

General remarks (Ellen De Doncker)

1) it is not clear whether I should write 'X' or "X" in the main text. I now accentuated only where there is 'X', all other items are "X" in the main text.

2) Change everything to /Ibidem/ (/.../ stands for Italics)

3) Can I do abbreviated titles? I now indicated in pink to change to abbreviated ones.

4) For articles: 'Title' instead of "Title"

5) Colours: yellow for 'X'; Green: reference to be corrected; Pink: Abbreviate title; Blue: put in Italics

6) sometimes, the letters 'st' merge into a strange form, I indicated this in purple

Thank you!

Teshuva as Philosophical View on History: The Problem of Silence

Ellen de Doncker

1. Introduction

In November 2022, walking around in the rainy streets of Vilnius, a certain type of sadness wrapped its sticky arms around me. I visited the city together with Professor Luc Anckaert, to encounter Professor Jolanta Saldukaitytė. Jolanta guided us around and told us the stories of the ghetto of Vilnius, of the difficult identity of Lithuania and of the sadness that fills the city and that was so tangible that November-night. This paper aims to address one part of the melancholic sadness that contrasts with the lively streets of Vilnius, in approaching the difficult question of the Shoah from the perspective of Jewish philosophy.¹

Theodor Adorno wrote: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”.² The horror of Auschwitz forms a horrific caesura that cannot be represented or understood. We start from this caesura, the break that Auschwitz and the Shoah represent. More specifically, we look at this horror as a challenge for Jewish philosophy. In this regard, we choose the term Shoah (Hebrew: catastrophe)³ because this term implies a break within Judaism. We use the term Holocaust (Greek: burnt offering)⁴ only when discussing authors who themselves use the term Holocaust. The Shoah radically challenges the idea of historical progress. R. Rubenstein states

¹ This paper is an adaptation of my Master’s Thesis in Philosophy: Ellen De Doncker, *De Shoah als uitdaging voor de joodse wijsbegeerte: Historische en transhistorische visie op teshuva*, promoter: Prof. Dr. Luc Anckaert (Leuven, 2018), ined. Master’s thesis.

² Theodor. W. Adorno, *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 31.

³ Michael Berenbaum, ‘Holocaust’, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. by F. Skolnik & M. Berenbaum, 22 Vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), Vol. 9, p. 324-343 (p. 325).

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 325.

that the Shoah is, in fact, witness to the advance of civilization; a statement that would be elaborated by Z. Bauman in his *Modernity and Holocaust*.⁵ The goal of this paper is to analyse precisely what Judaism's relation is to history: once the concept of history as progress has been shattered horribly, it represents a caesura to all rational thinking. Not only is the Shoah a caesura as an irreducible evil (cf. Adorno's statement "Das Negierte ist negativ, bis es verging."⁶), according to Bauman it is also *normal*. The oxymoron of "the simultaneous uniqueness and normality of the Holocaust"⁷ should stress that even though the Shoah is unique in its horror, it is nonetheless *normal* since the violence concentrated through modernity, was during the Shoah only redistributed by civilization, thus making the Holocaust a true, normal modern product. That this horror was a modern product, in no way makes the Shoah graspable by reason; the radical evil of the Shoah forms a caesura and cannot be transcended in a metaphysical, positive *Aufhebung*. The mental caesura and state of disorientation caused by the horror of the *Shoah* is visually illustrated in Berlin, where foremost Daniel Libeskind's Jüdisches Museum (see under), but also Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial on the Ebertstrasse figure as an ungraspable labyrinth, disorienting the visitor, depriving them of all visio-spatial reference points.⁸ In this disoriented state after the Shoah, how should Judaism relate to its shattered history? Jewish philosophy offers a twofold answer. The aim of this paper is to elaborate two stances of Judaism towards history, using the Jewish concept of 'teshuva' (return, repentance). These are on the one hand the transhistorical perspective, embodied by Franz Rosenzweig and Catherine Chaliel, and on the other the historical perspective, embodied by Emil Fackenheim.

First, we characterize teshuva and her place within messianic thinking. In this first chapter, we travel to Vilnius by referring to Vilna Gaon's understanding of teshuva as *silence*. This understanding of teshuva proves difficult after the Holocaust: can and should one remain silent? Similarly, the aporia of messianic thought arises: can one await the messianic end time, or does the horror within history call for active messianism within the present? Next, using the concept of teshuva, we clarify the transhistoric and the historic perspective. As a critical conclusion, both Jewish perspectives on

⁵ Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History* (New York: Harper, 1978), pp. 91, 195. Cited in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 9-10.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 94.

⁸ Bert Olivier, 'The Libeskind Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Unrepresentable and Experience', *Acta Academica* 53/1, 2021, 23-43.

the relationship to history will be applied to the specificity of Lithuania, where the events of the Shoah in some ways escape Bauman's take on it, as it was less impacted by mechanical processes, but all the more by human cruelty. In order to do this, poetry of Avrom Sutzkever will be used, as one example of an esthetic reflection on the Shoah in Lithuania. We examine in what way his poetry, as a Lithuanian point of view, equally raises the question of the relationship to history, and offers an answer in between historical and transhistorical perspectives.

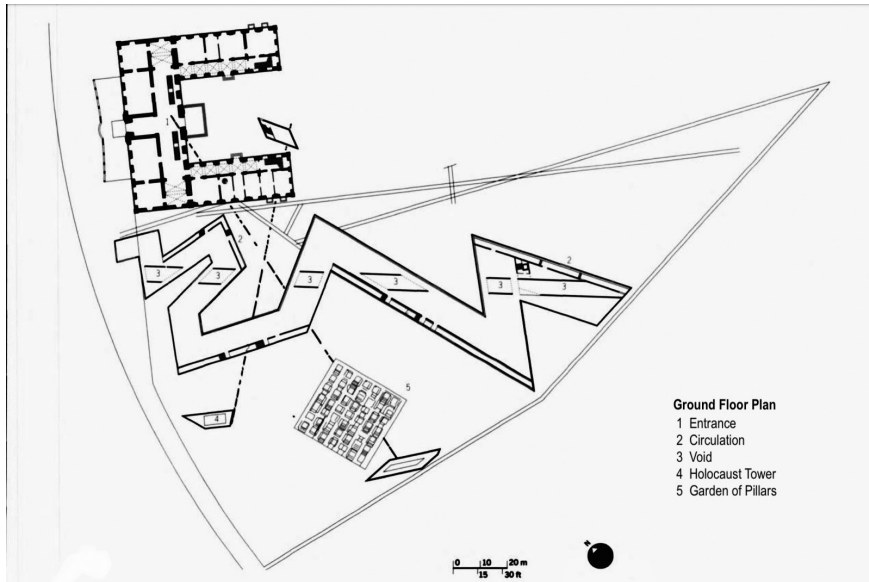


Figure 1: Desorienting Ground Floor Plan of Daniel Libeskind⁹

1.1 Teshuva

1.1.1. Definition

Starting from the concept of *teshuva*¹⁰ (תשובה) two Jewish responses to the Shoah and their relationship to history are explored. The word *teshuva* does not appear anywhere as such in the Hebrew Bible, and probably only

⁹ Daniel Libeskind, 'Ground Floor Plan Jewish Museum Berlin', in *Plans, Sections and Elevation: Key Buildings of the Twentieth Century* (London: Laurence King, 2004), p. 219.

¹⁰ In this paper, the spelling *teshuva* is used, while other spellings like *techouva*, *teshouva* or *teshuba* are possible.

came into existence later. Nevertheless, in the Tenach we find teshuva's root in the verb *shuv* (שוב), which means to turn around, to reverse, to turn over, and indicates that teshuva is a dynamic principle.¹¹ In essence, *shuv* stands for a return to the origins, expressed in, among other places, the prophetic writings where the people of Israel are returned by God to their own land.¹² The notion of return as restoration plays a crucial role in Judaism. Indeed, (Kabbalistic or mystical) Judaism is situated between *tsimtsum* (צמצום, God withdrawing in order to give place to man)¹³ and *tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם, the restoration of the world in the end times).¹⁴ God, certain mystical writings suggest, was banished from the world. The Lurianic Kabbalah, the medieval school of mystical Judaism according to Isaac Luria, describes this exile in a specific way: as contraction (*tsimtsum*).¹⁵ At the beginning of the world God stepped out of Himself and revealed Himself, but then withdrew to keep His deepest being hidden. Departing from the *Schechina* (שכינה), the indwelling of God in the world at the beginning of everything, one looks forward to the end of the world where this God will be reunited with His *Schechina*.¹⁶ *Tsimtsum*, besides being a religious-mystical concept, also has a philosophical scope. Habermas discovered *tsimtsum*, or contraction, as a central theme within Schelling's *Weltalter*. This idea of contraction allows Schelling, influenced by Luria and Boehme, to think of God's infinity without identifying the finite creation with this infinity. In God's contraction the true creation takes place, for by God's withdrawal creation has free play. Habermas uncovers in Schelling's contraction, which Schelling himself never calls *tsimtsum*, a philosophical mechanism. Contraction differs from Hegelian mediation in that it does not replace the position and the negation with a third element, but puts the elements in relation to each other: man is free through God's contraction, but is nevertheless completely dependent on his infinite

¹¹ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 17th ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1954), pp. 810-812.

¹² Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: the Meaning and Practice of Teshuva* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), p. 83

¹³ Gershom Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), p. 148.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 151. CF. Abraham Heschel, who underlines the importance of good deeds. He holds that righteousness on earth paves the way to God's *Schechina*. Teshuva could figure here as one of these good deeds, as a step towards the righteousness preparing the *Schechina*. Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), p. 311-312.

being, without ever coinciding with it.¹⁷ Rosenzweig is strongly influenced by Schelling's concept of contraction in his view of teshuva. The fact that teshuva, as we will show, carries within itself the notion of recovery, links it to *tikkun olam* and places it as a bridge between *tsimtsum* and *tikkun olam* – it constitutes the free play of creation.

Teshuva, in its turning movement, constitutes a form of repentance, as a return to the righteous path – more so a dynamic form of repentance. The dynamic aspect is in a double movement away from evil and toward good. In this way, we can draw a parallel between teshuva and the biblical *metanoia* (μετάνοια), both of which stand for a radical change in mind and heart. *Metanoia* is essential in Christian and Western thought. We find this concept both in Plato's allegory of the cave, where conversion is necessary to reach philosophical truth,¹⁸ and in Christianity, where *metanoia* is considered a crucial element of the Christian walk of life.¹⁹ Teshuva, on the other hand, is typically Jewish. Judaism emphasises, both in its writings and in its holidays (esp. Yom Kippur), the liberating power of teshuva, which consists in a self-salvation from sin. Moreover, Jewish teshuva calls for external changes in behaviour and deeds in addition to an internal change.

Teshuva as dynamic repentance has three implications. Firstly, this notion of repentance challenges determinism, since one can always choose a turn in the here and now that holds promise for the future.²⁰ Secondly, teshuva allows not only man to turn to God and the other, but also God towards mankind.²¹ Man must first repent and ask forgiveness of the victim before God can forgive him.²² Thirdly, teshuva implies a double vision of

¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, 'Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus – Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes', in *Theorie und Praxis: Sozialphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), pp. 172-227.

¹⁸ Plato describes the conversion as a release (λύσις) and healing (ἰασις) from bonds. Plato, *Republic*, 7.515c.

¹⁹ E.g., Acts 20:21

²⁰ Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: the Meaning and Practice of Teshuva* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), p. 48. **Abbreviate to Newman, /Repentance/, p. 48.**

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 75. **Italics!**

²² To illustrate this, we refer to a Talmudic commentary by Levinas: Rav et l'égorgeur. (Emmanuel Lévinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris: Editions De Minuit, 1968), pp. 30-33.) Levinas tells how, on the evening of Yom Kippour, Rav visits the butcher who did him wrong. This is because on the evening of Yom Kippour one must repent and ask forgiveness of the victim in order to receive forgiveness from God. Rav would like to forgive the butcher so that he may receive Divine forgiveness and visits him. The

man. On the one hand, it emphasises human failure, since teshuva indicates that Jewish life is marked by repentance and committed sin.²³ On the other hand, there is also an optimistic view in the emphasis that every human being can get back on the right track.²⁴

1.1.2. Interpretations

In addition to the rather narrow definition of teshuva as a dynamic form of repentance, there is the broader definition as 'return'. This latter meaning is a product of modernity, a period characterised by a departure from traditional Jewish belief or the abandonment of belief as such.²⁵ Rosenzweig is exemplary here. Questioning, as an assimilated Jew, from a young age the value of Judaism, his friendship with Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy was of great importance. In fact, Rosenstock-Huessy's view of *Offenbarung als Orientierung* offered an alternative to Rosenzweig's relativistic vision. After the famous *Leipziger Nachtgespräch*, Rosenzweig decided to convert to Christianity, but *as a Jew*. To this end, he wanted to experience Yom Kippur (where teshuva stands central) in a Berlin synagogue.²⁶ After an intense existential experience, he decided to remain a Jew in spite of everything: "Ich bleibe also Jude".²⁷ Accordingly, Rosenzweig considers himself a *ba'al teshuva*, a 'master of the return', since he returned to his faith in spite of everything.²⁸

replace with: hit

butcher, however, continues to **bonk** a head undisturbed and sends Rav away with the words "I have nothing in common with you". Then a bone jumps out of the boned head and hits the butcher mortally in the throat. For Levinas, this story illustrates how a person has to step out of his own closedness in order to forgive the other and only then to receive divine forgiveness.

²³ Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: the Meaning and Practice of Teshuva* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), p. 49. **Abbreviate to Newman, /Repentance/, p. 49.**

²⁴ Kohler Kaufmann, Max Schlesinger, 'Repentance (Hebr. "teshubah")', in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. by Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906), p. 376-379.

²⁵ Unterman, **Alan**, 'Repentance', in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. by F. Skolnik & M. Berenbaum, 22 Vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), Vol. 17, p. 221-224. **Correct reference: Alan Unterman, 'Repentance', in /Encyclopedia Judaica/, 2nd ed., ed. by F. Skolnik & M. Berenbaum, 22 Vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), Vol. 17, pp. 221-224.**

²⁶ Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953), p. 23-29.

²⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe Und Tagebücher*, ed. by Rachel Rosenzweig et al. (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1979), I: 1900-19181, letter nr. 198, 31 **oktober** 1913. **replace with: October**

²⁸ Unterman, **Alan**, 'Repentance', in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nded., ed. by F. Skolnik & M. Berenbaum, 22 Vols (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), Vol. 17, p. 221-224.

Abbreviate to: Unterman, 'Repentance', pp. 221-224

Schematically, then, we can distinguish three interpretations of teshuva that are complementary to each other and sometimes merge.²⁹ A first interpretation is of a moral nature: this is the definition of teshuva as *dynamic repentance*. Secondly, there is the psychological interpretation of teshuva, which is about finding oneself again, a *resourcing*. Finally, there is the religious interpretation. The three writers we are discussing should be placed under this last concept. Rosenzweig sees teshuva as a return to oneself, but this return encompasses an entire generation, namely that generation of Jews who doubt the faith and return to themselves from alienation.³⁰ In a similar way, we can classify Fackenheim under the heading of religious teshuva, since he connects teshuva with the restoration of the entire Jewish people.³¹ Chaliier sees teshuva as a form of Jewish messianism and can thus also be placed under the denominator religious teshuva.³² We depart from the religious meaning of teshuva in the broad sense, namely, to the extent that a return of the Jewish people to themselves also carries psychological and moral consequences.

1.1.3. *Teshuva and Vilna Gaon: Silence*

Before we address the two (historical and transhistorical) understandings of teshuva, it appears interesting to *turn* already to the final point of this paper: teshuva in Vilnius. An interesting, Lithuanian account on teshuva occurs in a letter of Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, better known as Vilna Gaon (1720 – 1797). Vilna Gaon, often referred to as HaGra, legendary rabbinic and expert in Bible, Talmud, Mishnah, and Kabbalah, is considered as member *par excellence* of the Litvak movement – i.e., the group Jews rooted in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where Vilnius formed an important center.³³ When setting off to Israel, Vilna Gaon wrote a letter to his family, in which the concept of teshuva acquires

²⁹ Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: the Meaning and Practice of Teshuva* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), p. 107.

³⁰ Salomon Malka & Alexis Lacroix, *Le dictionnaire Franz Rosenzweig : Une étoile dans le siècle* (Paris : Cerf, 2016) 'Techouva'.

³¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 320.

³² Cathérine Chaliier, 'L'Utopie messianique', in *Répondre d'Autrui: Emmanuel Levinas*, J. Aeschlimann (ed.) (Boudry- Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1989) pp. 53-71 (p. 41).

³³ Because Vilna Gaon is regarded as such an important figure in the Litvak movement, 2020 was celebrated as "The Year of Vilna Gaon" which aimed to focus on the history of Lithuanian Jews.

Corrected reference:
Salomon Malka & Alexis Lacroix, 'Techouva', in /Le dictionnaire Franz Rosenzweig: Une étoile dans le siècle (Paris: Cerf, 2016), p. 421ff.

a special meaning.³⁴ The letter in question, *Iggeret HaGra*, has been regarded (especially in the Mithnagdic movement, promoted by Vilna Gaon, against the Hasidic movement) as a Mus(s)ar letter: a letter with an important ethical direction, aimed at perfection and expression of the self, freed from worldly restrictions.³⁵ Vilna Gaon's discussion of teshuva should accordingly be placed in this specific *mussaric* context, which leans closely towards certain prescriptions found in the Biblical book of Proverbs. He writes:

Man must deprive himself until he dies, not by fasting or asceticism, but by controlling his mouth and desires. This is teshuvah. And this is the whole reward of the World-to-Come, as it is written: "For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light" – but "the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines." And that is worth more than any amount of fasting and self-affliction! For every second that man controls his tongue, he merits some of the "hidden [by Hashem for the righteous] light," something which no angel or [other] creature can imagine. And it is stated: "Who is the man who desires life, and loves days that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully." This will atone for any sin and save one from Gehinnom, as we find: "He who guards his mouth [from too much eating and drinking] and tongue [from idle words] guards himself from trouble." Also: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Woe to one who gives away his life for one word! Then what advantage is there to one who has a tongue? And, "Everything has a cure except, etc." It is most important to refrain from speaking words of praise about anyone. How much more so does this apply to speaking ill of anyone! Why must one speak about others? "The mouth that speaks strangely is a deep pit; he who angers Hashem falls into it".³⁶

delete the pink parts

³⁴ This is written at the beginning of the letter, preserved together with the *Iggeret Rambam* in the *Alim Literufah*, stating: "Sent by the Gaon, R. Eliyahu, of blessed memory while traveling to Israel, to instruct his family in the ways of God".

³⁵ See for a more detailed account on the difficult characterization of Musar literature: Joseph Dan, *Hebrew Ethical Literature and Via Mystica*, in *Expérience et écriture mystiques dans les religions du Livre: Actes d'un colloque international tenu par le Centre d'études juives Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne 1994*, ed. by Paul B. Fenton & Roland Goetsche (Brill: Leiden, 2000), pp. 77-88.

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³⁶ Vilna Gaon, *Iggeret HaGra*, 8. Italics mine. Text: translation and edition by Sefaria, via: https://www.sefaria.org/Iggeret_HaGra.8.

From this text, it becomes clear that for Vilna Gaon, silence and teshuvah are closely bound together. The importance of silence is underlined in some parts of the Hebrew Bible, cited often in this text (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiasts). The idea that teshuva and silence are closely bound, should be read in the context of Mussar, where the liberation of the self by discipline and freedom from worldly deviations is the focal point: as such, “controlling one’s mouth” is placed at the same height as “controlling one’s desires”. Not speaking does not only avoid doing evil and the punishment that must follow, but already in itself “atones for any sin”. As such, the Gaon’s understanding of teshuva aligns with the before-indicated double dynamics of teshuva: away from sin and towards righteousness. This double movement is of great importance to the so-called *tikkun hamidot*, the improvement of character that stands central in Jewish ethical literature: “*tiquin hamidot* has two sides: the acquisition of virtues, on the one hand, and the “breaking” of vices, on the other.”³⁷ Later in the letter, Vilna Gaon once more stresses: “But the main way to merit *Olam Haba* (the World-to-Come) is by guarding one’s tongue. That is worth more than all the Torah and good deeds.”³⁸ In order to get to the world to come, silence seems to be the way, even more than via Torah and good deeds, for in silence seems to lay the ultimate control of one’s desires. To understand this, we should look at the beginning of the letter, where it is announced that “all this world, it is all emptiness”, together with the statement that words that are uttered, carry such a significant weight, that “the sin of the tongue is the most severe”. One should therefore abstain from speaking, because worldly things are not worth speaking of since they are vain, and because speaking could entail great danger (especially concerning *lashon hara*, evil gossip) in constituting an unforgivable sin that cannot be made up by the study of Torah or good deeds. In conclusion then, Vilna Gaon’s advice is: ““What should be a man’s occupation in this world? He should become as a mute person” (*Chullin* 89a). One must seal his lips as tight as two millstones.”³⁹

Atonement through silence seems an audacious thesis and hard to reach, if one wants to participate in society. Of course, Vilna Gaon did not intend a physical silence, but a silence that grows from wisdom – almost a meditative state of reflection. Nonetheless, the call for silence surprises and evokes questions. One could inquire if this ‘wise silence’ is desirable. Is it, especially after the horror of the Shoah, desirable that one remains

³⁷ Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 239

³⁸ Vilna Gaon, *Iggeret HaGra*, 11, Sefaria ed. & transl.

³⁹ Vilna Gaon, *Iggeret HaGra*, 3, Sefaria ed. & transl.

silent? Is there not an *appel* to speak up, to affirm one's identity against the annihilation? Levinas' moral question "est-ce que je ne tue pas en étant?"⁴⁰ could be relevant in this perspective. The Shoah forms an *il y a*, that necessitates a *hypostatis*, an expression of the particular against its annihilation. However, in the expression of the self, one encounters the Other and possibly takes up, in the own hypostasis, the place of the Other. This *hypostasis*, however, is also necessary not to drown in the *il y a*. Therefore, "une vie vraiment humaine" is bound to walk on the thin line between self-affirmation in *hypostasis*, and the questioning of our own *Dasein* as a threat to the Other, asking the question "do I not kill by being?". In this regard, silence could be problematic, as it difficultly counts as *hypostasis*. Silence also poses a moral problem. After the Shoah, the many lost people can be commemorated by uttering their name, restoring their individuality against the annihilating horror of the Shoah. Silence could in this perspective metaphorically be equated with Levinas' 'tuer' (to kill). This is illustrated, for instance, in Paul Celan's poem *Todtnauberg*, written as an enigmatic reflection of the encounter between Martin Heidegger and Celan in Heidegger's *Hütte*. Interpretations of this poem vary, but at the centre of these interpretations stands the silence that is evoked by the peculiar stanza of the poem,⁴¹ and the sad humidity, like tears, at the beginning and end of the poem. The poetic silence possibly reflects Heidegger's silence about his role in the Shoah, and seems to counter the hopeful beginning of the poem, where there is hope for "a word", that apparently did not come.⁴²

⁴⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et Infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 129.

⁴¹ An analysis that takes into account many of the past interpretations of *Todtnauberg*: "Do these final words not also speak about silence, in their own way? Not only Heidegger's silence, or the silence of expectation for a word to come, or the silence of the conspicuously absent voices who are still also spectrally present, but also the silence which ends the poem, any poem." P. Räsänen, "Undecidably Equivocal": On "Todtnauberg" and Forgiveness", in K. Korhonen & P. Räsänen (eds) *The Event of Encounter in Art and Philosophy: Continental Perspectives* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, 2010), pp. 125-170 (p. 140).

⁴² *Todtnauberg*
 Arnika, Augentrost, der
 Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem
 Sternwürfel drauf,
 in der
 Hütte,
 die in das Buch
 – wessen Namen nahms auf
 vor dem meinen? –,

Corrected reference: P. Räsänen, "Undecidably Equivocal": On "Todtnauberg" and Forgiveness", in *The Event of Encounter in Art and Philosophy: Continental Perspectives*, ed. by K. Korhonen & P. Räsänen (Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, 2010), pp. 125-170 (p. 140).

Besides this (moral) difficulty of silence, the specific context of the Shoah in Vilnius problematizes in its own way Gaon's call for silence. Robert van Vooren characterizes the Shoah in Lithuania as "undigested past", because of the long silence that surrounded the events of the Shoah in Lithuania: "In Lithuania, the discussion of the Holocaust started only at the very end of the Soviet regime and, until then, both Soviet and *émigré* Lithuanian historiography completely ignored what actually happened."⁴³ The book of Raul Hillberg forms here an exception.⁴⁴ The more general, Lithuanian silence about the Shoah results from the complex context in which the annihilating events took place. Focusing on Vilnius, it should be noted that the city was under Soviet control until the 24th June 1941, and then was invaded by the Germans, who soon left to attack the Soviet Union and had to rely on the local Lithuanians to remain in control of the city.⁴⁵ As such, in the beginning "the Jewish problem was secondary to the Polish".⁴⁶ This, sadly, did not decrease the horror that took place – instead, three waves of violence took place, each one murdering many thousands of Jews: "The period of mass executions (June-December 1941), the ghetto period (1942-March 1943), and the final liquidation (April 1943-July

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 geschriebene Zeile von
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 viel.

Paul Celan, *Todtnauberg*. italics

⁴³ Robert van Vooren, *Undigested Past: The Holocaust in Lithuania* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 179.

⁴⁴ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961).

⁴⁵ van Vooren, *Undigested Past: The Holocaust in Lithuania*, p. 85.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 86. replace for consistency with: /Ibidem/, p. 86.

1944).”⁴⁷ Despite this enormous suffering caused, Lithuania remained largely silent about the events, in which it also played a role. The silence results from the complex start of the German invasion of Lithuania – at the same time a liberation from the Sovjet Union – and the fact that also the Lithuanian people can rightly be seen as having suffered immensely under the Sovjet rule, making it difficult to allow for another victim, namely the many Jews who suffered under the Shoah in Lithuania.⁴⁸ The silence has been broken in Lithuania, informing people about the horrendous events that took place, but still a stubborn silence remains, invalidating the Jewish suffering in Lithuania.⁴⁹

The problem of silence asks the question what one should do after such devastating events. Should one await (silently) the *à-venir*, or does the horror of the Shoah call for a (loud) answer in the here-and-now? This urgent question brings us to the next chapter, where the aporia at the heart of messianism will be explored.

1.2. Messianism, Toledot, Tikkun Olam

1.2.1. *Messianism: Description*

Messianism, as a grouping of different variants on the same theme, rather than as a sharply delineated concept, stands at the heart of the Jewish question of its relation to time. After the World Wars, Scholem,⁵⁰ but also Lukàcs, Rosenzweig, Bloch and Benjamin⁵¹ put messianism at the centre of Jewish thought and self-understanding. Messianism takes place on the brink of catastrophe: “Der jüdische Messianismus [...] ist in seinem Ursprung und Wesen eine Katastrophentheorie.”⁵² In its origins, according to Gershom Scholem, (apocalyptic) messianism is linked to the catastrophic.⁵³ The

⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, pp. 179-181. replace for consistency with: /Ibidem/, p. 86.

⁴⁹ See, for instance the quite recent issue of “a different kind of Holocaust in Lithuania” that would invalidate or soften down the Jewish suffering: <https://www.lzb.lt/en/2019/04/15/a-different-kind-of-holocaust-in-lithuania/>.

⁵⁰ Stéphane Mosès, *L'ange de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 188.

⁵¹ Lieven De Cauter, *De dwerg in de schaakautomaat* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1999), p. 293.

⁵² Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica* 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 20.

⁵³ A distinction can be drawn between apocalyptic messianism, which is the focus of this article, and rational messianism. Whereas apocalyptic messianism rather emphasizes the catastrophic element, rational messianism - found especially in rabbinic literature, but also in Levinas’ writings - focuses less on the rupture, arguing that the messianic end time appears only as the end of

eschatological roots and apocalyptic visions are a matter of revelation, but also a reflection of the dramatic environment of the authors.⁵⁴ Similarly, in modern messianic- Judaism, a large number of messianic-inspired texts can be linked to the experience of the dramatic events related to the world wars.⁵⁵ The origins in catastrophe or trauma could even be said characteristic of Jewish philosophy more broadly.⁵⁶

In its essence, then, messianism is marked by the *catastrophic*. The coming of the Messiah, of the end times, takes place as a spontaneous, radical *rupture*: “Im Grunde [...] kann der Messias nicht vorbereitet werden. Er kommt plötzlich, unangemeldet.”⁵⁷ This spontaneity, which Scholem refers to as the “Unberechenbarkeit der messianischen Zeit”,⁵⁸ expresses Messianism’s breaking with causal categories of necessity. Messianism contains another mode of being: the mode of *possibility*.⁵⁹ In addition, this spontaneity also implies a catastrophe at the very heart of the coming: “Es ist ja gerade die Überganglosigkeit zwischen der Historie und der Erlösung.”⁶⁰ The redemption, the *tikkun olam*, coincides with the end of history. There is an absolute gap between history and redemption: the coming of the Messiah cannot be described by means of a transition, this would mean to place it within categories of necessity, but is fundamentally characterised by the spontaneous, the possible. It breaks radically with history, yet history turns out to be a precondition for the coming of the Messiah

oppression by the foreign nations. Furthermore, rational messianism emphasizes continuity above all, and tries to reduce the scope of messianism as much as possible.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

Abbreviate to: Mosès, /L’ange de l’histoire/, p. 189.

⁵⁵ Stéphane Mosès, *L’ange de l’histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 189.

⁵⁶ For example: Emmanuel Lévinas replies to the question “Comment commence-t-on à penser?” by saying “Cela commence probablement par des traumatismes ou des tâtonnements auxquels on ne sait même pas donner une forme verbale: une séparation, une scène de violence, une brusque conscience de la monotonie du temps.” Emmanuel Lévinas & Philippe Nemo, *Ethique Et Infini: Dialogues Avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 15.

Abbreviate to: Lévinas, /Ethique et Infini/, p. 15

⁵⁷ Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

Abbreviate to: Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Scholem uses the analogy of a midwife. Our actions throughout history provide a framework within which redemption *can* take place, but the actual coming of the Messiah happens spontaneously, just as a birth ultimately only takes place thanks to the mother who carries the child, rather than because of the midwife. (Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 26)

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24

who will transform the world. In this sense, looking forward to the coming of the Messiah appears as an *aspiration towards the impossible*.⁶¹

Besides the catastrophic, there is also a creative element in messianism: the restorative, repairing force and the utopian, renewing force. These forces combined, constitute the *messianic hope*.⁶² The interweaving of the utopian and the restorative means that redemption should never be seen as a circular metaphor. Scholem illustrates this with the origin story from the Lurianic Kabbalah, which describes how the creation contained a harmony destined for the world. This harmony, however, met with resistance, referred to as “the breaking of the barrels” (*Schebira-ha kelim*).⁶³ In the world of the *tikkun*, the messianic time, this original harmony is finally put into practice, but it is richer than the harmony that the creation contained in itself; there is no question of a mere return to the origin, but of an enrichment.⁶⁴

1.2.2. *Messianism and History*

Walter Benjamin approaches Scholem’s “catastrophic element” in a unique way. Historicism, a term coined by Meinecke, is ubiquitous in Benjamin’s writing. Benjamin characterises historicism (or *historische Materialismus*) as a “Verfahren der Einfühlung” – a method of empathy.⁶⁵ This method reduces history on the one hand to a relativism, given that everything appears as relative to the *Zeitgeist* that we have to emphatically move into, and on the other hand to an objectivism, given that the various elements belonging to the *Zeitgeist* are abstracted, in order to arrive at “objective facts”. Historicism is also a “psychologism” in that it departs from empathy (*Einfühlung*).⁶⁶ In so doing, it fundamentally undermines certain aspects of history. This becomes clear when one asks the question in whom one empathises: “Die Antwort lautet unweigerlich in den Sieger.”⁶⁷ Thus, the whole of history appears as a triumph (*Triumphzug*) and this triumph

⁶¹ Stéphane Mosès, *L’ange de l’histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 189.

⁶² Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 12.

⁶³ Gershom Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), p. 148.

⁶⁴ Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 47.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 696: These VII.

⁶⁶ Lieven De Cauter, *De dwerg in de schaakautomaat* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1999), p. 300.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, p. 696 (These VII).

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is considered as the origin of culture. Benjamin calls a halt to this historiography. It is against this same, machinal historicism that Rosenzweig reacts, too.

The historiography Benjamin *does* have in mind, is expressed by means of a metaphor: the *Angel of History*. His metaphor is based on the *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee:

*Der Engel der Geschichte muss so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert.*⁶⁸

The Angel that Benjamin describes turns his face towards the past, not to discern in it a chain of events – a historicist chain of victories – but to contemplate the catastrophe that is being built, wreck upon wreck, at his feet. Here, we can draw the parallel with the catastrophe as element of messianism, described above. The catastrophe as a point of departure of messianism, implies a critique of a specific aspect of historicism: the faith in progress, as a *secularized eschatology*. Against this historicist conception of progress, Benjamin places the messianic conception of time. The messianic conception of time wants to counteract the quantifying historicism (which adds up victories), by focusing on the qualitative.⁶⁹ Benjamin aims to achieve this through *Eingedenken*, a presentation of history as a “commemoration”.⁷⁰

1.2.3. *Messianism: Aporia and Silence*

The theme of Messianism is closely linked to the problem of the Jewish relationship to history. Scholem writes: “Die Größe der messianischen Idee entspricht der unendlichen Schwäche der jüdischen Geschichte [...] aber auch seine konstitutionelle Schwäche. Die jüdische sogenannte “Existenz” hat [...] das nicht Ausgebrannte an sich, das, wo es sich in

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⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 697 (These IX).

⁶⁹ Stéphane Mosès, *L'ange de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 180. abbreviate: delete pink parts

⁷⁰ “Das Eingedenken als der Strohalm / Die Katastrophe ist der Fortschritt, der Fortschritt ist die Katastrophe / Die Katastrophe als das Kontinuum der Geschichte. Geistesgegenwart als das Rettende ; Geistesgegenwart im Erfassen der flüchtigen Bilder ; Geistesgegenwart und Stillstellung [...] Das Subjekt der Geschichte : die Unterdrückten, nicht die Menschheit / Das Kontinuum ist das der Unterdrücker / Die Gegenwart aus dem Kontinuum der historischen Zeit herausprengen : Aufgabe des Historikers.” Walter Benjamin, ‘Anmerkungen’, in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, Band I.3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 1228-1247 (p. 1244).

unserer Geschichte entlädt, mit einem törichten Wort dann als Pseudo-Messianismus entlarvt wird.”⁷¹

Scholem asks whether the price that Judaism had to pay for the messianic idea is not too high.⁷² The powerlessness that characterises Jewish history and from which the messianic idea springs will be broken in the messianic end time. Since this end-time takes place on the axes of history, Judaism carries with it a certain distancing from history: it is eternally looking forward to something that does not take place in history, and every time the advent seems to take place it is unmasked as a *pseudo-messianism*. Scholem then asks whether Judaism should not return to history to take action as a “Messianische Aktivismus”⁷³ rather than passively await the messianic time. This question, this “Aporie”,⁷⁴ is the question at the heart of this paper, and brings us back to the problem of silence addressed before: should one wait (silently), or should one act by “Messianische Aktivismus” here and now?

Indeed, in the messianic conception of time, time no longer appears as continuous and empty, waiting for its fulfilment towards its inherent direction, but appears (especially within Benjamin’s *Engedenken*) as a discontinuous time that is fundamentally open. Each moment, as a gateway through which the Messiah can come, is open to the radically new.⁷⁵ The *Shoah* sharpens the question of the aporia of messianism: does its horror call for *messianic activism*, or should one wait for redemption to come? This same question rose in our evaluation of Vilna Gaon’s understanding of teshuva as silence. In what follows, two answers will be set out: one transhistorical and one historical answer to this *messianic aporia* will be discussed using the concept of teshuva.

2. Transhistorical Perspective: Rosenzweig and Chalier⁷⁶

Rosenzweig and Chalier offer a transhistorical perspective on history. First, we discuss how teshuva appears in their thinking. Then how their concept

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⁷¹ Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 74.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 190

⁷⁵ “Denn in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten Konnte.” Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, p. 704 (Anhang B).

⁷⁶ Parts of this chapter have been published as an article following the 2019 conference on Rosenzweig’s *Stern* in Jerusalem. See: Ellen De Doncker, ‘Rosenzweig and Chalier on Teshuva: Repentance and Redemption’, in Irène Kajon, Luca Bertolino (eds.), *Gebet, Praxis, Erlösung / Prayer, Praxis*,

of teshuva implies a new, transhistorical perspective. Finally, with Chalier, we describe this conception of time as sacred time and as a response to the rupture of the Shoah.

2.1 Teshuva: Rosenzweig and Chalier

Both Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) and Cathérine Chalier (1947-present) pay attention to messianic thinking. For both, the catastrophic forms the starting point. Rosenzweig's main work, *Stern der Erlösung* (1921), starts from the experience of death. This experience was both existential and world-historical. After the *Leipziger-Nachtgespräch* with Rosenstock, Rosenzweig wanted to commit suicide.⁷⁷ Moreover, Rosenzweig wrote his *Stern* partly during the First World War, surrounded by the catastrophe. His thematisation of "nothingness" can be seen as a response to this catastrophe. Chalier's thinking is a response to the catastrophe of the Second World War. She sees the Shoah as a rupture within history). The *toledot* opens the possibility of a historiography that respects this rupture. Both philosophers respond to the catastrophe in a *transhistorical* manner. How Rosenzweig and Chalier offer a transhistorical answer to the *aporia of messianism* will become clear through an analysis of their conception of teshuva.

In his description of teshuva as return or reversal, Rosenzweig goes back to the Hebrew roots of the word:

Uns gilt unsre "Verstocktheit" als True, und unsre "Abtrünnigkeit von Gott" wird, da es eben Abtrünnigkeit und nicht ursprüngliche Gottes ferne ("Adams" Sündenfall!) ist, nur durch Rückkehr, nicht durch Umwandlung, geheilt. Dass der Begriff der Busse, der hebräisch durch „Rückkehr“, „Umkehr“, „Wiederkehr“ wiedergegeben wird, dass also dies hebräische Wort „Teschubah“ im Neuen Testament μετάνοια [Umdenken] heißt, das ist einer der Punkte, wo die Weltgeschichte im Wörterbuch steht.⁷⁸

Redemption (Rosenzweig Jahrbuch, 12) (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Albert, 2021), p. 205-219.

⁷⁷ Ephraim Mair, 'The Relevance of the *Gritli-Letters* to the Clarification of the *Star*', in *The Legacy of Franz Rosenzweig: Collected Essays*, Luc Anckaert, Martin Brassier & Norbert Samuelson (eds) (Leuven: University Press, 2004), pp. 3-32 (p. 5).

⁷⁸ Rosenzweig's letter of November 4, 1913, to Rudolf Ehrenberg, in: Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher*, (Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften, I), eds. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, in collaboration with Bernhard Casper (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), vol. I, p. 142.

Rosenzweig departs from the Jewish alienation from God (*Abtrünnigkeit von Gott*). Alienation from God, Rosenzweig writes, can only be restored by return (*Rückkehr*), not by transformation (*Verwandlung*). Rosenzweig has Christianity in mind here. The fact that Christianity sees teshuva as transformation, or even more as *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), “rethinking” (*Umdenken*), is for Rosenzweig characteristic of the difference between the two religions. Christianity, for whom the place is within world history, can act transformatively within history to overcome alienation. Judaism, which, as will be explained later, stands outside the world and its history, cannot make such a transformation and must necessarily return to what has already been given. However, this return is also positive: Israel, as the holy people, can return to her roots, for she is chosen. Rosenzweig shows with his description of teshuva that it is a dynamic principle. Teshuva concerns a reversal/return (*Umkehr*) and not a rethinking (*Umdenken*), implying a critique of rational, totalitarian thinking on history, where every revolution in history appears as a revolution in thought, or, more Hegelian, as a step in the self-fulfilment of Spirit.⁷⁹

This brings us to Catherine Chalier, student of Emmanuel Levinas and specialist in Rosenzweig and Spinoza’s philosophy. In her own way, she opposes the totalitarian assimilation of reality, as description of teshuva expresses:

*Ce qu’enseigne l’idée de techouva n’est en aucune façon l’effacement du mal : l’irréparable de la mort demeure. Mais [...] techouva peut enrayer l’engrenage fatal du mal, [...] elle met un terme à cette nécessité terrible d’un mal qui appelle un autre mal en un processus sans fin. Elle déjoue le piège d’une condamnation définitive au mal, elle récusé le verdict sans merci jeté sur le pécheur et donne à penser le temps comme soustrait à la rigueur imitable de la seule fatalité.*⁸⁰

Teshuva does not take away the irreparable evil, shows Chalier, referring to the stories of Cain and Abel and the Fall of Adam. In both stories, the evil committed is irreparable, in line with Adorno’s statement “Das Negierte ist negativ, bis es verging.”⁸¹ At the same time, Chalier indicates a positive movement away from evil: teshuva, as repentance, breaks with the *fatal* character of evil, while it does not take away the irreparable of evil. On the

⁷⁹ Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, hrsg. von Albert Raffelt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Universitätsbibliothek, 2002), p. 7.

⁸⁰ Catherine Chalier, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p. 195.

⁸¹ Theodor L. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 159.

one hand, there is the irreversible of the evil, referring to the past, and its consequences in the present. This cannot be reversed. The fatal character as a “nécessité terrible d’un mal qui appelle un autre mal en un processus sans fin”,⁸² a necessary process of retribution, on the other hand, refers to the future that *can* be reversed or *turnt* around, as the root “shuv” indicates. Teshuva holds the power to overthrow the logic of retribution: by repenting, the merciless verdict (*verdict sans merci*) of the sinner can be reconsidered. The sinner is no longer doomed to evil and his evil does not have to be retaliated. Chalier criticises dialectic’s perspective of history, which conflates evil and necessity:

*La dialectique, grâce à son pouvoir d’assumer les contradictions du réel, de les subordonner à la rationalité d’un projet qui les intègre et qui les dépasse, justifie la nécessité du mal en tant que moyen de réalisation de ce règne des fins où l’Esprit et le réel se réconcilieront enfin.*⁸³

When evil is incorporated into a (Hegelian) project of spiritualisation, it loses its tragedy as it is understood as a necessary, negative instant. Chalier objects to this necessity. Whereas Benjamin’s *Angel of History* looks to the past to discover the suffering and irreducible trauma, and to be propelled towards paradise, Chalier’s understanding of teshuva looks to the past to find the particular, irreparable evil and to break with the fatality of evil in a positive movement.

2.2. Teshuva: Opening up from Closedness

Chalier holds that, in order to speak of true teshuva, two difficulties need to be solved: “Les deux plus grands obstacles à la techouva [sont]: la satisfaction de soi-même d’une part et de l’autre le désespoir qui fait oublier qu’une conversion reste à chaque instant possible.”⁸⁴ The first difficulty to be resolved, is complacency. Chalier contrasts the closedness of self-satisfaction (*satisfaction de soi-même, contentment de soi*) radically with the humility needed for teshuva: “[la *techouva*] nécessite toujours de savoir arracher le ferment (*haretz*) du cœur, d’en déchirer la superbe pour l’ouvrir sur la voie de l’humilité.”⁸⁵ Teshuva, then, is about breaking through the

⁸² Catherine Chalier, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p. 195.

⁸³ Cathérine Chalier, ‘L’Utopie messianique’, in *Répondre d’Autrui: Emmanuel Levinas, J. Aeschlimann* (ed.) (Boudry- Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1989) pp. 53-71 (p. 55).

⁸⁴ Catherine Chalier, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p. 196.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 196.

self-satisfaction in order to humbly open the heart to the other. To understand this, we need to delve into a theme of Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung*.

2.2.1. *Overcoming Complacency*

In his *Stern*, Rosenzweig starts from three “nothings”, contrary to the great “All” of idealism. In the fear of death, irrefutable according to Rosenzweig, the “All” bursts open in three parts that are absolutely separate; they are “nothings”. These “nothings” are man, God and world, and constitute the starting point of Rosenzweig's philosophy. Accordingly, the “nothing” of our thinking is not the ungraspable event of death – rather, in the face of death “das Nichts des Wissens [ist] nicht mehr einfach, sondern dreifach.”⁸⁶ The shattering of the “All” into three “nothingnesses” is followed by an explication of the nothingness through two paths: the path of affirmation (*Bejahung*, an affirmative “yes”) and the path of denial (*Verneinung*, a negative “no”).

When the “nothing” man is explicated through the two paths, and, next, brought together (*und*),⁸⁷ an overconfident, defiant (*trotz*) will to preserve oneself in one's singularity appears. This overconfident will, then, takes the *character* as its object and thus the “self” is formed: “Das “Selbst” ist das, was in diesem Übergriff des freien Willens auf die Eigenheit, als Und von Trotz und Charakter, entsteht.”⁸⁸ To the extent that this overconfident will, in its defiance, focuses on the singularity of the character, the self is closed and centered around itself. This way, the *solitary self* forms the counterpart of the *personality*, part of the *individual*, which fulfils a role in the world.⁸⁹ This solitary self is one of the three elements found via the paths of affirmation and negation Rosenzweig views these elements in the way they appear in antiquity as mythical, metaphysical God, as plastic,

⁸⁶ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 24.

⁸⁷ Rosenzweig is inspired, here too, by the correlation-thinking of Hermann Cohen. See: Pierfrancesco Fiorato & Hartwig Wiedebach, ‘Hermann Cohen im *Stern der Erlösung*’, in *Rosenzweig als Leser: Kontextuelle Kommentare zum »Stern der Erlösung«*, Martin Brassler (ed.), pp. 305-356.

⁸⁸ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 73.

⁸⁹ The individual is a part of the world: through affirmation, the world appears in its generality, coherent with its original self-evidence. In its negation, it appears as an infinite richness of individuals, a fullness. When we think both affirmation and negation together, a richness of the private unfolds with the unity of the general forms: both the species and the individual are given a place here. The individual is then man insofar as he participates in the world of things, man as part of a species.

metalogical world and as tragic, metaethical man.⁹⁰ The *meta*-prefix indicates a fundamental separation, which is part of the elementary givenness of the elements. Man, in his self-satisfied solitude, stands outside the world and, therefore, also outside of the ethical system; he is *meta-ethical*. This separation from the world makes man tragic: the closed man cannot break through his own closedness and is thereby doomed to an incessant, solitary and silent affirmation of himself.

It is this form of complacency that Chalier sees as a challenge for teshuva, when she argues that complacency must be broken so that true teshuva or repentance can take place.⁹¹ Fortunately, Rosenzweig's *Stern* shows how this obstacle can be overcome. In the second book of the *Stern*, Rosenzweig describes how the three elements step out of their elementary closedness by confirming or denying their original affirmations and negations, thereby entering into relationship with one another. Rosenzweig thinks of their relationship from a religious horizon. Through the word "and", the elements stand authentically open to one another thanks to the temporary succession of the series creation-revelation-redeeming.⁹² Teshuva, for Rosenzweig, will take place in the transformation of the elements within Revelation and Redemption, that both necessitate the "opening up" of Creation. Only after the opening of the elements God and world in Creation, can a relationship be drawn between God "and" man; this happens in *Revelation*. Revelation takes place in a mutual turning of God and man. The first movement is God denying his elementary infinity in order to reveal himself.⁹³ God, to be factual and no longer closed, must be present at every moment. This instantaneous presence is found in the love of the loving one: "Gott liebt ist reinste Gegenwart".⁹⁴ In the *instantaneous present*

⁹⁰ The mythical God is metaphysical: by affirmation, God appears as an infinite position of being; in negation, He appears as infinite freedom, as power. God is metaphysical: he does not step outside himself to enter into relationship with man and the world. The plastic world is metalogical: the world is self-evident. The world possesses autonomy, it has coherence of its own, but it is also closed in on itself, because in its autonomous self-evidence it is independent.

⁹¹ Chalier, *La persévérance du mal*, 196.

⁹² Here, Rosenzweig is inspired by Herman Cohen who, in his *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, uses the religious categories of creation, revelation and redemption as philosophical concepts within his *correlative thinking*. Cf. Stéphane Mosès, *Système Et Révélation : La Philosophie De Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 144

⁹³ We find here something similar to Schelling's idea of contraction, and parallel to the Kabbalistic *tsimsum*: God voluntarily denies his infinity, He contracts Himself for the benefit of the finite world and the finite man.

⁹⁴ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 183.

the eternity of God's love takes place, an eternity to be grasped only in this instantaneous present. The love of God flows over man, who constitutes the other side of revelation. In return, man transforms his closed, self-centred *Hybris* to the reverence of the beloved who feels loved, i.e., humility (*Demut*). Accordingly, heteronomy precedes man's turning outwards. It is, after all, God's love that breaks the elementary human closedness, and God even *commands* man to love Him. Through the commandment, God presents himself as an "I" (*Ich*): "love me", says the commandment. Only when acknowledged as a "You" (*Du*) can God himself become an "I".⁹⁵ In response to God's absolute commandment, man confesses his sins, and it is here teshuva takes place: against the Absolute God, man necessarily appears as flawed, and becomes conscient of his own lack of absolution/perfection. Doing so, he affirms the existence of God as the perfection he does not possess, but of which he bears a trace. The root "shuv" (to turn around, to twist) clearly emerges: it is a turning *away* from the closed self, simultaneously turning *towards* God.

In the last phase, *Redemption*, a relationship is outlined between man "and" the world. For man to open himself to the world, a final element of complacency must be overcome: this concerns man's character (*Charakter; Daimon*). Rosenzweig discovers in *charity/neighbourly love* the movement opening man to the world. Here again absolute heteronomy is present: charity is initiated by God. Indeed, man responds to divine love with neighbourly love. This neighbourly love, in turn, embraces the whole world in the fact that the neighbour is only a *token*: it focuses on the one who is the neighbour *at that moment*.⁹⁶ Chalier writes the following in this regard: "La repentance s'identifie à ce moment où [...] le cœur se brise [...] par là elle ouvre [l'homme] [...] à l'amour de l'autre que soi. [...] Avant même de prouver notre liberté la repentance témoigne de la responsabilité qui la précède et la sollicite."⁹⁷ Chalier perceives in repentance or teshuva, as man's movement towards the world, a moment of love for the other-than-himself. Another form of radical heteronomy emerges here. Before man repents for what he has done, he is touched by the suffering of the other, a suffering that constitutes a Levinasian appeal to responsibility that precedes any freedom.

⁹⁵ Cf. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's motto: "respondeo etsi mutabor". Similarly, Hermann Cohen writes: "erst das Du, die Entdeckung des Du mich selbst auch zum Bewußtsein meines Ich, [vermöchte] zur sittlichen Erkenntnis meines Ich zu bringen". See Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd ed., ed. Bruno Strauß, (Frankfurt a. M.: J. Kauffmann, 1929), 17.

Corrected reference: Hermann Cohen, /Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums/, 2nd ed., ed. by Bruno Strauß, (Frankfurt a. M.: J. Kauffmann, 1929), p. 17.

⁹⁶ The difference with Levinas should be noted here: for Levinas, the neighbor can never be a mere "token".

⁹⁷ Catherine Chalier, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p. 199.

2.2.2. *Overcoming Despair*

Next to complacency, Chaliier discerns a second element standing in the way of teshuva: despair – “le désespoir qui fait oublier qu’une conversion reste à chaque instant possible.”⁹⁸ Despair assumes the fatality of evil. However, to realise teshuva as true repentance, evil, as explained above, must be thought of as *irreparable but reversible* (i.e. not fatal). Chaliier views the love for the stranger (*amour de l’étranger*) as an exemplary alternative to the fatalistic logic of retribution.⁹⁹ Chaliier drawing a line from teshuva to love for the stranger, implies that repentance is a matter of love. Indeed, as explained above, teshuva takes place in the moment when the heart opens up to love for the other-than-itself (*l’amour de l’autre de soi*).¹⁰⁰

To understand the link between love and teshuva, Rosenzweig’s distinction between an act of love (*Liebestat*) and a purposeful act (*Zwecktat*) is helpful.¹⁰¹ Rosenzweig distinguishes the *act of love* from the *purposeful act* in the fact that the former is blind, as opposed to the purposeful act that aims straight for its goal. This is how love of neighbour occurs: blind love gropes around to find the one it loves (the neighbour here again as token for the one being neighbour *at that moment*). Neighbourly love is a fundamental part of the redemptive relationship between man “and” the world. By answering to God’s eternal love by the constant present of love for one’s neighbour, man contributes to redemption, to the coming of the Kingdom. The act of love is blind, however, and thus cannot bind God’s redemptive action to an object, nor to a fixed time. This blindness further implies that the other cannot be seen as a “shortcut” to God’s redemptive action. Moreover, this implies that redemption cannot be thought of in this day and age. Thinking that through the act of love, salvation can be achieved in the here-and-now, would, in fact, follow the thinking of the purposeful act.

The love of the stranger (*amour de l’étranger*) and teshuva, being so closely bound, reveals another aspect of teshuva. This love, Chaliier argues, arises within the Jewish people from the memory of having once been themselves strangers to others during slavery in Egypt. This memory, as painful as it might be, holds at the same time a rediscovery of the call to holiness, crucial in the philosophical thinking of Rosenzweig and Chaliier. Both philosophers characterise the Jewish people as a *holy people* (*peuple sainte*, or *heilige Volk*). Two events are formative to this holiness: the promise (*Promesse*) to Abraham of a people from his lineage, and the election of this people to receive God’s Word (*Parole*), the Torah. Accordingly,

⁹⁸ Catherine Chaliier, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p. 196.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 199.

¹⁰¹ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 299.

the Jewish people thus have a unique *modus essendi*: their existence is a *response* to the Promise and to the Word of God.¹⁰² While the gift of the Word is part of the Jewish holiness, the directives of the Torah (Rosenzweig and Buber translate the word as *Weisung*) are also the only ones: the Jewish people have no land, no language and no law, as will be explained below.

The Jewish people, as a holy people, must constantly be aware of their *modus essendi* as response to the Word and Promise of God: their own speech is preceded by a word, the people does not have its origin in itself. For the Jewish people to answer God, their *name* is of crucial importance. Rosenzweig defines the proper name as that name which God has created for man himself to receive God's call.¹⁰³ It is through this receptivity that man can receive the commandment of divine love, to which man will respond with neighbourly love. This very receptivity is *election*: the ability to respond to God's Word.¹⁰⁴ The receptivity of the proper name is parallel to the breakthrough of self-satisfaction, where man recognises God as "You". For it is in the receptivity of the proper name that God arises as a "You"; only after this decisive moment of opening up a true dialogue can take place. The Jewish people, like teshuva which is a *Liebestat*, has to break with the *modus essendi* of the *Zwecktat*. Its speech is a response to instead of an action in function of, receptive heteronomy instead of goal-directed autonomy.

2.3. Teshuva and Time

2.3.1. Teshuva: Triple Criticism of Historicism

Teshuva, as formulated in the philosophy of Rosenzweig and Chalier, forms a criticism to historicism. Rosenzweig, who received his doctorate under the guidance of the historian Meinecke on Hegel's philosophy of law and state,¹⁰⁵ breaks with historicism already on a **linguistic** level. Indeed, as shown above, the term teshuva denotes, in contrast to the idea of progress, a "Rückkehr", "Umkehr", "Wiederkehr".¹⁰⁶ Like Benjamin's *Angel of History*, it stands with its back turned to the future in order to look at the evil done in the past and to confess this evil. Against the positivist

¹⁰² Cathérine Chalier, *Pensées de l'éternité : Spinoza, Rosenzweig* (Paris : Cerf, 1993), p. 126.

¹⁰³ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's motto: "respondeo etsi mutabor".

¹⁰⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel Und Der Staat*, (München: Oldenbourg, 1920).

¹⁰⁶ Rosenzweig, *BT*, p. 142

progress-thinking, teshuva is future-oriented, not goal-oriented, but as an act of love (*Liebestat*).

In addition, teshuva breaks with the totalitarian character of history thinking that focusses on necessary, **fatalistic** events. On the one hand, teshuva challenges the fatality of evil. Chaliel argued that teshuva, despite its positive, reversing movement, does not erase the irredeemable evil, while it *can* reverse the fatality of evil.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, teshuva preserves the particularity of the person, that might get lost in the totalizing, fatalistic historicism. Man, in order to repent, must be torn out of his elementary closedness for him to be interpellated by the suffering of the other. In this way we can see teshuva as a mode of Benjamin's *Eingedenken*. This *Eingedenken* is a voluntary retrieval of history in order to remember and preserve the private. Within Jewish thinking, this *Eingedenken* takes place within the remembrance of the *proper name*. The proper name, as a symbol for the intimate, irreducible human being, guarantees the relationship between God and man, insofar as God created the personal name so that man could respond to God's call.¹⁰⁸ In addition, the proper name also guarantees a relationship between man and the world: in remembering the proper name of the other, man remembers the other in his particularity.

Finally, teshuva breaks with a totalitarian conception of history in the fact that it starts from a radical **heteronomy** versus the autonomy that lies at the basis of the concept of progress. Progress-thinking starts from rational, autonomous actors who together form a socially engineered society, socially engineered in the sense that it orientates itself on the basis of ever greater progress. This progress, at the center of the project of modernity, is challenged by (amongst others) Bauman, who indicates "the double sidedness of modern social arrangement",¹⁰⁹ underlines that the so-called civilization progress, besides eliminating violence and irrational, antisocial drives from society, also holds a darker side: "the civilizing process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms or moral inhibitions."¹¹⁰ Teshuva also criticises the idea of progress. Firstly, teshuva, as a confession of sins, forms a response to God's love. God, in the Revelation, had broken man open from his elementary closedness through His love. In receiving God's love, man acknowledges himself as imperfect, and thus his confession of sins is a confession of love as a response to God's love. Man's response is

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Chaliel, *La persévérance du mal* (Paris : Cerf, 1987), p 195.

¹⁰⁸ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p; 172.

¹⁰⁹ Bauman, *On Modernity*, p. 28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

crucial; it is only through his response that God escapes His elementariness: by acknowledging God as a **you**, God can be an **I**. Secondly, teshuva is characterised by heteronomy as it forms an openness to the world. In this way, teshuva is truly an act of blind love: instead of looking ahead with purpose, within teshuva man makes himself receptive as a response both to God and to the other in the world.

2.3.2. *Teshuva: Messianism*

After this negative designation of teshuva, examining what teshuva as a breaking point *is not*, we now turn our attention to the positive conception of time contained in the term teshuva. Chalier connects teshuva as repentance directly with messianic time:

*Or si la messianité du moi consiste à s'ouvrir à la souffrance d'autrui jusqu'à la prendre en charge avant de songer à son intéressement à être, cette messianité commande également de répondre à la sollicitation infinie des versets en se faisant lieu pour eux.*¹¹¹

Chalier characterises repentance not as a free decision, but as the messianic response to the election of the Jewish people. The Jewish people are seen by both Rosenzweig and Chalier as a *holy people*, holy through their election by God to receive the Torah and His promise to create a nation out of Abraham. Chalier thus draws a line between teshuva and the reading of the Torah: both are a messianic response to the election of the Jewish people as holy people, they are preceded by the radical heteronomy of God's Word.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Cathérine Chalier, 'L'Utopie messianique', in *Répondre d'Autrui: Emmanuel Levinas*, J. Aeschlimann (ed.) (Boudry- Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1989) pp. 53-71 (p. 67).

¹¹² Cf. Levinas who understands the book, rather than an instrument (*ustensile*) that carries information, as a mode of being (*modalité de notre être*): in the book (and especially in the Book) man meets the *alterité*, here lies the catastrophic that births messianism. "C'est à la lecture des livres - pas nécessairement philosophiques - que ces chocs initiaux deviennent questions et problèmes, donnent à penser. [...] On y vit "la vraie vie que est absente" mais qui précisément n'est plus utopique. Je pense que dans la grande peur du livresque, on sous-estime la référence "ontologique" de l'humain au livre que l'on prend pour une source d'informations, ou pour un "ustensile" de l'apprendre, pour un *manuel*, alors qu'il est une *modalité* de notre être. [...] Dans ce sens, la Bible serait pour moi le livre par excellence." Emmanuel Levinas & Philippe Nemo, *Ethique Et Infini: Dialogues Avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 15-16.

Abbreviate title to: Levinas, /Ethique et Infini/, pp. 15-16.

Teshuva is situated in the midst of redemption, which is about the “not yet” of the future. Both Chalier and Rosenzweig think of the future as a true *à-venir*. This “yet-to-come” future is experienced in the *anticipation* withing the present. The best expression of this anticipation is *messianic impatience*.¹¹³ The Jewish people live in the awareness of the radical alterity of the coming Kingdom of God, but at the same time experience this future during their redemptive acts and within the liturgy as a longing for the final redemption. The future appears in the thinking of progress as “nur eine in unendliche Länge hingezogene, nach vorwärts projizierte Vergangenheit”.¹¹⁴ Rosenzweig, on the other hand, asks us, against the thinking of progress, to think of the future again as a radical alterity, parallel to the redemptive coming of the Kingdom of God. The future of the Kingdom is always “yet-to-come”, it is always as present as it is future, *it comes eternally*. There is a necessity in the coming of the Kingdom: its growth is necessary, but not fixed; we cannot derive it from time, as it is opposed to the determinism of progress thinking.¹¹⁵ Benjamin, too, understands every moment as a gateway through which the Messiah can come.¹¹⁶ Rosenzweig writes: “Ewigkeit ist nicht eine sehr lange Zeit, sondern ein Morgen, das ebensogut Heute sein könnte.”¹¹⁷ To experience this future moment, that might just as well come tomorrow, man must, on the one hand, wait patiently by beholding it as a miracle yet to come. On the other hand, man can experience the Kingdom in *messianic impatience*, in anticipation of what is yet to come.

The future is characterised by the tension between waiting and anticipating, a tension that Rosenzweig expresses as *hope* (*Hoffnung*). For Rosenzweig, the anticipation that is part of *messianic hope*¹¹⁸ entails a specific relationship to time: in anticipation, one presents the eternity of the Kingdom in its impatience. Anticipation thus involves waiting for an eruption of the radically new. This radical newness is only possible through the human being who breaks with the organic, homogeneous passage of time and thus makes room for eternity through his redemptive action. Teshuva is one of those forms that human, redemptive intervention in the world takes.

¹¹³ Stéphane Mosès, *Système Et Révélation: La Philosophie De Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 140.

¹¹⁴ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 253-254.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 250.

¹¹⁶ Benjamin, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, Anhang, p. 704.

¹¹⁷ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 250

¹¹⁸ Cf Gershom Scholem, who understands messianic hope as the combination of the utopian and restorative, a specific form of this anticipatory waiting. Gershom Scholem, ‘Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum’, in *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 12.

2.3.3. *The Holy People: Election And Absence*

The Jewish people were previously characterised as a *holy, elected* people. Rosenzweig connects election with receiving the Torah.¹¹⁹ Chalier thematises election in its responsive structure: the response to the Promise (*Promesse*) and the Word (*Parole*) of God. This makes the Jewish people unique and singular in relation to the secular nations, who sacralise both the nationalistic feeling (the secular nation sees itself as a chosen people) the idea of election (the nation, conscious and proud of its historical destiny, portrays itself as a chosen people).¹²⁰ In its origin, however, the idea of election refers to the Jewish people's election to receive the Torah; the bond that the Jewish people then enter into with the Word of God constitutes its eternity. When the idea of election is universalised, the idea of eternity is also universalised. Whereas the Jewish people experience eternity in their anticipation, the nation wants to immortalise itself *within* history. Rosenzweig and Chalier want to rethink the idea of election as an essentially Jewish category and restore it to its *transhistorical* capacity.

The Jewish people are characterised by a *triple absence in world history*. First, the Jewish people carry with them the exile as an event in history, but also as a *modus essendi*. Abraham left the land at God's command, which means that Judaism in its origin is landless. The land is always a *holy land*: the land of desire. Judaism is not at home in the world, its world is outside, it is promised to it. Secondly, the Jewish people lost their own language and now speak the language of the people with whom they are guests: because of the *Diaspora*, Hebrew is no longer a language. This does not mean that Hebrew is a dead language, but that it is a *sacred language*. The sacred language is not bound to a linguistic area, but lives apart from world events: it is the language with God. Finally, the Jewish people also have a law that is different from that of the nations. The Jewish people find their law in the Torah. Unlike the nations, which make and adjust their laws through revolutions, the law of the Torah is already given and is lived as an ever-present memory. In this threefold way, the Jewish people stand outside world history. The Jewish people are *transhistorical*.

2.3.4. *Eternal People: Toledot*

The transhistorical relationship to world history is a sore point for the Jewish people. In the split between holiness and worldliness, the Jewish people, must speak another language with their neighbour than the language he speaks with God, which limits his freedom and open-mindedness in this world. In addition, the triple absence that constitutes the holiness

¹¹⁹ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 346.

¹²⁰ Stéphane Mosès, *L'ange de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 73.

of the Jewish people is also necessary. Because the Jewish people are not bound by the transience of a land, a language and a law, they can be *eternal*. Judaism experiences its eternity in the liturgy, which forms an eternity within time in the repetition of the liturgical cycle. The particular mode of and focus on eternity, distinguishes Jewish people from Christianity. For Judaism, the Messiah has not yet come, whereas Christianity places the coming of the Messiah at the centre of history. Judaism experiences eternity in its messianic impatience; Christianity experiences eternity in the witness (*Zeugnis*) at the centre of history.¹²¹

By distinguishing between Christianity and Judaism, Rosenzweig unmasks the Hegelian conception of time as a Christian historiography in which the various nations *within history* work towards redemption. Hegel's historiography, however, does not do justice to Rosenzweig's understanding of Christianity, in which *every* point of history is a part of the path of eternity. For Hegel, nations participate in eternity only when their national spirit (*Volksg Geist*) becomes part of the universal spirit (*Weltgeist*). In his *Hegel und der Staat*, Rosenzweig sharply criticises this Hegelian conception of history:

*Das Prinzip dieser "Entwicklung" ist dann das Prinzip des "Geistes" überhaupt: dass er immer mehr er selbst und immer reiner er selbst, das er therefore immer geistiger und immer freier wird - ein Prozess den Hegel mit dem Namen des Bewusstwerdens bezeichnen kann. Diesen Fortschritt des Selbstbewusstseins müssen sich nun die Volksgeschichten einfügen; ein Volk ist eine Stufe in diesem Prozess.*¹²²

The Jewish people is not merely a phase in a process of spiritualisation, but can, thanks to its threefold absence from history, live eternally. The eternity of the Jewish people lies in the fact that it trusts in itself, instead of making itself dependent on land, language and law: its eternity lies in the blood community (*Blutgemeinschaft*). Judaism preserves its eternity by immortalising the life of the people in the succession of the generations that form a blood community. The term 'blood community' evokes Nazi and racist connotations. Rosenzweig, however, uses the term blood community to indicate the Jewish people united by remembering their ancestors' names, a remembering that makes the Jewish people eternal.

¹²¹ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 366. Cf. Stéphane Mosès, *Système Et Révélation : La Philosophie De Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 210.

¹²² Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat*, (München: Oldenbourg, 1920), p. 177. It should be stressed, however, that in his PhD *Hegel und der Staat*, Rosenzweig writes only one chapter critical of Hegel.

Es muß seine eigene Zeit erzeugen. Es muß sich selbst ewig fortzeugen. Es muß sein Leben verewigen in der Folge der Geschlechter, deren jedes das nachkommende erzeugt, wie es selber hinwiederum von der Vorfahren zeugt. Das Bezeugen geschieht im Erzeugen. In diesem doppelsinnigen, tateinigen Zusammenhang des Zeugens verwirklicht sich ewiges Leben. Vergangenheit und Zukunft, sonst einander fremd, jene zurücksinkend, wenn diese herankommt, - hier wachsen sie in seins: das Erzeugen der Zukunft ist unmittelbar Bezeugen der Vergangenheit. Der Sohn wird gezeugt, damit er vom hingegangenen Vater seines Erzeugers zeuge. Der Enkel erneuert den Namen des Ahns.¹²³

Rosenzweig views in the chains of names, that form chains of generations a *Zeugen* (testimony) that constitutes an eternal time that stands outside of the *Weltgeschichte*. In their translation of the Pentateuch/Torah (*Weisung*), Buber and Rosenzweig use this same word *Zeugen* to translate the Hebrew word *toledot*, which, now, precisely refers to this transhistorical chain of generations.¹²⁴ Chalier understands *toledot* as a holy history (*histoire sainte*).

La longue patience nécessaire à l'énumération de noms qui engendrent d'autres noms possède en elle-même une excellence, celle qui donne sens au temps par la grâce des noms propres. La langue hébraïque, en parlant de toledot [...] enseigne que l'histoire comprise comme quête d'un sens à donner au devenir humain n'est pas liée à la lutte du pouvoir recherchant à s'imposer, à la violence des Etats avides de puissance et de reconnaissance, mais bel et bien à la possibilité d'énoncer des noms propres sources d'autres noms propres.¹²⁵

¹²³ Rosenzweig, *SE*, p. 330.

¹²⁴ Cf. F. Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 4 Sprachdenken im Übersetzen: 2. Band Arbeitspapiere zur Verdeutlichung der Schrift, ed. by R. Bat-Adam (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhof, 1984), p. 12 (on Gen. 2:4-7): "Alle andern toledot gehen eigentlich aufs Folgende. Aber dies paßt ja in seinem Inhalt nur aufs Vorhergehende. Aber Ursprung zerstört die Pointe, die doch grade die Gleichheit mit den folgenden toledot ist. Die Gleichheit und die Unvergleichlichkeit!" It is also interesting to return to the first paragraph of this section, where *Zeugnis* within history was seen as a typical Christian messianism. Here, the *Zeugen* seems distinctly Jewish, and open to the future. *blue words in italics!*

¹²⁵ Cathérine Chalier, *L'Histoire promise* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), p. 297.

Toledot (תולדות), from the root *yalad* (לד), to bring forth, give birth) means 'offspring' or 'genealogical history'.¹²⁶ It constitutes in itself a specific experience of history, contained within the list of personal names (*noms propres*). History is not understood from the perspective of the victor, but from the memory (or in Benjamin's words: an *Eingedenken*) of the particular, proper name. Rosenzweig, in his *Hegel und der Staat*, criticises the equation of history (*Weltgeschichte*) and world justice (*Weltgericht*): "Weil die Weltgeschichte Weltgericht sein soll, so muss das einschienende Chaos, die ganze "bunte Wirklichkeit" in Wahrheit Kosmos sein."¹²⁷ If history appears as a world court, all the folds of the world are smoothed into a *cosmos*. Thus, the variegated reality (*bunte Wirklichkeit*) disappears: the individual no longer appears here as a particular individual, but as part of a universal, logical whole. This does not only have implications for mankind. Time also appears as homogeneous and irreversible. Time functions then an instrument to realise the spiritualisation of reality. By remembering the proper name, Judaism wants to put the particularity of man and people at the centre and present time as *discontinuous*.

Chalier, as cited above, states that one should conceive of history as the utterance of proper names that are in turn the source of proper names. This perception of history emphasises the heteronomy at the origin of man: his natality.¹²⁸ Also Hannah Arendt thematises natality, against Heidegger's focus on mortality, as a defining condition of human existence. According to her, natality connects the radically new with what already exists: birth is a new beginning, but at the same time it is also an initiation of the self into a world where there are already others. The start of man's active life (*vita activa*) is preceded by a passivity: man is born into a world that already exists.¹²⁹ Natality, then, determines human action in the world: natality opens man up to the world.¹³⁰ Closely bound to natality, sexual intercourse plays an important role within the *toledot*:

Le toledot exige la transmission de l'humain dans l'être. Cette transmission n'équivaut pas seulement à celle de la vie, elle implique que passe dans le nom et la chair de l'enfant la trace de la

¹²⁶ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 17th ed. (Berlin: Springer, 1954), pp. 873.

¹²⁷ Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat*, (München: Oldenbourg, 1920, p. 176.

¹²⁸ Chalier, *HP*, p. 297.

¹²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 8-9.

¹³⁰ Chalier, *HP*, p. 178.

*Transcendance, c'est-à-dire celle du masculin et du féminin en tant que porteurs ensemble de Sa ressemblance.*¹³¹

Chalier understands sexual intercourse as an act that opens man up to transcendence. In the fear (*crainte*) and the love (*amour*) which, according to Chalier, unite in the act of love, we can recognise a response to the Word of God. Together with love, there is the fear of the radical other that will grow: the child is the alterity that breaks through the erotic identity. This openness to otherness results as a response to God's Word, which, in turn, gives power to love and fear by leaving in them a trace of transcendence. Thus, sexual intercourse carries in itself a transcendence and can be placed within the messianic view of time: "Accomplir l'acte de chair, ce n'est pas perpétuer l'espèce humaine dans son animalité mortelle, c'est accroître la ressemblance à Dieu, la divinité de l'homme."¹³² In this way, the intersubjective relationship between woman and man, which includes an openness to the alterity of the world (the child), implies a relationship to God (the absolute alterity). Moreover, as it was painfully described by David Grossman, the continuation of the *toledot* in the Shoah, as a continuation of this *transhistory* against all odds, forms a love for life against all costs, and a protest against the annihilating strategies of the Nazis.¹³³ Understanding history as *toledot*, as remembering and continuing the chain of proper names, means emphasising the double heteronomy of man's origin. In this way, history as *toledot* constitutes a reversal of the concept of progress that assumes rational and free actors.

2.4. Responding to Silence: Transhistorical Perspective and Shoah

The transhistorical perspective offers a response to the messianic aporia by the *messianic hope* that is a form of anticipating the Coming, while not fixing it in a given time or place. The *toledot* is crucial in the transhistorical answer, as it offers a perspective on history that preserves the particularity of the individual, and enables the Jewish people, as a holy people, to remember their own history. Time is discontinuous in this particular form of history: it does not lead as a *Zwecktat* straight towards its goal, but, guided by the proper name, records suffering and particular stories.

The transhistorical perspective forms at the same time a response to the catastrophe of the Shoah. Chalier understands the Shoah as a "*rupture de l'histoire*" (a break in history).¹³⁴ In order to continue thinking of the Shoah

¹³¹ Chalier, *HP*, p. 26.

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹³³ D. Grossman, *Zie: Liefde* (Utrecht: Veen, 1990), p. 500

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

as a break, we must not fall into the historicism that sees time as continuous. We must think of time in its discontinuity and remember the victims by their proper name in order to preserve the horror of the past in its particularity. In its historiography, Judaism commemorates the private proper name as toledot, and at the same time offers a protest against the assimilating thinking of the Shoah. The speaking out of the proper names contrasts with Vilna Gaon's understanding of teshuva as silence. However, after the annihilation of the Shoah, something is needed to save the victims from the horrible 'nothingness' that formed the starting point of Rosenzweig's thinking. The continuation of the toledot, as an ultimate protest against the nothingness and the recording of the proper names, forms a strong, transhistorical reply to the horror of the Shoah. Paul Celan's poem *Psalm* is exemplary:

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
 niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
 Niemand.
 Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
 Dir zulieb wollen wir blühen.
 Dir
 Entgegen.
 Ein Nichts
 waren wir, sind wir, werden
 wir bleiben, blühend:
 die Nichts-, die
 Niemandrose.
 Mit
 dem Griffel seelenhell,
 dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
 der Krone rot
 vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen
 über, o über
 dem Dorn.¹³⁵

Red is the colour of protest, here the protest against the swallowing force of the nothingness. Celan describes how man dies and there is no one to speak to his dust. Death appears as an abrupt end that no one will ever remember. Celan portrays this nobody as God, the incomprehensibly absent God during the Shoah. In the face of God, man, like nothing, will bloom like a red rose. His blooming seems useless, for no one (or better, Nobody)

¹³⁵ Paul Celan, *Psalm*, in Paul Celan, *Gedichten*, **vert.** Frans Roumen (Baarn: Ambo, 1985), pp. 64-65.

will perceive it. A tragic illustration of the red blossoming of lost names, is found in the impressive Pinkas synagogue, where the names of the fallen Jewish people in the second World War are painted in red and black all over the walls of the hauntingly silent synagogue (see picture below). In the transhistoric perspective, man posits himself as a proper name inscribed in the *toledot*. The *useless* continuation of the *toledot* during the devastating Shoah turns out to be an ultimate protest to consider oneself human again in spite of everything. Intercourse, as a continuation of the *toledot*, appears here as an ultimate protest against the Nazi regime that wanted to exterminate the Jewish people. Sexual intercourse during the Shoah is a love of life at all costs: however much life seems threatened and however much man himself wants to die, still the divine calls for continuing life and opposing the destructive Nazi regime. Chalier goes a step further when she states that in sexual intercourse man grows in his being as *imago Dei*. During the Shoah, where the man of the Jewish people appeared in his bestiality, intercourse constitutes a protest and restores the Jewish people to their dignity as *imago Dei*. The sexual intercourse aims not merely the preservation of the species, but at continuing the sequence of *toledot* through which man is connected to an eternal time and discovers himself as part of a holy people. Through the idea of the *toledot*, Chalier gives a transhistorical response to both the aporia of messianism and the horror of the Shoah.



Figure 2: Names for Holocaust victims at the wall of the Pinkas Synagogue in Josefov, Prague. Picture by Øyvind Holmstad

3. Historical Perspective: Fackenheim

3.1. Teshuva: Fackenheim

Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) represents the historical perspective. He studied at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin. After *Kristallnacht* (10 November 1938) he was arrested and locked up in Sachsenhausen for three months. He then left Germany and finally settled in Israel in 1983.¹³⁶ Fackenheim sees teshuva as a historical response to the rupture of the Shoah. He has written an impressive oeuvre over the years. *To Mend the World* is one of his later works, in which his thoughts come to a conclusion and forms the focus of this chapter.¹³⁷

3.1.1. Teshuva Questioned

We began the description of the *transhistorical* perspective with the study of teshuva in the writings of Rosenzweig and Chalier. Understanding the *historical* perspective requires a different approach. Fackenheim's thinking starts from the radical rupture of the Shoah.¹³⁸ Rather than describing teshuva, teshuva is questioned: "Can teshuva after the Holocaust be the same as before? Is it possible at all?"¹³⁹ Fackenheim argues that teshuva is at the heart of Jewish existence.¹⁴⁰ To question the possibility of teshuva, then, entails questioning Jewish existence as a whole. Teshuva is questioned in its possibility because it is not (any longer) evident. Fackenheim explicitly thematises the Holocaust as the starting point and focal point of his philosophical project. Fackenheim's philosophical thinking, in contrast to Platonic astonishment, springs from the terrible trauma of the Holocaust, linking it to the messianic thinking that departs from the catastrophe.

The rupture that the Holocaust represents manifests itself in two reactions that Fackenheim rejects.¹⁴¹ On the one hand, there is the *mediatic thinking* that perceives the Holocaust as a mere moment in a great hist-

¹³⁶ Didier Pollefeyt 'De ontmoeting van Athene en Jeruzalem in Auschwitz: Het joodse denken van Emil. L. Fackenheim', *De uil van Minerva*, 12 (1996) 157-176 (p. 173).

¹³⁷ Michael L. Morgan, *Fackenheim's Jewish Philosophy: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 31.

¹³⁸ Fackenheim uses the term *Holocaust* instead of *Shoah* because he views the horror of Auschwitz as a rupture not only inside Judaism, but also in the Christian, philosophical, historical and poetic thinking. This is why, in this chapter, the term *Holocaust* will be preferred.

¹³⁹ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 317.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 317.

¹⁴¹ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 309.

ory. By embedding the Holocaust into a larger, rational whole, the horror is overcome.¹⁴² Fackenheim opposes to this neutralising thinking. The Holocaust must remain as a foreign element and cannot be mediated or overcome: “Where the Holocaust is there is no overcoming; and where there is an overcoming the Holocaust is not.”¹⁴³ In this way, Fackenheim explicitly connects with Adorno, who states that Auschwitz paralysed the metaphysical capacity.¹⁴⁴ The resistance to mediating thought marks the shape of Fackenheim’s thinking: instead of a philosophical system, his thinking is built around private testimonies and midrash which, as mythical, Jewish philosophy, can never be assimilated into a rational whole.

Besides the rationalising reaction, Fackenheim also opposes to a *nihilistic reaction*. An excerpt from *The Night* of Elie Wiesel provides an exemplary testimony to this. The survivor Wiesel describes how, at the age of fifteen, he had to attend an execution.

The three victims mounted together on to the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. “Long live liberty!” cried the two adults. But the child was silent. “Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. [...] The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive [...] Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on these gallows”¹⁴⁵

This fragment is particularly rich in content and symbolism. The last sentence forms the climax: God has been hung on the gallows; God is dead. The untold and unimaginable human violence of the Holocaust shows a dark

¹⁴² Didier Pollefeyt gives the example of the rational-cosmic theodicy-model of Maybaum, who holds that Jews in Auschwitz suffered as subsidiaries under Hitler, who is seen in this model as “God’s servant”. See: Didier Pollefeyt ‘De ontmoeting van Athene en Jeruzalem in Auschwitz: Het joodse denken van Emil. L. Fackenheim’, *De uil van Minerva*, 12 (1996) 157-176 (p. 158).

Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 135.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 133. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 351.

¹⁴⁵ Elie Wiesel, *La nuit* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1958), p. 104-105. delete pink parts
elie wiesel, night, translated by Stella Rodway (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 76-77

side of the world where any talk of God appears as blasphemy. Wiesel's fragment speaks, therefore, not about the real death of God, nor about the (Nietzschean) metaphysical death of a supreme being, but about the death of an image of God: God no longer appears in His saving presence, but in His silence. Likewise, Rubenstein argues for the death of God: because of God's fundamental absence during the Holocaust, the traditional idea of the merciful God has become untenable.¹⁴⁶

Fackenheim responds to this nihilistic reaction. In his *Quest for Past and Future*, he describes the absence of God in Auschwitz as an *eclipse*: "An eclipse does not destroy the sun; moreover it is temporary. A faith which accepts a divine eclipse listens even in a time of silence, in the trust that the divine word will again be heard."¹⁴⁷ God is still there, despite His apparent absence and his incomprehensible silence, just as the sun is still there during an eclipse. It is now man's role to listen to God through the silence, in other words, to trust. Fackenheim describes this role also in *God's Presence in History*, where he describes how Judaism finds its foundations in *root-experiences*, founding core experiences of a divine presence within history. The *Exodus* is one of these root experiences. During the Exodus, the presence of God was felt, for instance, at the parting of the Red Sea. This experience of His presence lies at the heart of believing that the Jewish people enter into a relationship with God as a *reenactment* of this presence as a moral life that bears witness to God.¹⁴⁸ After Auschwitz, the Jewish people must continue to echo or reenact this root-experience by denying God's death. It is not God who is dead, rather, man is incapable of hearing God. This incapacity, this silence that constitutes a rupture in the relationship between God and man, leads to the concept of teshuva: "Does this seeming incapacity signify that God is dead? Or that the great religious demand made of this age is a radical t'shuvah – a turning and listening to the God who can speak even though He is silent?"¹⁴⁹ The silence of God requires a turning (teshuva) of man towards God to listen to His silence. In listening, man again becomes a witness to God's presence, even though this presence is silent and seemingly absent. Teshuva, here, appears as an impossibility: how can man, who does not hear God, listen to Him?

¹⁴⁶ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 70.

¹⁴⁷ Emil L. Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future* (Beacon Press, 1970), p. 302.

¹⁴⁸ Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York University Press: New York, 1970), p. 40.

¹⁴⁹ Emil L. Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future* (Beacon Press, 1970), p. 315.

3.1.2. *Teshuva Described*

Teshuva is, thus, not obvious – if not impossible. Moreover, Fackenheim understands teshuva world-historically as the bridge between the “breaking of the vessels” (*Shevirat ha-Kelim*, שבירת הכלים) and God’s “contraction” (*Tsimtsum*, צמצום), and the restoration of the world/ “to mend the world” (*Tikkun Olam*, תיקון עולם). Fackenheim, fascinated by the Kabbalah, incorporates mystical concepts in his search for the way Jewish life should be shaped after the Holocaust. After God’s contraction, and the shattering of the vessels which contained God’s emanating light in the empty space after God’s contraction, the world needs to be mended, the shatters of the vessels need to be repaired. In this time between breaking and mending, the Holocaust constitutes a particular event. God’s saving presence in history can no longer be felt here, it seems as if He has left man forever in the horror of the Holocaust. This absence, this rupture, is such that a future recovery seems impossible: “No Tikkun is possible of the rupture, ever after.”¹⁵⁰ Jewish life after the Holocaust must take place within this oxymoron of a *necessary impossibility*. A *Tikkun* and, related to it, a *Teshuva*, are necessary, since otherwise thinking would fall into nihilism.

After questioning the possibility of teshuva and outlining the rupture that the Holocaust represents, Fackenheim shares his understanding of teshuva: “Teshuva in Judaism is a many-sided experience. Its core, however, is a divine-human turning-toward-each-other, despite and indeed because of their persistent and unmitigated incommensurability.”¹⁵¹ Like Rosenzweig, Fackenheim returns to the Hebrew root ‘shuv’ (בוש), as a turning movement. He discerns in teshuva a double movement. On the one hand, there is the movement of man towards God, and on the other hand the turning from God towards man, analogous to the double movement in *tikkun*: the impulse below brings forth an impulse above.¹⁵² In its pre-Holocaust history, the Jewish people experienced various catastrophes, such as the destruction of the Temple and the catastrophes on the Ninth of Av.¹⁵³ In these extreme horrors, a return always took place: a part of the Jewish people always returned and participated in the dialogical turning and being turned towards the divine.¹⁵⁴ The post-Holocaust teshuva stands with one foot in this tradition and with the other in the broken world. It

¹⁵⁰ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 254.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 253. Fackenheim refers here to Gershom Scholem.

¹⁵³ The Ninth Av is a day of sorrow within Judaism, as many catastrophes that took place on this day (like the failure of the Bar Kochba-revolt) are commemorated.

¹⁵⁴ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 251.

participates in the hope related to the Ninth Ave, where in the catastrophe a mutual turning towards God between man and God proved possible, but it is simultaneously doomed to remain essentially fragmentary.

Teshuva being about the dialogical turning towards each other of God and man, does not imply the *unification* of man and God. Like Rosenzweig, Fackenheim understands our time as *post-Hegel mortuum*.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the *post-Hegelian* thinking is not *anti-Hegelian*, for the Hegelian separation of man and God is still relevant. Teshuva is crucial in the *post-Hegelian* thinking: “What is pitted against the Hegelian *Idea of Overcoming* is the Jewish *Idea of Teshuva*.”¹⁵⁶ The Hegelian separation is preserved, yet no longer included in an overcoming mediation, but in a dialogic turning towards each other that is teshvua.

3.2. Teshuva: Tikkun of the Irreparable

3.2.1. *The Irreparable*

The rupture of the Shoah is irreparable. The victims (the innocent children and the *Muselmänner*) must not be forgotten:

*The screams of the children and the silence of the Muselmänner are in our world. We dare not forget them; we cannot surpass or overcome them: and they are unredeemed. [...] In our search for a post-Holocaust Tikkun we must accept from the start that at most only a fragmentary Tikkun is possible. This is because we are situated in the post-Holocaust world.*¹⁵⁷

The irreparability of the Holocaust constitutes a caesura within philosophical thinking. Rosenzweig’s three elements have decayed into horrifying shards. **Man** appears here as an anonymous, silent human being, relating to Primo Levi’s *Muselmann*: “the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continuously renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty really to suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death”.¹⁵⁸ Whereas Rosenzweig highlighted the human uniqueness within the character of man, man appears here as an empty shell, whose life can hardly be called a life. The *Muselmänner* show the meaning of what Benjamin called the catastrophe

¹⁵⁵ Letter to Eugen Rosenstock, 5 september 1916: Rosenzweig, *BT*, (brief nr. 291, 5 september 1916). Correct to: Letter nr. 291, 5th September 1916

¹⁵⁶ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 141.

¹⁵⁷ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 256.

¹⁵⁸ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, p. 82, as cited in Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 99.

of the same thing over and over again.¹⁵⁹ Man's decay into an anonymous mass shows the horror of absolute identity.¹⁶⁰ The death of the empty *Muselmann* is bestial: his death is no longer a death, for before it there was no life. In addition, **God** also appears differently: as described above, it is difficult to speak of God's salutary presence after the Holocaust. In this respect, Fackenheim radically breaks with the theodicy of absolving God from human suffering.¹⁶¹ Any theodicy would minimise the horror of the Holocaust. Moreover, Rosenzweig's characterisation of God's love as a love that is eternally present in the moment becomes problematic: God is seemingly absent, as appears from Wiesel's question "where is God?". Finally, the element of the **world** also appears as a difficulty after the Holocaust. Where Rosenzweig presented the world in its fundamental insightfulness, this insightfulness appears to be lost. The Holocaust appears as an aporia within and at the same time a culmination of rationalising thinking. Questions about the meaning of the Holocaust cannot be answered, according to Fackenheim: "The Nazi murder [...] was annihilation for the sake of annihilation, murder for the sake of murder, evil for the sake of evil."¹⁶² The Nazi horror was evil for evil's sake, fundamentally irrational.

Fackenheim does not hesitate to refer to the Holocaust as a *unique* evil.¹⁶³ By listing the characteristics of the Holocaust, he calls this event unique:

*One looks at this list (which could be expanded) and is hard put to find another catastrophe containing even one of these features. [...] All this is by no means to deny the existence of other catastrophes equally unprecedented and endowed with unique characteristics of their own. But to make this admission is only to say that these other catastrophes, too, must be confronted in their own right.*¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', p. 673.

¹⁶⁰ Man appears here analogous to Jozef K., the main character of Franz Kafka's *Process*, who incessantly and obsessively searches for the reason for his conviction. The name Jozef K., with the empty initial, refers to the inner emptiness that arises during this obsession. The novel ends with the gruesome death of Jozef K., who in his inner emptiness had lost his humanity and is slaughtered like an animal. Cf. Roger Burggraeve & Luc Anckaert, 'Crisis and Meaning: F. Kafka and the Law', *Coactivity: Philosophy, Communication*, 25 (2017), 123–134.

¹⁶¹ Levinas calls Fackenheim in this regard "the end of the theodicy": Emmanuel Levinas, 'La souffrance inutile', in *Entre nous : Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1991), 100–112 (p. 107).

¹⁶² **Emil** Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: University Press, 1970), p. 70.

¹⁶³ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

abbreviate

Fackenheim is well aware that calling the Holocaust a unique evil is a bold step. However, this does not diminish the horror of other catastrophes. For Fackenheim, the Holocaust was unique in its large scale, its focus on the extermination of all Jews, its focus on the very existence of the Jews.¹⁶⁵ According to Fackenheim, the Holocaust was also unique in its purposiveness and in the fact that the entire project was carried by idealists.¹⁶⁶ That Fackenheim characterises the Holocaust as a unique evil, stems from his horrifying discovery that there was no valid reason for the evil done: it was an *evil for the sake of evil*.¹⁶⁷ Bauman accords a chapter of his *Modernity and the Holocaust* concerning the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Like Fackenheim, he views the Holocaust as unique, since it bears some features that none of the genocides throughout history do. Unlike Fackenheim, and almost paradoxically, Bauman places the Holocaust also under the label of normality. After all, the Holocaust appears as a ‘normal’ product of modernity with its technological and bureaucratic patterns that replace morality and the fiction of autonomy they create, which ultimately leads to a concentration rather than an elimination of violence.¹⁶⁸

The evil of the Holocaust is not only unique, but also *radical* – not *banal* (contra. H. Arendt)¹⁶⁹ or *diabolic*.¹⁷⁰ Fackenheim quotes Adorno: “The

¹⁶⁵ This is illustrated in *The Boy with the Striped Pyjamas*, where Bruno, son of an SS-Obersturmbannführer, befriends Shmuel, a boy his age who is a camp prisoner. Through the barbed wire that separates them, they secretly converse. Bruno assumes that the barbed wire is there for the wild animals. When Shmuel explains to him that it’s there to prevent people from leaving the camp, Bruno asks, startled, “But why? What have you done wrong?” Shmuel replies: “I am a Jew.”

¹⁶⁶ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ **Emil** Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: University Press, 1970), p.70.

abbreviate

¹⁶⁸ **Zygmunt** Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 94-98.

replace for consistency with: pp.

¹⁶⁹ NB: Fackenheim, strongly opposed to H. Arendt, radicalises Arendt’s theory here. In fact, Arendt shows how Eichmann, by following a ‘perverted’ categorical imperative was capable of committing his atrocious crimes. Accordingly, she does not minimise in any way the evil. On the contrary, by showing how the actor of the evil is *banal*, the evil appears all the more in its horror. Fackenheim wrongly seems to apply the banality of the *actor* to the *evil* itself.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. the “diabolisation of evil”, a term used by Didier Pollefeyt, who distinguishes three paradigms in speaking about evil: diabolicisation, banalisation and ethicalising of the evil. The diabolizing perspective is defined as follows: “In the idea of diabolicisation, one is overwhelmed and insulted by evil to such an extent that one is no longer capable to look at the evildoer from another perspective than in the light of the crime that he has committed. Being

Cf.

individual is robbed of the last and poorest that until then still remained his own. In the camps it was no longer the individual that died: the individual was made into a specimen. And this fact necessarily affects the dying also of those who escaped the procedure.”¹⁷¹ Since the Holocaust targeted the identity of being-human, i.e. humanity itself, Fackenheim argues that within the Holocaust the Jews represented all humanity. The Holocaust constituted the death of the very *Idea of Humanity*. All these points come together in a climax, which Fackenheim describes as a *circle of thought*. Philosophical thought is perplexed by the Holocaust, its thoughts circle around this radical evil, and it hits the limits of intelligibility.¹⁷² The Holocaust cannot be encompassed by thought: it was an evil for evil’s sake that cannot be further rationalised without neutralisation. Philosophy must, therefore, pay attention to individual testimonies, which give an exclusive picture of Auschwitz and the horror of the Holocaust. Yet, this boundary does not mean the end of philosophy. The philosopher must now, against the Hegelian, mediating impulse, surrender to the Holocaust as a *whole-of-horror*.¹⁷³ This whole, however, cannot be understood or overcome; thinking is overwhelmed by the fact that the Holocaust is there when it should not be. Thinking must, then, adopt the modality of flesh-and-blood resistance.¹⁷⁴

The Holocaust constitutes a radical rupture, not only to thinking, but also within Jewish existence.¹⁷⁵ Jewish identity must therefore be reformulated in a radical way: “A Jew today is one who, except for a historical accident – Hitler’s loss of the war – would have been murdered or never been born.”¹⁷⁶ If the Holocaust had not failed because of a historical event (Hitler’s defeat), there would no longer be a Jew today. Fackenheim contrasts Rosenzweig’s idea of the Jewish people as a holy people with

horrified by evil, one considers the malefactor as non-human, as an ethically completely perverted creature, possessed by evil or even as the embodiment of the devil. This [is] the process of diabolisation, in which the criminal is completely fitted into the wickedness of his crime.” Didier Pollefeyt, ‘Ethics, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable after Auschwitz’, in *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation*, ed. by Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2004) pp. 121-160 (p. 125).

¹⁷¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 354, **zoals geciteerd** in Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 133.

¹⁷² Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 248.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

¹⁷⁴ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 239.

¹⁷⁵ “The Holocaust is a *caesura* not only for the historian, the poet, the philosopher. It is a *caesura* also for the Jewish faith.” *Ibidem*, p. 318.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 293.

replace with: as cited

the *accidental remainder*: “We, the Jews of today, would either have been murdered or never born. We are not a holy remnant. We are an accidental remnant.”¹⁷⁷ Labelling the Jewish people as an accidental remnant does not, however, strip them of their holiness. The Jewish people can still be understood as holy in their own way: “Maimonides is said to have ruled that any Jew murdered for no reason other than being a Jew is to be considered holy. [...] Only in this and no other sense are we, the accidental remnant, also a holy remnant.”¹⁷⁸ The Jewish people are a *holy remnant* because of their death. In this way Fackenheim gives a radically different turn to Heidegger’s *Sein-zum-Tode*. Instead of an *Existential* of the *Das-ein*, death appears to Fackenheim as the *Muselman’s* mode of existence: dead before having died. This “useless” death is a *novum*¹⁷⁹ in history, a *novum* that affects and redefines the entire Jewish people as an *accidental remainder*.

3.2.2. *Tikkun of the Jewish People: the 614th Commandment*

Fackenheim calls for a restoration of the Jewish people, even though this seems difficult after the caesura of the Shoah. A restoration of this break, a *tikkun*, is necessary in order not to fall into a blasphemous God-is-dead-thinking.¹⁸⁰ For Fackenheim, through his so-called “Heideggerian ontic-ontologic circle”, the resistance during the Holocaust calls for the same resistance today. This call is not voluntary but is a *necessity*. Fackenheim identified this as the *614th commandment*: “the ‘614th commandment’ [is] forbidding Jews to give Hitler posthumous victories.”¹⁸¹ After the Holocaust, it is necessary to add to the 613 commandments revealed to Moses a 614th commandment, a commandment that consists of the moral-religious duty of the Jew to bear witness to the own Jewish identity and, as such, not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory.¹⁸² In the face of the destruction and despair that Hitler wanted to create, the Jew should bear witness to God’s presence, respect the Jewish faith and customs and stand in history with hope. Fackenheim underlines that this is a commandment, no mere wish: “The wish to bear witness turns into a commandment, the

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 308.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. xix.

¹⁸² Fackenheim is conscient that the addition of a 614th commandment is radical, and received a lot of criticism. Nonetheless, he holds that the 614th commandment is a necessary addition.

commandment to restore the divine image to the limits of its power.”¹⁸³ In the person of *Muselmann*, man as *imago Dei* was destroyed: man appeared as an empty shell. Those who did not allow themselves to be reduced to *Muselmänner* and chose life form the *ontic ground* for the 614th commandment. Their choice for a life that can be called sacred, as a testimony to the belief to be *imago Dei* (or an indestructible humanity), forms the basis of today’s opposition to Hitler’s possible posthumous victory. In *To Mend the World* Fackenheim named this commandment *The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz*, thus giving the commandment a broader scope. According to Fackenheim, not giving Hitler a posthumous victory is a task not only for the Jews, but for everyone: for example, after the Holocaust, it is the task of philosophy to restore the idea of man.

The fact that Fackenheim speaks of a commandment, of a commanding voice, is related to the idea of rupture. After Auschwitz, no philosophical system is possible. All speaking must depart from the irreducible horror. Fackenheim cites the testimony of Pelagia Lewinska, who describes how, after understanding the horrific purpose of Auschwitz upon her arrival, she managed to live up to it. This is the *commanding voice of Auschwitz*: “To hear and obey the commanding voice of Auschwitz is an ‘ontological’ possibility, here and now, because the hearing and obeying was already an ‘ontic’ reality, then and there.”¹⁸⁴ In this testimony Fackenheim finds the *ontic reality* for the *commanding voice of Auschwitz*: the miraculous resistance through life itself forms the basis of the resistance to a posthumous victory of Hitler today.

Fackenheim situates against this background the post-Holocaust *tikkun* for the Jewish people:

*The Tikkun [...] is composed of three elements: (a) a recovery of Jewish tradition – a ‘going back into possibilities of [Jewish] Dasein that was once da’, (b) a recovery in the quite different sense of recuperation from an illness; and (c) a fragmentariness attaching to these two recoveries that makes them both ever-incomplete and ever-laden with risk.*¹⁸⁵

The *tikkun* contains three elements. First, the Jew must return to the Jewish *Dasein*: the Jew must return to the Jewish tradition in order to rediscover his connection with God throughout history. This return to tradition

¹⁸³ Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 251.

¹⁸⁴ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 25.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 310

functions as a reenactment of the root experiences.¹⁸⁶ The return takes the form, among other things, of prayer and is based on the Torah. Like Rosenzweig and Chalier stressed, the Book is a crucial part of Jewish identity. Besides, the Jew returning to tradition in prayer, turns simultaneously to eternity within time: his prayer forms a messianic fragment in which he, God and Torah are one.¹⁸⁷ The second element of the Jewish *tikkun* consists in a recovery in the sense of healing. This takes place in the revaluation of man as *imago Dei*. Against to the *Muselmann*, man is now to be restored by a radically different attitude: man is to act actively as witness of his being *imago Dei*. For Fackenheim, this happens with the State of Israel. Thirdly, a *tikkun* remains necessarily fragmented after the Holocaust. The Holocaust being an insurmountable rupture, it is impossible to speak of an all-restoring *tikkun*. The first two elements are necessary (for without a return to tradition there is no hope for the future and without the healing of man as *imago Dei* the tradition would die) but remain fragmentary.

3.3. Historical Perspective

3.3.1. Return to History

Whereas Rosenzweig and Chalier adopted a *transhistorical* perspective on history, Fackenheim resolutely opts for a *historical* perspective. He argues for an active witness to Jewish identity *within history*:

*Less than four years after Rosenzweig's death, events began to unfold [...] which, for better or worse, have cast the Jewish people back firmly, inescapably, irrevocably, back into history: not into sacred history, but rather into the flesh-and-blood history of men, women, and children.*¹⁸⁸

Fackenheim argues that the events of the Holocaust have dragged the Jewish people back into history. The Jewish people can no longer take refuge in a transcendent sacred time, but must play their part in *flesh-and-blood history*. Fackenheim here reacts against the idea of transcendence in a specific way. He goes evaluates several philosophical thinkers who have thematised transcendence and shows how their thinking breaks down on the Holocaust. Within this group of criticized thinkers, there is Rosenzweig, who identified the Jewish people as a holy nation that bears witness to eternal truth and thus transcends history. The notion of the holy people

¹⁸⁶ Emi Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: University Press, 1970), p. 40.

¹⁸⁷ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 329.

¹⁸⁸ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 33.

must be replaced by the one of the *accidental remainder*. There is also a more general problem within the transhistorical perspective, according to Fackenheim. By characterising the Jewish people as transcendent to world history, the horrendous evil of the Holocaust, unique within history, is transcended.¹⁸⁹ This transcending of radical evil means its neutralisation. The transhistorical perspective, according to Fackenheim, denies historical situatedness by characterising the Jewish people as a people participating in an eternity *outside of history*. After the Holocaust, the Jewish people can no longer be called a holy, eternal people; they are an accidental remainder.

The Jewish return to history distinguishes itself from transcendental thinking, insofar as it is historically situated, and from Heideggerian thinking insofar as it takes the Holocaust seriously and confronts it. Fackenheim finds the return to history in Zionism:

*The Zionist impulse, then, thought in the modern world, is a renewal-of-the-old within it. It is a Teshuva that in our time has produced a return of the dispersed from all corners of the world; a relearning of the political and military arts of self-preservation after long centuries of disuse; the rebuilding of a land desolate through the ages; and giving of a secular flesh-and-blood to a language long confined to the sphere of piety.*¹⁹⁰

The return to history takes place in a teshuva, a return to the land, the language and the political and military self-preservation that was lost throughout history. According to Rosenzweig, the Jewish people were characterised by a triple absence on the political, linguistic and geographical level. This absence guarantees the holiness of the Jewish people within the transhistorical perspective. According to Fackenheim, however, the Jewish people are forced to return to history and thus exchange their triple absence for a triple presence. Fackenheim sees in Zionism, as a contemporary teshuva, a fusion of the religious and the secular: "It is between the extremes of a modern-religious *Teshuva* to the old God and a modern-secular *Teshuva* to the old land that future Jewish thought must assume its location."¹⁹¹ Whereas he previously emphasised the separation of man and God, he now allows a relationship between secular and religious thought. Zionism could not exist without the modern-secular idea of self-liberation and the modern-religious impulse that would lead to Zion. Fackenheim warns that this post-Holocaust teshuva forms as an amalgamation of two extremes that remain fundamentally at odds with each other. The post-Holocaust

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 320.

¹⁹⁰ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 144.

¹⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

tikkun always carries a risk. It is a fragmented *tikkun*. This fragmentation makes the Jewish people aware that they are situated in a post-Holocaust world, a world after a rupture that can never be completely repaired.

3.3.2 *Historical perspective versus historicism*

The return to history is by no means a historicist thinking. Fackenheim argues for a thinking that is aware of its historical situatedness, but opposes historicism. This historically situated thinking opposes to the Hegelian thinking which takes history seriously, but at the same time transcends it into an all-absorbing thinking. By stringing together historical events through an all-pervading Spirit, history becomes too comprehensible: the chaos of history no longer has a place, everything has its place within a totality. Fackenheim, like Adorno, wants to put the discontinuity of history at the centre.¹⁹² Interpreting the Holocaust as just one of many events in the past, undermines the evil of the Holocaust, which, as explained above, is *unique* and *radical*. In order to think of history in its *discontinuity*, Fackenheim understands the concept of teshuva as a relation to history: it means (cf. its root שׁוּבָה) a *return to history* without falling into a historicist thinking. Fackenheim emphasises that teshuva is more than its historical situatedness: “Teshuva, though ever-situated in history, is at the same time endowed with a transcendent dimension”¹⁹³ Teshuva possesses a transcendence that takes place *within history* itself, since it is always situated within history.

Fackenheim sees in Jewish liturgical time, which for Rosenzweig constitutes sacred time and thus provides the Jewish people with a time outside history, a notion of eternity *within history*. The teshuva that is to bring about the threefold *tikkun* described above,¹⁹⁴ encompasses this eternity within time. On this teshuva, Fackenheim now writes: “We must ask whether this ever happened that after two millennia, a people was returned to its language, its state, its land. Without a Book –this Book– this return could not possibly have taken place. [...] These are the gates of Teshuva open to the whole Jewish people today.”¹⁹⁵ Fackenheim argues that the post-Holocaust teshuva, which constitutes a return to language, land and state, is only possible because the Jewish people have their Book. Here we find a parallel with Rosenzweig, who, like Fackenheim, sees the Word of God as a possibility for teshuva: teshuva is not a *metanoia* for the Jews,

¹⁹² Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 260.

¹⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 318.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 310

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 328.

but a *return* because they can return to the Word.¹⁹⁶ Thanks to the Torah, Fackenheim argues, the whole Jewish people participates in teshuva: the awe that both religious and secular communities share for the Torah constitutes the ‘gateway’ for teshuva for the whole Jewish people. Prayer is the experience of this awe par excellence. Moreover, prayer itself is a form of teshuva, in its sense as a mutual turning of man and God. It is in prayer that the Rosenzweigian notion of *eternity-in-time* is guaranteed. Fackenheim refers to this eternity-in-time as “a Messianic moment, a Messianic fragment”,¹⁹⁷ a messianic fragment in which the Jewish people participate in an eternity that is in the moment itself. Here, Fackenheim separates himself from Rosenzweig: this eternity is fragmentary and must not be transcended; the Jewish people must remain *within history*, within which they occasionally know this eternity. For *flesh-and-blood* Israel, it is impossible to transcend its position in history, its fragmentation.

4. A Way in Between? Avrom Sutzkever as a Voice from Vilnius¹⁹⁸

4.1 Two Perspectives







In the previous chapters, two perspectives on history after the Shoah were explored. Within the historical perspective, Fackenheim answered the rupture of Auschwitz through teshuva which constitutes a return to history. Fackenheim sees *Zionism* as a historical task for the Jewish people to achieve a restoring *tikkun*. After the Holocaust, the Jewish people must counter the immorality of the Holocaust by standing up for the Jewish identity and by establishing their own state. Following in Rosenzweig’s footsteps, Chalier argues that the Jewish people must live up to their vocation as an eternal and holy people from a position that transcends history. Chalier shows how a transhistorical response to the Shoah is possible. She tenaciously argues that *Zionism* is not (active) messianism and understands *charity/neighbourly love* as a response to the Shoah. In the *toledot*, the proper name is central. The proper name not only attests the bond with the ancestors, through the proper name, man is also called to his sacred election to God’s love. Man answers this divine love with neighbourly love, which is man’s redemptive action in the world and of which teshuva is an authentic expression.

¹⁹⁶ Rosenzweig, *BT*, p. 142.

¹⁹⁷ Fackenheim, *TMW*, p. 329.



¹⁹⁸ I would like to thank prof. Jolanta Saldukaityte for her suggestion to include the poetry of Avrom Sutzkever. Thanks to her suggestion, I discovered the magnificent poetry of this Vilnian poet, and I could not be more grateful for this discovery.

Procreative love, as the most intimate form of charity, constitutes in the transhistorical perspective a protest against the Holocaust. Procreative love, then, figures as the transhistorical version of Fackenheim's 614th commandment. In resistance to the all-destroying Holocaust, the Jewish people make love through which they inscribe themselves in the transcendental genealogical lists, which include the forgotten names.

Each in their own way, both the transhistorical and historical perspective offer an answer to the caesura of the Shoah. Both of the perspectives make it clear that it is no option to remain passive and silent after this rupture. Transhistorical perspective understands the remembering and continuation of the chain of proper names as the ultimate protest against the annihilation of the Shoah, whereas Fackenheim's historical perspective goes even further and calls for *flesh-and-blood* answer *within history* to respond to the commanding voice of Auschwitz. The Shoah as catastrophe, thus sharpens the aporia of messianism. After the Shoah, passively waiting for the coming of the messianic age no longer seems correct; the horror calls for a reaction in the here and now, an active messianism. From this point of view, Fackenheim delivered a serious critique of the transhistorical perspective. Is it enough to remember the proper names and continue the succession of *toledot*? Shouldn't the Jewish people actively protest the annihilation of the Shoah? Nevertheless, the historical perspective is also unsatisfactory. Against the Israel-Palestine issue, Fackenheim's blunt call for a strong, political Zionism seems untenable. While both perspectives have their problems, it is clear that both of them oppose Vilna Gaon's understanding of teshuva as silence. After the rupture of the Shoah, an answer, either historically or transhistorically, is needed. In this chapter, a way in between is presented through the poetry of Avrom Sutzkever.

4.2 Avrom Sutzkever as a 'Way in Between'

Avrom Sutzkever (1913-2010) is an important voice within the Yiddish (post)-Holocaust poetry. After the death of Sutzkever's father, the family returned to Vilnius, where Sutzkever would play an important role during the Second World War. Already in 1932, Sutzkever becomes member of the *Yung Vilne*, a diverse group of modernist Yiddish writers in interwar Poland. From the start on, Sutzkever appears as a *stranger* in *Yung Vilne*, as he thematizes nature and its beauty in a time where horror was on the foreground, and resists to politics, whereas other members believe that their poetic engagement must go hand in hand with political resistance.¹⁹⁹ When

¹⁹⁹ Justin Cammy, Introduction, in Avrom Sutzkever, *The Full Pomegranate*, transl. Richard Fein (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2019), p. xxiv-xxv.

replace with 'Introduction'

the Second World War breaks out, Sutzkever is constrained to live in the *Vilna ghetto*. Here, not partaking in resistance seems impossible, and Sutzkever becomes an important figure in the “paper brigade”, a group of Jews who must gather paper documents for the cruel Nazi-project of building a museum that would recollect information about Jews, once they would all have been destroyed.²⁰⁰ Sutzkever and the others accomplish to hide and safeguard many of the manuscripts from the Nazis. Besides this small victory, Sutzkever’s time in the ghetto is haunted by horror. In 1942 his first-born baby is killed the day he was born, and shortly after also Sutzkever’s mother is assassinated. As by wonder, in 1943, Sutzkever manages to escape and becomes part of the partisan resistance in the woods outside of Vilnius.²⁰¹ Sutzkever’s greatest act of resistance, however, is to be found in his poetry. Not only was Sutzkever, through his poetry that reached Stalin, part of the Antifascist Jewish Community in the Soviet Union, but it is also the *modality* of Sutzkever’s poetry that forms an act of resistance on itself.²⁰²

Replace by:
Nazis

It is precisely in this modality of Sutzkever’s poetry that we find ‘a way in between’ the historical and transhistorical perspective. The attentive reader might be stunned here: did this paper not start by quoting Adorno “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”?²⁰³ If poetry is no longer possible after the Shoah, then how can poetry form a response to the Shoah? Rachel Ertel, in her introduction to Sutzkever’s poetry, explains carefully how the poet, conscient of the painful past, finds in his poetry a way to reconnect past and present as an “*écrire pour briser la vitre du temps*”. The risk of this reconnection, that was explored in this paper under the theme of messianism is not negated and Sutzkever was aware of this: “Plusieurs questions hantent alors les poètes : la *légitimité*, la *possibilité* et le *sens* de la création littéraire à l’intérieur du royaume de la mort, où le poète, sa langue et son peuple sont en train d’être annéantis. A ces questions une seule réponse pour Sutzkever: l’œuvre.”²⁰⁴ Sutzkever replies to questions regarding the legitimacy, possibility and meaning of his poetry by the *poetry itself*. He finds in his writings a *modus essendi* that speaks of the horror, without inserting it in an apol-

²⁰⁰ Rachel Ertel, “Écrire pour briser la vitre du temps Avrom Sutzkever”, in Avrom Sutzkever, *Heures rapiécées : Poèmes en vers et en prose*, trad. & intro, Rachel Ertel (Paris: Editions de l’éclat, 2021), xii-xxxix (p. xx-xxi).

²⁰¹ Avrom Sutzkever, *Groen aquarium & dagboek van de Messias*, transl. from Yiddish to Dutch Willy Brill & Mira Rafalowitsj (Amsterdam: Vassallucci, 1998), p. 156.

²⁰² Rachel Ertel, “Le poète yiddish Avrom Sutzkever: l’homme phénix”, *Po&sie* 2020/1 n°171, p. 191-205 (p. 191).

²⁰³ Theodor. W. Adorno, *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 31.

²⁰⁴ Ertel, “Le poète yiddish Avrom Sutzkever”, p. 192.

pp.

Replace all “X” with ‘X’

linic harmony that would erase the past into a necessary step of the course of the history. Instead, he views his poetry in line with Benjamin's *Eingedenken*. Sutzkever thinks of the link between the horribly shattered past and the incessant present as a *symbiosis* that takes place *in the word*. The word, for Sutzkever, holds power and has an *agency* in itself; the word is, thus, understood in the biblical sense, as holding a *creating power*. Sutzkever wrote in his *Togbukh-notitsn* ("notes from my diary"): "Death 's kingdom has already become a legend. The dead live there on the other side of life. I send them poetic signals, as to beings on another planet. I seek words that we have in common, so that we can understand and love each other."²⁰⁵ Sutzkever finds in his poetry words to communicate with the dead. Heather Valencia comments: "In this remarkable statement it is no longer a question of merely memorializing the dead; [...] Rather than returning to the world of the dead, the poet calls them into the present, through the power of his poetic word."²⁰⁶ The poetic word, for Sutzkever, resembles the divine word, in holding a power to bring things alive – poetry is an *act*, the *act of nomination*. Ertel adds: "Avrom Sutzkever ne visait à rien moins qu'à s'emparer de cet attribut divin – l'acte de nomination – pour, à défaut de rendre la vie aux ossements de la Vallée des morts, du moins les revêtir de la chair de ses mots."²⁰⁷ Sutzkever finds in the poetic word a power that counters death and protects as an amulet against the fading over time. Not only has poetry saved himself, Sutzkever views poetry as an ethical task that saves his loved ones – Yiddish poetry to save the Jewish people almost annihilated during the Shoah. Poetry is a *redemptive act*:

*To conquer domains of time with the word,
anointing your spotless pure syllables with them;
to bind all your muscles in tefillin of music,
and clothe your earthly skin in silence,
to split open a rhyme like a pomegranate, drink it,
and let all your limbs melt away into poems
until all your poems become limbs once again –
It was for this, lad, that you were created.*²⁰⁸

Replace all "X" with 'X'

²⁰⁵ Avrom Sutzkever, *Togbukh-notitsn*, *Di goldene keyt* 42, 1962, 164 – 167 (p. 166). Cited from Avrom Sutzkever, *Still My Word Sings: Poems*, ed. & transl. Heather Valencia (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), p. 277.

²⁰⁶ Heather Valencia, "Avrom Sutzkever's Life and Work", in Avrom Sutzkever, *Still My Word Sings: Poems*, ed. & transl. Heather Valencia (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), p. 277-78.

²⁰⁷ Ertel, "Ecrire pour briser la vitre du temps", p. xxxii.

²⁰⁸ Avrom Sutzkever, *My Life and My Poetry* (Montreal 1959), in Avrom Sutzkever, *Still My Word Sings: Poems*, ed. & transl. Heather Valencia (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 19-56 (p. 37)

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Poetry, and especially Yiddish poetry for the Jewish people, has this power, because the instantaneous moment that poetry incessantly captures, holds eternity. This is best expressed in Sutzkever's poem *To the Thin Vein in My Head*:

*I love the unadulterated taste of a word, that won't betray itself,
Not some sweet-and-sour hybrid with strange taste.
Whether I rise on the rungs of my ribs, or fall –
That word is mine. In the black pupil of death – a little flame.*

*No matter how great my generation might be – still greater yet is
its smallness.
Still eternal is the word in all of its ugliness and splendor.*²⁰⁹

In *To the Thin Vein on My Head*, Sutzkever contrasts, much like Rosenzweig, the smallness of the Jewish people (for Sutzkever, who wrote this poem in 1945, probably most visible in the cruelties he had to witness in the ghetto) with the eternity that inhabits Judaism. This eternity lies, for Sutzkever, in the word – more precisely, in the Yiddish word. Yiddish, instead of the holy and absent Hebrew for Rosenzweig, is the common language for the Jews in Diaspora. Instead of being marked by a triple absence, Sutzkever views the Jewish people as united through Yiddish, and dedicates a poem to the power of the Yiddish word and its triumph for the Jewish people: “the Yiddish Word gazes down into abysses and foundations. The globe below is not bigger than a diamond ring.”²¹⁰ The Yiddish word connects the people once again, to this extent that the world seems only a small diamond ring. Sutzkever finds in the Yiddish poetic word a *redemptive power*, “the word redeems the word from its captivity.”²¹¹ Moreover, poetry transforms through the act of composition, the horror into another reality –for instance, in *Vilna Ghetto*, the coffins that were omnipresent in the ghetto, symbol of death, gain a new poetic significance by portraying them as a boat, and thus transform the gruesome past into a new reality.²¹² On the other hand, Sutzkever believes in the eternity of the

²⁰⁹ Avrom Sutzkever, ‘To the Thin Vein in My Head’, in Avrom Sutzkever, *The Full Pomegranate*, transl. Justin Cammy (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2019), p. 74.

²¹⁰ Sutzkever, [A special announcement...], *The Full Pomegranate*, p. 246.

²¹¹ Sutzkever, Excerpt from *Twin Brother*, 1981, *The Full Pomegranate*, p. 180.

²¹² Valencia, Avrom Sutzkever's *Life and Work*, p. 268.

One should also note the recurring theme of the pain of the poet in Sutzkever's oeuvre: pain appears as an indissoluble part of composing poetry, it forms its origin. A poem that illustrates this with excellence: *Two Bullets* (“A bullet

word and finds in this eternity the ultimate protest and resistance against the Nazist annihilation. He illustrates this best in his poem *The Lead Plates of Romm's Printing House*, a poem that tells of a courageous act in which Sutzkever partook, that consisted of melting down the lead types from the printing house, in order to make bullets from them. In the power of these letters, now literal bullets, he finds the powerful eternity: "The lead plates with their letters embody the spirit and history of the Jewish people, and as the plates are melted into bullets, that inspiration becomes the weapon of resistance, protecting the Jewish people against the enemy. In this imagery we see the concretization of the idea of the word as protection and resistance."²¹³ Because the word is eternal, the poetic word holds the antidote against the annihilation of the Jews: they live on, eternally, through his poems. Instead of the transcendental *toledot*, we find the *goldene keyt*²¹⁴ in Sutzkever's poetry that figures as "an inn in the wild forest"²¹⁵

*From right-angled book covers, two by two and arm in arm, single-handed, single-hearted, I've built a little room
of unknown words. Dimly lit and speckled,
it's well-protected from the poisoner with a thousand eyes.*

*An inn in the wild forest... hidden even from itself, hidden from the
brass band of the slaughterhouses. One by one my dearest people,
lost in eternity,
lost in their memories, approach my inn.*²¹⁶

sticks in me – loaded with poems. And when I am sick like an indoor plant at night – it burns out the poison in my limbs. And I love my bullet. Its hot crucible melts the world. From its metal I mold, crate my truth, the way a child in a crib forms his planet from pure nothing" (Sutzkever, "Two Bullets", *The Full Pomegranate*, p. 58)

²¹³ Idem, p. 270.

²¹⁴ "Di goldene keyt ('The Golden Chain') was the title of a 1907 modernist drama in which 'the father' of Yiddish literature I. L. Peretz (1859–1915) depicted the decline of a multi-generational Hasidic dynasty. Avrom Sutzkever, the poet, partisan and survivor of the Vilna ghetto, used *Di goldene keyt* as the name for the Yiddish literary journal which he edited in 146 volumes between 1949–95 in Tel Aviv. In this way the poet highlighted the transmission of Peretz's vision for a modern Yiddish culture to the newly founded Jewish State."

Jan Schwarz, "Transnational Ashkenaz: Yiddish culture after the Holocaust", *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 27 (2016), pp. 189–202 (p. 189).

²¹⁵ Sutzkever, "Writings from 1974-1984 (1975)", *Still My Word Sings*, p. 169.

²¹⁶ Sutzkever, "Writings from 1974-1984 (1975)", *Still My Word Sings*, p. 169.

Blue = Italics!

Replace all "X" by 'X'

Replace pink by /Ibidem/.

The (Yiddish) poetic words function as a safe harbour, far from the horrendous course of the history that would poison the deceased in absorbing them into the nothingness, far from the slaughterhouses of the Shoah. The poems form the *Eingedenken*, they, in fact, form the redemptive turning of *teshuva*: a turning towards the past without absolving it into a necessary process.

Accordingly, Sutzkever embodies both perspectives at the same time. In his poetry, like the transcendental *toledot*, he finds the way to bridge future and past and finds in this an *eternity*. Like the historical perspective, on the other hand, the poetic word takes place *within history* and forms an *active resistance*, almost as a reply to Fackenheim's 614th commandment. It should be noted that Sutzkever, like Fackenheim, also found in Zionism an answer to the devastation of the Shoah.

4.3. Sutzkever and Silence

Both the transhistorical and the historical perspective, as we tried to show in the foregoing chapters, oppose Vilna Gaon's understanding of *teshuva* as *silence*. Both perspectives call for a transhistorical/historical answer that sufficiently replies to the horrendous past and that does not silence victims and events into the same annihilated nothingness of the Shoah. Sutzkever, however, not only forms a way in between both perspectives, but, against all odds, votes in favour of Vilna Gaon's vision.

While Sutzkever finds in the poetic word a *redemptive resistance*, it seems that this word is not his final goal. Rather, it is "the silence beyond the realm of words [that figures] as the ultimate goal of human perception".²¹⁷ The poetic word, in fact, has to guide towards this silence, that forms the expression of the ultimate reality. Heather Valencia discerns three terms that designate this outer-worldly silence: "The three related concepts of שטומקייט (*shtumkayt*, muteness), שטילקייט (*shtilkayt*, stillness or silence), and שווייגן (*shvaygn*, silence) are seminal terms in Sutzkever's permanent metapoetic vocabulary from the postwar period on. [...] In the final analysis this language of silence beyond human words, which expresses the ultimate reality, is the true and constant goal of his poetic quest."²¹⁸ Sutzkever's poetic terms muteness, stillness and to be silent all aim towards the metapoetic, almost mystical, goal of reaching an ultimate silence. This seems paradoxical: how can the *word* be the vehicle of *silence*? Sutzkever, through the images he creates (the creative power of the word!) not only transforms past into a poetic present, but hopes to evoke or suggest a special language of silence as a place where one can

²¹⁷ Valencia, "Avrom Sutzkever's Life and Work", p. 286.

²¹⁸ Valencia, "Avrom Sutzkever's Life and Work", p. 287.

communicate with the dead and where one is safe from invasions of history, forgetfulness and pain. His poem *The Third Silence* forms one of his most detailed reflections on this theme:

*Two pans hang before me on these scales:
on one the silence of the sea. And on the other
the desert's silence. Someone must weigh them.
Their ancient weeping is my true companion.*

*The pointers wavers to and fro. It's not yet clear
which silence is the heavier.
Don't flee, my heart. Just wait a little while.
A third silence exists. O, listen carefully:*

*It gave birth to life. It is immortal.
There is no grain of sand without its seed.
The fragment hunters kiss its fragments,
and though men call it death, it has a different name.*

*At night, the scale pans gleam with silvery light,
glowing blue with sea and desert silence,
the pointer falls asleep, without a voice or sound –
and that third silence speaks out from its slumber.²¹⁹*

In purple: strange 'st' form

The word silence/being silent (שטילקייט, *shtilkayt*) is repeated six times in this poem, and used for three types of silence: the silence of the sea (*shtilkayt yam*), the silence of the desert (*midbar shtilkayt*) and then, at the center, a “third silence” (*drite shtilkayt*). The primordial silence evoked by the mighty desert and sea, lead to the ungraspable third silence that is at the origin and end of everything. The true *eternity* of the poetic word lies in this third silence: “it is immortal”. It is in this silence that Sutzkever finds the language to communicate with the dead, in this silent eternity that is incessantly evoked by his poetry he reincarnates his lost ones and transforms the cruelties without absolving them. He finds in this silence a redemptive power, a liberation: “human language is imprisoned in strong

Replace “The Third Silence” by “The Third Silence”

²¹⁹ Avrom Sutzkever, “The Third Silence”, *Still My Word Sings*, p. 157. The translation of this poem is not entirely accurate, and omits at the end the repetition of “third”. For a more correct translation, see Rachel Ertel’s beautiful rendering in Avrom Sutzkever, “troisième silence”, *Heures rapiécées*, p. 283.

Blue = Italics!

cages. It's time to listen carefully, and, spying through a crevice, to see mute stillness learning the alphabet of silence."²²⁰

What is striking is that Sutzkever, also outside of his poetry, accorded silence an important role, and explicitly views silence as an answer to the Shoah. Sutzkever, upon his arrival in Moscow (1944) and his inclusion in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, dared to speak of the cruelties in Vilnius. Through his courageous stories, Sutzkever became an important figure within the Soviet Jewry and was selected to gather evidence for the *Blad Book*, "a testimonial history of the destruction of European Jewry that was later censored by the Soviet regime".²²¹ In this context, it is not unexpected that Sutzkever was appointed as a witness at the Nuremberg Trials (27 February 1946) – a task he accomplished with great responsibility. He writes about this: "That great responsibility filled all the cells of my consciousness. For the two nights before my appearance, I was unable to close my eyes at all. I kept seeing before me my mother running naked over a snow-covered field, – and the warm blood from her pierced heart began to trickle across my room and surrounded me like a ring."²²² The mixture of grief and vengeance made it tough for him to speak out, but in the end, after his testimony he feels "the mighty feeling [...] that our people lives, that it has survived its executioners – and that no dark force is able to annihilate us".²²³ It is precisely in this Nuremberg trial, that was of major importance to Sutzkever, that we find another expression of silence. During the trial, when asked if he had been an eyewitness to the persecution of the Jews in Vilnius, Sutzkever replies affirmatively and then, strangely does not speak anymore, while the tribune waits for his further explanation. Christian Delage comments:

Sutzkever did not speak. He seemed to draw back from this day of reckoning for which he had waited and prepared for so long. The silence that he maintained lasted exactly eleven seconds. The routine of the trial was thereby suddenly interrupted. No further translation came to those who had earphones, reinforcing their visual attention on what was taking place. These eleven seconds

²²⁰ Avrom Sutzkever, Exerpts from 1974-1984 (1974), *Still My Word Sings*, p. 167.

²²¹ Cammy, Introduction, p. xxxv.

²²² Avrom Sutzkever, Mayn eydes-zogn farn Nimberger tribunal, in Idem, *Baym leyenen penimer : dertseylungen, dermonungen, eseyen* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 150-166 (p. 162), cited from Valencia, Avrom Sutzkever's Life and Work, p. 249.

²²³ Idem.

add pp.

Replace with:
Black Book

replace with:
which

Should be:
These

Replace all "X" by 'X'

Replace with: /Ibidem/.

*of empty silence are not mentioned in the official trial transcript of this hearing. They have no existence except in the audiovisual recording of the trial.*²²⁴

While it is not clear what Sutzkever had in mind with this silence, or whether the eleven seconds are symbolic, it is sure that this silence, like his poetry, formed an *act of resistance*. In this account it becomes clear how silence should not yield a passive *laissez-faire* but can form a powerful resistance to the annihilating forces of the Nazist regime. Perhaps it was right in this silence that Sutzkever felt “the mighty feeling” of victory.

Conclusion

In this chapter, two Jewish, philosophical perspectives on the history after the Shoah were presented, using the concept of teshuva. The starting point formed the *aporia of messianism*: can one await the Coming, or is there, necessitated by the horror of the Shoah, a call for an “active messianism” *within* history? This aporia was elaborated under the prism of Vilna Gaon’s understanding of teshuva as silence. Where the Gaon understood silence as the preparation for the *olam ha-ba* (the world to come), it seems that this silence is untenable after the Shoah. Both perspectives, in fact, call for a loud reply to counter the annihilation of the Shoah. The transhistorical perspective, on the one hand, views teshuva as one of these replies, perceiving it as a form of messianic anticipation. The historical perspective, on the other hand, links teshuva directly with the 614th commandment that has to take place *wit-hin* history. In the last chapter, we presented the Vilnian, Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever and how, through his poetry, he presents an answer in the middle between historical and transhistorical perspective. This last chapter *returns* to the first, as it offers silence a place in the post-Holocaust world: silence itself forms an active resistance to the annihilation of the Shoah.

These answers show the diversity and resilience of post-Holocaust Judaism. Each in their own way, they show how the Jewish people, an “accidental remnant”, reaffirms itself and survived, despite everything. In this regard, I would like to close this paper with a poem of Sutzkever:

*Who will remain, what will remain? A breath of wind will stay,
and the blindness of the blind man, even though he goes away.
A fleck of foam will stay as a reminder of the sea,
and a wisp of cloud, caught in the branches of a tree.*

²²⁴ Christian Delage, ‘Bringing History into the Present Through Film: An Historian in the Archives of Nuremberg’, *Cinéaste* 37/1 (Winter 2011), pp. 34-39 (p. 39).

*Who will remain, what will remain? A syllable remains,
to bring forth grasses in a new Creation once again.
A fiddle rose will still remain, alone and in command,
her nature only seven of those grasses understand.*

*Of all the stars spread out between the farthest north and here,
there will remain only the star that falls into a tear:
A drop of wine will always remain within its cup.
Who will remain? God will remain. Is that not enough?*²²⁵

In this poem, Sutzkever asks the question of what will last, and it might remind us of Fackenheim's characterization of the Jewish people as an "accidental remnant". Besides, in the eternity that seems described at the very beginning of the poem, a transcendent eternity seems described, an eternity outside of the history, with signs as memories, parallel to the trans-historical understanding of history as *toledot*, where the chain of proper names constitutes an eternal memory,²²⁶ outside of the victorious history. In the center of the poem, we clearly uncover Sutzkever's answer: in the power of the syllable, closely related to the creation, lies the hope and a resistant power. The poem ends with: "Who will remain? God will remain." Whereas Sutzkever, during his time in the Vilna ghetto, perceived God as absent ("I long to say a prayer – to whom, I do not know. He who used to comfort me will not hear it now, and so I do not know – it fills my heart with woe."²²⁷), now a *teshuva*, a mutual turning, seems to have taken place. God is present again and safeguards His remnant. The response to the Shoah, in sum, is a hopeful one, in both perspectives. In conclusion, to Sutzkever's question, Judaism can proudly answer: we will remain, despite everything.

Replace all "X" by 'X'

²²⁵ Sutzkever, "Who Will Remain?", *Still My Word Sings*, p. 167.

²²⁶ Cf. Sutzkever's poem "I know that nothing remains", where he seems to reply to "Who will remain, what will remain?". In "I know that nothing remains", he writes: "I know that nothing remains of my sister except her name and that I am the one and only who remembers her name." The importance of the proper name is underlined here. Sutzkever "I know that nothing remains", *The Full Pomegranate*, p. 252.

²²⁷ Sutzkever, "I Long to Say a Prayer", *Still My Word Sings*, p. 95.