier livre begins with a direct quotation from the Kabbalah about God's manifestation of Himself in a point; this black point, in fact, is the cover and "title" of that book. The point, though a manifestation of God, is God's absence and exile from Himself as well, an idea whose implications are profound for Jabès.

> At this time before time, when life was only a bare death with weak lungs, one insignificant point in space contained, like a bubble, all the wanderings of the worlds. When it burst it freed the universe, but gave form to exile.
>
> God had disappeared, existing only in Creation. Being the Principle of Unity—a circle tightening in infallible memory of the circle—He was going to become the dazzling center of clear absence.
>
> Never again will we escape exile.
>
> The book is among its true sages. (*Et,* 30–31)

In the next major doctrine of Lurianic Kabbalah, "The Breaking of the Vessels" (*shevirat ha-kelim*), exile is again central to the creative process. The original divine creative emanations are succeedingly "dimmed," concealed and contracted, creating myriads of worlds. The original "light," that is, is too intense for finite creatures to bear. The divine emanations (*sefirot*) are dimmed manifestations made up of two elements: "Lights" and "Vessels." In the Lurianic cosmogony, the primordial intensity of the lights was too strong, and the divine emana-

tions could not properly relate to each other. The Vessels "broke," "died," fell to a lower level, taking with them shards or "sparks of holiness" that ultimately became embedded in this lowest physical world. "Shatter," "break," and so on are all metaphorical terms; in effect, the divine light recedes, though a vestige remains and descends with the vessel. In the Kabbalistic view, the redemption of the world depends upon the restoration of these fallen sparks of holiness from their exile to their supernal source through the performance of the religious commandments and directives of the Torah, a process known as *tikkun*. This also effects a reunion of God with his *Shechinah*, the "Divine Presence" or immanence of God in the world, afterward symbolized as a woman, or "Bride" and "Queen" to God the King. The Talmud relates that "when the Jews were exiled to Babylon, the Shechinah went into exile with them" (*Meg.* 29a). In Kabbalah, the historical exile of the Shechinah becomes a cosmic exile.

Thus in Kabbalah, it is not only the tablets of the law that are broken. The universe itself has undergone a primordial shattering; God has withdrawn; the Vessels are broken; the divine sparks are lost in the material world. As Scholem reads it, Kabbalah is a great myth of exile, a passionate opening of the sacred text to the sorrows of a people in exile from whom the face of God is all too often hidden, and to whom the world appears as a shattered vessel. And the great themes of Kabbalah as an extreme opening of the rabbinic text—exile, God's negation of God, absence, shattered light, separated lovers—are the great themes of Jabès.

Accomplishing the Negative

The Maggid of Mezritch said: The creation of heaven and earth is the unfolding of Something out of Nothing, the descent from above to below. But the *tzakkim* [spiritual leaders and saints] who in their work disengage themselves from what is bodily, and do nothing but think about God, actually see and imagine and understand the universe as it was in the state of nothingness before creation. They change the Something back into the Nothing. This is more miraculous: to begin from the lower state. As it is said in the Talmud: "Greater than the first miracle is the last."[29]

These great negations in Jewish thought are important for understanding Jabès. His constant shifts of perspective, I have been arguing, emerge from and displace the dialectical negations of rabbinic and Kabbalistic thinking. And the God of Jabès is, above all, the God of withdrawal:

"God is absence of God. Exile within exile."

—Reb Sarda

"God had to be absent so that man could push back his limits in reading God."

—Reb Abassis (*BY*, 104)

The word "God" interests me, he said, because it is a word which defies understanding, by the fact that it doesn't allow itself to be comprehended in any word, escapes sense, transcends it to annul it; so that there is always a word before or after the word, a word without word, in the past or in the future; a useless word, whose use offends meaning.

The questioning of God is the questioning of the void. (*LR*, 67)

And in discussing the words that obsess him, Jabès writes:

"God" as the extreme Name of the abyss. "Jew" as the figure of exile, wandering, strangeness, and separation, a condition which is also that of the writer. "Book" as the impossibility of the book, or as the place and non-place of all possibility of constructing the book. "Name" as the unpronounceability of the Name as canceling of all names, the silent Name of God, of the Invisible. (*SD*, 85)

What I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance . . . the distance that is always between things.

God is perhaps a word without word. A word without meaning. And the extraordinary thing is that in the Jewish tradition, God is invisible, and as a way of underscoring this invisibility, he has an unpronounceable name. . . . When you can't say the word, you are standing before nothing. (I)

This void is "whatever stands at the limits of truth." Words, in questioning each other, move toward this void in a constant stripping away, until the name becomes unpronounceable. But this movement, warns Jabès, has nothing to do with nihilism.

God is the beyond, which nevertheless invades the here and now as void and darkness—the silence within the word within the word. And here again is the opening of the question which emerges from and probes the silence of words:

"My questions are the mountain tops of the book. At night, I must climb down to the valley."

"You bring back words learned in the silence where God has exiled Himself."

"I am the doubt of the word where words are expected."

"How do you reconcile belief and doubt? You have no faith. I pity you."

"Dawn follows the dark in the day and at night. Does doubt not mean pushing off any grain of belief in order to believe without interruption, for the first time?" (*BY*, 133)

Questioning, then, is part of the movement of dialectical negation: it destroys in order to create.

Blanchot, in his analysis of Jabès, also notes the dialectical relation of speech and silence: the very interruptions of a conversation allow it to proceed; the intervals and pauses between speakers allow the formulation of question and response. Blanchot finds another type of interruption, however, one founded on the irreducible otherness and distance between the speakers, which is also the discontinuity of writing. This is a negative interruption, outside of language entirely. In history, says Blanchot, the center of the rupture is Judaism: that is, the Jew as Other, bearing witness to the Otherness of God. Blanchot perceives Jabès's strong affinities to Hassidism in Jabès's identification of Judaism with the ambiguity of rupture, "which even in its explosion reveals the center (essence, unity), while leaving it intact, but which is perhaps also the explosion of the center, the eccentric point which is center only in the shattering of its explosion."[30]

This insight is important. Among other accomplishments, Hassidism psychologized and individualized the cosmic speculations of Kabbalah, adapting them to the struggles and inner life of even simple, unlearned Jews far from the circle of elite mystics. Similarly, Jabès adapts the negations of Kabbalah, the obsessive speculation of the rabbis, and the collective agonies of Jewish history even to modern assimilated Jews far from Judaism—and further, to the writer, no matter

how secular. Hassidism was also known for its special genre of songs, stories, parables, aphorisms, and legends, in which Rebbes (Hassidic leaders) and their disciples struggled with problems of faith, suffering, and despair and interpreted Torah in startling new ways.

One of the greatest storytellers of the Hassidic movement was Rabbi Nachman of Bratslov (1772–1810), whose tales of beggars, princes, and other imaginary characters are filled with Kabbalistic symbolism. Like Jabès, Nachman tried to transmute into story, aphorism, and parable his visions of the abyss and the exile of God. He grappled with the challenges of secular knowledge and problems of faith and doubt that were beginning to overwhelm the modern Jew. We can more fully understand Jabès's relation to Jewish mystical tradition by pausing to consider Nachman, who in pushing Hassidism to its limits touches Jabès, pushing post-modernism to its limits.

As Arthur Green shows in his brilliant study of Nachman, *Tormented Master,* Nachman's path is also one of dialectical negation and, like that of Jabès, edges precipitously close to heresy in the search for God, who is both in and of the void. Nachman used the Lurianic concept of *tsimtsum* to define the path that man in search of God must also take: man must also proceed via negation, question, and doubt—and God must be sought in the void. Nevertheless, the most profound questions—the suffering of the righteous, providence, and so on—are unanswerable. Nachman refuses all attempts to provide answers to these difficulties, no matter how pious. The essence of faith for him, as for Jabès, is not its content but its stance: "Faith for him is an act of defiance."[31] Like Jabès, Blanchot, and Levinas, he recognizes that the stance of the Jew is defined by distance. Distance itself arouses man, causes him to long for God, and defines his relation to God in its passion; the collapse of this distance is paradoxically the death of this longing and "closeness," and so the believer must cry for God's absence: "He seeks the nearness of God through ever seeking to confront his distance."[32]

Green comments that Nachman in effect has uplifted and transformed doubt, including "doubt within an expanded notion of faith. . . . lifting up his own experience of God's absences."[33] This was part of Nachman's attempt to confront the onslaughts of rationalism, enlightenment, and modernism. Herein, I think, is a profound part of Jabès's strategy as well, and one of the sources of his identification of Jew

and writer, his merging the condition of the alienated, nihilistic writer with that of the Jew: the "sanctification" of negation. Near the beginning of *El,* the last volume of the *Book of Questions,* Jabès quotes Franz Kafka, another tormented master and storyteller, a Jew who had much to do with creating the modern sensibility: "It is for us to accomplish the negative; the positive is already given."

In Kabbalah, Nachman, and Jabès, this negative is ceaselessly dialectical; it leads to a tentative creation, only to be again negated and recreated. In Lurianic Kabbalah, the negation, the void is necessary; it allows for the gift of the world's existence, and both Nachman and Jabès understand this as the inevitable, paradoxical, and painful condition of things. This void, moreover, is the realm of silence — the place of questions which cannot be resolved. God creates the world through his word, says Nachman, "but in the void which surrounds all the worlds and is completely empty, there is no language. . . . the questions which arise there are silent."[34] For Jabès, too, this is a silence beyond speech. As Nachman explains, one who is on the highest level and enters this void partakes of this silence; that is why Moses is described in the Bible as "hesitant of speech" (Ex. 4:10).

Entering the void, however, is dangerous. In fact, Nachman forbids seeking God in the void to the average person; only the *tzaddik* — the saintly and spiritually exalted person — should dare it. As Green comments, if all were to seek God in the void,

> one would have to set aside all the carefully drawn categories and distinctions lying at the core of conventional religion. Surely distinctions between "holy" and "profane" or between "permitted" and "forbidden" make no sense as one enters that void where language itself is said to have no place. If man were permitted to enter into the void in his search for God, all the trappings of traditional religion could not be seen but as obstacles to be overcome in the final assertion of God's paradoxical presence. . . . In facing the assertion that God in some sense is to be found within the void, Nachman stands at the brink of religion's mystical self-transcendence, which viewed differently, is also its self-destruction.[35]

Jabès knows this brink:

> The center is the threshold.
> Reb Naman said: "God is the Center. That is why bold minds have claimed

> He does not exist. For if the center of an apple or star is the heart of the heavenly body or the fruit: which is the true middle of the orchard and the night?"
> Storm and the hour modify the center.
> Likewise good and evil.
> And Yukel said:
> "The center is failure. The Creator is rejected from His creation. Splendor of the universe. Man destroys himself as he creates." . . .
> The center is mourning. (*RB,* 194)

He has crossed it, entered the void, and from there he speaks:

> We are at the heart of creation, absent from the All, in the marrow and moire of Absence, with the Void for recourse, for a means to be and to survive. So that, in the creative act, we are and even surpass the Void facing the restoring All.
>
> Book rejected and reclaimed by the book. The word, for which I was pain and meditation, discovers that its true place is the non-place where God lives resplendent with not being, with never having been. Therefore interpretations of Elohim, approaches to Adonai can only be personal, laws only individual laws, truth only solitary truths in the scream they wrench from us. And this even within the possibility of transmitting a recognized Truth, a common and sealed law. (*RB,* 232)

To the conventional, orthodox Jewish community, this position is subversive. From the beginning of *The Book of Questions* on, however, Jabès constantly affirms his solidarity with Jewish history and with the sufferings and yearnings of the Jewish community, and continually expresses his painful love for other Jews. Pained by their seeming rejection of him, his books contain several imaginary dialogues with them, including a fantasised "trial" at the end of *The Book of Resemblances,* where he tries to defend his Judaism, and these passages in *The Book of Questions.*

> Have my books added to the misunderstanding between me and my brothers? They have turned hope into despair. . . .
>
> I have been around.
> I have circled around myself without finding rest.
>
> My brothers turned to me and said:
> "You are not Jewish. You do not go to the synagogue."

I turned to my brothers and answered:
"I carry the synagogue within me." . . .

"Rejected by your people, robbed of your heritage: who are you?
"For the others you are a Jew, but hardly for us."

I turned to the oldest of my brothers and answered:
"I have the wound of a Jew. I was circumcised as you were, on the eighth day after my birth. I am a Jew, as you are, in each of my wounds". . . .

I beat my breast with my fist and thought:
"I am nothing.
"My head is cut off.
"But is one man not as good as another?
"The beheaded as good as the believer?" (*BQ*, 60–62)

"Any coercion is a ferment of freedom," Reb Idrash taught further. "How can you hope to be free if you are not bound *with all your blood to your God and to man? . . . You think it is the bird which is free. Wrong: it is the flower."*

And Reb Elat into this motto: "Love your ties to their last splendour, and you will be free." (*BQ*, 115)

You cannot pretend, Yukel, if you want to bear fruit. To aspire to freedom you must first be within the law. (*BY*, 90).

But Jabès also puts the law into question—or rather, the law is the law of the word, and the word is founded on silence. Yet like the Kabbalists, Jabès's journey into the void will not make him forsake the Book:

I have said that to be a Jew is to take responsibility for all books, through obsession with the single Book. I have said that the death of one Jew is the death of all the words of the book, of all the books of the unfinished Book. I have said that the Jew's will to survive is in his persistence in beginning the word anew. I have said that the Messiah was the extreme openness of the book, being the word which points to itself by that opening. I have said that the Jew, at the newest, oldest, and most risky part of his quest, was no longer a Jew to other Jews and that that paradox was one of the keys to Judaism. (*SD*, 138–40)

The opening of Jewish tradition as it expands into a void and a silence even within God can, then, also be a renewal. Heresy and tradition, here, are not opposites but dialectical partners in the opening process

that ultimately preserves the book. The heretic hermeneutic continues even as it abrogates tradition; it is a complex of identification and displacement inextricably linked to a Jewish scriptural and exegetic tradition, which it inverts yet which somehow retains a compelling power. The boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy become very difficult to ascertain as Kabbalah opens to make room for the void and integrates negativity into God.

Perhaps, however, only those who have passed through the void can understand, and Rabbi Nachman was correct in trying to forbid the experience of the abyss to men of ordinary religious perception—few will be able to emerge on the other side. Few can emerge from the struggle with the stranger of the night as Jacob did—wounded, yet forcing a blessing of a new name from his antagonist partner.

The Talmud in a famous story recounts the fates of four great sages who entered the *pardes*, the garden of mystical speculation: one died, one went mad, and one became an apostate; only R. Akiva "entered in peace and left in peace." Today, many of our best writers and poets have flung themselves into the void only to meet similar fates. Jabès, too, has tried to enter with the rabbis—and in his book he suffers the fate of all four. There is death, madness, heresy, yet Jabès emerges—but unlike R. Akiva, not in peace: "I have never found this peace. . . . Everything important to me has been called into question. . . . If these books tell the reader anything, it is that he should take on the burden of what troubles him, that he should carry his questioning to the very end. Which means putting oneself in question, doesn't it? To the very end. Endless questioning." (I)

This final counsel is strongly reminiscent of a Hassidic story about a tormented disciple who came to Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz in terrible distress, suffering from utter doubt and despair. The Rebbe advised him to seek solace in the study of Torah, which was the only remedy and contained all the answers. But the disciple's condition was so agonizing that, try as he might, he couldn't concentrate on even one line of Talmud. What, he asked the Rebbe, could he do in order to be able to go on? As recounted by Elie Wiesel, Rebbe Pinchas then told the visitor the following story:

Know, my young friend, that what is happening to you also happened to me. When I was your age, I stumbled over the same obstacles. I, too, was filled

with questions and doubts. About man and his fate, creation and its meaning. I was struggling with so many dark forces that I could not advance; I was wallowing in doubt, locked in despair. I tried study, prayer, meditation. In vain. Penitence, silence, solitude. In vain. My doubts remained doubts, my questions remained threats. Impossible to proceed, to project myself into the future. I simply could not go on. Then one day I learned that Rebbe Israel Baal Shem Tov [the founder of the Hassidic movement] would be coming to our town. Curiosity led me to the synagogue where he was receiving his followers. When I entered he was finishing the *Amida* prayer. He turned around and saw me, and I was convinced that he was seeing me, me and no one else—but so was everyone else in the room. The intensity of his gaze overwhelmed me, and I felt less alone. And, strangely, I was able to go home, open the Talmud, and plunge into my studies once more. You see, the questions remain questions. But I was able to go on.[36]

The intensity of Jabès's vision also overwhelms us, but finally, I think, he accomplishes the same: the questions remain questions—but we are able to go on. "The fate of the word is the fate of our passions. A writer questions himself forever in the infinite solitude of God whose gesture he has inherited, but with its fire gone out. Re-kindling the divine gesture again and again, this is our contribution to the light" (*RB*, 232).

Postscript: In trying to relate Jabès to one of his major contexts, I fear that this essay has insinuated itself as a kind of "answer" to his work. Ideally, to write well about Jabès, one should enter with him into the vertigo of his questioning—and indeed, I find that I can interrogate every statement I have made in this essay. Wiith Jabès, every reading must be double; but then question can also be answer. A final statement from Rabbi Nachman, as told to Elie Wiesel in Auschwitz by a Bratslaver Hassid: "Two men separated by space and time can nevertheless take part in an exchange. One asks a question, and the other, elsewhere and later, asks another, unaware that his question is answer to the first."[37]

Notes

1. Maurice Blanchot, "Être Juif," *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 188.

2. Ibid., 187. Blanchot has another insight here central to understanding Jabès: "What we owe to Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God; it is the revelation of the word as the place where men can be in rapport with what excludes all rapport—the infinite Distance, the absolute Stranger. God speaks and man speaks to him. There is the great accomplishment of Israel. . . . If there is an infinite separation, it devolves upon the word to create the place of meeting, and if there is an insurmountable abyss, the word crosses the abyss. The distance isn't abolished, it isn't diminished; it is, on the contrary, maintained, preserved, and made pure by the rigor of the word which maintains the absolute of the difference. . . . In this sense, the word is the promised land where exile establishes a dwelling" (translation mine). What the Jew teaches us, then, says Blanchot, is a new rapport with truth, a "nomadic truth."

3. Certainly for the Greeks, for example, Homer was an inspired text, but never attained the absolute status and authority the Bible had for the Jews. As C. K. Barrett puts it: "To the Greek philosopher, the existence of earlier literature was no more than incidental; at most it provided a useful confirmation of truths of which he was already persuaded on other grounds. . . . [For the Jewish writers, by contrast,] the ancient scriptures were a constitutive and generative element in their religious life. Their system of thought was . . . not confirmed but created by their work on documents possessed of absolute authority. . . . The Jewish interpreters are distinguished from Greek by the fact that they take their stand under the authority of, and profess to be controlled by, their scriptural text." ("The Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New," *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970], 380.)

4. In fact, the proper way to read the Book has been the cause of violent schisms and "holy wars" between religions—and schools of literary criticism. The hostile relations between Jews and Christians at bottom result from the conflict over proper interpretation of the Book. For the history of the West, the Christian understanding of the Bible became predominant; Jewish interpretation went "underground," so to speak, as Christianity became the state religion and spread its influence throughout Europe. Until fairly recently, the central tracts on language and interpretation were written by theologians, and writers of nonreligious literature absorbed these notions of the Book and its meanings. With the waning of Christianity and liberation of the Jews from the ghettos into the mainstream of European intellectual life, Jewish notions of the text, language, and interpretation emerged and mingled with the newly

created secular culture. One can't understand a Kafka, Freud, Levinas, Derrida, or Jabès otherwise. Jabès as poet is the first to openly recognize and celebrate the renewed "Judaization" of the book.

I have studied this relation of biblical interpretation to literary criticism in my *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1982), from which I also draw many of my thoughts in the present essay.

5. The lack of punctuation and paragraphing opens the possibility for diverse interpretations. In the early Hebrew texts there was no "chapter and verse" marking of the Bible; different sections instead were demarcated by white space between them. The chapter and verse division added by the Jews in the Middle Ages was made necessary by the theological debates forced on the Jews by Christians, who cited chapter and verse. Moreover, in the Hebrew language, words are written without their vowels. Vowels can be printed into the text, for those unfamiliar with it, in the form of small dots and lines placed under the letters. Thus words, too, may be read in various ways.

6. Rabbinic discourse in the Talmud has many other parallels with post-modern writing. Roland Barthes emphasizes that the post-modern "text," as opposed to the "work" is a "production" not a "representation" of meaning. In his view, reading should be a step-by-step commentary, a "decomposition" of the text, a "systematic use of digression," and a cutting up of the text into contiguous fragments. The text subverts old hierarchical classifications of genres and is paradoxical. It infinitely defers the signified and is experienced in relation to the sign — is radically symbolic and without closure. The text is irreducibly plural and intertextual. And it abolishes the distinction between writing and reading. Reading is playing the text, and the text demands the reader's collaboration. Finally, the text is its own social utopia and sphere of pleasure. These characteristics also describe rabbinic interpretation. I paraphrase the above from Barthes's essay "From Work to Text" in Josué Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), 73–81.

7. From the Midrash Rabbah on Genesis discussing what the quarrel between Cain and Abel was all about:

"And Cain spoke unto Abel his brother . . ." [Gen. 4:8]. About what did they quarrel? "Come," said they, "let us divide the world." One took the land and the other took the movables. The former said, "The land you are standing on is mine," while the latter retorted, "What you are wearing is mine." One said, "Strip"; the other retorted, "Fly [off the ground]." Out of this quarrel, "Cain rose up against his brother Abel. . . ." R. Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name: Both took land and both took movables, but

about what did they quarrel? One said, "The Temple must be built in my area," while the other claimed, "It must be built in mine." For it is written, "and it came to pass when they were in the field." Now field refers to naught but the Temple, as you read, "Zion [the temple] shall be plowed as field" [Mic. 3:12]. Out of this argument, "Cain rose up against his brother Abel. . . ." Judah b. Rabbi said: Their quarrel was about the first Eve. Said R. Aibu: The first Eve had returned to dust. Then about what was their quarrel? Said R. Huna: An additional twin was born with Abel, and each claimed her. The one claimed: "I will have her because I am the first born," while the other maintained: "I must have her, because she was born with me." (Ber. Rab. 22:7). The Midrash proceeds to speculate about what instrument the deed was done with and so forth.

Jacques Lacan makes the following perceptive statement about Midrash: "In effect, for this people who have the Book, the only people who proclaim themselves a historical people, the only ones who never proffer myth, Midrash first of all represents a mode of which modern historical criticism is but a bastardization. It takes the Book literally not in order to allow this literalness to support more or less obvious intentions but to allow collusion of signifiers to be taken as such, as materials. What is joined together is not willed but a result of proximity, and grammatical variants dictate choice of inflections. Another statement must be drawn from the text so that the omitted is implicated" (translation mine). ("Radiophonie," in *Scilicet 2/3* (Paris, 1970), quoted in Jeffrey Mehlman, "The 'Floating Signifier': Lévi-Strauss to Lacan," *Yale French Studies* 48 [1972]: 33.)

8. See for example the works of Geza Vermes and Renee Bloch — especially Bloch's "Midrash" (trans. M. Callaway in W. S. Green, ed., *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* [Missoula, Mont.: Scholar's Press, 1978], 27–50) and her "Methodological Note for the Study of Rabbinic Literature" (pp. 51–76 in the same volume). A very interesting study of the relationship of Midrash to the Bible is Michael Fishbane's "Torah and Tradition," in D. A. Knight, ed., *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (London, 1977), 274–300. See also my "Freud's Midrash: The Exile of Interpretation," *New York Literary Forum* 2 (1978): 98–112, on the relation of Midrash and psychoanalysis.

9. Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), 3–23. One of the difficulties we have in grasping this rabbinic concept of the text is our immersion in Greek and non-Jewish ways of thinking about language and meaning. For the Greek, the ambiguous, shadowy, fragmentary nature of language was a sign that, to the contrary, language was not the realm of truth.

The goal of the seeker of truth was a climax of silent vision. In Plato's higher realm, for example, ideas are the forms of true being, but not in any way linguistic entities. And, of course, Plato wanted to banish the poets from his Republic, relegated language to inferior levels, and disparaged writing. Derrida has seen to it that Plato's sin in this shall not be forgotten. Even the famous Greek *logos,* translated as "word" in the well-known opening of the Gospel of John—"In the beginning was the *logos*"—did not originally mean word, but rather "reason, definition, formula." And for the Christian, the crucial event is not the logos as word in itself, but the transformation of the logos into *flesh,* in the Incarnation, out of the realm of shadowy signs. This was a "fulfillment" of the word, a fulfillment the rabbis never accepted.

The contrast between Hebrew and Greek has often been written about, but we cannot pursue it at length here. One of the most interesting discussions is Lev Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem* (trans. Bernard Martin [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1966]). The central point is that the Bible was a supreme challenge to Greek metaphysics; to assert that the world was created, that matter was not eternal and, moreover, that the world came into existence through God's word threatened the foundation of Greek ontology. In contemporary terms, we would say that the Bible is a "deconstruction" of classical metaphysics; it posited an extreme negativity at the center of things, and this negativity is associated with language. One does not attempt to transcend the realm of language to a vision of being, but rather probes the inner world of the word to find the key to reality. The movement, therefore—as in Jabès—is not to imagination but to interpretation; not to theophany, but to textuality.

10. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12.

11. See especially the chapters on Derrida and Bloom in Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses.* In fact, every Jewish "heresy" has claimed that it is the true extension and interpretation of the text. Christianity, in asserting this claim, undoes the validity of rabbinic interpretation, affirming that the word has now become "fulfilled" through the Incarnation. The rabbinic play of interpretation is now obsolete; the gaps and enigmas have been illuminated. As Paul polemicizes, the rabbis cling to the "dead" letter and refuse the liberating "spirit."

12. Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," in Nahum Glatzer, ed., *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 45–80. See also his longer essay in the same volume: "Israel's Two Beginnings: The First 'House' and the Second 'House.'"

13. The figure of Moses breaking the tablets of the law was also especially fascinating to Freud, and he wrote an entire essay about it, "The Moses of Michelangelo." In his late study, *Moses and Monotheism,* Freud himself breaks and displaces Mosaic law with his assertion that Moses was an Egyptian. For Freud, psychoanalysis will be the new Torah. On Freud's Jewish identity, see the excellent book by Marthe Robert, *From Oedipus to Moses: Freud's Jewish Identity,* (trans. Ralph Mannheim [New York: Doubleday, 1976]), and my "Interpretation as Devotion: Freud's Relation to Rabbinic Hermeneutics" (*Psychoanalytic Review* 68 (1981): 201–18). Freud is another in the line of Jewish prodigal sons and practitioners of heretic hermeneutics.

14. Another statement of Jabès on this issue: "We question only in the hope for an answer which might restart our questioning. Would we therefore refuse to accept an answer given us as definitive even if it had the virtue of satisfying us? And would we do so in order to protect our thinking which can only develop through questions? But how could there be a single answer to the innumerable questions which fluster any one question? The Jew bears witness to this, having for centuries questioned his truth which has become the truth of questioning." ("The Book or the Four Phases of a Birth," in *Performance in Post-Modern Culture,* ed. M. Benemou and C. Caramello [Madison, Wis.: Coda Press, 1977], 126–27).

15. Martin Buber, "Schneur Zalman of Liadi," in *Tales of the Hassidim: Early Masters* (New York: Schocken, 1946), 271.

16. Robert P. Scharlemann, "The Being of God When God Is Not Being God: Deconstructing the History of Theism" in *Deconstruction and Theology,* ed. Carl A. Raschke (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 88, 97.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, "To Love the Torah More than God," *Difficile Liberté: Essai sur le Judaisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), trans. Helen A. Stephenson and Richard Sugarman in *Judaism* 28 (1979): 216–23.

18. Ibid., 218.

19. Ibid., 219

20. Ibid., 221.

21. Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," *Writing and Difference* (1967), trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 67. Blanchot also interprets the broken tablets as a kind of primal void: "The Tablets of the Law were broken when still only barely touched by the divine hand . . . and were written again, but not in their original form, so that is from an already destroyed word that man learns the demand that must speak to him: there is no real first understanding, no initial and broken word,

as if one could never speak except the second time, after having refused to listen and having taken a distance in regard to the origin" (see Blanchot's "Interruptions," in this volume).

22. Derrida, "Jabès and the Question of the Book," 77.

23. Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 282–303. For a good overview of Scholem's thinking, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979).

24. Scholem is the best guide for the study of Kabbalah. See his many works, including *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (1960; reprint, New York: Schocken, 1969); *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941; reprint, New York: Schocken, 1961); "The Name of God in the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 59–80, 164–94. Harold Bloom has also done some interesting studies of Kabbalah as a theory of language and poetic influence, including *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford, 1973); *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1975); and *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford, 1975).

25. Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition," 295.

26. Ibid., 30–31.

27. Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in Bloom, et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 4.

28. Here is a sample from the beginning of the *Zohar,* the preeminent Kabbalistic work: "When the most Mysterious wished to reveal himself, He first produced a single point which was transmuted into a thought, and in this He executed innumerable designs, and engraved innumerable engravings. He further engraved within the sacred and mystic lamp a mystic and most holy design, which was a wondrous edifice issuing from the midst of thought. This is called *MI* [Who], and was the beginning of the edifice, existent and non-existent, deep-buried, unknowable by name" (*Zohar* 1b).

29. Buber, "Dov Baer of Mezritch: The Great Maggid," in *Tales of the Hassidim,* 104.

30. Blanchot, "Interruptions."

31. Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (Univ. of Alabama Press, 1979), 300.

32. Ibid., 302–3.

33. Ibid., 307.

34. Ibid., 316.

35. Ibid., 326. One of the striking characteristics of Jewish mystics—especially when compared to non-Jewish mystics—is that they were also great legalists. The same rabbis who codified and articulated the vast body of Jewish law—sages such as R. Akiva, R. Joseph Caro, R. Schneur Zalman—were also Judaism's outstanding mystical thinkers. Green speculates that it is in fact the extreme legal conservatism of the mystics that allowed them the luxury of their speculations. Nevertheless, even their most profound mystical interpretations of the minutiae of Jewish law never caused them to abrogate the literal observance of those laws. Christianity did abrogate the laws, however, and this was a critical breaking point and unacceptable interpretation—despite certain Talmudic hints about changes in the Law that will take place in the Messianic Era.

In the Talmud, the rabbis will vociferously debate the various interpretations of the law; some will prohibit and some will permit, and all interpretations are considered "Torah." But in the realm of practical decision-making, one interpretation is chosen to be followed—though in carrying it out, customs may vary. Despite variance, this assures a common core of observance through which collective Jewish identity is affirmed and maintained.

36. Elie Wiesel, *Four Hassidic Masters and Their Struggle Against Melancholy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 1–3.

37. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hassidic Masters* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1983), 201.