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**Zachary Braiterman: (God) After Auschwitz**

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# INTRODUCTION

## MODERNITY SURPASSED

### JEWISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Once upon a time we were dreaming of sweet and imaginary  
fires and of crumbling wedding canopies, but he, Sutzkever,  
beheld man in his utter ugliness, in his physical and  
spiritual degradation.

(Marc Chagall)

**Z**YGMUNT BAUMAN was certainly not the first to note that “the Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, catastrophic suffering belongs to the entire twentieth century—a century in which mass murder and mass death marked the convergence of modern organization, modern technology, and human propensities for violence and apathy. The Holocaust, two world wars, the Armenian genocide, the Stalinist gulag, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Maoist purges, killing fields in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, along with the specters of nuclear apocalypse, global environmental, disaster and the spread of AIDS all combine to haunt the Western imagination. To be sure, this all-too-familiar litany has already become rote, piously intoned, then easily ignored. But these names still work to different effect on those who take the time to linger over them. The litany retains its power to undermine the value of the human person, the meaning of history and modernity, and the significance of human cultural practice and social organization (along with belief in God). The endemic suffering that has riddled the entire twentieth century confronts theologians, philosophers, artists, novelists, and poets with the dilemma of orienting human life and thought around the experience and memory of profound negativity and broken cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Jewish religious thought provides a focal node with which to analyze postmodern (post-Holocaust) attempts at refiguring cultural and intellectual praxis. In the following pages, I examine how catastrophic suffering and its memory absorb the work of three pivotal contemporary Jewish thinkers: Richard Rubenstein, Eliezer Berkovits, and Emil Fackenheim. Their writings have framed post-Holocaust religious discourse, defining

its left wing, its right wing, and its center. Assuming that religious reflection intersects with reading, my focus is twofold: theological and literary. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim began to rework received notions about God and covenant by rereading traditional Jewish texts. In the process (and despite fierce disagreements among themselves), they have articulated a uniquely post-Holocaust theological sensibility dominated by what we are about to call *antitheodicy*.

*Theodicy* is a familiar technical term, coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to mean “the justification of God.” We expand this to include any attempt to justify, explain, or find acceptable meaning to the relationship that subsists between God (or some other form of ultimate reality), evil, and suffering. In contrast, *antitheodicy* means refusing to justify, explain, or accept that relationship. Although it often borders on blasphemy, antitheodicy does not constitute atheism; it might even express stubborn love that human persons have for God. After all, the author of a genuine antitheodic statement must believe that an actual relationship subsists between God and evil in order to reject it; and they must love God in order to be offended by that relationship. *Antitheodicy* is my own neologism.<sup>3</sup> I use it in order to account for a particular religious sensibility, based (in part) on fragments selectively culled from classical Jewish texts, that dominates post-Holocaust Jewish thought.

It will become apparent in the chapters that follow that my use of *theodicy* is intentionally broad. Critical readers might even object that I have applied it too broadly, that I have found theodicy where none in fact exists. This will appear especially to be the case when I turn to Jewish thinkers like Joseph Soloveitchik and Mordecai Kaplan—thinkers who ostensibly reject the very project of theodicy, along with other “God’s eye” explanatory frameworks. I would only point out that theodicy constitutes a large family of different (and often contradictory) types of religious utterance. These include theories of just deserts, spiritual or ethical catharsis, the free-will argument, privation theories of evil that deny its ultimate existence, and epistemological doubts about the human capacity to know the ways of God or theologically interpret moral experience. Some theodicies ascribe blame to victims, others merit. The author of one type of theodic statement interprets suffering as a punishing sign of divine displeasure. Another might understand it as a sign of God’s passionate love for the persons suffering. Another might profess the human inability to read such signs. My purpose in casting so wide a net is to show how these contradictory types of religious utterance are made to function to the same effect: to justify God and providence in the face of evil and suffering. In my view, *any* utterance that attributes positive spiritual or moral “meaning” to genuine evil, any attempt to “redeem” suffer-

ing, risks entering into this family resemblance. Readers will find this author largely unsympathetic to this task, but not entirely. Indeed, I suggest at the end of Chapter 3 that religious thinkers must sometimes take this risk in ultimately desperate attempts to draw good out of evil.

My own suspicions regarding theodicy and my sympathies towards antitheodicy do not overlook the point that neither represent stable entities. Theodicy and antitheodicy are but second order, heuristic categories with which to evaluate the meaning of a given religious utterance. As such, both remain subject to intense interpretive play. A statement that is theodic in one context (e.g., “God is good because God rewards the righteous in the world-to-come”) can become antitheodic in another semantic context (e.g., “God misgoverns this-world and so defers reward until the world-to-come”). The same slippage holds true of antitheodic statements. The notion that we can never explain the ways of God by means of speculation can turn theodic when followed by statements that justify God and affirm the ultimate moral value of suffering. Indeed, such statements may sometimes even follow claims that a religious thinker rejects theodicy! I make these points at the end of Chapter 2 and in my discussion of Soloveitchik and Kaplan in Chapter 3. In the meantime, I want to suggest the following about the authorial intent of religious thinkers: whether or not a particular thinker consciously understands herself to have explicitly employed theodicy does not mean that she has not made implicit use of it.

It is not coincidental that post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers make little to no such use of theodicy—explicit or implicit. The collapse of theodicy in their work speaks to vexing questions surrounding the Holocaust’s historical and theological uniqueness. Rubenstein and Fackenheim have argued that the Holocaust represented a unique and radical evil in human history that has ruptured traditional theological categories like theodicy. Against Rubenstein and Fackenheim, other scholars maintain that the Holocaust was only one of many catastrophes in Jewish history; as such, it neither requires nor has generated any unique theological response. It will become clear that I disagree with both positions. On the one hand, the Holocaust and post-Holocaust thought occur within broader historical and theological contexts. One cannot properly understand the Holocaust outside of the larger context of modern mass death. Nor can one understand contemporary Jewish response to catastrophe without reflecting upon the shape of classical and modern Jewish thought. At the same time, Auschwitz represents a theological point of no return. A uniquely modern catastrophe with uniquely modern implications befell the Jewish people in the twentieth century. In turn, this catastrophe and its memory have profoundly reshaped the given theodic and antitheodic contours of its religious culture.

We return to the question concerning the uniqueness of the Holocaust at the end of this introduction. Narrowing our focus for now, we see that the Holocaust has radically complicated the project of twentieth-century Jewish modernism. By “Jewish modernism,” I mean a series of disjointed efforts to renew traditional ideational, social, and textual patterns broken by the uneven encounter with Western culture. Modern Jewish thinkers sought to “make it new” by turning against nineteenth-century views of progress and other canons of Enlightenment reason and historicism. Examples include the neo-Hasidism of Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, Gershom Scholem’s rehabilitation of Kabbalah’s intellectual respectability, Franz Rosenzweig’s return to revelation and ritual, Soloveitchik’s phenomenological analysis of Halakha, and general reappraisals of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic aggadah. These projects paralleled the use of traditional motifs in the poetry, novels, and paintings of Hayim Nahman Bialik, Shai Agnon, Marc Chagall, and so many others. In turn, these Jewish thinkers and artists reflected the Orientalist turn to archaic, Eastern, and “primitivist” tropes in the varied works of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and other avant-garde modernists. In our view the Holocaust has posed unique theological problems to those Jewish thinkers who fall under this rubric. Not surprisingly, little to no “post-Holocaust” thought appears among ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have wanted nothing from either modernity or modernism.<sup>4</sup>

The Holocaust intensified an already-strained relation between Judaism and modern cultural currents. It did not take the Holocaust for Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and the proponents of historicism and positivism to cast doubt upon the cogency of a traditional narrative pattern based on [1] a transcendent deity who [2] created the world, [3] chose one particular people, [4] and revealed to that people one particular set of commandments encoded in a particular textual corpus that would [5] lead them toward privileged messianic and otherworldly futures. Jewish thinkers like Buber, Baeck, Rosenzweig, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan responded to the challenge posed by modernity by recasting traditional Jewish texts, tropes, and narrative structures. Judaism was made to accord with modern intellectual and cultural trends while calling the hegemony of Enlightenment reason into question. The Holocaust, however, has exacerbated extant questions about God, Torah, Israel, mitzvah, and covenant by placing them before the historical presence of monumental horror. By the end of the twentieth century, European history has undermined modern Jewish life and thought more thoroughly than did nineteenth century German *Geistesgeschichte*.

Modern Jewish religious thinkers like Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan made only haphazard and oblique reference to the Holocaust

immediately after the war. Some scholars and critics have suggested that they suffered from a state of psychological shock—like mourners and terminally ill patients who undergo a transitional period of denial and disbelief. In this view a prolonged psychic distress rendered modern Jewish theologians mute.<sup>5</sup> However, we will see in Chapter 3 that despair, anxiety, and disillusionment had already begun to mark the theological literature of the 1950s and early 1960s. In the face of tragedy, Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan sought to affirm *guardedly* optimistic appraisals of God, the ultimate direction of providence, the human person, society, Jewish destiny, and the abiding relevance of traditional texts. They ignored neither tragedy nor the Holocaust. Instead, Auschwitz represented a silent but as yet unnamed presence in their postwar writings.

Discursive factors explain this relative silence better than psychology. Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan lacked a widespread discourse with which to discuss the Holocaust. A flurry of memoirs, literature, film, and scholarship would begin to chronicle the Holocaust in graphic detail. Such texts disseminated a vocabulary, a body of knowledge without which one could only have referred to the Holocaust in passing and general terms. Indeed, the very word *Holocaust* appeared relatively late. Some time elapsed before the name Auschwitz or phrases like “Arbeit macht frei” assumed their current iconographic status. Without a sufficiently developed discourse, there was simply no language with which to talk about the Holocaust, no pastiche of image, figure, phrase, slogan, narrative, and reflection with which to rivet the religious imagination.

Religious thought cannot operate in a discursive vacuum. In our case, post-Holocaust theology owes its origin to a larger discourse taking shape throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The 1963 Eichmann trial, the testimony it generated, and Hannah Arendt’s formulation of the “banality of evil” constituted central moments in its formation. The work of Elie Wiesel played a pivotal role, providing Jewish theologians images of hunted, hanging, and burning children, death marches, concentration camp life, the figure of the survivor, a language of witness, and an anti-aesthetic of bitter despair and resistance. Primo Levi left Jewish theologians with the figure of the “Musselmann”—the camp denizen broken by what Jean Amery called the Nazi “logic of destruction.” Alexander Donat used the term “Holocaust Kingdom” to designate a specific place in the history of human suffering. The critic Terrence De Pres in his study of Holocaust memoirs suggested the image of “excremental assault.” In addition to memoirs and literary representations, the 1960s and 1970s saw the historical studies of Lucy Dawidowicz and Raul Hilberg, and the psychological reflections of Elie Cohen, Viktor Frankl, and Bruno Bettelheim. The documentary film *Night and Fog* visualized the Holocaust, providing macabre images of warehoused human hair and typhus-ravaged

bodies bulldozed into mass graves. This extensive Holocaust discourse did more than dominate post-Holocaust religious thought. It constituted the very condition of possibility for any sustained theological encounter with the Holocaust.

Rubenstein was one of the first Jewish theologians to respond to this literature, practically inventing post-Holocaust theology *de novo* in 1966 with the publication of *After Auschwitz*. At the time Rubenstein was a campus rabbi at the University of Pittsburgh. The enfant terrible of Jewish theology, Rubenstein would soon suffer what Michael Berenbaum called bureaucratic excommunication for advancing radical conclusions in the wake of catastrophic suffering. With the publication of *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein found himself pilloried by the organized Jewish community and unable to find academic work. He eventually took a teaching post at Florida State University in Tallahassee. At present he is president of the University of Bridgeport—an academic institution associated with Rev. Moon’s Unification Church. Rubenstein had dared to argue that the Holocaust radically sundered Jews from biblical and rabbinic ideas about God, covenant and election, suffering and redemption found. According to Rubenstein, the “Judeo-Christian” tradition posits belief in an omnipotent and just God, the ultimate author of history. Rubenstein argued that if such a God exists, the Holocaust had to represent divine will. Rejecting that theology, Rubenstein declared “the death of God.” He argued that contemporary Jews who honestly confront the Holocaust can no longer orient their lives around cherished beliefs and texts. Instead, he advanced what he called an insightful paganism. In an absurd universe, the suffering person does not represent a figure of guilt and redemption, but a victim of tragic happenstance.

In stark contrast, Berkovits denied that the Holocaust posed any unique theological challenge to traditional belief and Jewish texts. Ordained at the modern Orthodox Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Germany, Berkovits taught Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, before immigrating to Israel. In *Faith after the Holocaust* (1973) and *With God in Hell* (1979), Berkovits argued that traditional Judaism retains its integrity after Auschwitz. He criticized Rubenstein for using Christian terms like “the death of God” and for addressing the Holocaust out of historical context. Berkovits was a self-styled champion of tradition, who sought to define and defend the nature of “authentic” Jewish faith. According to Berkovits, Jewish tradition had confronted the problem of evil throughout a long history of exile. At the surface, Berkovits argued that the notions of human freedom and messianic trust remain philosophically and theologically cogent after the Holocaust and Israel’s military victory in 1967. In fact, the Berkovits I describe in Chapter 5 was more complex than this quick sketch suggests.

The traditionalism informing Berkovits's thought belied an edge no less radical than Richard Rubenstein's.

With his own rhetoric of rupture and repair, Fackenheim assumed a position roughly between Rubenstein and Berkovits. Like Berkovits, Fackenheim was born in Germany, where he was ordained (at the liberal *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*). Fackenheim escaped the war and settled in Toronto where he taught philosophy for many years. He now lives in Jerusalem. Fackenheim became best known for claiming that a 614th mitzvah commands the Jewish people after the Holocaust. In *God's Presence in History* (1970), he argued that "The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz" commands Jews to remember the Holocaust and survive as Jews without despairing of God, world, or "man."<sup>6</sup> Fackenheim paradoxically asserted that post-Holocaust Jews must mend a radical rupture in Jewish life, belief, and tradition. Culling insights from Bible, midrash, continental philosophy, and contemporary Jewish narrative, he tried to orient post-Holocaust Jewish life and thought around precarious shards of moral good. The astonishing examples of Jewish and gentile resistance to the Nazi onslaught, and above all the State of Israel, were said to represent God's uneven presence in the midst of history.

In following chapters I critically examine the theological positions staked out by Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim. I argue that post-Holocaust Jewish thought has hinged on unexamined understandings of "tradition," "reading," and "rhetoric." These hermeneutical foci lead directly to postmodern critical theory. Now obviously, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim display neither the same ironic self-consciousness nor sense of play shared by so many of their postmodern contemporaries. Nor (by and large) do postmodern theories show the communal solidarity or ethical urgency that dominate post-Holocaust literature. However, postmodern theories illuminate post-Holocaust thought on at least two counts. First, they provide analytical tools with which to identify and evaluate the play of difference that permeates tradition. Rather than search for uniform messages or meanings (what Martin Buber called *Botshaf*), postmodern theories allow us to critically assess the deep tensions that rend traditions. Second, postmodernism has come to shape the very same thematic horizon occupied by post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers. I refer primarily to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Edmond Jabes, and Edith Wyschogrod. One would also include the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Maurice Blanchot, and Mark Taylor. Together, they have identified: [1] the unstable field that constitutes historical consciousness, [2] the experience, memory, and threat of catastrophe and rupture in the twentieth century, [3] the impotence of language and reason before this "tremendum," and [4] the potentially reorienting significance of the supplement, the trace, and the fragment. These are the



postmodern topoi reflected in this study. As I see it, postmodern and post-Holocaust thinkers inhabit different sectors of style, mood, and sense within the same mental and cultural universe.

Postmodern theory also facilitates our own attempts to undo the hegemony of theodicy and “meaning” in the philosophy and sociology of religion. In chapter 1, I show how catastrophic suffering generates a vast, and heretofore unexplored, cluster of religious problems. I argue that God does not represent the sole religious figure requiring justification in the face of catastrophe. Religious thinkers must also justify social institutions and textual canons. The Holocaust has threatened the physical community of Israel, its Torah, and the motif of covenant that runs throughout its religious life. In this light, theodicy does *not* represent the privileged preoccupation in post-Holocaust Jewish thought. I argue throughout that the reconstruction of Jewish religious life and thought after the Holocaust has depended on rebuilding community and rereading texts—particularly the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic midrash. Justifying God barely enters into the equation.

In Chapter 2, I continue to explore the limits of theodicy by examining theodic and antitheodic motifs and figures in classical Jewish texts. In particular I pay close attention to the book of Deuteronomy, the book of Job, and rabbinic commentaries. Theodic texts like Deuteronomy’s Song of Moses (chapter 32) depict a just, good God using painful suffering in order to punish the wicked and purify the righteous. Their authors accept suffering and urge the people to return to God and covenant. In contrast, antitheodic figures like Job depict aggrieved human parties who reject suffering and protest providence. In these texts God may appear unjust and unkind and must ultimately repent. Classical Jewish texts, I conclude, swing between a theodic center and antitheodic margins in their response to suffering. As such they provide a rich field of suggestive figure, image, and contention that Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim reject, adopt, and transform after the Holocaust.

In Chapter 3, I examine how the phenomenon of suffering shaped the thought of Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan. I have chosen these four figures and ignore Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig for the simple fact that these latter two thinkers did not live to see the Holocaust. To be sure, Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan offered radically different understandings of God, Jewish peoplehood, mitzvah, and covenant. Yet their work betrays a surprisingly pronounced consensus surrounding the problem of evil. To be sure, none of these thinkers ever sought to formulate a systematic theodicy. Soloveitchik and Kaplan rejected such attempts out of hand. However, implicit theodic assumptions and expression permeated modern Jewish thought well into the 1950s and early 1960s. On the one hand, Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and

Kaplan absolved God by blaming evil on human agents, on a callous Western civilization. At the same time, they sought to frame suffering within the larger context of spiritual catharsis and ethical good. In their view, Judaism held the same. Modern Jewish thinkers privileged the moral rigor of the prophets over Job's embittered protest. Striking a "realistic" position regarding the scope of human evil and suffering, they then sought to turn them into foundations for good. In contrast, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim attempted no such alchemy. Post-Holocaust thinkers, we will see, abandoned even the most modern and (self-) disguised variants of the theodic "tradition." Instead, they reconfigured tradition by appropriating antitheodic biblical and midrashic fragments and by pointedly ignoring modern-readings-of-tradition.

Having offered a more nuanced rendering of "tradition" in the first part of this book, I devote Chapters 4, 5, and 6 to Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim, respectively. I remain deeply indebted to Steven Katz's *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*—undoubtedly the single most important example of critical scholarship in the field. In this seminal text, Katz applied a closely reasoned philosophical analysis to the claims posed by post-Holocaust thinkers. While relying on Katz, my own study includes a "literary" dimension that he left unexplored. Rhetoric simply inundates the literature. Under "rhetoric" I include hyperbolic slogans, polemical overkill, rhetorical overstatement, and gross overinterpretation expressed with the intention to shock readers, foment resistance, rally solidarity, and carve out new theological identities. Rubenstein proclaimed "the death of God" and the creation of an "insightful paganism," but he himself was neither a death of God theologian nor a pagan. Berkovits championed "authentic Judaism" by reinventing it. Fackenheim's rhetoric about the 614th commandment obscured the fact that he had reduced the content of revelation to an anxious minimum—while staking a heavy investment on highly stylized antitheodic figures for whom revelation offers little hope or consolation.

I ask my readers in advance to note the marked ambivalence with which I approach the use of rhetoric by these thinkers. I have employed both a hermeneutic of charity and a hermeneutic of suspicion. On one hand, I want to show that wild speech begets new religious expression by opening up uncharted conceptual and hermeneutical territory. As such, rhetoric proved indispensable to the formation of post-Holocaust Jewish thought. For example, I explain in Chapter 4 that Rubenstein *had no choice* but to adopt "pagan" rhetoric. His teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary (like Heschel, Robert Gordis, Louis Finkelstein) had not provided him a Jewish vocabulary with which to formulate his own critique of theodicy. I therefore think it would be uncharitable to fault Rubenstein for not understanding the tradition as we have come to under-

stand it in the 1990s. It would also show ingratitude. I cannot but suspect that Rubenstein's blistering attacks helped prompt many thinkers (like Berkovits and Fackenheim) to "rediscover" antitheodicy within the tradition, if only to prove Rubenstein wrong. On the other hand, rhetoric does not always yield new insight. Indeed, we will see rhetoric missing its mark throughout the post-Holocaust literature. In particular, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim respectively overstate (or rather overinterpret) their own radicalism, conservatism, or return into history. Trying to respect this ambiguity, I neither condemn nor celebrate hyperbole and other forms of wild speech. As I see it, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim demand readers who *simultaneously* endorse and distrust the rash language that made it possible to reinvent theological and literary origins after Auschwitz.

In the book's conclusion, I argue that the writings of Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim coalesce into what Michel Foucault called a common "discursive formation." By this I understand Foucault to mean a network of rules, assumptions, and expression operating anonymously upon the individuals who speak within it. Discourse generates new discursive objects. It relies upon experts authorized to restrict its operation. Examples of post-Holocaust discourse formation include the emergence of privileged antitheodic subjects from the margins of tradition and attempts by an expert class to restrict theodic expression. Note too that Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim appeared unaware of the family resemblance that they shared with each other. This point only confirms Foucault's general observation that disparate authors have but an inadequate idea of the breadth of the discourse in which they themselves participate. This new post-Holocaust discursive formation bears directly on the process of cultural transformation in modern Jewish life. Drawing on Umberto Eco, I suggest that religious cultures prove intrinsically plastic. In the face of historical flux, the parts that compose a tradition can always be reconfigured into surprising new patterns. Throughout this study we see Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim rifling through tradition. They abandoned what were once central ideas and texts while bringing once-marginal themes and figures into the center of Jewish thought. In the process they came to formulate a religious sensibility (we explain in the conclusion: a religious aesthetic) that is unique in the history of Jewish thought.

We cannot do complete justice to the discourse without briefly explaining the relative absence of Arthur Cohen and Irving Greenberg from this study. Cohen's *The Tremendum* may constitute the single most sophisticated piece of post-Holocaust thought written to date. Greenberg has been among the most forceful critics of theodicy within the modern orthodox camp. Two reasons dictate their exclusion. First, Rubenstein,

Berkovits, and Fackenheim were the first religious thinkers who systematically addressed the Holocaust. The *Tremendum* (Cohen's first and only book on the subject) appeared in 1981. As such, it owes its sophistication not only to the author's obvious brilliance but to its own belatedness. Both Cohen and Greenberg build on the discussion begun by Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim. Like Rubenstein, Cohen does not think that God actively interferes in history; God is too impersonal a figure in his thought. Nevertheless, Cohen argues (like Fackenheim) that God maintains a trace presence within history; he likens this presence to a "filament." For his part, the specific quality of Greenberg's appeal to human dignity and sympathy echoes Berkovits's thoughts about theology and Halakha. Second, Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim are the foci of this study because they proved to be so prolific. This allows us to trace the trajectory of their thought. In contrast, Cohen and Greenberg's writings about the Holocaust stand outside a larger post-Holocaust oeuvre. As such, they tell us less about the internal texture of an individual's intellectual development or the tensions that characterize the discourse.

Many critics of the discourse still wonder why it should have ever formed at all. This returns us to that central tenet in post-Holocaust Jewish thought concerning the Holocaust's uniqueness. One might presume that a unique evil would therefore justify unique theological and textual revisions. But, we ask again, was the Holocaust unique? Confining ourselves to Jewish history, we again note many other instances of catastrophe and mass murder. Examples include the destruction of the Temple, the Crusader massacres, the Chmelniki pogroms, and widespread massacres in the Ukraine following World War I. And even if the Holocaust was *historically* unique, does it truly represent a *theologically* unique evil? The death of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands should also trouble religious faith. No less than the Holocaust, these events call into question the notion of a good and powerful God, acting in history, and watching over Israel with special care. The Holocaust, it would seem, does not substantially change the problem.

Indeed, I argue that the antitheodic response of Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim to suffering does not constitute a complete novum in Jewish intellectual history. Many classical Jewish authors had already responded to the evil of their times with many of the same antitheodic positions found in post-Holocaust thought. Moreover, as David Roskies and Alan Mintz have each persuasively shown, the proponents of Yiddish and Hebrew literary modernism anticipated the rebellion of Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim. God's absence was protested by characters in the novels of Shai Agnon and in the pogrom poetry of Peretz Markish and Hayim Nahman Bialik. Even earlier, antitheodic motifs appeared in

nineteenth-century Europe—in Nietzsche’s figure of the madman who declares the death of God and in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s fictional antihero Ivan Karamazov. Together, all of these writings suggest that antitheodic response to the problem of evil represents nothing new. The Holocaust has created no unique theological problem and no unique response.

Or so it seems. True, the Holocaust does not substantially change the problem of evil nor generate new types of antitheodic response, at least not in terms of strict *content*. Indeed, the exact wording of an antitheodic utterance may stay the same over time. However, the changed context in which these utterances appear after the Holocaust creates a decisive shift within the *formal* parameters of Jewish intellectual history.

Debates concerning the uniqueness of post-Holocaust Jewish thought have heretofore ignored the importance of genre. In our opinion, something new has happened within the particular field of *religious thought*. It is one thing when poets, novelists, literary figures, and philosophers challenge a God in whom they disbelieve. Take for instance the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever’s protest poem “Kol Nidre.” Written in the Vilna Ghetto, Sutzkever drew on a long preexisting tradition. But Sutzkever never believed in the God of history! Referring to one of Sutzkever’s critics, Roskies comments: “Could someone like Sutzkever carry it off? Kalmanovitsch’s reaction on hearing the poem was apt: ‘Whoever calls God to account [*ver es hot a din-toyre mit got*],’ he argued, ‘must first of all believe in God.’ There was an element of posturing in a poet who in other contexts rarely invoked the name of God and whose most religious poem, written in the ghetto, ‘I Feel Like Making a Prayer,’ actually asserted the impossibility of prayer.”<sup>7</sup> Kalmanovitsch addressed the irony of a nonbeliever calling God to account. Yet he may have had it backward. Modern poets and other skeptics have always found it easy to ridicule and protest a God in whom they don’t believe. Theologians have exercised greater hesitation. Buber, Heschel, Soloveitchik, and Kaplan never assumed the antitheodic posture struck by poets and novelists. Antitheodicy gains a larger currency in specifically religious circles only after the Holocaust. Not just a literary trope, it has entered into the mainstream of contemporary religious thought.

We note the following structural difference. A shift between the center and margins occurs within the genre of religious thought. Although not rare, antitheodicy represented an isolated discourse in biblical and rabbinic texts. Antitheodic statements did not form together into a coherent tradition within the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, an entire historical chronicle and prophetic tradition rested on Deuteronomy’s theodic discourse of rebuke and retribution. The antitheodic motifs found in the Babylonian Talmud and midrash compilations constituted suggestive counter-traditions at best. They never assumed normative status, coalesced around

revered iconographic figures like the martyred R. Akiba. Nor did they enter the traditional prayer book. Antitheodicy, we safely conclude, proves more central in the writings of Rubenstein, Berkovits, and Fackenheim than in classical texts and traditions. The meaning of antitheodic expression shifts in the process of moving from the margins to the center of Jewish thought. Statements and sentiments that occupy the public center of a religious discourse carry more normative weight than they do from exoteric and literary margins where they are barely read and easily forgotten.

The broader currency and structural weight given to antitheodic discourse speak to the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust. Fackenheim has rightly observed that the Romans allowed R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai to escape Jerusalem and establish an academy in Yavneh. The crusader massacres were marked by scattered killing. Chmelniki did not pursue a “final solution.” We might say the same of the widespread massacres during the Russian Civil War. As Roskies notes, the Holocaust has become its own archetype.<sup>8</sup> Comparing the modern pogrom poetry of an earlier generation with the poetry written in the ghettos during the war, Roskies writes: “In all these [former cases], the scene of destruction was never more than a catalyst, a small part of the whole, and therefore its artistic representation could elicit only so much. No writer, not even Lamed Shapiro, would dwell exclusively on the meaning of Jewish catastrophe. After 1 September 1939, however, the subject of catastrophe eclipsed all others as millions of Jews suddenly found themselves standing ‘at the cross roads’ with nowhere to turn.”<sup>9</sup> Catastrophe no longer represented a dissonant cloud over some distant corner of Jewish life. It engulfed the whole of Eastern and Western European Jewry, pushing the problem of evil into the center of Jewish thought. Maybe this alone does not substantively change the problem of evil. One might even hope that over time Auschwitz may no longer eclipse Jewish life and thought. But who could doubt that the record of that historical eclipse will endure in the forms of myth and memorial? Coupled with the threat of nuclear weaponry, the image of Auschwitz, I suspect, will continue to shape religious thought well into the next century. It has finally forced theologians (together with poets, novelists, and critics of religion) to consider that no promised redemption, no good, is worth the price of catastrophic suffering.

The Enlightenment as a whole has been faulted for a variety of pathologies. Social critics like Arendt, Foucault, Rubenstein, and Bauman have observed the murderous effects of rationalization and bureaucratization. Philosophers like Levinas, Derrida, and Lyotard have associated the notions of synthesis and totality with totalitarianism and terror. I do not need to rehearse these arguments but want to add the following point.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has made the counter-claim that modern men and women show heightened aversions to pain and suffering. For Taylor, modernity has come to mean sensitivity for the dignity of the individual and his or her everyday life in the here and now. This explains the response of Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov for whom the suffering of even one single innocent child in this-world disrupts whatever harmony may await him in the world-to-come. Ironically, however, this very sensitivity comes at that precise historical juncture where the human person has acquired unique destructive powers. Indeed, Levinas understood how responsibilities multiply before the infinite horizon of the other's face. In my view it is technology that augments this responsibility by extending the scope of human power. At no other point in time have human beings possessed the actual power to inflict global harm. The artificially enhanced intensity of the Nazi onslaught (coupled with the precedent established at Hiroshima and Nagasaki) points to the unique responsibilities people bear today.

As such, the Holocaust points beyond itself—which is why perhaps Berkovits concluded *Faith after the Holocaust* noting the global dangers posed by poverty, environmental degradation, and atomic weaponry (a “monstrous increase in human power”). As Berkovits warned, “A much more dangerous man lives on with a soul infected by the holocaust betrayal.”<sup>10</sup> This capacity to inflict universal harm (realized for the first time in our century) generates a unique theological problematic before which formulaic restatements of the problem of evil inevitably pale. Prior to the twentieth century, theologians offered more or less satisfactory answers as to why God would create creatures capable of murder (even mass murder) and indifference. For its part, the Book of Job ends with God's poem describing the terrible beauty that floods the world. Suffering and indifference prove ultimately unable to overshadow this theophany. Yet the force of God's response to Job wanes in the twentieth century. For the first time in history, genocidal human cultures can now turn into ash that very creation described by the author(s) of Job. This constitutes a unique theological problem. Never before have human beings had to confront the possible combination of Nazi will and American knowhow. One might very well take up the point made by Berkovits and wonder what kind of God would create such creatures.