What makes Jewish thought Jewish? This book proceeds from a view of the Hebrew language as the holy tongue; such a view of Hebrew is, indeed, a distinctively Jewish view as determined by the Jewish religious tradition. Because language shapes thought and Hebrew is the foundational language of Jewish texts, this book explores the idea that Jewish thought is distinguished by concepts and categories rooted in Hebrew.

Drawing on more than 300 Hebrew roots, the author shows that Jewish thought employs Hebrew concepts and categories that are altogether distinct from those that characterize the Western speculative tradition. Among the key categories that shape Jewish thought are holiness, divinity, humanity, prayer, responsibility, exile, dwelling, gratitude, and language itself.

While the Hebrew language is central to the investigation, the reader need not have a knowledge of Hebrew in order to follow it. Essential reading for students and scholars of Judaism, this book will also be of value to anyone interested in the categories of thinking that form humanity’s ultimate concerns.

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Studies, which are interpreted to cover the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, culture, politics, philosophy, theology, religion, as they relate to Jewish affairs. The remit includes texts which have as their primary focus issues, ideas, personalities and events of relevance to Jews, Jewish life and the concepts which have characterized Jewish culture both in the past and today. The series is interested in receiving appropriate scripts or proposals.
HEBREW LANGUAGE AND JEWISH THOUGHT

David Patterson
For my teacher Rabbi Levi Y. Klein,
with deepest gratitude
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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago my four-year-old daughter asked me, “What does Adonai mean in Hebrew?” As my wife and I had been trying to teach her some Hebrew, I explained, “Well, honey, it’s one of the Hebrew words we use to refer to G-d.” She answered, “But I thought every Hebrew word referred to G-d.” And so my little one taught me something about Hebrew and theleshon hakodesh, the “holy tongue.”

Although anyone who reads this book should learn some Hebrew, its aim is not to teach Hebrew. Further, one must bear in mind a distinction between the holy tongue—the language of the Bible, Mishnah, and prayer—and modern, spoken Hebrew, which is the vernacular of the state of Israel. While the holy tongue has much to do with modern Hebrew, it is not the same as modern Hebrew. Yes, the holy tongue is Hebrew, but Hebrew, as it is used in the streets of Tel-Aviv, is not the holy tongue. When the term Hebrew is used in the pages that follow, then, it is generally used to refer to the holy tongue.

Titled Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought, this book explores, among other things, the question of what makes Jewish thought Jewish. The fact that a Jew happens to have a thought does not make it a Jewish thought. There is also the matter of Jewish philosophy: is it the same as Jewish thought? If not, how does it differ?

Here Emil Fackenheim makes a helpful distinction, pointing out that in Israel the term Machshevet Yisrael “encompasses all ‘Jewish thought,’ from ancient Midrash to modern Zionist thought, including also Jewish philosophy. Philosophia Yehudit is the narrower category of the kind of thought that involves a disciplined, systematic encounter between Jewish heritage and relevant philosophy” (Fackenheim 1996: 186). Because “relevant philosophy” includes a speculative tradition inspired by the Greeks, we run a certain risk when attempting to tie it to Jewish thought. For it was said of the talmudic sage who became an apostate, Elisha ben Avuya, that he would secretly study Greek philosophy even before he abandoned Torah (see Chaggigah 14b, 15b). And it is written that when a man asked Rabbi Yehoshua when he might teach his son the wisdom of the Greeks, the Rabbi answered, “It may be taught at a time which is not part of the day, nor part of the night” (Midrash Tehilim 1.1.17; also Menachot 99b). Which is to say: we
must heed the Talmud’s warning to protect our children from a philosophy based solely on the speculations of reason (see Berakhot 28b; also Bava Kama 82b).

Even with its critique of the Western speculative tradition in contrast to Jewish tradition, this volume is perhaps more along the lines of Philosophia Yehudit than Machshevet Tisrael. It is close to Machshevet Tisrael, inasmuch as it draws on Jewish texts and teachings from throughout the tradition. And yet it aspires to transcend both categories, inasmuch as it is concerned not so much with how thought shapes concepts as with how Hebrew shapes thought. The Hebrew language, it is maintained, is the key to what makes Jewish thought Jewish. Perhaps the best term for what we are doing in this work is Machshavah Yehudit, particularly since the word for “thought,” נפש (machshavah), may also mean “troubled mind,” something that most Jewish thinkers have in common. And the root of יהudit (Yehudit), the word for “Jewish,” is יהוד (hodah), which means to “offer thanks.” It would seem, then, that one definitive feature of Jewish thought is that it is a thinking at once troubled and steeped in gratitude—troubled because of how much is at stake in our thinking, grateful precisely because so much is at stake.

There have been many thinkers throughout history who happened to be Jewish, but not all of them have generated what I refer to as Jewish thought. I do not regard the philosophy of Spinoza, who identified G-d with nature, as an instance of Jewish thought. Nor do I see the communist thinking of Karl Marx as Jewish. What characterizes Jewish thought, as I define the term, is an understanding and/or questioning of G-d, world, and humanity that is couched in the holy tongue and in the texts of the sacred tradition, which include Torah, Talmud, Bible, Midrash, Kabbalah, and the commentaries and teachings of the sages. This does not mean that one must master spoken Hebrew in order to think Jewishly; nor does it mean that one must be a strictly Orthodox adherent of Torah and Talmud. But it does mean that if thinking is to be regarded as distinctively Jewish, it must stand in some kind of informed relation to the Hebrew language and the sacred tradition.

Briefly stated, then, Jewish thinking is shaped by the teachings of Judaism. And it is the Hebrew word—the language of Torah—that defines Judaism, as Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira (1889–1943), the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, has said: not only are the ideas contained in the words of Torah meaningful but also of profound importance are the vessels, the words and letters, that convey those ideas (see Shapira 2000: 46). To be sure, it is written in the Sifre on Deuteronomy that when a father begins to speak with his son in the holy tongue, he begins to teach his son Torah (Sifre Ekev 46). Which is to say: the holy tongue is itself part of what is revealed in Torah, and not just a medium of Torah. In the words of the Zohar, the holy tongue is a manifestation of the Ruach HaKodesh, or the “Holy Spirit,” as it “issues forth and arouses the secrets of Torah” (Zohar III, 61a).

This investigation of the relation between Hebrew language and Jewish thought, therefore, is grounded in Judaism and Torah, as revealed through the holy tongue. I take this approach while fully accepting its limitations and fully acknowledging the varieties of Jewish thought that range from mysticism to rationalism.
Jewish thought is not “one thing,” but it is one thing that, with the help of the Hebrew language, may open up a deeper understanding of the human soul. “According to Torah and Judaism,” Matityahu Glazerson states it, “the written word is not merely a vehicle for making known the speaker’s intent. Nor is the alef-bet a set of symbols or conventions. Rather, the words and letters shape the soul” (Glazerson 1997: 63–66). To sound the depths of the holy tongue is to penetrate the depths of the human soul as it comes from the hand of G-d, through the holy tongue. Rooted in the holiness of the holy tongue, Jewish thought is above all a philosophy of life that addresses the holiness of life.

Drawing heavily on Jewish texts both from the sacred and from the philosophical tradition, this volume is what might be called a “Jewish book.” It is written from a Jewish perspective that might be deemed “religious,” but it is not written for Jews alone, nor even for those who think of themselves as religious. Rather, it speaks to anyone who has an interest in the question of what imparts value and meaning to the life of a human being. Nor is it necessary to know Hebrew in order to follow the line of thinking presented here, since a phonetic spelling of each Hebrew word is given when the word is introduced. Hence, in keeping with the universalism of Judaism, which affirms the absolute sanctity of every human being as a being created in the image of the Holy One, this book is intended for all. Its purpose is to bring to light the abundance of meaning that abides in the language of Torah and to pursue the ramifications of that meaning for how we understand our lives. As generated from Jewish thought, then, a Jewish philosophy of life is a general approach to life that affirms the infinite value of every human life. For the Torah that comes to the world through the Jews opens up to all humanity just such an exalted view of the human being.

It must also be pointed out that this book is not a linguistic or etymological study of Hebrew. Although a careful examination of Hebrew words and letters is central to the investigation, the aim is not simply to explore the letters and words of the Hebrew language. To be sure, a number of excellent works have already accomplished such a task. This book, however, differs from other books about Hebrew words and Hebrew letters, inasmuch as it is not concerned with etymology or with mystical meanings. While the book contains elements of such investigations, its primary aim is to look for ways in which the possibilities of meaning in Hebrew words may (1) inform our understanding of what distinguishes Jewish thought as Jewish and (2) enhance our thinking about some fundamental questions of human existence. Because language imparts form and substance to life, the question here is: How does the Hebrew language illuminate human life? And because Hebrew is the specifically Jewish language, we ask: How does the holy tongue lead us toward a Jewish philosophy of life?

In an effort to respond to these questions, I have ordered the chapters in the book according to some key concepts and key terms in Hebrew. After some opening remarks on the holy tongue in the first chapter, the book moves directly into the “First things,” as Chapter 2 is titled, that go into our existence. Chapter 3,
“Giving voice to G-d,” then, addresses the higher things by examining a few of the ways of referring to G-d in Hebrew. Since from G-d we have “the Good,” that idea is the topic of Chapter 4; and since the Good arises in an act that transpires between two, Chapter 5 explores what it means to live “for the sake of another.” That living is what goes into the life of the soul, so that Hebrew thinking about “the soul” is examined in Chapter 6. Because the life of the soul opens up the issue of being at home in the world, and not merely surviving, Chapters 7 and 8 explore what the Hebrew language reveals about “exile” and “dwelling” in the world. Chapter 9 proceeds from there to the house that is our most fundamental dwelling place, “the house of the book.” And since the word in which and through which we dwell is the fundamental element of the book, Chapter 10 is an exploration of “the word.” Through the word of the holy tongue, then, we finally arrive at the topic of Chapter 11: “The holy.”

In the process of exploring these questions, it will be shown that the thinking couched in the holy tongue is quite different from the predominant thinking in the Western world, both ancient and modern. From Aristotle to Aquinas, from Descartes to Kant, from Hegel to Heidegger—despite all their differences—Western thought has its origins in a rationalistic speculative tradition, a tradition that has largely—and, from a Jewish perspective, erroneously—shaped our view of G-d, world, and humanity. Indeed, Western thought has basically collapsed G-d, world, and humanity into thought itself. Because the Jewish thought couched in the holy tongue maintains a radical distinction between G-d, world, and humanity, a reading of this book might require stepping out of a mold of thought to which we have grown dangerously accustomed. Indeed, the term holy tongue already goes against the grain of such thinking, since the category of holiness invokes something that sanctifies all there is and thus exceeds all there is. To use a phrase from one of the great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Emmanuel Lévinas, the holy is “otherwise than being.” Grounded in the holy tongue, Jewish thought opens up the “otherwise.”

While the ordering of the chapters and the topics covered in this book is not random, it has come to be what it is according what the Hebrew language reveals, within the limits and shortcomings of my understanding of that revelation. Let me also acknowledge the danger of reading into the holy tongue and not listening to it, but this is a risk that must be taken if one is to pursue a deeper understanding of anything. In any case, my failure to have properly grasped what the holy tongue teaches is my responsibility alone. And I welcome correction. For my aim in writing this book is as much to understand as to be understood. Therefore I offer my thanks beforehand to the reader who would oppose me for the sake of Torah and Truth.

Finally, a note on citations: I have generally used the Harvard reference system for citations. In the case of the holy texts of the Jewish tradition, such as the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah, and writings of major sages, I have used a standard system of noting chapter, verse, page numbers, and so on. I have also
used the universal notation for certain philosophical works, such as the dialogues of Plato, the *Meditations* of Descartes, and the critiques of Kant, when referring to those texts.

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OPENING REMARKS ON THE HOLY TONGUE

The Torah portion Vayakhel (Exodus 35–38) relates how the Israelites built the Mishkan (the Holy Tabernacle) as a dwelling place for the Shekhinah (G-d’s Indwelling Presence); creating such a dwelling place for the Holy Presence was essential for the Israelites to find their way through the wilderness. One of the artisans chosen to oversee the work was Betsalel. In fact, it was he who made the ark that was to be the vessel of the Holy Word. According to the Talmud, Betsalel was chosen for this most sacred of tasks because he knew the secret combinations and meanings of the Hebrew words and letters that G-d uses at every instant to do the work of creation (Berakhot 55a).\(^1\) Which means: Betsalel had the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to sound the depths of the holy word contained within the Ark of the Covenant. For out of that word heaven and earth—the sum and significance of life—came into existence. If “Hebrew words describe not only an object but its very essence,” as the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loeve (1513–1609), has said (Loeve 1997: 288), it is because an object is in some sense made of its Hebrew word. Betsalel’s wisdom lay in understanding that connection between word and reality.

As we participate in the work of creation, we engage in the work of Betsalel, transforming the world itself into a Mishkan where the holy may find a dwelling place in a realm that is otherwise a wilderness. Indeed, the Mishnah identifies the thirty-nine categories of labor that are forbidden on the Sabbath according to the categories of labor that went into the construction of the Mishkan (see Shabbat 7:2). The purpose of our labor, therefore, is to make the world into a place where the Shekhinah may dwell, transforming all of creation into a Mishkan, so that life may take on meaning. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, then, פיקוד העם (melakhah) or “labor,” is the effort to create a dwelling place for holiness in the world, without which there is no meaning in the world. The key to such labor is the insight into the word that guided the labor of Betsalel: the key to meaning in life is meaning in the word. When meaning is torn from words, life is drained of its substance and the world is transformed into a wasteland. That is when the world as Mishkan is in need of mending, even as the Holy of Holies in the Temple (which was also called a Mishkan) on occasion required repairs.
The Talmud relates that whenever the Holy of Holies required mending, a craftsman would be lowered into the sacred enclosure in a חֵיצָה (tevah) or a “box” (Midot 37a). There were openings in the box just large enough for the craftsman to see what had to be repaired and to do his work, so that he would not be tempted to feast his eyes upon the glory of the Shekhinah. Now the word חֵיצָה signifies not only a vessel; it also means “word.” Entering the vessel of the word—entering the חֵיצָה—we may descend into the world to undertake the task of restoring the world as a holy place. This mending, moreover, is a mending of our own souls, as Adin Steinsaltz helps us to realize: “Beyond our creations, words are also our creators . . . . ‘The soul is full of words,’ . . . so much so that people believe that each person gets an allocation of words for a lifetime, and once it is used up, life ends” (Steinsaltz 1999: 18). If we come into being through an utterance of the Holy One, our being is also sustained—or threatened—by our own utterances. An investigation into the meanings of Hebrew words will not exhaust the words we are allotted, but it may open up an insight into the soul that is full of words and, through that insight, reveal the depth of meaning entrusted to our care.

Pursuing the ramifications of the meanings of Hebrew words, we take up the task of exploring the wisdom we receive through the Hebrew language. Thus sounding the depths of the holy tongue, we may sound the depths of Jewish thought. In principle, of course, any language might serve as the basis for exploring thought, inasmuch as every language contains its own consciousness and ordering of reality. Still, it may not be clear as to why the Hebrew language in particular is crucial to an exploration of Jewish thought. Why, then, Hebrew? What makes it holy? And how is it related to Jewish thought?

The holiness of Hebrew

Hebrew is the focus of this investigation precisely because it is the לְשׁוֹן הָקַדְשׁ (leshon hakodesh), the “holy tongue.” And it is the holy tongue for several reasons. In his Esh Kodesh, the journal of Torah commentary that he kept in the Warsaw Ghetto, for instance, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalnsh Shapira compares the holiness of Hebrew to the holiness of the Sabbath. Just as the Sabbath imparts meaning and sanctity to the other days of the week, he maintains, so does the Hebrew language impart meaning and sanctity to the other languages of humanity (see Shapira 2000: 46–47). Significantly, Rabbi Shapira makes this observation in the midst of the Nazi assault on language: the assault on the word is among their major means of assaulting the Holy One. As Sara Nomberg-Przytyk recalls in her Holocaust memoir, “the new set of meanings” that the Nazis imposed on the word, beginning with the word Jew, “provided the best evidence of the devastation that Auschwitz created” (Nomberg-Przytyk 1985: 72).

Rabbi Shapira’s insight from the time of the Shoah has its roots in a teaching from the talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan, who maintains that when G-d created
the heavens and the earth, His first utterance broke into seventy sparks. From those seventy sparks emerged the seventy languages of the world (Shabbat 88b). The Midrash on Psalms contains a variation on this theme: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave forth the divine word, the voice divided itself into seven voices, and from the seven voices passed into the seventy languages of the seventy nations” (Midrash Tehilim 2.68.6). But if the seventy languages of the seventy nations arise from a Divine utterance, what language does G-d speak when He makes that utterance? It is Hebrew, as the talmudic commentary on Betsalel suggests. “For all seventy languages flow forth from the holy tongue,” says Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905), the great Chasidic sage of the nineteenth century. “It is the Torah that gives life to all those languages” (Alter 1988: 62). Because “it is the Torah that gives life to all those languages,” they all harbor a trace of the Divine Utterance; that spark of the Divine is what instills language with meaning. Hence, according to the Midrash, when Moses reviewed and taught the teachings of Torah just before the Israelites entered the Holy Land, he taught them not only in the holy tongue but also in all the seventy languages of the world (Tanchuma Devarim 2). And that is why, according to the tradition, there are seventy legitimate ways of interpreting the written Torah (see, for example, the Or HaChayim on Deuteronomy 23:23; see also Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15).

Thus Hebrew is not among the seventy languages of the seventy nations; rather, as the vehicle of the divine voice, it precedes those languages. Indeed, according to an ancient mystical text, the Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Creation), the thirty-two references to G-d in the first chapter of Genesis correspond to the ten sefirot and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Sefer Yetzirah 1:1). Michael Munk points out an additional teaching:

That the twenty-two letters of the Aleph-Bais [alphabet] were used to create the world is alluded to by the gematria [numerical value] of the first three words of the Torah, הבואת שלמה אוכלס [bereshit bara Elokim, “in the beginning G-d created”] (1202), which is the same as the gematria of המלכים אוחיות קרא [bekh”v otiot bara], “with 22 letters He created” the world. (Munk 1983: 222)

Thus tradition has it that Hebrew is older than creation itself, since it is the very stuff of creation. This is one reason why here we attempt to sound the depths of the Hebrew word and regard it as the holy tongue: Hebrew is the wellspring of creation, and the idea of creation is central to Jewish thought.

Mystically understood, then, Hebrew is not in the world; rather, the world—all of heaven and earth—consists of the letters that form Hebrew words and the Hebrew language. As Benjamin Blech points out, the Jewish tradition maintains that “in the beginning G-d created the letters, and through the letters and their respective arrangements, G-d was able to create the universe” (Blech 1991: ix). Indeed, the Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760), founder of Chasidism,
teaches that “in each and every letter there are worlds and souls and divine powers that both interconnect and join together” (Keter Shem Tov 1). Thus, says the Baal Shem, in the letters of Torah abides the living Light of the Infinite One; that light is the substance of our lives and the subject of our learning (see Keter Shem Tov 96). How do we draw nigh unto that light? Through the holy tongue.

Expounding on this idea, Yitzchak Ginsburgh explains that each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet possesses three creative powers known as נב (koach) or “energy,” נצח (chiyut) or “life,” and נט (or) or “light,” corresponding to physical matter, organic matter, and soul respectively. The Hebrew letters, says Rabbi Ginsburgh, function as “the energy building-blocks of all reality; as the manifestation of the inner life-pulse permeating the universe as a whole and each of its individual creatures . . .; and as the channels which direct the influx of Divine revelation into created consciousness” (Ginsburgh 1991: 2–3). The creative power of the letters of the holy tongue arises not only in the beginning but also makes every hour a beginning—the beginning of material reality and spiritual meaning. “The Aleph-Bais,” says Rabbi Munk, “is a ladder and a link. It binds us to the spiritual origin of creation and life” (Munk 1983: 231). Arising prior to the world, the holy letters of the holy tongue connect us to the world from beyond the world.

According to Jewish tradition, moreover, the Hebrew alphabet is the source not only of the animation but also of the enlightenment of all life. “The soul,” Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) teaches, “is full of [Hebrew] letters that abound with the light of life, intellect and will, a spirit of vision, and complete existence” (Kook 1993: 93). And the thirteenth-century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240–c. 1291) asserts that “the letters are without any doubt the root of all wisdom and knowledge” (quoted in Idel 1988a: 101). Although they lived in quite different times and places, these sages maintain that not only Hebrew words but also the letters that form them constitute both the fabric of creation and the ground of its meaning. As far as I can determine, no other language that uses an alphabet contains such teachings and traditions surrounding the very letters of its alphabet. Perhaps that is because unlike other languages, which are a means of communication between human and human, Hebrew is one way in which G-d communicates with humanity. “It thus conceals within its structure,” Rabbi Daniel Lapin points out, “many of the secrets that a benevolent deity wanted us to know” (Lapin 2001: 56). Hebrew is not a language among languages. It is the eloquent silence that precedes and reverberates throughout all tongues; it is the language that imparts meaning to language.

Hebrew therefore is not only the wellspring of creation but is also the medium of Revelation. For the Midrash Tanchuma relates that when G-d spoke the Ten Utterances at Mount Sinai “in a single Voice,” the “Voice was divided into seven voices and from there into seventy languages” (Tanchuma Yitro 11). When G-d speaks at Mount Sinai, He speaks Torah; if He speaks Hebrew, then that too is Torah. Thus Hebrew is the language of Torah, of what the Midrash calls black
fire written upon white fire (Devarim Rabbah 3:12), in a double sense—both as medium and as message. If the seventy sparks that formed the seventy languages come from the black fire and the white fire of Torah, then each spark corresponds to one of the seventy facets of the Torah [the renowned sage of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Chayim ben Attar (1696–1743), comments on the seventy facets of the Torah in his remarks on Leviticus 26:3 in the Or HaChayim]. Understanding the Torah to be such a primal fire, the Zohar describes it as the blueprint—the soul and substance—of all creation: four times, says Rabbi Shimon, the Holy One looked into the Torah before beginning His work of creation (Zohar I, 5a; see also Bereshit Rabbah 1:1; Tanchuma Bereshit 1). The famous sixteenth-century mystic Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), in fact, reads the first word of Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית (bereshit) not as “in the beginning” but as “by means of the first thing,” where the “first thing” is Torah: creating by means of the first thing, G-d created by means of Torah (Cordovero 2002: 23).

Looking further at the first line of the Torah, we note that the word תַּהְדָּר (תַּהְדָּר) is untranslated: בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמָיִם אֶת הָאָרֶץ (bereshit bara Elokim et hashamaim v'et haaretz), “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). It is the word that precedes השמים (hashamaim), or “the heavens,” and הארץ (haaretz), or “the earth”—that is, the תַּהְדָּר precedes the created realms. Made of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, א (alef) and ת (tav), the תַּהְדָּר contains every letter and every word of Hebrew. What is left untranslated—the Hebrew alphabet couched in the תַּהְדָּר—is the vessel of all of creation. Just as a vessel is distinct from yet gives shape to what it contains, so is Hebrew distinct from yet gives shape to heaven and earth. Unlike the vessel, however, it also permeates and thus gives substance to heaven and earth. Like the holiness that sanctifies all of creation, Hebrew is both beyond and inherent to creation.

Further, according to the Zohar, the alef and tav of the תַּהְדָּר attach themselves to the first letter of the next word, which is ה (hey), a letter that signifies G-d (see Zohar I, 15b). When the sum of Hebrew utterance is thus attached to the Holy One, we have the word הַתָּדָר (hatadhar), or “you” (תַּהְדָּר, of course, is the masculine form of “you,” while תַּהְדָּר is the feminine form, a point discussed in Chapter 10). Thus in the beginning there is a profound saying of הַתָּדָר that is the basis of creation’s meaning: in the beginning G-d created You, the one without whom there is no creation because without the You there is neither meaning nor relation. Each time we say “you” in Hebrew, we gather together all the letters of the language to affirm a relation to G-d that lends meaning to every word that passes our lips; we affirm that our words have meaning inasmuch as they draw us into a deeper relation to the one we address as “you.” For in every address to the “you” we address the Eternal You (cf. Buber 1970: 123). That is what makes Hebrew the נִיצָר הַשָׂדֶה.

A legend from the mystical tradition illustrates further the significance of the letters of the Hebrew language and their capacity for transmitting those teachings which characterize Jewish thought. The tale relates that before heaven and earth came into being, in the time before time, the letters of the Hebrew

OPENING REMARKS ON THE HOLY TONGUE
alphabet had an argument over which of them would be the first letter in the Torah, the one to initiate G-d’s act of creation. Knowing that G-d would pronounce His creation to be good, the letter ט (tet) maintained that it should be first, since it begins the word טוב (tov), which means “good.” Then the letter ר (lamed) spoke up, arguing that without it there could be no Torah, since it is the first letter in the word תורה (Torah). Finally, after the other letters had stated their case, G-d decided on ב (beit), the first letter in the word ברוך (barukh), meaning “blessed.” For creation came into being in order to open up a realm of blessing. Closed on three sides, the ב is also the womb that harbors the seed from which creation is born; for the realm of blessing is, above all, a realm of birth. Thus born from the womb of the ב the Torah begins with the ב of בראשית (Bereshit): “In the beginning . . . .”

Because Torah assumes a Hebrew form, dressing itself in Hebrew clothing, its form and its substance are of a piece: the revelation that is Torah unfolds not only in Hebrew but also through Hebrew. Each is interwoven with the other, as the soul is interwoven with the body. Hence, according to the teaching of the great halakhic scholar of the sixteenth century, Moshe Isserles (c. 1525–1572), “in the Hebrew language itself there is holiness” (quoted in Schiﬀ 1996: 14). Hebrew derives its holiness not from the fact that it is the language of Scripture but from its status as the primal ground of the truth and meaning of creation—hence it becomes the language of Scripture. Which is to say: Hebrew is the holy tongue not because it is the language of Torah; rather, Hebrew is the language of Torah because it is the holy tongue. “To Hebrew,” says the twelfth-century sage Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141), “belongs the first place, both as regards the nature of the language, and as to fullness of meanings” (Kitav al khazari 2:66, italics added). This understanding of Hebrew is not so much an article of faith concerning a language as it is a distinctively Jewish way of thinking about language as such. It is a means of getting at the truth of language and the language of truth. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, and contrary to what is maintained by the likes of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), language is not the “house of being” (see, for example, Heidegger 1959: 166)—it is a breach of being, the avenue through which being is sanctified and thus made meaningful from beyond being.

And so we come to a question: what does the Hebrew word reveal about the truth and meaning of life? The question is a crucial one, especially in our time, because in our time—as perhaps in every human era—there is a hunger for meaning. Indeed, I do not think it is too much to say that we are living in the midst of a “meaning famine.” The dictum that terrified the thinkers of the last few centuries—namely that nothing is true and everything is permitted—is now glorified by intellectuals who run from one postmodern fad to another to barter the serious for the superﬂuous. For as the body needs bread, so does the soul need meaning in order to live. And our souls are starving. Our souls crave the sustenance that is also their substance, for in the words of Matityahu Glazerson, “the Torah and the soul are both woven from the same threads—the letters of the holy tongue” (Glazerson 1997: 72). What, then, does the Hebrew language
reveal about the meaning that sustains the soul? And how does the Jewish thought shaped by Hebrew characterize that meaning?

The issue of meaning

The Hebrew word for “meaning,” “sense,” or “significance” is מַשָּׁמה (mashmaut), from the root שָׁמַע (shama), which means to “hear.” Like language, meaning is first of all heard; like language, meaning addresses us. Jewish thinking, then, is not so much a manner of speculation as it is a mode of hearing and responding. To have a sense of meaning in life is to hear something or someone calling out to us; to receive a message is to receive a summons to follow a particular path. To have meaning, in other words, is to have direction.

Indeed, the word for “direction” in Hebrew, קִוּן (kivun), is a cognate of כָּבוֹד (kavanah), another word for “meaning”; כָּבוֹד also means “purpose” and “devotion.” Here lies the key to determining who we are and what is the purpose of our lives. It has nothing to do with dreams or obsessions, no matter how magnificent. Rather, the purpose of life is inscribed in the name that gives us life. A cognate of כָּבוֹד, เมֶה (mekhuneh), drives home this point; for מֵשָּׁה means “named,” “called,” and “designated.” The issue of meaning, then, is an issue of identity. The Jewish tradition teaches that G-d names each soul and that each soul’s purpose is inscribed in its name.6 The summons that each of us receives in life—the summons that defines the meaning of life before it is lived—consists of our name. That is what we struggle to hear when we thirst for meaning.

Once we hear this summons inscribed in our name—once we have a sense of מַשָּׁמה or meaning—we must summon from within ourselves the devotion required to follow it. This brings us to another word whose root is שָׁמַע: מַשָּׁמָא (mishmaat) or “discipline,” which is necessary to mend our deeds. Once we find that discipline, it grows and nurtures itself. Recall here the wisdom of the Gerer Rebbe: “By properly mending our deeds, we can come to hear more and more. This goes on forever.” (Y. L. Alter 1998: 20). The greater our hearing, the greater our sense of meaning; the greater our sense of meaning, the greater our capacity for mending our deeds. Each reinforces the other. Those of us who lose a sense of meaning in life—those of us who are empty of devotion—are set adrift without a sense of who we are. And so we do not know what to do. We struggle to lend an ear to the world, to retrieve the message, but we hear only the sound and the fury signifying nothing. Thus we grow afraid and clamber to fill our lives with more noise, so that we do not have to endure the silence that lurks beneath the anonymous rumbling. To be sure, there has never been an age noisier than ours. Or emptier. For this noise is the sound of meaninglessness that returns to haunt us upon the cessation of every other noise.

Because the noise is empty, the collision with meaninglessness is a collision with silence. In the midst of that collision we seek the face of life, even as we fear that life may be faceless. We seek life’s face because we strain to hear a voice—and it is the face that speaks: the word arises from the face, and the face is revealed in the
word. Stepping before the countenance, we hear the word and encounter meaning; stepping before the face, we receive a summons to which we must respond, “Here I am,” if we are not to be swallowed up by the faceless silence. Further, it is a summons that we hear most profoundly within the very response we offer to it. The commandment that comes from beyond us forms itself on our own lips, like a prayer uttered in a tongue that is not our own, uttered in the holy tongue—uttered in Hebrew. Here the problem of hearing is a problem of hearing the Hebrew word as a word, and not as a mere noise, to hear it as sense, and not merely as sound. The problem of hearing, then, is a problem of understanding. It is the problem that guides Jewish thought.

Which brings us to another meaning of מִקְרָא: to “understand.” Where meaning is concerned, we long to do more than hear; we long to understand, a point that is reinforced when we consider some words derived from הבין (hevin), the verb to “understand.” The noun “understanding” that corresponds to the verb is הבין (binah); the related word for “meaning” or “sense” is הבין (muwan), which also means “understood.” At the core of הבין, הבין, and הבין is הבין (bein), a word that means “between,” suggesting that meaning or understanding is something that arises between two. And so we realize that the silence of emptiness is the sound of our own solitude; we realize that meaning in life is about relation to another. Thus, where meaning in life is concerned, we long to do more than understand—we long for the depth and dearness of a relation to another: we long to love. Unlike much of the thinking that belongs to speculative philosophy, Jewish thought struggles to fathom what there is to love. For coming to a realization of what there is to love, we realize what must be done, as when holding a newborn in our hands for the first time. And Jewish thought is about the matter of what must be done. Informed by the Hebrew language, Jewish thought understands meaning in terms of doing, so that with the hearing that belongs to the realization of meaning a mission unfolds.

To receive the revelation from the holy tongue is to be charged with a sacred mission: having heard, we are now enjoined. Having heard, we now must heed, which is another meaning of מִקְרָא. Here life becomes life time, which is the future time that opens up all time. Where there is something we must heed, living now means having something to live for, so that life assumes a direction defined by a devotion, a מֶעַן steeped in מֶעַן. Direction and devotion מֶעַן and מֶעַן constitute the yet that constitutes meaning in a life. Made of this yet, time is the presence of meaning in life; just as the word is the vessel of meaning, so is it the vessel of time. Hence the Name of the Holy One—the Tetragrammaton יד-הוי-ו-ה (yud-hey-vav-hey), from which all meaning and all of creation are derived—contains all the tenses of time: היה (hayah) or “was,” הוהי (hoveh) or “is,” and יהי (yihye) or “will be.” As it is written in the Sefer Yetzirah, “All that is formed, all that is spoken, emanates from one Name” (Sefer Yetzirah 2:5). All that emanates from the Name has meaning because the Name is the vessel of all time.

A commentary on the Holy Name from Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan reveals something of the mystery of holiness, time, and meaning in the Name. He suggests
that the first letter in the Name, the י, represents a coin. The first ה, with a numerical value of five, denotes the five fingers of a hand that is about to give the coin to another in an act of loving kindness. The י connects the hand to the body, and, with the value of six, it moves in the six directions of physical space to create a connection with another person. The second ה is the hand that receives the gift. The five that receives and the five that gives add up to ten, which is the value of the י that is the gift itself (see Kaplan 1985: 73–74; see also Haralick 1995: 159). Thus, it is written in the Zohar, “he that gives charity to the poor makes the Holy Name complete as it should be above” (Zohar III, 113b). If Jewish thought entails thinking about the holy, it entails thinking about this giving that is revealed through the Holy Name. For holiness is precisely this mystery of giving; what is given is meaning, through the Divine Name. And, inasmuch as meaning opens up a mission that we have yet to achieve, meaning opens up time. That is why the Name is the vessel of all time.

This concern with the Holy Name returns us to our own name. Since time is tied to meaning and the Holy Name is the vessel of time, the meaning of all words, of all names, arises from the Holy Name, including the meaning of our own name. If the highest revelation possible is the revelation of our own soul, as Rabbi Steinsaltz argues (Steinsaltz 1989: 50), then the word we seek in our exploration of the soul is our own name. For “the name is the soul,” says the Chasidic master Nachman of Breslov (1772–1811) (Nachman of Breslov 1984: 102), a teaching tied to the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra (1093–1167) on Isaiah 14:22, where he noted that the word שם (shem) designates not just a “name” but “the person himself.” Attending to the holy word, we strive to respond more thoroughly to our name and to penetrate more profoundly into our soul. Thus taking up an effort to understand why we live, we take up the project of hearing the word on deeper and deeper levels. More than speaking of the word, the aspiration here is to hear the word speak. And that is precisely the aspiration of Jewish thought.

In keeping with the methods that characterize much of Jewish thought, this book pursues both an analytical organization of ideas and a conceptual association of key words. The line of thinking may follow paths that perhaps are not evident at first glance, as in the aforementioned reflection on the relation between meaning and hearing. This may be due to the fact that the reference points that stake out these paths are not so much the markers of linguistic science or mystical speculation as they are the signposts of spiritual seeking. For there is no Jewish thinking that is not also a spiritual seeking, a seeking guided by the holy tongue. This book, therefore, is a book more of questions than of answers. If G-d, אלה (el), is ultimately what we seek in the holy tongue, we seek Him in the midst of the “question,” in the שלה (shelah).

According to the mystical tradition, in the act of creation G-d undertakes a movement of תסום (tsimtsum) or “contraction,” so that the finite can come into being in the midst of the infinite—so that the finite can become a vessel of the infinite. Just as the creation arising from this תסום issues from the Hebrew word, so does the Hebrew word undergo a kind of תסום: the word contracts into a שם.
(shoresh) or three-letter “root,” from which a multitude of meaning unfolds. Thus word generates word to impart meaning to creation. Let us go now into the דלתן of the Hebrew word that will return us to the meaning of the word; let us go into the vessel that is the דלתן, the “word,” as Noach went into the ark that carried him over the face of the deep. For “ark,” is also a meaning of דלתן. Like Noach, we too live in the days of a flood—a flood of noise that inundates us with silence. It is a silence that returns us to the silence that was broken upon the first utterance of creation. It is the silence of the origin of the word.

Thus we begin with the issue of the origin and the silence of the beginning.
The Torah begins with the word בְּרֵאשֵׁית (bereshit), a word that contains the word ראש (rosh), which is the “chief,” “head,” or “most important” of all things. It signifies, in short, the first things. What precedes the beginning, however, is sealed off by the wall that forms the right side of the letter ב (beit) itself. In the margin, or what might be called the “twilight,” of creation—in the blank before the ב—there is only silence. And yet it is a silence that is not left to the margin. Rather, like creation itself, this silence is ongoing; like the space between letters and words, it abides within the utterances of creation. For creation emerges not precisely from nothing but from silence.

The harbinger of the beginning—the harbinger of first things—is silence, the silence of a mute and indifferent cosmos that fills us with terror, and so we strain to listen for a Big Bang in a realm in which there is no sound. The moment of just-before-the-beginning haunts us. We are drawn to the Big Bang because we long for a noise, yet we dread the Big Bang because we fear it is nothing but a noise. As we have seen in Chapter 1, more than hearing a sound, the soul longs to hear a sense or a meaning that will breach the neutrality of an indifferent being that is simply “there” and nothing more. To be sure, the Hebrew word for “neutral,” прек (srak), also means “emptiness.” That is what ontological thought would posit as the fundamental condition of being; that is what Jewish thought opposes. The problem of silence is the problem of transcending the mute indifference—the neutral emptiness—of the cosmos to come before an eloquent non-indifference, before the “Let there be.” How to attain that transcendence? Through an act of utterance.

Such is the subject matter of first philosophy or metaphysics: as a study of first things, metaphysics is both a responding and a listening to silence. It is the “Big Bang” of thought that attempts to hear the “Let there be” and thus breach a silent void, both within and beyond the human being. With this breaching of silence comes a hearing; with this hearing comes a realization. It is the realization that all the while we have been addressed, as when Jacob awakens from his dream and cries, “The Lord is in this place, and I knew it not” (Genesis 28:16). We have been addressed from the start: from out of the silence of an ongoing beginning, someone is saying something to us; someone is demanding something...
of us. It is as though we had received a call: “It’s for you . . .” Whereas the Greek ontological thought at the root of Western thinking gazes upon the cosmos in search of a principle, Jewish thought attends to the silence and hears a voice. For the former, the world reflects something from within the world; for the latter, the world is a revelation of something from beyond the world.

That the original saying arises from the silence that exceeds all there is, is revealed to us through the Hebrew verb רーム (amar), which means to “say” or “utter.” And this is the first action of creation: "וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִצְרָאֵל" (vayomer Elokim), “And G-d said” (Genesis 1:3). Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1992) notes that רーム also means to “think” (Soloveitchik 1965: 73), that is, to think in a manner characteristic of Jewish thought. This thinking is a saying that precedes speech, and it implies a saying that has meaning, as Joseph Albo (c. 1360–1444) reminds us when he points out that that רーム means both to “say” and to “signify” (Sefer HaIkkarim 3:1). Recall, for example, the talmudic expression רーム רーム (zot omeret), which is “this says” or “this signifies.” If, in an act of saying, G-d not only summons the world into being but also thinks it into being, then the world has meaning: the world signifies—it is not simply or neutrally “there.” Contrary to ontological thought, for which Dasein or “being there” is a fundamental category, Jewish thought proceeds from the premise that nothing is merely “there” but is brought into being by a Creator. Indeed, without that premise, “nothing” is merely “there,” as Martin Heidegger surmised. Unlike the languages that shape Western ontological thought, in Hebrew we have a passive voice of the verb היה (hayah), or to “be”: it is ניחיה (niheyah), which translates as to “become” but in its passive voice implies an agent that brings something into being. In English it would be to “be been,” or some such unintelligible combination of words. Thus to “be” in Hebrew can, in principle at least, have a transitive form, suggesting that everything that is has behind it an active agent who makes it “be.” How? Through utterance. And if through utterance, then with meaning.

In the beginning, meaning emerges from silence to become utterance, as רーム emerges from the א (alef), from the silent letter that precedes the ב of והיה and begins the alef-beit. In fact, the Midrash notes that והיה is itself among the Ten Utterances of creation (Bereshit Rabbah 17:1; see also the Mishnah Avot 5:1); since it is not preceded by the רーム, however, it is known as a מאמר סתר (maamar satum), a “closed” or “hidden” utterance, one that is not part of the fabric of being (see Kaplan 1990: 51). Therefore the silence that precedes the creation, the א that precedes the ב, is itself a kind of utterance. Recall in this connection the teaching from the Pesikta Rabbati: when asked who created it, the letter ב answers, “He who is above created me.” When asked, “What is His name?” the ב points with the extension of its base back to the א (21:21). Just as the shape of the ב points to א, “the shape of alef,” says the mystic Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen (d. c. 1270), “acts as a witness to the name of the Holy One, blessed be He” (quoted in Dan 1986: 155; see also Vital 2000b: 110–111). What exactly does this mean?

From this first letter, this silent letter, of the alphabet—from this letter signifying both a saying and a silence—every letter, every word, and every utterance arises, as the Baal Shem Tov has taught (see Keter Shem Tov 45; also 355). This
“every” includes the first utterance of HaShem Himself. “The letter א is Wisdom,” says the Baal Shem, referring to a mystical teaching that creation arises from the sefirah of Wisdom.1 “It is clothed within the letter צ” (Keter Shem Tov 86), suggesting that the א transcends the צ as the eloquent silence that not only precedes it but lies deep **within** it. And, the Baal Shem teaches, “He created light from the letter א” (Keter Shem Tov 355). Just as silence lies deep within the Divine utterance, so does the Divine light lie deep within creation as the horizon of all reality.

Here we recall a Hebrew word that begins with א, the word **ט/א** (ot), which means “letter,” “sign,” or “symbol.” And a symbol takes us both to what is beyond and what is within. As the letter that both precedes and is clothed within the צ of the origin, the א symbolizes an original silence, a *pregnant* silence whose womb, harboring the seed of creation, is the צ. It is the sign, the **ט/א**, not of a sound but of a meaning that makes saying possible; it harbors a silence that is *already* a speaking, prior to the contexts of anything said, as with any instance of any human saying. Recalling that another meaning of **ט/א** is “miracle,” we glimpse something very important about the original miracle of creation: the miracle of creation is not merely that it happened but that it has *meaning*. It comes not in a Big Bang but in an *utterance*. “Let there be . . . .”

Thus signifying silence, the א imparts to silence an eloquence that surpasses utterance. It signifies what Martin Buber (1878–1965) deems “the silence of all tongues” (Buber 1970: 89). What is that silence, that *meaning* of all tongues, from which all of creation emerges? It is Torah. Says Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), “Were I to choose principles for the divine Torah I would only lay down one, the creation of the world” (Abrabanel 1982: 192). Rabbi Benjamin Blech explains:

> Creation begins with צ, but something precedes Creation. א precedes צ in the alphabet. **ט/א** (Anokhi), the introduction to law, comes before the existence of the heavens and earth. Without G-d there would be no world. Without Torah there would be no reason for the world to exist.
>
> (Blech 1993: 115)

And Torah is wrapped in the holiness of the holy tongue, a point that comes to light upon examining the א itself, the first letter in the divine **ט/א**. The letter א is made of a י (yud) above and a פ below, with a ג (vav) connecting the two. The numerical value of י (10) plus פ (6) plus י (10) is 26, which is the numerical value of the Holy Name יהוה: signifying silence, א signifies the interrelation between above and below, through which holiness and therefore meaning enter creation to breach the silence of indifferent being (see Blech 1991: 23; see also Ginsburgh 1991: 25).

The ten, six, and ten in the letter א also call to mind the ten utterances of creation, the six days that G-d labored, and the ten utterances of revelation, all of which combine to form meaning: meaning *happens*—meaning is an *event*—in
the movement that transpires between above and below, both as creation and as revelation. It is that silence that lurks in the said, the alef that harbors the Divine Name. Where there is one there is the other. The movement of the beginning is not only over the face of the deep—it is a calling from deep unto deep. For in the beginning there is meaning. 

Like the silence that is in the beginning, the beginning itself is eternally unfolding. For the upper י in the א corresponds to the י in the Holy Name, which in turn, Adin Steinsaltz observes, designates “continuous being rather than single action . . . Creation is thus not to be understood as a single action performed in the Six Days of Genesis. It is a continuous process; G-d keeps creating the world all the time” (Steinsaltz 1989: 43–44). Similarly, Judah Halevi writes:

One must not consider the work of creation in the light of an artisan’s craft. When the latter, e.g. has built a mill, he departs, whilst the mill does the work for which it was constructed. The Creator, however, creates limbs and endows them continually with their faculties. (Kitav al khazari 3:11)

What is in the beginning, therefore, is forever upon us: in the beginning is the eternal. At every instant the unending utterance of “Let there be” calls all of creation into being, as we affirm each day in our prayers, declaring that G-d renew each day, continuously, the work of creation.” How does the utterance itself come into being? By joining the א with the second letter, with the other: sound and sense arise from a primal relation between two. That is why the alphabet that preceded creation is called the alef-beit. Let us consider this ongoing relation that is our unending origin.

Eternal origins: the father and the mother

The second letter of the alphabet, as already noted, is ב; spelled out, it is בית, which, as בית (bayit), is the word for “house,” “home,” and “family.” In the movement from א to ב, from eloquent silence to meaningful sound, there emerges a home or dwelling place; the meaning of creation arises through dwelling in creation. In his book on Hebrew letters and Jewish thought Yitzchak Ginsburgh explains:

At the level of Divinity the house symbolizes the purpose of all reality: to become a dwelling place below for the manifestation of G-d’s presence. “Not as Abraham who called [the Temple] ‘a mountain,’ nor as Isaac who called it ‘a field,’ but as Jacob who called it ‘a house.’”

(Ginsburgh 1991: 46)
Realizing that the purpose of all creation is to become a dwelling place, we see that the problem of silence is a problem of dwelling: lost in the wilderness of an indifferent silence, we wander in a realm empty of meaning. The age of emptiness, therefore, is also an age of homelessness.

To receive the word that joins above and below is to enter into a relation to the transcendent center that is essential to dwelling in the world. And in the relation to a transcendent center lies the relation essential to meaning, the relation that constitutes the core of home and family. It is the relation we affirm when we cry from below to the One who is above: “Father!” This outcry bursts forth in the joining of the first letter of the alphabet to the second, the א to the ב, to form בָא (av), the Hebrew word for “father.” It comes in a primal merging of silence with sound, from which all the letters emerge. Hence, according to the teachings of the sixteenth-century mystic Chayyim Vital (1542–1620), in the beginning the father “first sowed a seed, a drop of material substance that [became] the letters” (Ets Chayyim 5:5). Thus the silence was transformed into eloquence.

Among the other meanings of בָא are “principal,” “chief,” “teacher,” and “origin.” These possibilities of meaning demonstrate that, within Jewish thought, the origin signified by the בָא constitutes more than a point of departure—it is a source of teaching. Here we understand more deeply an important point so far only touched upon: the indifferent silence of the beginning is broken not merely by a sound but by a sense, not by a noise but by the word. It is broken by the word of the father, which is the wisdom of a teaching. To know the father is to know the word of the father; it is to know him as teacher or revealer. What does he reveal? He reveals the teaching that is Torah.

Hence in the Sifre (an ancient commentary on Deuteronomy) we are taught that when a child begins to speak, his father should teach him Torah and the holy tongue; if his father fails to teach his child Torah and the holy tongue, “it is as though he had buried the little one” (Sifre Ekev 46). Why is it as though the father had buried his child? Because, Matityahu Glazerson explains, the א (emet) or “truth” of the holy tongue “is the foundation upon which the world stands. If one fails to acknowledge the א (alef), symbolizing G-d, who is the Chief (אַלְף) of the world, one removes the א fromemet. What remains is ‘dead’ (met, מֵת)” (Glazerson 1997: 253). The father who would impart life to his child teaches him the holy tongue, so that the child may receive the nourishment of the truth that abides in the holy tongue. When Scripture was rendered in Greek, it was turned over to the philosophical language of Athens. When it was translated into Latin, it was surrendered to the political language of Rome. Both amounted to a betrayal of the holy tongue and the holy teaching. Both finally led to a devastating sense of alienation among the Jews.

Without the father’s teaching concerning the truth of the holy tongue, we cannot know the truth of who we are, because knowing who we are entails knowing the link to our origin. And our origin is the very origin of all things: it is the holy tongue itself, out of which, according to Jewish tradition, heaven, earth, and humanity are formed. For Jewish thought, the holy tongue is the fabric of our
soul and the principal point of reference from which we make sense of everything else. Through the holy tongue the father bequeaths to us teaching, testimony, and inspiration. The tradition traceable to an origin and passed on through the father is more than a chronicle of customs; it is the history of the eternal in time. It is the tale of life time that comes to us from a source—and a silence—that precedes time, as the \( \text{S} \) precedes the \( \text{Z} \) that begins creation. Because the origin precedes time, it is neither behind us nor ahead of us. It is above us. And with us.

“The Universe,” explains Maimonides (1135–1204), “has not been created out of an element that preceded it in time, since time itself formed part of the creation. For this reason Scripture employs the term \( \text{bereshit} \) (Moreh Nevuchim 2:30). From what has been said, we know what this means: the origin is a transcendent \text{dimension} rather than a \text{coordinate} in time or space: it is the metaphysical dimension of height. As such, the origin is the portal of the \text{yet to be} that opens up a meaningful future (a point explored more fully below). From the depths of the teaching and tradition transmitted by the \( \text{B} \), we are summoned to a truth yet to be embraced, a task yet to be accomplished, and a responsibility yet to be met.

The web of interconnections that link teaching to the parent and both to Torah can be found in another word for “father” or “parent”; it is \( \text{horeh} \). Written with a \( \text{kamats} \) vowel sound under the \( \text{r} \), we have the verb \( \text{horah} \), which means to “teach.” And two key cognates of both words are \( \text{moreh} \), meaning “teacher,” and \( \text{Torah} \), which is the “Teaching.” Immediately we understand why the Fifth Commandment, to honor our father and mother (Exodus 20:12), falls into the category of commandments that concern the relation between G-d and humanity, rather than those pertaining to the relation between one person and another.2 The Torah that proceeds from G-d reaches us most fundamentally through our father and mother. They are our first teachers, and the Torah is the first teaching, the teaching that makes teaching itself meaningful. Therefore when the Talmud tells us that three are required to create a human being—father, mother, and G-d (Kiddushin 30b)—it is because three are required to transmit the teaching that is Torah. For the human being is made of Torah: we cannot know who we are without knowing Torah any more than we can know who we are without knowing our parents.

Of course, there is no father without a mother, no \( \text{hr\ell/h} \) without a \( \text{hr;/h} \), the feminine form of the word for “parent.” A more common word used to refer to the mother is \( \text{em} \), which also means “womb.” Another word for “womb” is \( \text{rechem} \); it is a cognate of \( \text{racham} \), which means to “love” or to “have compassion” as only a mother can love and have compassion. Noting that the Holy Name ends with a \text{kamats} \ vowel notation followed by the letter \( \text{h} \)—which indicates a masculine noun made feminine—one sees that the love and compassion of the mother are among the first things. Yes, the feminine: that is what is added to the father to make a family and a “people,” \( \text{umah} \), which is a cognate of \( \text{B} \). Joined with \( \text{rachamim} \)—that is, “compassion” or “love” (from \( \text{racham} \))—the father, \( \text{B} \), becomes the Holy One, as in the expression \( \text{B} \).
(av harachamim), “the Father of love and compassion” or “the loving and compassionate Father”—the Father who is also a Mother. Without the mother we have no access, no relation, to G-d the Father.

That is why it is not good for a man to be alone, as it is written (Genesis 2:18): the teaching of the Father must join with the love of the Mother to instill the human being with the image of the holy. Thus the adam who had begun as both male and female is split into two distinct beings, so that each could enter into a relation with the other, and neither would be alone (see Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 1:27). The Oneness of G-d is a singularity that entails the Oneness of the Supernal Mother and the Heavenly Father; as these two origins are uniquely One, the purpose of reality becomes clear: to create a home, a תֶּּלֶּב. Perhaps that is one of the mysteries underlying the אֶּהֱי of creation: G-d could not be G-d and be alone, any more than the א could be א without the ב. The one created in the image of the Holy One is created male and female—and then separated into two—because both are required to make creation into a dwelling place for the Creator.

And so it is written in the Zohar: “When a man is at home, the foundation of his house is the wife, for it is on account of her that the Shekhinah departs not from the house” (Zohar I, 50a). The thirteenth-century mystic Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, for instance, asserts that the Shekhinah “in the time of Abraham our father is called Sarah and in the time of Isaac our father is called Rebecca and in the time of Jacob our father is called Rachel” (Gikatilla 1994: 204). What enters the dwelling place through the wife and mother? It is the Torah itself. Therefore the woman of a household is called an עָּקֵּר (akeret), a word that derives from עָּקֵר (ikar), which means “essence,” “basis,” “foundation,” and “origin”: the א is all of these things. According to Rashi (1040–1105), the Torah had to be accepted first by the women gathered at Mount Sinai before it could be received by the men; for the House of Jacob mentioned in Exodus 19:3 precedes the reference to the Children of Israel, and the House of Jacob refers to the women among the Hebrews, the mothers of Israel (see Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 19:3; see also the commentary in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Bachodesh 2). Therefore it is through the mother that we have the Torah.3 Bearing life into the world, she bears Torah into the world. For the Torah is life; it is the עֵץ חָיִים (Ets Chayim) or the “Tree of Life” that sustains all life (see, for example, Proverbs 3:18; see also Berakhot 32b and Taanit 7a; also Vayikra Rabbah 35:6). Through the mother manifest as עֵץ we engage the mystery of the עֵץ חָיִים. Thus the Talmud compares the Torah to a woman (Kiddushin 30b).

Here we can better understand why in the Zohar it is written: “First came Ehyeh (I shall be), the dark womb of all. Then Asher Ehyeh (That I Am), indicating the readiness of the Mother to beget all” (Zohar III, 65b). Bearing in mind the association between the mother and the House of Jacob, we note that this principle is also stated in the Midrash: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to His world: ‘O My world, My world! Shall I tell thee who created thee, who formed thee? Jacob has created thee, Jacob has formed thee’” (Vayikra Rabbah 36:4). For the House of Jacob
signifies the mother of creation. From the depths of the mother’s compassion—from the וַתַּהְפֹּךְ within the וְרָבָּם—human life itself begins to stir.

Thus the mother links us to the Creator revealed through maternal compassion and love, or חֵסֶד (chesed), which, as Gikatilla notes, is at the root of creation (Gikatilla 1994: 276). In his commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah, Aryeh Kaplan points out that the Feminine Essence underlying creation belongs to the domain of Understanding or בִּנְאָה (Binah), a word derived from בֵּין (beyn), which means “between” (Sefer Yetzirah 1990: 16). As noted in the last chapter, understanding arises from the difference between two, and, as the highest manifestation of the Feminine Essence, the mother transforms the radical difference that underlies understanding into the absolute non-indifference of love. Therefore, inasmuch as love is among the first things, the mother is at the center of the first things: the life that is borne into the world through the mother is the life of Torah. Thanks to the mother, the world itself is sustained and all of creation becomes a dwelling place; thanks to the mother, creation has meaning.

Only a mother, moreover, can beget a mother: what lies at the core of an immemorial origin lies also at the heart of an ongoing creation—not only of what is but of what is yet to be, so that anticipation becomes a definitive element of creation. Says André Neher, “G-d starts creating, and He distributes creation over seven days. Time itself is of the uppermost importance. Creation manifests itself by the appearance of time” (Neher 1969: 131). Thus, for Jewish thought, the tenses and the intensity of time comprise a fundamental aspect of an origin that is not only behind us but is forever before us: the origin is the future.

**First things and the future**

The notion of an immemorial origin that at once precedes us and summons us is embodied in the Hebrew verbanniak (kadam), which means both to “precede” and to “anticipate.” While this verb, like any verb, has past and future tenses, its very root embodies both past and future time. It tells us that the opposite of the past is not the future but the absence of a future, that the opposite of the future is not the past but the absence of a past. Thus we perceive the categories of time that belong to Jewish thought. Anticipation requires precedence; precedence generates anticipation. This simultaneous looking backward and forward is reflected in the noun בן- (kedem), which refers both to “ancient days” and to the “east.” The days of old take on meaning with the dawning of the sun in the east; like the light of the sun, ancient time illuminates our life time by enjoining us to transform darkness into light, as the sun transforms night into day. If the silence that is breached in the beginning is broken by a sound, it is broken, too, by the light of meaning, which is also the summons to a mission. Thus we have the word בן (kadimah), which means “forward” or “onward.” As soon as meaning opens up with the breach of indifferent silence, the future emerges as meaning yet to be consummated, as a mission yet to be fulfilled. If “Let there be light” amounts to “Let there be meaning,” then it
amounts to “Let there be future”: emerging as meaning, the light emerges as future.

Where does it emerge? In the one Voice that reverberates throughout the voices of the living souls who call out to us. “Each call summons to the future,” says Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929). “Who is the caller? This again is the ultimate secret, and again it is no secret” (Rosenzweig 1999b: 83). Who is the caller? It is the One who called out in the beginning in a call that signifies the yet-to-be-accomplished: “Let there be.” If in the beginning is the relation, as Buber claims (Buber 1970: 69), in the beginning is the future—not as a what or even as a when but as a who: the future is the Divine being who summons through the other human being, the other human being as the image of the Divine being. For the relation that is in the beginning is a relation to another person, or to the other as person, at once human and Divine—that is where we encounter the light of life that we call a face. The future and the face are of a piece.

Time is not only the presence of G-d in the realm of space, as Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) maintains (Heschel 1981: 100); from the standpoint of Jewish thought, time is the presence of person in the realm of space. Hence, Rosenzweig asserts, the person we encounter “represents the whole world and the very next instant may represent eternity” (Rosenzweig 1999b: 89). There is no time without eternity. To have time is to have time always for the one who calls our name; to have time is to give the other the time of day, offering him the time of our life, by attending to him. When someone asks us for a moment of our time, he asks us to become present before him—to attend to him, even as a father might attend to a child. He or she asks us for our eternity, and we must answer, “Here I am, for you!” That is how we receive the teaching and the tradition that the father imparts to us: by teaching a tradition of caring through the care we give to another. That is how we have time. That is how we are most fundamentally connected to the first utterance of “Let there be.”

The Hebrew expression of this care for another is בֵּית לֶב (tsumet lev); recalling that the root of בֵּית לֶב is ב ל (sim), a verb that means to “put” or “place,” we see that the expression literally means “placing the heart” before another. As the seat of life, the heart or לב (lev) is among the first things. Therefore it is upon the heart, and not in the head or brain, that we are commanded to engrave the words of Torah (see Deuteronomy 6:6)—engraved, be it noted, so that the substance of the heart is made of the words of Torah. Indeed, heart and Torah are of a piece: the letters that form the word לב are the first and last letters of the Torah; therefore the לב contains Torah. The לב is Torah. Placing the heart before the other, we place the Torah before the other, teaching Torah through the care that we give to our fellow human being. In fact, when spelled out, the letter ל (lamed) is ב כ, which is a cognate of the verb לְמָד (limed), meaning to “teach.” It is the letter that reaches upward and points to the Most High, who is the origin of all teaching. Combined with the ב—or the ה ב—that is a dwelling place, the word לב reveals to us a definitive connection between teaching and dwelling in the very spelling of the word לב: ה ב (lamed-bait). Here we are reminded of Rabbi Ginsburgh’s insight.
concerning the purpose of all reality: to create a dwelling place for the holy. For the holy dwells wherever we teach Torah through the care we show for another.

Once again we see a relation between time and eternity. Teaching Torah by placing the heart before the other, we draw the eternal into time: eternity is manifested between two. As the eternal is manifested in time, we are summoned to an encounter. Which brings us to the piel (kidem) or intensive form ofKidem (kidem et panim), a verb that means to “encounter,” “meet,” “welcome,” or “greet” someone. Greeting the other, we encounter the panim (panim) or “face” of the other, as in the expression Kidem (kidem et panim), which means to “welcome” or “greet” someone. Significantly, this phrase is also used to express the greeting of time itself, as in the expression Kidem (kidem et panei Rosh Hashanah), to “greet the New Year,” or literally to “greet the face of the New Year.” Here we see once more that the future and the face are of a piece, and we discover yet another link between person and time. Harboring a face, time speaks through the person before us, becoming the voice not merely of history but of tradition. It addresses us now, from the origin, calling us forth. As we hear—as we heed—the summons, we enter time by entering into a relation with another. Deaf to the cry of the other human being, we remain outside of time, outside of life, in the dead silence of our timeless muteness, in the mute silence of our nothingness.

That the summons from another draws us into time is illustrated by the cognates hazmanah (hazmanah), which means “summons,” and zaman (zman), which means “time.” The word hazmanah, moreover, means “invitation,” from the verb zimen (zimen), which is to “invite” or “summon together.” Like the eternal, time unfolds in the space between two, where one has summoned the other to come together. The origin of that calling is the face, which summons us to greet it before we even glimpse it, summons us from above, from the dimension of height that is the dimension of the origin. Contrary to Buber, the I is not on an equal footing with the Thou: the Thou is higher than the I. Calling out from above, the face calls out from a position beyond our field of vision. In the “invisible” realm that is beyond our vision—in the invisibility of God—abides the eloquent silence that is transformed into sound and sense, into meaning and mission, in the face-to-face relation. Thus when we greet the face of the other, we encounter more than a face (which is one way of understanding why panim is plural): there is the face that meets the eye and the face that eludes the eye. The face that meets the eyes invites violence; it belongs to the landscape of being that we would conquer. The face that eludes the eye forbids violence; beyond being, it belongs to the origin that commands love. The former is seen; the latter is heard.

What is heard from the depths of the face is not only the prohibition against murder that Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–1995) rightly associates with the face (see Lévinas 1985: 86). More than that, it is the commandment Vahavta l’reakha kamokha (v’ahavta l’reakha kamokha), “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Contrary to the assumptions of egocentric speculative thought, this commandment does not mean, “I know how much you love yourself, and that is how much I want you to love your neighbor.” No, given the possibilities of
meaning for the word רַבִּיָּה, “as yourself,” a better translation would be: “you shall love your neighbor, for that loving is your self,” the soul and substance of who you are. That love for the other is the meaning of our life. It belongs to the first things that go into who and what we are.

Significantly, the rest of this verse from Leviticus is אָנֹי הַשֵּׁם (ani HaShem) or “I am the Lord,” affirming G-d’s centrality to our identity as children of the Creator, of the original בָּא: to be a child of G-d is to be commanded to love His other children. Who am I? The one commanded to love the other human being. Who is G-d the Father? The One whose love for us is expressed in the commandment to love. We respond to the commandment by declaring, “אָי יִה—Here I am, for you!” The commandment, moreover, originally comes in the form of a question, the first question put to the first human being, which is put to us all at every moment: “אָי אָקי—Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). This question—like the commandment, like the love that both commands and is commanded—is among the first things.

The utterance that breaches the silence of nothingness to introduce meaning is this question couched in the commandment to love. Constituting the core of meaning in life, the commandment to love has its origin in the origin of all, in the Creator. Greeting the other person, we encounter the One who formed us from the beginning and who now lays claim to us, the Invisible One, who nevertheless is not the Silent One. This brings us to another cognate of רַבִּי (as it appears in the expression מֶלֶךְ שְלֵב שְלֵי שֵּׁם (kadmono shel olam), which means “the origin of the world.” Signifying G-d, this phrase tells us that G-d is not love; rather, as the Creator, G-d is the commandment to love, which is a commandment to draw His love into the world. This point is underscored by the fact that the verb רַבִּי designates a saying that is a commanding, as the noun רַבִּי (maamar), meaning “command” or “bidding,” suggests: when silence is transformed into utterance, it is manifest as commandment. Love is commanded upon the first utterance of creation, when the light is commanded into being. Because the summons of light into being harbors the commandment to love, this first utterance of creation reveals the meaning of all creation: to transform darkness into light by answering, “אָי יִה!” to the commandment to love. With that answering a world opens up; העולם (olam) opens up.

World

The noun העולם refers to the sum of the universe. It signifies not only the expanse of the universe, as in the phrase העולם הולך (olam umlo’d), meaning “the world and all its fullness” (as, for example, in Pesikta Rabbati 28:3), but also its duration, as in the expression העולם ולע (leolam vaed), meaning “forever and ever.” “World” in this instance is space-time, encompassing both what is and what is not yet, within and without what in physics is known as the “event horizon.” The notion of העולם exceeds the limits of “Being” as (mis)understood by much of the ontological tradition in Western philosophy. To use a metaphor from Rosenzweig, whereas
Western ontology is but a cup of water drawn from the river, אֶלֶּה is the river itself (Rosenzweig 1999b: 65–66). One implication of these possibilities of meaning for אֶלֶּה is that the first things contain the last things, with the ultimate rooted in the fundamental. Permeating the space and time that constitute שָׁלוֹם, the light summoned upon the first utterance of the world’s creation exceeds all there is, to include what is yet to be realized, that is, what is better.

To be sure, as we know from physics, light defines the horizon of space and time, what is known as an “event horizon.” Defining that horizon, light exceeds the horizon of every event both from within and from beyond the horizon. Therefore the first utterance of creation, “Let there be light,” draws into being what is more than being, what is better than being. This better is the “shall be” of the הָיָה (Ehyeh), or “I Shall Be,” by which G-d identifies Himself when He instructs Moses to tell the children of Israel that I Shall Be has sent him (Exodus 3:14). The “G-d Who Is the Good,” הֶאֵל הוֹטָא (Hael Hatov), is the G-d who is better. The issue of what is better comes to bear when we consider the other meanings of אֶלֶּה: “humanity” and “community," where the fundamental and the ultimate merge in the ethical. The ethical is precisely what is better than all there is, without which neither the transcendent nor the imminent is meaningful.

Now the Hebrew word for “ethics” is מָעָר (musar), a word that also means “fetter” or “bond” (I shall elaborate on the cognates of this word below). What is fettered by ethics is not the human being but the darkness of chaos, of חֵרְבּוֹ (tohu vavohu, from Genesis 1:2), overcome through the light of Torah, which includes the light of the ethical. What is fettered, in other words, is the forbidden, as we see from the word אֵשׁ (asur), which means both “fettered” and “forbidden”—forbidden not for the arbitrary sake of some authority but because it threatens the very life called into being. Ethics, then, is among the first things, just as the light that fetters the darkness is among the first things; it forges the bond that holds humanity together as community. It is the bond that sets us free. For freedom lies not in doing whatever we want to do but in the realization of what we must do. To be free is to be chosen and therefore commanded for a mission—from the beginning; it points up a destiny, without which we are doomed.

To have a name—not an essence but a name—is to receive a destiny, as Benjamin Blech points out. A name, he rightly affirms, signifies “one’s destiny. A divine spirit aids parents in deciding which name they should give to their child. A name is the script for an entire lifetime: כִּי-כְּשִׁיתוֹ כָּנָה (ki-kishemo ken hu), ‘As his name is, so is he’ (I Samuel 25:25)” (Blech 1993: 170). A name is a commandment: if being who we are entails being free, then being who we are entails being who we are commanded to be. Thus in the Mishnah we have the commentary on the verse, מֵהַלְוִית לְפָסַכְתָּחֲלֶה הָעָלָם וְפָסַכְתָּחֲלֶה הָעָלָם חוּר חוּר (vehaluchot maaseh Elokim hemah vehamikhtav mikhtav Elokim hu charut al-haluchot), “And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d, graven וְהַלְוִית [cherut] upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:16): “Do not read חֵרְבּוֹ (charut or ‘graven’) but חֵרְבּוֹ (cherut or ‘freedom’), for no man is free save one who is engaged in the study of Torah” (Avot 6:2; see also Erwin 54a; Avot d’Rabbi Natan 2:3; and Bemidbar Rabbah 10:8). Which is to
say: no man is free who is not commanded from on high, and not from one’s own, inner autonomous reason, as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) maintained (see Kant, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, 446–447, 452–453). Studying Torah, we are charged with a mission to do good. We are not free to choose the good; rather, we are free because we have been chosen by the good before we make any other choices. That is what makes all of our other choosing matter.

While the ethical injunction of Torah is the tie that binds humanity into a community, it is a hidden bond. It is hidden in the silence of the ש that precedes creation, in the ineffable absolute that commands ethical action. That is why the ש is the first letter in the first utterance of the Ten Commandments, where the Hidden One reveals Himself to sanctify the world with His commandments in a saying of א, the divine utterance of “I.” Which brings us to a cognate of ליעל: it is the verb היעל (ilem), meaning to “hide” or “conceal.” In the Midrash it is written that the Torah begins with the letter ב because ב has a numerical value of two, indicating that two worlds were created: the world that meets the eye and the silent, hidden world (Bereshit Rabbah 1:10). The hidden world gives meaning to the material world, just as G-d’s utterance of א on the revelation of the Ten Commandments—or, more properly, the aseret hadibrot (as list הובד) or “Ten Utterances”—gives meaning to creation. For the hidden world is the olam haemet (olam-haemet), the “world of truth,” which is both to come and in our very midst, invisible as the Holy One is invisible (see Tanchuma Bereshit 5). The Holy One, blessed be He, is invisible not as the air is invisible but as the absolute is invisible, as what cannot be gauged or confined to a definition is invisible—invisible as the love of a father or the meaning of a life is invisible.

From this we learn what we always knew, namely that the wellsprings of joy are hidden from the five senses. Just as we seek in the caress what we cannot touch, so do we rejoice in the pleasure that cannot be possessed. Rejoicing is just the opposite of enjoyment. When we rejoice we perform an action: we attest to what there is to love. Heeding the commandment of the Creator with a cry of יאני — “Here I am, for you” — is a form of rejoicing. Enjoyment, on the other hand, is a passive state. It is ego-centered, as when we enjoy a good meal, a good show, or a good vacation. The egocentrism of enjoyment comes to light in the Hebrew word for “enjoyment,” הנות (hanaah), particularly as it is used in the phrase באלו (baal hanaah). Literally meaning a “master of enjoyment,” this phrase translates as “hedonist.” The master of enjoyment, however, is the slave of his pleasure, a point that becomes clear if we note that the word מַעֲדָן (maadan), which means “pleasure” or “delicacies,” also means “fetter” or “manacle.” Another word for “hedonist” is a cognate of הנות, it is חנאת (hanaatan), referring to a person who not only lives for his own enjoyment but also lives outside the rules of morality, a “free thinker.” When the enjoyment of oneself is the prime directive, sooner or later it will run contrary to the rejoicing commanded from On High. In that moment we decide whether we shall live by the truth of who we are or die in the lie of the ego.

When one is living is a state of “avoidance,” what one is usually avoiding is the truth. Thus we recall that הנות can also mean “avoidance” and discover another
important distinction between rejoicing and enjoyment: whereas rejoicing is an entry into the world, enjoyment is a flight from the world—which, of course, is an avoidance of what cannot be avoided. Similarly, just as the freedom that comes through an observance of the commandments enables us to enter life in the world, the enslavement that arises from ephemeral pleasures casts us into an exile from the world. For those who are trapped in the throes of pleasure-seeking are forever tormented by the “yearning” that in Hebrew is שוק (shokek); its cognate תשקה (teshukah) means “desire” or “lust.” The verb corresponding to these nouns is שקה (shakak), which means both to “be hungry” or “long for” and to “go back and forth” or “run about,” wandering aimlessly, without purpose or meaning. Having lost all meaning or sense of life, those who rush from one pleasure to the next, from one moment of enjoyment to the next, seek only the rush, only the sensational and its stimulation of the senses. In a world characterized by such aimless clambering we thrive on sex, violence, and special effects. And yet, as we accumulate thrill after thrill, we are beggared by our abundance. For in our running about we run away from the first things. And so we forget how to rejoice.

The distinction between enjoyment and rejoicing sheds important light on yet another meaning of שמח, which is the “pleasures of life.” Here the pleasures of life, in contrast to the pleasures signified by שמח, lie not in the egocentric enjoyment of the sensual but in the joy, in the שלג (gil), through which we participate in the world of humanity and community. Here it is worth noting that the verb שלג (gal), which means “to rejoice,” also means to “shake with fear”—not a fear of but a fear for. To know what there is to rejoice in is to know what there is to fear for, as when we fear for the babe in our arms, through whom our rejoicing takes on infinite depth. Within that little one curled up in our arms, in whose dark, infant eyes the silence of the ש(abides, lies the seed of a new age and a new generation, the promise of a new anointing. And so we have other meanings of שלג: “age” and “generation.”

Adding the meanings of שלג to the meanings of שמח, we see that the world of humanity and community inheres in a rejoicing in the generations of a begetting that is far more than a propagation of the species: it is a participation in the creation and in the life of the Creator. Contrary to enjoyment, all rejoicing entails this participation, this devotion and dedication. And because a generation derives its meaning from what comes after in the light of what comes before, it rests upon tradition. Once again we realize that tradition is among the first things. Let us take a closer look at this notion that so far we have only touched upon.

### Tradition

The Hebrew word for “devotion” or “dedication” is מיסרות (mesirud). When it concerns humanity, מיסרות is first of all an embrace of the other human being; it lies at the core of the מסורת (masoret) that is “tradition,” which is precisely what is transmitted through rejoicing. Examining the expression מיסורה נשמה (mesirat nefesh), we find that, far from being self-centered, rejoicing is “self-sacrificing,” which is
the meaning of —understood not merely as laying down a life but as handing down a life in a forgetfulness of the self. Self-sacrifice in this sense is a giving that is teaching and testimony, and there is no tradition, no , without . For the meaning of the root verb (masar) is to “transmit” or “hand down.” The tradition handed down from generation to generation is not only the link that connects each to the other but is also the substance that holds each one together. And what is handed down through tradition, through the , is a or a “message” concerning the first things of what there is to hold dear.

Bearing in mind that is also the moral of a story, we realize that tradition is a tale that contains a teaching essential to life. To be sure, telling tales that harbor teachings is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Humanity’s most ancient means of transmitting tradition is what is known in Hebrew as (agadah), which means “legend,” “tale,” “story,” or “myth.” Truly among the first things, is older than human memory. Giving voice to the ineffable, it harbors the memory of the immemorial. One of its cognates, the verb (higid), means to “narrate” or “relate.” Therefore it is a form of utterance quite distinct from (davar) and (amar), verbs meaning to “speak” and to “say.”

In a comment on the Zohar’s distinction between speaking, saying, and relating (Zohar I, 234b), the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), explains that

... speaking and saying come from the surface, not from the depth of the soul. The mouth can sometimes speak what the heart does not feel. Even what the heart says can be at odds with what the man truly wills in his soul. But “relating” comes from the depths of a man’s being.

(Schneerson 1986b: 74)

Because relating comes from the depths of the soul, the term relate is to be understood not only as relating a tale but also as entering into a relation, both with the one who hears the tale and with the one who tells the tale. Indeed, to come to know another person is to come to know his or her story—and to become part of it through that knowing: to know the tale is to become part of the tale. The relating, therefore, is an interrelating, as when Jews gather at the Passover Seder to relate the most famous of all, the (Hagadah), which is the story of the liberation from Egypt. Without the transmission of the tradition through the tale, there is no liberation, no revelation.

The tales handed down in each generation bind that generation to those who precede and follow it; the tale is a link both to what has been and to what is yet to be. This binding together is conveyed in a cognate of , in the verb (agad), which means to “bind,” “unite,” or “join together.” Another noun that derives from this verb, (agudah), signifies a “society” or a “group”; it also connotes the “celestial vault.” The tradition transmitted through tales addresses not merely the course of human events but also the truths of the first things that come to us from the Most High. That is why the Sifre on Deuteronomy 11:22
urges us to study תרייעא, saying, “You wish to recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being? Learn Agadah for in Agadah you will find G-d” (Sifre Ekev 49). The One who spoke and brought the world into being not only spoke—He related: in the beginning is the tale, which is the tie that binds us to the first things, to the eternal things. What is transmitted through the “once upon a time” is the One who creates time through the insertion of holiness into creation. To hear “once upon a time” is to be summoned to listen.

The narration of tradition, or the תרייעא of תרייעא, therefore, is the most fundamental means of opening up the eternal ground of creation itself. For this reason תרייעא—tradition—is among the first things. And chief among the first things handed down in the narration of tradition is the תרייעא (masorah), the text or word of tradition—the Hebrew word, the holy word as the Hebrew word, revealed in the tales of tradition and in the commandments of Torah. What is received in the handing down of the תרייעא? The answer lies in a cognate of the verb meaning to “receive,” in קיבהל (kibeh): we receive the תרייעא (kabalah), understood as the oral tradition of Torah, as well as the esoteric meaning of the Writings and the Prophets.

Because this tradition is transmitted תרייעא ל תרייעא (peh el peh), “from mouth to mouth,” it is transmitted precisely as G-d transmitted the Divine image to the first human being. It is a kind of spiritual resuscitation received in the “greeting” of the face, as implied by the phrase קיבהל פנים (kibeh panim), which is to “greet” someone. Receiving the word of G-d, we come before the תרייעא (or panim) or the “light of the countenance,” from which the Torah emanates, as we affirm each day in our prayers: תרייעא פנים לפני נתן לך תורה חיים (beor paneikha natata lanu Torah chayim), “through the light of Your face You have given us the Torah of life.” Therefore, Rabbi Blech reminds us, “to forget the word of G-d is to be surrounded by darkness. The Hebrew word for darkness is שבח (choshekh). Rearrange its letters and you have שחת (shakhach), forget” (Blech 1993: 74; see also Horowitz 1960: 233). The darkness of forgetfulness is the darkness dispelled with the creation of light. It is the darkness that we continue to dispel through the narration of tradition grounded in the word of Torah.

And what is the substance of the word of Torah, which was uttered in the beginning, תרייעא? It is מסורא, ethics—not as indicated by the Musar Movement but as articulated in the ethical injunction. And because we are so enjoined, we rejoice. This rejoicing in and affirmation of what is eternally dear—and therefore eternally commanded—is what constitutes tradition as the manifestation of the eternal in time. Hence, if tradition is the history of the eternal in time, it is the history of the ethical in time. It is the history of G-d and the Good in a world that G-d pronounced to be good in the ברכיה (ki-tov), “it is good,” which was among the first things uttered in the beginning. The task that eternally confronts us as we respond to the problem of silence is to join our voices to the Voice that declares, “It is good.” It is the task of giving voice to the Voice itself.
Who is G-d? When Moses asks for His name, He identifies Himself as “I Am Who I Am” or “I Shall Be As I Shall Be”: אָתהַעַשְׂרֵה אָתֶהַעַשְׂרֵה (Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh). Therefore, Moses is to tell the children of Israel that I Shall Be has sent him (Exodus 3:14). But what sort of name is I Shall Be? How is such a name to be understood, especially when the tradition reveals many, many names of the One called I Shall Be? In the previous chapter it was suggested that the divine I Shall Be pertains to a future-oriented meaning in life that instills life with a sense of mission: G-d reveals Himself to Moses as I Shall Be and sends him to liberate the Israelites. With the revelation of the וַיְהִי the yet that instills existence with meaning comes into being. Open-ended and replete with possibility, the Divine וַיְהִי reveals G-d as the One who has no limit, who is confined to no horizon of being.

Mystically speaking, וַיְהִי lies on this edge between being and non-being, as it were: it is associated with the sefirah of Keter, which, as the highest of the ten sefirot, is beyond all being (see Gikatilla 1994: 349–371). The Midrash, on the other hand, says that the name I Shall Be means that “just as I am with the Jews in this exile, so shall I be with them in future exiles” (Shemot Rabbah 3:6). And Abraham Abulafia interprets וַיְהִי to mean “I shall be whatever you will be,” suggesting that the “being” or “essence” of G-d depends upon what we make of ourselves through the works of our hands (see Idel 1988b: 12). What these interpretations of the Name revealed to Moses have in common is this: the One who is וַיְהִי is more than all there is, prior to all there is, beyond all there is, and determinate of all there is. The revelation of the וַיְהִי, therefore, precedes the revelation of the Tetragrammaton, which is the “proper Name” of G-d (Exodus 3:15). And yet I Shall Be bears many names, many קְנָי (kinuyim), to use a term for “names of G-d” found in the mystical texts (see, for example, Toledot Yaakov Yosef, Emor 16). Signifying a “name” or a “name of G-d,” the word קְנָ (kinui, the singular form) has as its root the word קֵן (ken), which means “yes”: assuming a name, the Nameless One says, “Yes,” to creation.

The first name for G-d that appears in the Torah is בְּרֵאשִׁית (Elokim). The Zohar explains the origin of this name:

When the most Mysterious wished to reveal Himself, He first produced a single point which was transmuted into a thought, and in this He
executed innumerable designs, and engraved innumerable engravings. He further engraved with the sacred and mystic lamp a mystic and most holy design, which was a wondrous edifice issuing from the midst of thought. This is called נִבְרָיָה (Miḇərāyōh), or “Who,” and was the beginning of the edifice, existent and non-existent, deep buried, unknowable by name. It was only called נ. It desired to become manifest and to be called by name. It therefore clothed itself in a refulgent and precious garment and created נֶדֶל (eleh), or “These,” and נֶדֶל acquired a name. The letters of the two words intermingled, forming the complete name מִי-וֹקִיע (E-l-o-k-i-m).

(Zohar I, 2a)

My purpose here is not to delve into the mystical depths of this passage; but I do want to point out that underlying the names of the Holy One is the mystery of the Who, and not the principle of a what, as Greek thought suggests. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, the very presence of a Who in the midst of being is a transcendence of being. Which means: our every encounter with a Who is an encounter with G-d, and from the depths of the names and expressions for G-d there arises a summons from the Who.

Numerous volumes have been written on the myriad names of G-d, both as He is revealed in Torah and as He is mystically invoked in Kabbalah. Maimonides, in fact, states that “the holy, divine names are too numerous to count and all show the existence of angels who have levels one above the other” (Maimonides 1991: 204). Nachmanides, to take another example, notes that, according to the mystical tradition, the entire Torah, from beginning to end, “is composed of Names of the Holy One, blessed be He, and each and every section [of the Torah] contains a [Divine] Name upon [the basis of] which a particular matter was formed or accomplished or is dependent for existence” (Nachmanides 1978: 112). A variation of this teaching holds that Torah itself, with all its words written together as a single word, is regarded as the name of G-d: says the Zohar, “The whole Torah is an enfolding of the Divine Name, the most exalted Name, the Name that comprehends all other names” (Zohar II, 124a). Here we have a hint of what Judah Halevi asserts of the Divine Name, when he notes that . . . it is a proper name which takes no article . . . . Although its meaning is hidden, the letters of which it is composed speak. For it is the letters alef, heh, vav, and yud which cause all consonants to be sounded, as no letter can be pronounced as long as it is not supported by one of these four . . . . They form, so to speak, the spirit in the bodies of the consonants.

(Kitav al khazari 4:3)

Not only does the Name of the Holy One impart meaning to every name, but the Name of the One, who created through the utterance of His Name, makes possible every utterance. And what does He utter in the utterance of His Name? Torah.
Hence in the Zohar it is written further:

For the Torah is the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He. As the Name of the Holy One is engraved in the Ten Words (creative utterances) of creation, so is the whole Torah engraved in the Ten Words (Decalogue), and these Ten Words are the Name of the Holy One, and the whole Torah is thus one Name, the Holy Name of G-d Himself.

(Zohar II, 90b)

And: “The Torah consists wholly of the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and every letter of it is bound up with that Name” (Zohar III, 73a). In fact, says the Zohar, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah (the Talmud) “are intertwined and form one entity, and this is the sum of the Holy Name” (Zohar III, 113a). Thus, Nachman of Breslov teaches, “the written Name is the written Torah and the spoken Name is the Oral Torah” (quoted in Nathan of Nemirov 1973: 390).

Whatever else will be said of the names of G-d, this point from the mystical tradition is crucial, because it reveals two fundamental features of the very notion of G-d’s name: (1) G-d’s name is the basis of all that exists, and (2) G-d’s name conveys a commandment. G-d’s Name imparts meaning to creation because creation is born of that Name. And where there is meaning there is mission. Through G-d’s Name, creation is Commandment (cf. Rosenzweig 1999b: 91–92).

In the Talmud one finds a discussion of nine names of G-d that must never be erased (see Shevuot 35a); in the Zohar those nine names become ten names, with each name associated with one of the ten sefirot (see Zohar II, 42b). Following a development traceable to the Talmud, the mystical tradition known as the Kabbalah of Names is based on the permutations of the divine names that shape all of existence (see Idel 1988a: 8f.). In addition to the four-letter name of G-d, there is the seventy-two-letter name of G-d, with a three-letter name corresponding to each of the seventy-two letters.1 There are also the forty-two-letter and the twelve-letter names of G-d,2 as well as the sixty-three-, fifty-two-, and forty-five-letter names.3 Recall, further, the teaching from Rabbi Yochanan cited in Chapter 1, namely that when G-d created the heavens and the earth, His first utterance broke into seventy sparks. From those seventy sparks emerged the seventy languages of the world (Shabbat 88b). Here we may note that the Zohar associates each spark with a divine name, suggesting that language itself is a manifestation of the Holy Name.4 These seventy names of G-d, says the Zohar, are gathered into the single name שְׁמֵא (Shema), which, it will be recalled, means “hear” and begins the prayer “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One” (Zohar II, 216a). It is as if the prayer were saying, “Hear, for that hearing of G-d is G-d.”5 G-d is manifest in the movement of His witness, which is a hearing and a heeding. That movement is His movement. And His movement is His Name.

To be sure, speaking from the pages of the Midrash, G-d declares, “You wish to know My Name? I am called according to my deeds” (Shemot Rabbah 3:6); proceeding from this teaching, Maimonides explains that the names of G-d derive
from His actions: who G-d is lies in what He does (see Moreh Nevuchim 1:61). Further, Gikatilla devotes his Sha’are Orah to an examination of the ten names of G-d invoked in the Sefer Yetzirah (6:6). Corresponding to the ten sefirot, these ten names are the “gates of light” through which the Divine Presence emanates throughout the worlds of creation: who G-d is lies in how he enters creation (see A. Kaplan 1979: 143). Inasmuch as the hour of the Eternal’s entry into time is called Shabbat, or the Sabbath, we are taught that רןנ (Shabat), too, is one of G-d’s names (Zohar II, 88b; see also the Or HaChayim on Exodus 20:8): who G-d is lies in when He sanctifies his chosen. Finally, we recall that G-d is also called מ"מ;ח (HaMakom) or “the Place” (see, for example, Yoma 85b): who G-d is lies where His Presence abides, and that where has the potential of being every where that He is allowed to enter. It seems that G-d may not be so much a verb as an adverb, something added onto the verb from beyond the verb: G-d is the One who contains the how, when, and where of all that is—and that makes Him more than all that is. He abides in every interrogative, the ℏ (el or “G-d”) in the ℏר (shelah or “question”) who makes questioning not only possible but also meaningful.

The aim of this chapter, however, is not to report on the sublime studies of G-d’s names that the sages and the mystics have already accomplished. The interest here, rather, is to examine some ways of referring to G-d in Hebrew—ways of giving voice to the Voice—and to determine what those expressions reveal about Jewish thinking on the Holy One and the relation between the human and the divine. For the use of the names and expressions for G-d are ways of hearing G-d, as Judah Halevi suggests. No one, he maintains, “applies a distinct proper name to G-d, except he who hears His address, command, or prohibition, approval for obedience, and reproof for disobedience. He bestows on Him some name as a designation for Him who spoke to him” (Kitav al khazari 4:3). Because the life of the soul rests upon hearing G-d, the cry of “Tell me Thy Name!” is a way of pleading, “Save my soul!” From the standpoint of Jewish thought, that is what is at stake in the matter of seeking the names of the One who calls our name.

The name and the names of G-d

If it seems that the names of G-d are endless, it is because no name can define and thus confine G-d. This feature of G-d as the Absolute and the Infinite makes every letter of every name, every name and every utterance, meaningful. Because G-d is beyond naming, His names are without end. To be sure, one way of referring to G-d in Hebrew is the expression ℏ (Ein Sof), meaning “There Is No End.” This is G-d as One who is ℏ (nistar), that is, “hidden” or “concealed,” the One we refer to not by name but as “He,” in the “third person,” which is another meaning of ℏ. An expression that appears throughout kabbalistic texts, ℏ signifies G-d’s infinitude—not as the One who goes on and on and on forever, but as the One who encompasses all that goes on and on and on forever, both within and beyond space and time. Here it is worth recalling a point made by Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira. He notes that we bless G-d’s holy Name in both the
second and third person: when we say, “Blessed are You, Lord our G-d,” we address G-d by His Name, but when we say, “Blessed is He who spoke and created the world,” we invoke the One who is beyond the Name, who is Ḥayye—we invoke the Ḥeyyeh, whose names are endless (Shapira 2000: 108).

Because G-d is more than all there is, He is not reducible to a single name. Indeed, it is just the opposite, as one of His names suggests: it is the name Ṣọm (emet), which is “Truth.” Consisting of the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet, this name contains all the letters, all the words, and therefore all the names that can be formed in the holy tongue. To refer to G-d as Ṣọm is to invoke G-d as the source not only of all truth but also of all names and of every word. Thus the One who is the Ṣọm is called Ṣọ́m (HaShem), or “the Name.”

This term is used not simply to avoid pronouncing the Tetragrammaton Ḥayye (yud-hey-vav-hey); nor is it merely to suggest that G-d has one proper Name and no other, as if the issue of standing in a relation to the Holy One were a matter of correctly identifying Him. Far beyond such considerations, to refer to G-d as Ṣọ́m is to affirm that “all that is formed and all that is spoken”—all that is real and meaningful—“emanates from one Name” (Sefer Yetzirah 2:5). When G-d speaks and thus summons the world into existence, He speaks His Name. While language contains names and nouns, it does not contain the Name; rather, the Name contains language. The Name, therefore, is not something we use to call upon G-d—it is how G-d calls upon us, as the Zohar suggests: “The Great Voice is the root of all things, and is the essence of the Holy Divine Name” (Zohar II, 226b). Indeed, the great mystic Abraham Abulafia maintains that “the pronunciation of the true Name is dialogue between man and G-d” (quoted in Idel 1988a: 87). That is what makes the Holy Name the Ṣọ́m (Shem Hameforash), which is the “Ineffable Name,” or literally the “Explicit Name” or “the Name Itself,” distinct from all other names and unlike any other name.

Further, as the Great Voice who summons us, Ṣọ́m is the One who is “there,” who is Ṣọ́m (sham), not as a blind principle or an abstract essence—not as an indifferent It—but as an involved He or She. The One who is Ṣọ́m, therefore, is like one who bears a Ṣọ́m (shem), a name: He is One who listens and calls out, not a logos we derive or a phenomenon we experience but One with whom we enter into a relation. Recalling that Ṣọ́m [or Ṣọ́m (shamah)] means not just “there” but “to there,” we realize that Ṣọ́m is the One we move toward. Now one expression for “toward” in Hebrew is Ṣọ́m (lekivun); literally meaning “in the direction of,” Ṣọ́m is a cognate of Ṣọ́m (kivun) and Ṣọ́m (kavanah), which mean “direction” and “meaning” respectively. If Ṣọ́m is the One we move toward, it is because He is the One who imparts direction and meaning to life: to have meaning is to have direction. Another word for “toward” or “to there” is the preposition Ṣọ́m (el); as indicated above, written as Ṣọ́m, with a tseire vowel point, the word means “G-d,” confirming the truth that movement in life is movement toward G-d. And He is the One who moves toward us.

As the Name that permeates being from within and beyond being, G-d is also known as the Ṣọ́m (Shem Havayah), or the “Name of Being” (as in, for example, the Or Hachayim on Leviticus 18). Which is to say: G-d is the meaning of being.
From the standpoint of ontological thought, being has no inherent meaning or name; being is simply what is there, not who is there. Neutral and indifferent, it is deaf and dumb, an “it” whose silence is but a rumbling and whose rumbling is a just a noise. According to such an understanding of being, G-d is not the Creator but is, at best, the Supreme Being, the Unmoved Mover, the First Cause, or the First Principle—all of which are utterly indifferent and therefore utterly alien to Jewish thought. Understood as sheer perfection, such a god is in need of nothing: as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) asserts, it neither loves nor is in need of love (see, for example, Aristotle’s Eudemian Ethics, VII, 1244b; see also Heschel, Vol. 2, 1975: 12ff). Cause, principle, and other “big bangs” are not called by name: we do not cry out, “Father!” to a concept or to some primal event in the past. Nor does such being ask what G-d asks Adam and each of us: “Where are you?”

The Jewish understanding of G-d as Creator—as the One who summons life into being in an act of love and who is constantly in search of His beloved—views G-d not only as ה:ה ו:ה, as the One who is the Name of Being, but also as the name of our very being. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz comments:

When a person contemplates this truth that He is our very life, then the thought takes us beyond the fact of His greatness to the core of one’s own self . . . . Thus, when we say, “He is our life,” the intention here is not that He is the giver of life, but that He Himself is our life. When I search for the I in the body, I find the I of the soul; when I search for the I of the soul, I find the I of the Divine.

(Steinsaltz 1989: 6)

Coming to the I of the Divine, I come not to the Supreme Being but to the One who is precisely otherwise than being, beyond the coordinates of space and time. Not the All Powerful but the One who determines the meaning of power; not the best of the good but the One who determines the meaning of the good.

Revealing Himself as I—as אני (Anokhi)—at Mount Sinai, G-d reveals to us that all I-saying is a breach of being; for, as the Chasidic master Aharon of Karlin (1736–1772) taught, only G-d can say I (see Wiesel 1982c: 39; see also Zevin 1980: 205). Why? Because the I-saying of G-d, which is the ground of all I-saying, comes from beyond being, which is to say: He is not perfect—He is holy. As the Holy One, G-d has a name because G-d is beyond essence; He has a name because He is more than He is: He is eternally more and therefore eternally meaningful. Only as the Name of Being calls out the name of the soul can the soul come into being to occupy space and time and thus take on a name and a meaning. The soul is not a subject who imposes its will on the world; rather, the soul is the object of G-d’s creation, the means by which He acts upon His creation. That is why human I-saying reveals a trace of the Divine utterance of I: not merely because we are like G-d but because we come into being through a Divine will.
Further, only inasmuch as G-d is otherwise than being can G-d care about world and humanity. And only because G-d cares can we enter into an argument with Him—which brings us to another meaning of הַנִּיחַ: it is “argument” or “dispute.” As the Name of Being, G-d is revealed as the Name of Argument, as the One in whose name we enter into argument, sometimes with G-d Himself, as when Abraham challenges Him, saying, השג אֵל אִתָּךְ אֵל שָׁמָיִם הממקם (hashofet kol-haaretz lo yaaseh mishpat), “Will the Judge of all the earth not do justice?” (Genesis 18:25). It is in the name of הַנִּיחַ that Abraham poses the question to הַנִּיחַ. Indeed, the Talmud teaches that G-d likes to be defeated in such arguments (see, for example, Pesachim 119a). The question that Abraham puts to G-d comes in their first encounter after the Covenant is sealed; it is precisely the sealing of the Covenant that makes such a questioning possible. The Covenant is made not with mute Being but with One who speaks and listens—who calls our name and whose Name we seek.

Taking up an argument with הַנִּיחַ, moreover, is not only possible—at times it is required. For entering into a covenant is not like entering into a contract; it is like entering into a marriage. The human being here becomes to G-d what Eve was to Adam: an אֶזֶר קֶנֶגֶדו (ezer kenegdo), a “helper against him” (Genesis 2:20). Just as “it is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), it is not good for G-d to be alone. Thus G-d, the bearer of the Name, cries out, “Only when you are My witnesses, am I G-d, but when you are not My witnesses, I—if one dare speak thus—am not G-d” (Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 12:6; see also Sifre on Deuteronomy 33:5). The Name of Being longs for the disputation undertaken for the sake of the Name. Because it is not good for either G-d or the human being to be alone, the One who is like no other—who is absolutely other than anything in all of being—enters being to engage the human being in an argument. We are never less alone than when we are wrestling with G-d, as when Jacob wrestled at Peniel (Genesis 32:25–31).

The name לֶאַרְכָּל (Yisrael) or Israel, meaning “he who wrestles with G-d,” is derived from this wrestling that frees us from the solitude of being, within which philosophy confines us. It is a wrestling that becomes an embrace, as it attests to the Name of Being, affirming that only what is unlike being can be better than being. And only what is better than being can draw us out of the harrowing solitude of our being. That is why to be named לֶאַרְכָּל is to be blessed. Each time we pray מִי קָהָמְרוּ (mi khamokhah), “who is like You,” as Moses prayed upon crossing the sea (Exodus 15:11), we affirm the singularity of the One who alone reveals to us that we are not alone, that we are definitively tied to Him and to our fellow human beings. This singularity that belongs to G-d is what makes G-d יִחדְשׁוּל (Yichud Shel Olam), the “Unique One of the World,” unique because He enters the world both from beyond the world and from within the world, so that we are not swallowed up by the world or by the Creator of the world. The world can never be a sign of its own significance any more than a man can pick himself up by his own hair; the substance and significance of the world can derive only from the Singularity, from the יִחדְשׁוּל, who is other than the world. There alone lies all substance and significance of the world.
G-d as the significance of all there is

One of the most common ways of referring to G-d is by the phrase א-ר ב-ו א-ל (Hakadosh Barukh Hu), which means “the Holy One, Blessed be He.” Having already commented (for the moment) on ב-ו א-ל (Hakadosh), or “the Holy One,” as what is otherwise than being, let us consider ב-ו א (berakh). The verb ב-ו (berakh), from which we have the word ב-ו (berachot), means not only to “bless” but also to “thank,” as in the phrase ב-ו א-ל (berakh HaShem), meaning “thank G-d,” which is why Joseph Albo points out that ב-ו pertains both to the one who bestows and to the one who receives (Sefer HaIkkarim 2:26). As the Holy One, G-d is the Giving One, for holiness manifests itself in giving; hence the Holy One is the One to whom our thanks are due, even before we perceive what there is to be thankful for. It is a gratitude for our very being, regardless of circumstance, a gratitude for the opportunity to give thanks for all we give, as it is through our own giving that holiness enters our lives. That is why the great talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva could sing songs of praise and thanksgiving unto א-ר ב-ו א-ל even as he was being tortured to death: “Now,” he affirmed, “I can give G-d everything” (Berakhot 61b).

Indeed, nothing is more essential to attaining a nearness to G-d than thanksgiving. A life full of significance is a life transformed into a cry of gratitude; in a very profound sense, life’s meaning lies in giving thanks. As the Chasidic master Barukh of Medzebozh (1757–1810) once cried out, “How could I live without gratitude?” (see Wiesel 1982c: 39). Thus the first words to come from our mouths upon returning to life each morning are מ-ד א-ל (modeh ani lefaneikha), “I give thanks before You.” The You in this “thank You”—the You that reverberates in every offering of thanks—is the I who renders possible every utterance of “I.” For this is the You whose first utterance at Mount Sinai was י-ו (יִהְיֶה), “I.” The You in “thank You,” then, is א-ל, the Holy One, whose nearness we seek each time we give thanks or utter a blessing. Here it is significant to note that ב-ו (brakah) or “blessing” also means “greeting”: we greet G-d, א-ר ב-ו א-ל, by giving thanks. And in the midst of our thanksgiving we discover the very substance and significance of all there is.

Such a realization is the realization of the responsibility that is at the very core of our subjectivity, as it happens when we peer into the eyes of a newborn babe. From the depths of those circles of darkness in the infant’s eyes we receive a revelation and a summons. During that moment of clarity, in a life otherwise clouded and confused, we know why we live and what must be done. And we know precisely that we are obligated to do it. Thus we encounter G-d as the ב-ו (Mechuyav-HaMetsiut), as the One who “Affirms Reality” or “Obliges Reality”—or better, who affirms the nearness of reality by infusing reality with “duty,” with ח-ו (chovah), a cognate of ב-ו. Glancing up from the eyes of the infant, we see that reality has been transformed: suddenly the street we walk everyday assumes a different look. Having glimpsed what obliges and affirms all reality, we no longer walk the street—we pursue a path. Significantly, the phrase ה-ו ח-ו also means “necessary” and “vital,” indicating a necessity that is life affirming; indeed,
the noun ברייתב (chiyuv), another cognate of ברייתא (by"jum), means both “affirmation” and “obligation.” The life we affirm obliges us in our very affirmation of it.

For the life we affirm is precisely the life of the One Who Affirms and Obliges All Reality, the One who affirms us in our affirmation of Him. Neither G-d’s creature nor G-d’s world has any life without this affirmation and obligation. The life we affirm is the צ"ל (Chey HaOlamim), the “Life of the Worlds” or the “Life of the Eternal,” which in Hebrew is yet another way of referring to G-d (see, for example, Daniel 12:7). The life we hold in our hands and encounter each day is holy because it harbors a trace of the צ"ל. That the worlds or eternity would have a life tells us that, contrary to what speculative philosophy maintains, being is not simply there—it is alive. Because it is alive, all that unfolds within being unfolds according to a certain wisdom or intelligence; thus we have the phrase השכלה והשכל (HaSeckel HaPoel), which refers to G-d as the “Intelligence at Work.” The word השכל (poel) is from השכל (paal), which means to “do,” “make,” “work,” “act,” and “create.” This expression tells us that G-d’s work is the act of creation; it tells us that His wisdom is manifest throughout creation; it tells us that the Life of the Worlds is precisely the Intelligence at Work all around us all the time in a constant renewal of creation.

The intelligence that constitutes life—both in its particular manifestation and in its universal revelation—comes from a realm beyond being, just as the design of a piece of pottery comes from beyond the piece itself. Being cannot contain G-d any more that the pot can contain the potter. In Hebrew, in fact, both G-d and the potter are called יוצר (Yotser), one who “forms,” as in the daily blessing יוצר אור (yoster or), meaning “who forms light,” so that light assumes a form and therefore a meaning. Both G-d and the potter give form to what is formless to create a vessel that might hold something life-sustaining. In the case of the potter, who is of this world, form precedes substance; that is, meaning is not an issue until we ask, “The meaning of what?” In the case of G-d, however, substance “precedes” form, so that every form has meaning. For unlike the potter, G-d both encompasses and is in the midst of His vessel; unlike the pot, heaven and earth are in a continual state of beginning, coming into being at every instant through the utterance of the Creator. That is what it means to be the Creator, יוצר, who creates life out of nothing—or better, who creates life out of the Life that He is. The pot is not made of the potter; but the צ"ל, the Life of the Worlds, is made of the יוצר who is the Creator of Life.

Further, the life that is the צ"ל is eternal because it is eternally already there. Eternity is not an infinite accumulation of days, which is merely the multiplication of time; rather, eternity is the already that constitutes all time. Thus another expression denoting G-d as eternal is אלהי קדום (Elokei Kedem), which means the “Ancient G-d” or the “Eternal G-d,” eternal because ancient, where ancient refers not merely to a time long ago but to what is eternally already. Because G-d is eternal, it already matters how we speak, act, and treat one another, before any of us enters into a particular situation. The situation does not determine the good; rather the good judges the situation from a position that is always prior to the situation, always
older than any context, eternally \( \mu \) (kodem) or “before.” Because the \( \mu \) is always already there, we are always already summoned to help others regardless of circumstance. Meaning in life derives from this \( \text{already} \). For it contains the movement “forward,” \( \text{kadimah} \), which is the path implied by meaning.

**G-d as the ground of all meaning**

We can elaborate on this idea of the One whose eternity lies in this \( \text{already} \) if we consider another expression that refers to G-d: \( \text{Atik-Yomin} \) (Atik-Yomin), or the “Ancient of Days” (as in Daniel 7:9, for instance). The ancient G-d is not really, really old: rather, He is the One whose antiquity signifies the eternity that is \( \text{already} \), the \( \text{shai} \) that already precedes the \( \text{zayin} \) of the beginning. To be sure, Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that “the real meaning of the word [\( \text{shai} \)] atik is ‘cut,’ ‘cut off,’ ‘torn from,’ or ‘separated.’ We should translate atik as ‘the one who is separated from the days’” (Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 70). Hence the Zohar associates the \( \text{shai} \) with \( \text{Keter} \), the highest of the sefirot. The emanation that precedes all emanations, it is the bridge between the \( \text{shai} \) and creation; it is the “thorn” in the \( \text{yud} \) of the Divine Name, the mere dot that is prior to the Hebrew letters that constitute heaven and earth—prior to the \( \text{zayin} \) in \( \text{Baal Shem} \) (see Schochet 1979: 69–71). The \( \text{shai} \) is the G-d who constitutes life time by imparting meaning to the days of our lives before the day begins; older than the sum of days, the Ancient of Days fills our days with destiny. Recall in this connection Abraham Joshua Heschel’s insight that “time is the presence of G-d in the world of space” (Heschel 1981: 100). And the presence of G-d in the world of space is the presence of meaning in the realm of life.

Meaning opens up the \( \text{yet to be} \) in the light of a summons that is already and eternally uttered. Meaning imparts urgency to life. Meaning is time. A life void of meaning languishes in the moment at hand; for one who is thus adrift between nostalgia and dread, never here but forever elsewhere, the days drag and the years fly. A life filled with the \( \text{shai} \), on the other hand, is a life whose time is instilled with the eternal and is therefore eternally new. It is a life of mission and direction, whose eternal point of reference is the \( \text{shai} \), the Ancient of Days who takes hold of us as we seize the day. It is the Ancient of Days who renews our days as in the days of antiquity; He gives us a future by making us contemporary with our forebears. The \( \text{shai} \) is He who commands us \( \text{on this day} \), \( \text{hayom} \) (hayom), to lay the words spoken at Mount Sinai upon our heart (see Deuteronomy 6:6).

Inasmuch as the days are measured by the luminaries of the heavens, time belongs to a dimension of height, where height is understood not as a physical but as a metaphysical dimension. Because time is measured from on high and meaning is made of time, meaning rests in the Most High. Indeed, the Midrash Tanchuma teaches that G-d first created the heavens and then the earth so as to begin His creation with the dimension of height that would impart meaning to the rest of the world (Tanchuma Bereshit 1). The One who is the \( \text{shai} \), then, is the \( \text{Rokhev Shamaim} \), that is, the “One who Rides the Heavens,” or who “Mounts the
Mounting and riding the heavens, G-d controls the heavens from above the heavens, which is to say: the luminaries are guided not by the laws of nature but by the reins of G-d. Thus the who is already before is the who is already above. Life has meaning because this before and above are synonymous. For Jewish thought, such is the metaphysical time and space in which meaning is grounded.

While speculative philosophy seeks the firm ground under its feet, the Jewish thought that unfolds through Hebrew finds its “certainty,” its (vadai), in what is eternally above and eternally already. The ground may shift, but the already is certain; we may lose our bearings, but we can always look up. What is certain is that the Good has already chosen us before we make any choices between good and evil, and that we are judged from above for what we choose. That is why it matters whether we choose good or evil. The word is another Hebrew expression for G-d, then, not because we are always certain of what must be done, but because we are always certain that it matters. Meaning in life is steeped in this certainty, in this clarity, in this that is G-d. Even when we are confused about which path to follow in life, we have no doubt that one path is better than another. Though the ground under our feet may crumble, we must still tread a path.

The certainty or that is the ground of which He imparts to life can be expressed in another Hebrew phrase; it is (Tsur Yisrael), the “Rock of Israel” (see, for instance, 2 Samuel 23:3). While the word also means “fortress” or “refuge,” the foundation and security implied by the phrase is not reducible to the security of arms and ramparts. Rather, it is the security of meaning, of what lies beyond all concern for security. Like the path that remains even when the ground is gone, this security is an assurance that exceeds safety. It is the security of having something to live for and thus something—or better, someone—to die for. It is the security that we do not live and die in vain, that in our life, as well as in our death, we have a mission to accomplish.

Thus the does not protect us from death; He protects us from meaningless death, from a life lived and a death endured for nothing. For there is no terror greater than this terror over empty and meaningless suffering and death. The does not protect us from suffering; He protects us from this terror, so that we have a refuge without having to transform our home into a fortress that inevitably falls. For suffering and death breach the walls of every fortress. The is the rock not of the firm ground but of the good deed, which endures beyond the death that besieges us, unto the thousandth generation, as it is written (Exodus 20:6). Recalling that is also a verb that means to “besiege,” we discover that the besieges us with meaning even as we are besieged with death. That we are so besieged is the mystery of life and death.

In the face of this mystery, the G-d who is the Rock of Israel and the ground of Certainty is the (Chakham HaRazim), or the “Sage of the Secrets” (see, for example Bamidbar Rabbah 21:2), that is, the One who knows all secrets and fathoms every mystery. By this phrase we understand G-d to be far more than One who knows our every thought and deed, as if G-d were a kind of super spy.
Beyond His knowledge of what we ourselves secretly know and are afraid to admit, as the רְאוּי יָדָהו, G-d knows all that we do not and can never know. And it is precisely what lies beyond our knowledge that gives meaning to our knowledge; it is the mystery beyond the horizon of our understanding that summons us to draw nigh unto that horizon, even though it recedes as we approach it. As the רְאוּי יָדָהו, G-d is the master of the mystery that gives meaning to all our knowledge. Without mystery knowledge is nothing more than power; and if knowledge is nothing more than power, then it is meaningless. Reduced to power, knowledge is nothing more than the information that is ignorance of the holy; for the holy lies not in power but in truth, not in might but in spirit (cf. Zechariah 4:6).

It must be noted that the mystery tied to רְאוּי יָדָהו is not a form of ignorance; rather, it is a mode of understanding and thinking, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has pointed out. Mystery, he says, “is not a synonym for the unknown but rather a name for a meaning which stands in relation to G-d” (Heschel 1959: 51–52). Jacob Immanuel Schochet notes further that the numerical equivalence of רְאָה (raa), or “mystery,” and רָא (ra), or “light,” implies a connection between the creation of light and the creation of mystery (Schochet 1979: 42). Like the light created in the beginning, the mystery is a means of knowing G-d. It is not the light of reason or the “natural light” invoked by Descartes (1596–1650) and other such thinkers (see, for example, Descartes’s Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, 38). Rather, it is the light by which we behold the holy and the human in a single vision.

The mystery or רְאוּי יָדָהו, then, is the mystery of the meta- in the metaphysical; it is the mystery of the above that is also within; it is the mystery of a knowing that is a seeking. Entering into a relation to the mystery, we seek the One who is forever seeking us, who is manifest in our very seeking, in the awe and the devotion that drive our thinking. Here we recall yet another expression for G-d: בָּאל מַחֲשָׁבֹת (Baal Machashavot), the “Master of Thoughts” (see, for example, Rashi’s commentary on the phrase in Sanhedrin 19b). Suggesting far more than G-d’s knowledge of our thoughts, this phrase also refers to a deep thinker, one whose thinking takes him to the depths where something more than thought is revealed in the very phenomenon of thinking. What is revealed as the בָּאל מַחֲשָׁבֹת, in other words, is G-d as the “Owner of Thoughts,” that is, the One who makes thought itself possible. It is not that G-d is a “deep thinker,” but rather that thinking takes on a depth that exceeds acumen, impelled by an urgency that exceeds curiosity, only in the light of a relation to G-d. In that relation thinking is a form of prayer; it is a conversation. This too is a characteristic of Jewish thought.

For Jewish thought, the relation of the thinker to the mystery underlying thought is not comparable to philosophy’s view of the link between the human mind and the universal logos or between thought and being. While the logos may be seen as a principle of order that governs thought, it ultimately fails to generate meaning because it intends nothing. By contrast, the word בָּאל מַחֲשָׁבֹת indicates not only thoughts and ideas but also plans and intentions. As its cognate שָׁוָא (chashw), meaning “important,” suggests, בָּאל מַחֲשָׁבֹת is thought guided by a concern for a higher aim; it is the affirmation of a righteousness that is higher and more precious than
power. Righteousness gives meaning to all; it is the mystery, of which G-d is the great. It transforms our fortress into a home, so that in our thinking we take no thought for ourselves but only for what is most precious. Thus righteousness makes dwelling possible, beyond the struggle for survival.

G-d as the foundation of all righteousness

Understood in terms of dwelling, righteousness is a key to understanding G-d, as one discovers upon examination of another expression for G-d in Hebrew: it is נֶאוֹחֵה תְּסֶדֶק (Neveh Tsedek), the “Dwelling Place of Righteousness” (from Jeremiah 31:22). This phrase is also used to refer to the Temple, whose light emanates from its windows to transform the land into a dwelling place, making it into a land, and not just a piece of real estate or a slice of geography (see Tanchuma Tetsaveh 6).

To be sure, when combined with חָקֵד (hakodesh), or the “holy,” “land” is another meaning of נֶאֶה (naveh), as in the expression נֶאֶה חָקֵד, which is the “Land of Israel” or the “Holy Land”—or better: the “Dwelling Place of the Holy.” Only where the holy dwells can there be a dwelling place for the human being. And only as long as Israel is the Holy Land—a dwelling place, potential or real, for the People of the Covenant—can humanity hope to dwell in the world.

Derived from the holy, righteousness is prior to the dwelling place, just as the Ancient of Days is prior to the days of our lives. Since הָרְשָׁע, or “righteousness,” may also be translated as “justice,” חָקֵד נֶאֶה may also be rendered as the “Dwelling Place of Justice.” Justice signifies a primal order—or better, a primal care and commandment—that characterizes the holy. Above all, it signifies an ethical relation that Rabbi Don Isaac Abrabanel associates with שלום (shalom) or “peace,” which, he points out, is also one of the names of G-d (Abrabanel 1991: 62, 79). Why? Because peace brings “wholeness” or שלמות (shlemut) to the relation between one human being and another. In contrast to a justice that would balance the scales or “get even,” then, חָקֵד introduces a vertical dimension to the horizontal relation; that is where a dwelling that is more than surviving—more than securing one’s rights—becomes possible. Defined by the dimension of height or of the holy, dwelling is characterized by giving, as when we invite others to our table and offer them bread. Here justice is not only חָקֵד but also תמיס (tsedakah), which is giving without any interest in reciprocity or in balancing the scales. Conceived as giving, תמיס is justice conceived as holiness, which is to say: conceived as gratitude, as a gratitude for gratitude itself, a gratitude not for receiving but for giving. In short, it is justice conceived as righteousness—without which there can be neither world nor dwelling place. As חָקֵד נֶאֶה, G-d is the place of dwelling because G-d is the place of giving. What does He give? He gives life. And He gives life to the world by giving righteousness to the world.

A related expression referring to G-d as the foundation of all righteousness is חָצִדֵק חוֹלֵם (Tsadik HaOlamin), which means the “Righteous One of the Worlds.” That He is the Righteous One of the Worlds implies that G-d is not only the...
foundation of righteousness but that creation itself—all of reality, in this world and all worlds—rests on righteousness. Righteousness is not a cultural invention, as postmodernist thought maintains; rather, it makes culture possible. Upheld by righteousness, everything that exists has both value and design; nothing is merely “there,” neutral and value free; nothing is accidental. This idea brings to mind the legend of the Lamed Vav, of the thirty-six righteous people—the thirty-six צדיקים (tsadikim)—in each generation whose righteousness sustains all of creation—from above. The world, in other words, does not rest on the shoulders of Atlas, that is, on forces of might or even on forces of nature. Nothing physical—nothing existent—sustains existence. This bears repeating: Nothing existent sustains existence. The world, rather, rests on something above it, on something it never touches but that is nevertheless in its midst, touching it. That is why pursing a path is not the same as clinging to the firm ground, as the first philosopher, Thales of Miletus (c. 620–546 B.C.E.), did. No, the path of righteousness rests on the metaphysical, and the metaphysical is precisely the dimension of height, which defines righteousness of the צדיקים.

The צדיקים is made manifest in this world as the ה’ הוא השם ה’ (Ziv HaOlam), or the “Glory of the World.” The word ה’ or “glory,” in this phrase signifies something more authoritative than omnipotence. It signifies the authority of righteousness and goodness; it signifies an ethical height revealed through a commandment from on high. What is understood as ה’, therefore, is neither the object of contemplation nor a theme that might be postulated. Surpassing human utterance and eloquence, it is an afterimage that shows itself not as a shadow but as a light. Recalling that ה’ also means “light,” “luster,” or “brilliance,” we understand the glory of G-d to be the radiance of the testimony borne in every act of loving kindness, a testimony that implicates us even as it enlightens us. To be thus implicated is to have open before us the path to the ה’ הוא השם ה’ (Glory of the World). Each time we encounter an ethical truth—each time we witness the example of the righteous—we stand accused. For to know this truth is to know we have fallen short of the truth. And yet, knowing what must be done, we may find atonement in acting on what we have come to understand. In that and yet lies the ה’ הוא השם ה’.

The issue of atonement in the world is intelligible only in relation to the One who is the “Lord of the World,” the ה’ הוא השם ה’ (Adon Olam). Authority—the authority of the good—requires atonement, and ה’ הוא השם ה’ indicates such an authority. As the sole authority of the world—as the ה’ הוא השם ה’ (Melekh HaOlam) or “King of the Universe”—only the Most High can summon the ascent that is the movement of atonement. Considering another meaning of the word ה’ הוא השם ה’, however, we find that the ה’ הוא השם ה’ is more than the authority who rules over the world; He is the posessor of the world, the owner of our very lives and of all that sustains our lives. Therefore the מצווי of peah—of leaving a portion of one’s harvest for the poor and for the stranger—is, like the Holy One Himself, without limit (see Peah 1a; see also Chagigah 7a). Atonement is required before the ה’ הוא השם ה’ because our lives, body and soul, are not our own to do with as we please. Life, Heschel states, is “a transcendental loan; I have neither initiated nor conceived its worth and
meaning” (Heschel 1959: 62). Therefore I am accountable for it before the Infinite One, as something of infinite value that has been entrusted to me. Coming before the מנהיג, we have no rights to insist upon; what we can invoke is the Covenant of our fathers and the tradition of our teachers as transmitted through the Torah.

In that transmission of the Torah we have the key to understanding yet another term for G-d: דוד ת"ש (Ribon Kol HaMaasim), which means “Master of All Actions,” of all “events” and “deeds.” Noting that the verb הדש (asah), which is the root of הדש (asah), means not only to “do” but also to “fulfill,” we see that the Lord of all actions, events, and deeds is He who brings fulfillment or meaning to all actions. How? Precisely through the giving of the Torah. That is what makes the Torah “the blueprint of all creation” (see Zohar I, 5a): part of Torah is the fact that G-d has given it to the world. Fulfillment, then, is not the fulfillment of our own designs and desires; rather, it is the fulfillment of G-d’s will as it is expressed in the Torah. Everything that transpires is meaningful because Torah is meaningful. And since all things are meaningful, the Torah addresses us through all things.

This address arising from Torah and coming to us through all things is the basis for understanding the Torah itself to be the Name of G-d: when G-d speaks to us, He speaks His Name. Because G-d addresses us at every instant through every detail of everything all around us, He is the מנהיג. And when G-d addresses us, He teaches us by commanding us, making every moment a moment of revelation. Indeed, the word מנהיג is a cognate of רבי (rav), which means “teacher,” so that we may understand מנהיג to be “master” in the sense of “teacher.” We are not only G-d’s creatures—we are His disciples. Thus in our morning prayers we call out to the One who דוד ת"ש (teladom chukey chayim), that is, who “taught [our forefathers] the laws of life.”

Further, since G-d teaches through all actions, all actions are about something; that is to say, all actions are part of a providential design through which we are summoned to a destiny. And since the events of the world belong to a design, they form a kind of narrative: they are about something in the way that a story is about something, transmitting a message that is not subject to direct communication. Recall the comments in Chapter 2 on the מסר (meser) or the “message” that comes to us through tradition like the moral of a story. Recall, too, what is written in the Sifre about Agadah, or the tales of the tradition: “You wish to recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being? Learn Agadah for in Agadah you will find G-d” (Sifre Ekev 49). The tale that constitutes tradition is part of the tale that constitutes creation, and the tale of creation is the never-ending story of G-d. This point becomes clear when we recall that חסם (maaseh) also means “story” or “tale.” As the teacher who teaches us through the events that transpire around us—as the מנהיג—we are summoned to a destiny. How does G-d create? By telling a tale.

A teaching from the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson hydration, that was mentioned in the previous chapter comes to mind. It is
worth recalling: the Rebbe explains that, unlike speaking and saying, “‘relating’ comes from the depths of a man’s being” (Schneerson 1986b: 74). Connecting this with what we have understood about G-d as the רהמ הלאך, we see that if G-d creates through utterance, that utterance is more than saying or speaking: it is relating, particularly when G-d creates the human being. There G-d does not simply speak, saying, “Let there be”; rather, he blows the נשמת חיים (nishmat chayim), the “breath” or “soul of life,” into the human being from the very depths of His own Being (see Genesis 2:7). Nor does He make myriads of human beings, as He did with the animals; rather, He summons His inner Being to create a single being. Thus the tale of creation begins with a breath-to-breath relation. The sign that the human being is created in G-d’s image and likeness is not merely that the human being is a speaking being, as Maimonides maintains when he asserts, “The thing which is called man consists of life and speech” (Moreh Nevuchim 1:51). More than speech, what makes the human being one who is created in G-d’s image—what distinguishes the life that is breathed into the human being—is a capacity for telling tales. If man consists of life and speech, he consists of tradition and tales.

Just as G-d creates the fundamental relation in the creation of the first human being, so are we summoned to engender relation with this human being by sustaining his or her life. The tale that comprises the meaning of creation is the tale of human relation, as it is pursued in the light of a higher relation. For the tale that we relate has meaning because the relation to G-d is at the core of the relation to the other human being.

G-d as the depth of human relation

G-d is He who attends to the care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (see Deuteronomy 10:18), and who, through His example, commands us to do likewise. Why the widow, the orphan, and the stranger? Because these are the ones who exemplify a state of being radically alone that haunts any human being; they suffer a kind of violence in the intractable solitude and homelessness of their condition. They have nowhere to turn, no one to appeal to; they are at the mercy of the world around them. To be sure, in a sense the other human being is always at our mercy. Inasmuch as the other is thus in our care, we stand in a paternal relation to that other person, regardless of age differences. Our relation to the other human being has meaning precisely because he or she is just such an orphan. Known as the אבי י Enemies (Avi Yetomim), the “Father of the Fatherless” (as in Psalms 68:6, for example), G-d is He who announces that we are not locked into the solitude of our being. How do we escape that solitude? By attending to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, as the אבי י Enemies does.

Inasmuch as we have lost a sense of purpose and direction—inasmuch as we are flooded with a sense of emptiness and aimlessness—we are all orphaned. For we have lost the wisdom of our fathers that would show us the path to the paternal relation that alone frees us of our isolation. Having lost a relation to our fathers, we have lost the ability to be fathers: we have lost the capacity for the care
and the protection of the other human being, which is a capacity for human relation. If we are to seek the hidden and thus overcome our radical isolation, we too must become a father to the fatherless; we too must transmit a teaching and a testimony, the care and loving kindness and the protection of a father, to the other person. We realize the actuality of the Father of the Fatherless, then, not in the care we receive but precisely in the care that we give. And so once again we find that holiness lies in giving. In that giving we begin to fathom what it means to be holy as the Holy One is holy. In that encounter we move into the depth of human relation. Hence in that encounter we realize that we are not alone, for we realize that we are the other, or, in the words of Emmanuel Lévinas, that “the soul is the other in me” (Lévinas 1981: 191).

This oneness with the other person is not a mystical union by which we lose our identity; rather, it points up the wholeness of a relation by which we arrive at our identity. This oneness is akin to a marital union, as one can see from another Hebrew expression for G-d: He is the Dayan Almanot (Dayan Almanot). Translated as the “Protector of Widows” (as in Psalms 68:6), the phrase implies that, inasmuch as a husband is a protector, G-d acts as a husband to the one bereft of a husband. Calling to mind the tradition that Israel and G-d were gathered at Mount Sinai as bride and groom (Shemot Rabbah 41:6) and the intellectual fashion that “G-d is dead,” it appears that Israel—and with Israel all humanity—may indeed have been not only orphaned but also widowed. Humanity has lost its protector, however, not because G-d is dead (whatever that could mean) but because we have lost our capacity for relation, which is to say: we have lost our ability to be there for one another, which is the ability to be a sign of the dearness of the other. Losing this ability, humanity loses its significance.

What we see in the expression of G-d as the Dayan Almanot, that we do not see as readily in the Ṭayyibat Yb‘ia, is that the loss suffered by the widow matters; more than painful, it is meaningful. It is meaningful because our relation to the widow rests on the commandment of her protector, who requires us to act as a protector. The urgency of caring for one who has no protector, therefore, does not rest on anything so flimsy as human compassion; rather, it arises from on high. Caring for the other human being is a question of justice, not merely a question of kindness, where justice is understood, once again, as a giving, not as a balancing of the scales. For a Ṭayyibat Yb‘ia is also a judge: G-d is the “Judge of Widows”—in the sense that He judges our treatment of them: He judges on behalf of the bereft. Who is the widow? Anyone, man or woman, in need of a protector or an advocate.

In these expressions of G-d as One who stands in a relation to the widow and the orphan we see in what sense G-d abides in the depth of human relation. It is this: we must be for the other person what G-d is for us. In this task imposed upon us we find a certain comfort—not in the help we receive but in our having helped. And we understand why G-d is referred to as the Baal Nechamot, or the “Comforter” (see, for instance, Ketuot 8b). It is not that G-d pats us on the back when we are feeling low; nor is it that G-d loves us even when we are unworthy of love. Rather, G-d is the One who comforts because G-d is the One who
commands. Our comfort lies in our performance of *mitsvot*, in following the teaching of Torah and doing good deeds, because that is where our redemption lies. To be sure, the word **nechamah** (the singular of **nechamim**), means not only “comfort” but also “redemption”; like redemption, comfort comes through adhering to the commandments of Torah. It is also worth noting that a cognate of **nechamah**, the word **nocham** (the singular of **nechamim**), means both “comfort” and “repentance.” In our repentance we find both comfort and redemption because repentance lies not in feeling a certain way but in living a certain way. It lies in returning to a relation to the Holy One by entering into a deeper relation to the people around us. In short, we receive the comfort of the Comforter inasmuch as we offer comfort to the other, as the Father of the Fatherless and the Protector of Widows commands us to do.

Where that comfort happens, relation happens; where relation happens, a space between two opens up. Reflecting on this between space, we come to a deeper understanding of why G-d is called **HaMakom** or “the Place.” In the Midrash Rabbi Huna teaches that G-d is called “the Place” because He is the dwelling place of the world (Bereshit Rabbah 68:9); others maintain that it is because wherever the righteous dwell, G-d is with them (for example, Midrash Tehillim 4:90.10). Both, of course, are right: just as the world is sustained by righteousness, so does dwelling require righteousness. And the place both of dwelling and of world is the between space of human relation. Thus the key to understanding **HaMakom** in this sense is to recall that **nechamim** is not just any space or spot that might be called a “place,” for this word also means “dwelling” or “abode.” If G-d is “the Abode” or “the Dwelling Place,” it is because there is no dwelling, no family or home, without the human relation that is precisely expressive of the divine relation. Because G-d is the depth of human relation, human beings are able to dwell in the world and not just survive or seek shelter. The relation is the dwelling.

Which brings us to one more expression for G-d: He is the **Shokhen Ad**, the “One who Dwells Eternally” (as in Isaiah 57:15, for example). Or perhaps better: He is the One whose eternity lies in dwelling. For we encounter eternity in the time of our dwelling, a time that is constituted by human relation, where the other person is no longer just “someone else” but is our neighbor or, in Hebrew, our **shakhen** (shakhen). Entering into the relation to the **shakhen**, we come into the presence of the Eternal, for there we come into the presence of the **Shekhinah**, who is the “Divine Presence”—a “Divine Dwelling”—that connects the mystery of a meaningful cosmos to the mystery of a human embrace. The Divine Presence is not a metaphysical principle; rather, for Jewish thought, she is our eternal neighbor, our fellow dweller, a **who**, and not a **what**.

The eternity of the One Who Dwells Eternally is manifest in the eternal renewal of life that unfolds wherever the **Shekhinah** abides. Like renewal and return, renewal and eternal are spiritual synonyms, a point that can be seen in still another term denoting G-d: He is the **Mechadesh** (Mechadesh), the “One Who Renews.” The G-d who sustains all of reality, who protects widows and dwells where two are gathered together to study Torah (Pirke Avot 3:2; also Berakhot 6a), is the G-d who in the
beginning created the heavens and the earth. And He continues the creation that was in the beginning at every instant, as was pointed out in the last chapter: וַיִּכְרֹא יָהּ בְּכָלָּו וְיֵשֶׁר מְשַׁה בָּרָאָה (uvetwo mechadesh bekol yom tamid maaseh vereshit), . . . “and in His goodness He renews each day, continuously, the work of creation.” Note well, however, what was not pointed out in the last chapter: He creates in His goodness, by means of His goodness, forging all that is from the Good that He is. Every moment is a moment of renewal accompanied by the pronouncement of the כִּי-טוֹב (ki-tov), “it is good,” that was uttered in the beginning (Genesis 1:12). And uttered at every instant.

All the human expressions of G-d that we have examined are gathered into this one divine utterance; to the extent that such a thing is possible, in that utterance we have G-d’s “essence.” For in the utterance we encounter הַאֵל הַטוֹב (HaEl HaTov), the “G-d Who Is the Good,” whom we invoke in our prayers three times a day. In this term—in the טוב (tov), or the Good—lies the meaning of a creation effected through the Holy Name. Let us consider the place of this word in Jewish thought and the words in Hebrew that shed light upon it.
THE GOOD

The previous chapter concluded with the realization that the Good is at the core of the meaning of creation, as creation issues from the Holy Name. Here we have a crucial distinction between Jewish thought and the speculative thought that governs much of the Western worldview. “To the philosopher,” Abraham Joshua Heschel states the distinction, “the idea of the good is the most exalted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate; it cannot exist without the holy” (Heschel 1955: 17). According to the sage Moshe Chayim Luzzatto (1707–1746), the meaning of the word ב/ף (tov) or “good” is that G-d’s purpose in undertaking the creation was to bestow His ultimate and absolute goodness upon all He created—that is the essence of the Holy Name (Derekh HaShem 1:2:1). Each time the Holy One declares His creation to be good with the assertion of ב/ף (ki-tov), He pours the light of His holiness into all things. Thus the eternal enters time, and the finite becomes a vessel of the infinite.

In Chapter 1 it was pointed out that the Holy Name י-ו-ו-ו (yud-hey-vav-hey) contains all the tenses of time: ה-י (hayah) or “was,” ה-ו (hoveh) or “is,” and ה-י (yihyeh) or “will be.” The Holy Name, in other words, expresses the presence of the Holy One as the Eternal One. This presence is affirmed in a line from the Adon Olam (Lord of the Universe) prayer: ה-י ה-ו ה-י (vehu hayah vehu hoveh vehu yihyeh), which means: “And He was and He is and He will be.” A parallel portion of the daily prayers is found in the assertion ה-ו ה-י ה-י (HaShem melekh HaShem malakh HaShem yimlokh leolam vaed), that is, “G-d reigned, G-d reigns, G-d will reign for all eternity.” Part of a single testimony, these lines suggest that G-d’s eternal being inheres in an absolute authority that encompasses all time. This authority, moreover, is grounded not in an arbitrary power but in the Good, a point that becomes clear when we consider yet another parallel line, this one from the blessings said after a meal: ה-י ה-ו ה-י (hu heytiy . . . hu metiy . . . hu yeytiy), or “He has done good . . . He does good . . . He will do good.” As the absolute ground and authority of all creation, G-d is the One who is the Good: He is ב/ף (HaEl HaTov), the “G-d Who Is the Good.” That is the meaning of His being.

Connecting the Good with the manifestation of the Holy One in time, the Talmud teaches that whenever the word ב/ף appears in the Torah, it refers to the
Torah itself (Berakhot 5a). Matityahu Glazerson expands on this point, noting that the numerical values of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה,Torah), הנשמה (neshamah, meaning “soul”), and בן ברית all contract to eight (Glazerson 1997: 251). That is, the Tetragrammaton has a value of twenty-six, and those two digits add up to eight; יהוה has a value of 611, and those three digits add up to eight; and so on. This interrelationship tells us that the Holy Name, the Torah, the soul, and the Good are of a piece—and that they are eternal. Representing one more than the seven days of creation, the number eight signifies what is more than creation: it signifies the eternal that contains all of creation. Thus we circumcise a male child on the eighth day of his life to affirm the Covenant with the Eternal One, as it is written in the Midrash: “Give a share to the seventh [the Shabbat] and to the eighth [milah, or circumcision]” (Kohelet Rabbah 9:2). Thus the lights of Chanukah burn for eight days to bear witness to the return of the Eternal One to the Temple. Thus the Talmud teaches that in the time of the Messiah the seven-stringed harp used in Temple services will have eight strings (Arachin 13b).

As part of the being of the Eternal, the Good is made of the Light that constitutes the Torah, the Divine Name, and the soul. It is made of life. Hence the Zohar teaches that the letter ת (tet), the first letter in בנים, “signifies in all places the Light of Life; therefore the word ‘good’ (תוב) begins with this letter” (Zohar II, 152a). As the Light of Life, the Good is the substance of the soul. Indeed, according to a mystical method of interpretation known as אטבש (At-bash),1 בנים is “good” is נפש (nefesh), which is “life” or “soul.” Only where ירה the Light of Life, abides can goodness be found, and only where there is goodness can the soul have life.

And yet there is perhaps no word so ambiguous as the word good. We speak of a good deed, a good dog, a good time, or a good book; there is good sense, good taste, good news, and good food. Most of us want to feel good and look good; some of us even want to do good, which is often confused with doing well. Doing well generally means being successful, which in turn means having something: power, possessions, pleasure, and prestige. To be sure, in the confusion between being and having lies much of the general confusion about the Good. While doing well may imply having something, doing good entails being something. And being good entails doing something, or giving something. In Hebrew the word meaning to “do” is י עש (asah), which also means to “make,” “create,” “fulfill,” or “accomplish.” Hence the good not only includes the moral—it exceeds the moral. When we do good we bring something into being, we accomplish something. We create an opening in the fabric of being, through which G-d and Torah may enter and thus sanctify being.

Thus we see more clearly how to understand “the Good” with a capital G. Capitalizing the letter and thus elevating the word imparts a dimension of height to our thinking about the Good. When the letter כ (hey) is added to בנים to make בנים, the letter signifying G-d’s Name—the letter כ, whose numerical value corresponds to the five books of Torah—is added to “good” to form “the Good.” The Good is precisely G-d. What is revealed in the dimension of height implied by the Good is not only the Most High but also the Most Dear—in a
word, the Holy. Understood as the Holy, the Good is something other than what Socrates, for example, sought through philosophical contemplation. What is at work here is not the good of Greek philosophy but something that has defined the Jewish tradition shaped by the Hebrew word. Neither a concept nor an abstraction, it is a living Good. It is the Good that we choose when we choose life. It is the Good that is חayim (chayim), which is the Hebrew word for “life,” a word that is plural, suggesting that each life is made of at least two lives.

Life requires a relation between two lives, between an I and a Thou, in order to happen; like doing good, חayim is an event that transpires between two. Perhaps that too is why חayim is plural: where there is life, there is life between two, life within us and life above us. When we do good, we “do life,” “make life,” and “create life,” which brings to mind the Hebrew expression חayim קיימ (asah chayim); literally meaning to “make life,” the phrase translates as to “rejoice in life.” If this rejoicing is an act of creating or generating life through the Good, then the Good is precisely something we live through joy. Let us consider what the holy tongue teaches us about the Good in relation to who we are, how we live, and why we live.

Having, being, and doing good

When we die, it is related in a Jewish legend, we lie in the grave and wait for the Angel of Death to come to us, so that he may bring us into the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He. There is, of course, a catch: in order to draw nigh unto the Divine Presence, we must correctly answer a certain question. The question is the same for all, but for each the answer is different. And so, with his thousand eyes gazing upon us, the Angel poses the fearsome question: “What is your name?”

It seems so simple at first glance; who, after all, does not know his own name? But how, indeed, do we determine our name, the utterance that articulates the essence of who we are? We say we know our name like the back of our hand, perhaps because our hand has done the deeds that define our name. What, then, does it mean to know our name? It will be of no avail to explain to the Angel, “I am the one who owns this company, who bears that title, and who has made these conquests.” No, to know our name is to know the names of those who confer a name upon us, the names of our mother and father. It means knowing a tradition borne by those who have borne our names before us; it means knowing a teaching that harbors our future and our mission in life, as inscribed in our name; it means recognizing that we are called and answering to the call. Hence Rabbi Chayim ben Attar teaches that one who knowingly violates G-d’s commandment forfeits his original name (Or HaChayim on Genesis 3:30). Asking our name, the Angel tries to establish something about our being that is intimately tied to our doing: knowing our name means knowing what must be done. Which is to say: our doing is at the heart of our being.

The ramifications of this linkage unfold in the Hebrew verb קיימ (kum) and its cognates. The verb קיימ means to “stand” or “rise,” as well as to “take place” or “be established.” The noun corresponding to this verb is קיימ (kiyum), which means
“existence” or “affirmation.” Similarly, the וְיָדוּד (hitpael) or reflexive verb וְיָדוּד (hikayem) means to “exist,” “live,” or “take place,” and the corresponding noun וְיָדוּד (hikaymut) means “realization,” “fulfillment,” or “occurrence.” The weave of meanings of וְיָדוּד and וְיָדוּד, of וְיָדוּד and וְיָדוּד, enables us to see that existence is not a matter of simply being there; it is an event or an action, something that transpires—it entails doing something. Existence is not what is; existence is what acts. Here too we see the definitive connection between being and doing. The who that I am is not something that is; rather my who takes place in what I do—not however, in an existentialist sense. Here existence does not precede essence, but rather destiny precedes doing, for the doing that is my being is destined by the Good before I do it. Inasmuch as I exist, I affirm the Good by doing good; doing good, I not only exist—I transpire. The opposite of taking up space, this taking place opens up a place, a מַקּוֹם (makom), where life can unfold. When doing and being are thus joined in the Good, the One called מַקּוֹם (Hamakom), or “the Place,” emerges. Hence, in order to come into the presence of the One who is the Good, we must determine what doing good has to do with being who we are.

One can see the insidious confusion that lies in understanding who we are only in terms of what we have, as if to say, “The more I have, the more I am.” Yes, a person may be associated with an old sweater, a favorite armchair, or a wedding ring inherited from her grandmother. But such associations are not the same as the false sense of substance that we may derive from owning real estate and stock certificates. The lie of the longing for wealth for its own sake can be seen in the Hebrew word for “money” or “silver” and its verbal cognate: כֶּסֶף (kesef) means “money,” while the verb כָּסָף (kasaf) means to “yearn” or “long for.” Where this yearning is concerned, more is better, but it is never enough, so that even when we have money we long for money. And our being is squandered in that longing. Hence the teaching in the Pirke Avot: “Who is wealthy? He who is content with his lot” (4:1). Wealth is not the opposite of poverty—it is the opposite of greed.

When we are entrenched in greed, doing good is eclipsed by having it good, which is understood in terms of amassing “material wealth,” or נְכָה (nekhes) in Hebrew. The noun נְכָה is a cognate of the verb נָכָה (nakhas), which means to “mark” or “count.” The one who confuses being with having—who seeks his substance in נְכָה—seeks his “goodness” in what can be weighed, measured, and counted. Thus he marks himself as if he were staking a claim to a piece of property. The sages of the Talmud, however, teach that blessing does not fall upon what can be weighed, measured, or counted (Bava Metzia 42a). The amassing of נְכָה for its own sake is a squandering of the blessing that is life. Or worse: it is a slaughtering of life, as suggested by another meaning of נְכָה, which is to “slaughter” or “kill.” When wealth is the sole aim of human endeavor, human life is expendable. There is no logical inconsistency between a strictly material view of reality and committing murder, if murder should prove to be profitable. For if it has only a market value, then human life has no inherent value.

When “substance” is acquired through the accumulation of possessions, life is grabbed, not given. Here the place or מַקּוֹם where we establish a living presence
becomes a territory that we merely occupy through the frenetic clutching at a “good” that forever slips through our fingers. When we fall into this confusion, our being collapses into the action characterized by the verb צפְת (tafas), which means to “take,” “seize,” “occupy,” and “use.” More interested in having it good than in being good, we seize our possessions, occupy our property, and use it all to seize and occupy more—always at the expense of the other human being. The other human being in this instance is not one for whom we do good; rather, he or she becomes the חומר (chomer), or the “raw material,” to be tapped and utilized to suit our own ends. Thus we come to seek life in the lifeless matter that is חומר, confusing our “substance” with the “weight” we pull, both of which are also meanings of חומר. Thus reducing ourselves and others to a merely material reality, our lives become both heavy and empty. In fact, the heavier, the emptier: what we had mistaken for “precious things” turns out to be mere “baggage”—two possible translations of the word קֶוְדֶה (kevudah), whose verbal root קָבָד (kaved) means to “be heavy.” And so in our very longing to possess the Good we lose what we long to possess. For the Good will not be had.

Real estate and stock certificates, of course, are not the only things that we would possess. Instead of seeking such material objects, we are often more interested in having power and prestige than in having things. Indeed, Rabbi Luzzatto sees the desire for this counterfeit honor as the one that “tugs at a person’s heart more than any of the other longings and desires in the world” (Luzzatto 1990: 171). That is why so many of us look down upon those who succumb to the vulgarity of mere materialism: we relish the illusion of importance that comes with the ascent to the smug heights of pseudo-sophistication, pseudo-cultivation, and pseudo-spirituality. Especially pseudo-spirituality: here the interest lies not so much in having it good as in defining and dictating the Good, like one of the “higher-ups” who would displace the Most High. The “good” sought here is the phony good of self-righteous “authority” or “power,” which are two meanings of the word תָּקָף (takaf). Looking at this noun’s verbal root תָּקַּף (takaf), we see what sort of power is sought in seeking to dictate the Good. For תָּקַּף means to “attack,” “condemn,” or “overpower.” It is the counterfeit good that comes when we would raise ourselves up by putting others down.

When we attempt to legislate the Good, rather than heed the Good as commanded by יְהֹוָה, the power we seek is the power to crush. It is כֹּחַ (koach), the “power” that is also “violence.” The longing to be in possession of such power rests on the premise that there is no good other than what the powerful say is good. Hence there is no common humanity, no human relation, that would be expressive of a higher relation. Rather, every human relation is reduced to a master/slave relation characterized by a constant power struggle, not only between individuals but also between races, cultures, genders, and classes. But if being good means being powerful, then only the weak are in error. It is not the oppressor who is in the wrong but his victim, who “justly” suffers for the sin of being weak. Indeed, it seems that, with its rejection of any absolute Good, postmodernism is driven to such a conclusion.
The hunger for power that arises from the confusion between being good and having it good is closely linked to a longing for prestige; both rest on a desire to be feared. And yet the longing for power and prestige—the longing to be feared—is itself rooted in fear: we want to be feared, just as we want to be revered, because we are afraid. The verb הָרָתָס (arats) reveals these connections; it means to “terrify,” to “destroy,” and to “fear.” The link between fear and prestige is seen in the נִפַּל (nifal) or passive form of this verb, נֵירָתָס (neerats), which is to be “revered,” “respected,” or “esteemed”—and to “be fearful.” This fear has one thing in common with the prestige that it seeks: both are petrifying. Once we have won the esteem of others, we suppose that we do not have to do good, for we are good—that is why we are esteemed. And so we sink into a complacent contentment. The verb יָקָר (yakar) brings out the inertia of such a state. Meaning to “be esteemed” and to “be heavy,” it tells us that, like our power and our possessions, our prestige weighs us down until, as men of weight, we can no longer move toward the Good. Therefore the Talmud teaches that before we are born we learn all of the Torah, and we take an oath to be righteous and yet to regard ourselves as wicked, even though everyone around us may regard us as righteous (see Niddah 30b). Jewish thought, then, will have nothing to do with the self-esteem racket that is all the rage in the postmodern world.

As power becomes intertwined with prestige, being good means being acknowledged, which is to say: being good amounts to looking good in the eyes of others, so that any presence that we might have had here is scattered like dust among the eyes out there. Set adrift among those admiring eyes, we frantically search their gaze for our own reflection. But soon we tumble into the abyss of that mirror and fade into an unreal image. In that instant the first question put to the first human being, the question emblematic of all human being, struggles to make itself heard: אֵי כָּלָה (Ayekah), “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). And it reverberates in the two questions put to Cain: אֲכִיחָה (Ey achiha), “Where is your brother?” (Genesis 4:9). And: אֵשׁ בִּלְבָּד (Meh asita), “What have you done?” (Genesis 4:10). Unable to see past a concern for ourselves, we grope in the darkness of Egypt, the darkness in which לא רֹא שֵׁע (lo-rau ish et-achiv), that is, “a man did not see his brother” (Exodus 10:23). Recall here the verb יָבֵשׁ (iver) and two of its meanings: it suggests that to “make blind” is to “pervert justice.” Blinded by our own reflection, we are blind to our brother. Blind to our brother, we pervert the justice that is the basis of brother-to-brother—that is, human-to-human—relation. Which means: we have a hand in his death precisely because of our failure to declare, “!הֵינֶנײִ (hineni)—Here I am, for you!”

Being there for another means doing good for another. And only in the midst of doing good for another is our identity established. For only in such doing can a person establish himself as one who is irreplaceable: only I can open this door, offer this word of kindness, give this pint of blood here and now. In the contexts of this doing, the other person is not to be possessed, dominated, or won over. He is to be helped: to be my brother’s “keeper,” or שומֵר (shomer), is to be my brother’s “servant,” or מְשָׁרֵט (mesharet). A שומֵר is one who has been entrusted with the care of
something extremely precious; the noun comes from the verb שמר (shamar), which means to “keep,” “protect,” “safeguard,” and “preserve,” as well as to “observe” or “celebrate,” as in Sabbath observance (see Deuteronomy 5:12). The noun משלך (meshalek) comes from the verb שאת (sheret), which means to “serve,” as well as to “fill an office”; a משלך is also one who has been appointed to an extremely important task. For example, designating not only a “servant” but also an “attendant” or “ministering official,” משלך is a term used to refer to the angels, as in the phrase משרהלierarchy (meshartei eliyon), the “Servants of the Most High” (see, for example, Berakhot 60b); similarly, the מלאכים (malakhei hasharei) are the “Ministering Angels” (see Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 18). In order to be a שמר and therefore a משלך to our fellow human being—in order to become like the angels and perform the precious task entrusted to us—we must become servants. Which is to say: we must leave off the project of seizing power and possessions, of setting ourselves on high, and situate the other person in a position above our own, more dear than our own.

This “more dear” opens up something more than human within the human. For it opens up a Most Dear, One who is infinitely dear, within human finitude. The dimension of the Holy is thus added to the Good, so that being good becomes a matter of being for the other. Hence the other is not our equal—he is our better. That is why we become better by doing good for the sake of the other. Only by thus situating the other human being in a position of height can we glimpse the Most High and create an opening in the fabric of indifferent being through which the Good—the One who is more than being—might find His way into the world. For in this being-for-the-sake-of-another we elevate the sum of being. According to the Baal Shem Tov, this is why we have the teaching in the Torah: כי תירא חמור סנאהו רוב תחת מסוא . . . azov taazov imo (ki-tireh chamor snakha rovets tachat masao . . . azov taazov imo), that is, “If you see the ass of one who hates you fallen under its burden, . . . you shall surely release it” (Exodus 23:5). Says the Baal Shem, instead of חמור (chamor), or “ass,” we should read חומר (chomer), or “raw matter,” and thus realize that raw matter is hateful to us. Wherever we see it we must release the Divine sparks within it and thus raise it up to levels of sanctity. The height of the holy abides within material being; our task is to elevate it.

**The height of the holy**

In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth—the heavens first and then the earth, as if to say, “Let there be height,” before He declared, “Let there be light.” As we learn from our daily prayers, this is precisely what distinguishes the true G-d from the false gods of the nations: כל אלהי הממים אלילים ויהוה תวา (ki kol elohei haamim elilit vaHaShem shamaim asah), that is, “For all the gods of the nations are naught, and HaShem made the heavens” (Psalms 96:5). The gods of the philosophers, who view G-d as a passionless “unmoved mover” (for example, Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1071b-1072b), identify him with nature (for example, Spinoza, Ethics, Preface to Part IV), or reduce him a concept (for example, Kant,
And the God of the Tanakh is the God of Jewish thought.

Jewish thinking about God and humanity is radically different from the thinking that characterizes the Western speculative tradition. Grounded in the height of the holy, Jewish thought sees God turning to the Torah—hence to the Good—for His blueprint for creation. The meaning of creation, therefore, is prior to creation. And so God begins His creation with the dimension of height, which is the dimension of meaning: that is the light that comes into being prior to the creation of the luminaries of the heavens. To be sure, according to the Zohar the letter נ, the first letter in תּוֹרָה, “is a letter hidden and withdrawn, as it is symbolic of the light that is above other lights, of the light of which it is written, ‘And the Lord saw the light, that it was good’ [Genesis 1:4]” (Zohar II, 230a, italics added). The Good is the Light of Life, as stated above, because it is the light that is above all other lights: it is the light on high.

Thus linked to the dimension of height, the Good is precisely the ground of meaning, as Emmanuel Lévinas suggests: “Before culture and aesthetics, meaning is situated in the ethical, presupposed by all culture and all meaning. Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it; it discovers the dimension of height. Height ordains being” (Lévinas 1987a: 100). Height is the “background” or “foundation” of being—an insight that the Hebrew opens up when we observe that רְקָדָה (reka), a word that means both “background” and “foundation,” is a cognate of רָקִיָּה (rakiya), a word meaning “heaven,” “sky,” or “firmament,” as in the Psalm: חַסּוֹדְתֵּךְ רְקָדָה לְמִצְגָּדְרָהיה (umaaseh yadav magid harakiya), that is, “And the sky proclaims His handiwork” (19:2). The reverse is true as well: His handiwork proclaims the sky, inasmuch as the context that upholds and gives meaning to all there is—is not part of the landscape of being; nor is it even the ground under our feet, which can be very tenuous indeed. No, it is what lies above all there is; hence it is more than all there is. Further, as the dimension of height gives meaning to all there is, it judges all there is. And that judgment is what situates meaning in the ethical.
In a sense, G-d Himself is the dimension of height. Therefore the One whom we call אֱלֹהֵי יָרוֹד (El Eliyon), the “Exalted G-d”; as מִרְאֵשׁ עָלָיו (Gavhuto Shel Olam), the “Height of the Universe”; and simply as רַם (Ram) or לַאֵל (Gavoah), both of which may be translated as “Most High.” Indeed, in our prayers we affirm the Name of אֱלֹהֵי יָרוֹד by declaring, “His Name is Holy and High”—מַרְוֵם וְקָדֹושׁ שְׁמוֹ—affirming the relationship between height and holiness, between goodness and height, between holiness and goodness. The G-d who is the Good is the G-d who is the High. He is the opposite of the spirit of evil called בֵּליָיאָל (Beliyaal), whose name literally means “without height” (see, for example, Deuteronomy 13:14).

Signifying truth, meaning, and direction, the height of the Holy makes possible the utterance of the בֵּלְקָי (ki-tov), the “it is good,” that sanctifies creation. Strictly speaking, the creation does not begin with the fabrication of matter out of nothing; contrary to the ex nihilo thinking of speculative thought, the creation recounted in the Scripture begins with a creation of the Good not out of nothing but out of G-d’s very Being, out of the Being of אֱלֹהֵי יָרוֹד. It begins with the creation of height from within the אֱלֹהֵי יָרוֹד. Without the revelation of this height that belongs to the Most High, everything below is indeed reduced to a struggle for power, possession, and prestige. Without this vertical dimension, everything collapses into a horizontal plane of sameness, where one “value system” is as good as another, and the only “real” value is the market value. Here the distinction between life and death, good and evil, is obscured. The Torah, by contrast, contains no value system, as if someone had deduced a code to follow in order to get the best results in life. Rather, in Torah the dimension of height is revealed through G-d’s saying of אנוכי (Anokhi) at Mount Sinai, a point that becomes clear when we note that אנוכי (anakhi), a cognate of אנוכי, means “vertical.” That is what is revealed when G-d says אנוכי. And with the revelation of the vertical comes the revelation of the מִיתָסְוָה (mitsvah) or “commandments” that constitute Torah, which are not only commandments but are good deeds.

The singular form מִיתָסְוָה (mitsvah), moreover, is derived from the Aramaic word מִיתָסְוָה (tsavta), which designates a “joining together.” It suggests that the מִיתָסְוָה connect us with G-d by connecting us with the Good through the work of our hands. Says Rabbi Chayim ben Attar in the Or HaChayim, “Every מִיתָסְוָה is meant to close a gap that may exist between man and G-d” (on Exodus 30:13). Its importance, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz points out, “lies not in its content or efficacy, be it material or spiritual, but in the fact that it constitutes a point of contact with the Divine” (Steinsaltz 1987: 28). To be sure, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro has pointed out that, since the word מִיתָסְוָה contains the four-letter Holy Name י-ה-ו-ה (yud-heh-vav-heh), G-d, the Infinite One, is in the מִיתָסְוָה (Shapira 2000: 61). While the last two letters of the Name, ה-י (vav-hey), are apparent, the first two are hidden in the מִיתָסְוָה (mem-tsadi), of מִיתָסְוָה; for when transformed according to the מִיתָסְוָה (At-bash) method of interpretation, the mem and tsadi become yud and heh, the first two letters of the Name. The מִיתָסְוָה, therefore, is a vessel or a portal through which the Holy One enters the world.
The Good that commands and sanctifies

If being commanded means being sanctified, as indicated in the blessing said upon performing a תַּכּוּת— the blessing on HaShem, (asher kidshanu bemitzvotav), who “has sanctified us with His commandments”—then being commanded means being chosen. The deeds or מַעֲשֵׂה we perform are good, therefore, not because we have chosen the Good but because the Good has chosen us prior to all our choosing. Lévinas makes this point by saying,

The attachment to the Good precedes the choosing of this Good. How, indeed, to choose the Good? The Good is good precisely because it chooses you and grips you before you have had the time to raise your eyes to it.

(Lévinas 1990b: 135)

When the Angel of Death asks us our name, he does not ask who we have chosen to be; he asks whether we have become who we were chosen to become. Just as we may not enter into the presence of the Holy One if we do not know who we are, so was Moses denied entry into the Holy Land for denying who he was. According to Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid (1150–1217), when Moses was about to die before entering the Land, he asked G-d at least to allow his bones to be carried into Israel and there be buried alongside the bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had carried out of Egypt. G-d refused him this request, saying,

Throughout his whole life Joseph never denied that he was a Hebrew. But you, Moses, when you fled to Midian after having slain a man, you tried to pass yourself off as an Egyptian. Therefore even your bones will have no place in the Land.

(Sefer Chasidim 641)

Asking our name, in other words, G-d asks whether we have walked the path for which we were chosen. Hence the הלכות (halakhah) or Jewish law that interprets, explains, and expounds upon the מַעֲשֵׂה is from the word הלך (halakh), which means to “walk.” Similarly, הליכות (halikhah) means both “walking” and “conduct.” Conducting ourselves according to the מַעֲשֵׂה for which we are chosen, we “walk” toward—that is, we approach—the Most High. The One who has chosen us, therefore, is the One for whom we are chosen; He is both the road and the destination, the means and the end.

Having been chosen beforehand is precisely what makes the choice between good and evil matter. Once again we realize that our freedom does not lie in the freedom to choose between good and evil, which would wrongly suggest that even in choosing evil we remain free. No, it lies in our having been already chosen by the Good, chosen from a time immemorial, chosen from the womb. For this having been chosen—this having been commanded—is what lends
meaning and direction to our choosing, thus making our freedom meaningful, something other than mere caprice or a play for power. Recall the discussion of freedom in Chapter 2 and the commentary from the Mishnah on the verse, “And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was the writing of G-d, graven [חרות] upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:16): “Do not read חרות (charut or ‘graven’) but חרות (cherut or ‘freedom’), for no man is free save one who is engaged in the study of Torah” (Avot 6:2). No man is free save one who has chosen the path for which he was chosen.

By whom are we chosen, and for what? We are chosen by the Good for the Good, chosen by G-d for the child of G-d, for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Which means: we are chosen to declare in word and in deed the chosen-ness of all, to affirm with gratitude and rejoicing a life not of empty success and vain pleasure but of sacred truth and profound meaning. In the last chapter we saw that gratitude was a key to the relation to א-בי ר-יו, the “Holy One”; here we see that gratitude is the key to the connection to the Good established by the המראות that come from the Holy One. The very works of the creation that the Holy One pronounces to be י-ב-כ or good, in fact, cry out in thanksgiving, as it is written: ת-ע-מ (yodukha HaShem kol-maaseikha), “All Your works, HaShem, give thanks” (Psalms 145:10). There is no such thing as “dead matter”; “dead matter” does not sing songs of praise and gratitude. Gratitude, then, is a key category for Jewish thinking not only about human being but about all of being.

A Hebrew expression for “gratitude,” ח-כ-ק ת-ו-ל-א (hakarat tovah), makes this point clear: ח-כ-ק ת-ו-ל-א refers to the “good consciousness” that is also a consciousness or recognition of the Good. Praise and thanksgiving converge in this consciousness of the Good that is also gratitude; indeed, to be conscious of the Good is to be filled with gratitude. Hence הודאה (hodayah) means not only “praise” but also “thanksgiving” and is a cognate of the first word in the morning prayers services: ה-ד-כ-ח (hodu l’HaShem), “offer praise” or “give thanks” to HaShem. The verbal root of ה-ד-כ-ח (yadah), which is also the root for י-ד-כ (Yehudi), the word for “Jew.” Who is the Jew? He is the one chosen to be a light of gratitude unto the nations. Inasmuch as every human being is chosen to offer up praise and thanksgiving, ל-כ-ק ת-ו-ל-א, is a knowledge of the Good that is rooted in already being known by the Good, which is precisely the ground of meaning. This is the being “wise” or having “good understanding” that is an understanding of the good designated by the phrase מ-כ-ק ש-ז (tov sekhel); to be wise or to having an understanding of the good is to have a life overflowing with meaning. Only a life overflowing with meaning is one in which we may rejoice and for which we can be grateful, offering up the הודאה that flows from ח-כ-ק ת-ו-ל-א. When we lose sight of the Most High, we are left to grabbing our enjoyment whenever we can and counting our lucky stars. Therefore, the Talmud teaches, מי ל-ל ה-ש-ל (ein mazal l’Tisrael), literally “Israel has no constellation”—which is to say: Jews are not ruled by the stars or by luck (see Shabbat 156a–156b).

Enjoyment no more resembles rejoicing than being lucky resembles being blessed. We sit back and enjoy, but we rise up to rejoice; we grin and nod at being
lucky, but we sing songs of praise and thanksgiving at being blessed. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 2, there is a difference between הָסַדְתָּ הַשַּׁדְתָּ (simchah), which is “joy” or “rejoicing,” and חֲנָה (hanaah), which is “pleasure” or “enjoyment.” In Hebrew the usage of the word הָסַדְתָּ הַשַּׁדְתָּ reveals what there is to truly rejoice in; weddings, births, and bar mitzvahs, for example, are “simchahs.” Because rejoicing is tied to meaning, we rejoice in the basis of all meaning through a חֲנָה (hanaah), or “rejoicing in the Torah.” Because the Torah is the blueprint of creation, creation has meaning; and so we know the חֲנָה (hanaah), or “joy of creation.” And because creation is commanded into being, just as our souls derive their life from the commandments, we have a חֲנָה (hanaah), a phrase that translates as “religious celebration” but literally means “rejoicing in a commandment.” While the חֲנָה (hanaah) may at times seem to spoil our illusory חֲנָה (hanaah) or pleasure, the חֲנָה (hanaah) is precisely what makes possible our חֲנָה (hanaah) or joy. For, again, the חֲנָה (hanaah) is our אֲלֵהוֹ, our connection, to the Good—and that is what joy is, for joy enables us to behold the Good. Hence we have another revealing phrase that is used to express rejoicing in life: it is אֶהְוָה (raah betov), which is to “behold the Good”—or better: to “see by means of the Good.” To see by means of the Good is to behold all things by its light and by its height; it is to understand oneself not as happy or fortunate but as blessed from on high.

If being chosen means being blessed, being blessed means being commanded. When G-d created man and woman, for example, He told them to “be fruitful and multiply,” and this commandment begins with the words וְיָרָה עַל עָלֵיכֶם אֱלֹהִים (vayivarekh otam Elokim), “And G-d blessed them” (Genesis 1:28). This dimension of blessing, in which the human being is a commanded being—and therefore a being connected to G-d—manifests itself in the very words for “man” and “woman”: יש (ish) and אשה (ishah). As Benjamin Blech points out, “man and woman share the identical letters: א (alef) and ח (shin). יש (ish) has an additional י (yud), אשה (ishah) an extra ה (hey). Together they create the presence of י (Yah), the name of G-d” (Blech 1993: 153). Each containing an א (es), a “fire,” within, man and woman come together to bring out the fire of G-d and Torah.

Blech’s observation brings to mind an eighth-century rabbinic text by Raba, a disciple of Yehudai Gaon, where it is written,

Why is the word for “woman” אשה? Because she is “fire” (א, es); and why is the word for “man” יש? Because he is fire. The letters י from אשה and ה from יש form the Divine Name י, which is conferred upon them.

(Kallah Rabbati 51b(3))

How does the presence of י unfold? Through obedience to the commandment to bear life into the world, through the act of ילד (yalad), which is to “give birth” to a ילד (yeled), to a child. The numerical value of the letters of this root, י (dalet) + ל (lamed) + י (yud), is 4 + 30 + 10 = 44, which contracts to 8 (4 + 4); here too the number 8 signifies the eternal, or what is beyond heaven and earth. Thus the ילד, too, is tied to the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), י, וה, א, and ב. Obeying the
commandment to have children, we draw the eternal into the world each time a child is born. In this way the One who is higher than heaven and by whose commandment we are blessed is made manifest. It is He who abides in the אֱלֹהִים.

This presence of G-d in the world is the presence of sanctity in the world. Which brings us back to an essential point: G-d has not only commanded us but has “sanctified us”: קִדְשָׁנָנוּ (kidshanu), or “has brought holiness to us,” from the word קָדוֹשׁ (kadosh), meaning “holy.” How does G-d bring holiness to us? Through His commandments, as Moshe Chayim Luzzatto teaches: “The commandments are the means which transmit the emanation of G-d’s holiness and the Light of His Good” (Luzzatto 1988: 377). Far more than a rule to follow—and even more than a simple link—a משכן is a portal through which the Most Dear enters our lives. Here too the Greek analogy is inadequate to Jewish thought: we do not live in the shadows, like Plato’s cave dwellers, but in the light of the Holy. If all of existence sings G-d’s praise, all of existence teems with G-d’s command. And, says Judah Halevi, “the approach to G-d is possible only through the medium of G-d’s command” (Kitav al khazari 3:53). As an approach to G-d, a משכן is a prayer in the form of a deed (cf. Heschel 1954: 69), a prayer through which we are commanded ever more profoundly by our very action, in a calling of deep unto deep. Despite its insistence on virtue, Greek philosophy knows nothing of this calling. And there is no deeper difference between Athens and Jerusalem in their concern for the Good than the difference in their concern for prayer. Indeed, whereas the Greeks produced no major treatise on prayer and Immanuel Kant went so far as to deprecate it (see Cassirer 1981: 18), the Talmud begins with the question of when one may say the שמיה. And what are we to hear in the שמיה’s commandment to hear? The commandment to love: שְׁמֵעַ יִשְׂרָאֵל . . . וּהֲוָאֹבִים . . . (Shema Yisrael . . . v’ahavta . . .), “Hear, O Israel, . . . you shall love . . .”

Our realization of the dearness of the other person, then, arises not prior to but in the midst of the act of loving kindness performed for him or her: to know the Good is to know the dearness of the other person. As realization leads to realization, we discover that the other person is not only dear but is infinitely dear; which, in turn leads to the realization of an infinite responsibility: that is where we encounter the אֵין סופ (Ein Sof), the “One without End” or “the Infinite One,” who is not beyond us but is in our midst. Given this manifestation of the Infinite in the other human being, the otherness of the other person makes my responsibility altogether other than anything else that belongs to this world: otherness and responsibility are interconnected. Indeed, in Hebrew the word for “other,” אחר (acher), is the root of the word for “responsibility,” אחראית (acharayut). Therefore, entering into a relation to another human being, we do not become responsible—we are already responsible, responsible before we respond. The infinite scope of that responsibility cannot be thought in a moment of contemplation; it lies outside of the Cartesian cogito and the Kantian categorical imperative. But it can be acted upon. The question put to Cain is not “What have you contemplated?” but “What have you done?” (Genesis 4:10).
Recall in this connection the scene near the end of Schindler’s List, when, surrounded by the hundreds of Jews he has saved, Schindler gazes upon his car and cries, “The car! Why did I keep the car? It would have bought ten more lives!” Through eyes informed by his actions Schindler sees what is signified by the two scenes in color that frame the black-and-white film, at the beginning and near the end: the scenes of the Sabbath observances, when the Holy enters time. He sees what he saw when he saw the child in “red,” in אדום (adam): he sees the אדם (adam), the “human being,” through whom the Holy shows itself. And it is a child that he sees, a בנים, the one most closely associated with the Holy One. What is at stake in heeding the summons of the Good, moreover, is precisely the דם (dam), the “blood,” which is the vessel of the life in אדם (see Genesis 9:4). I cannot be silent; I must respond. For when I am “silent,” there is “bleeding,” both of which are meanings of חומת (dumah). To be sure, the word for “silence,” חומת (dumah) is also the name of the guardian angel of the dead and may signify the silence of the grave. Heeding the summons of the Good, therefore, is a matter of life and death.

The Good grounded in the yet to be

To see what is at stake in the help we offer is to see that we have not yet offered enough. Where the height of the Holy opens up, the debt increases in the measure that it is paid. Where doing good is concerned, we are never quits with our neighbor. And so we are overwhelmed by a yet-to-be that accompanies the Good. Defining a future that forever calls us forth, this yet-to-be is a definitive feature of the height that belongs to the Holy. The key to seeing these connections lies in the word אד (ad), which means both “eternity” and “until.” And the key to the word אד lies in a passage from the prophet Isaiah referring to G-d: רמ נisé אד veKadosh shemo, “the High and Lofty One inhabits Eternity”—that is, inhabits the עד or the Yet-to-Be—and His Name is Holy” (Isaiah 57:15), where “Holy” is to be understood both as a noun and as an adjective. Just as our being derives its meaning from the dimension of height, so do our lives take on meaning in the contexts of the yet-to-be. The “high” and the “yet-to-be” are of a piece.

This connection between the dimension of time and the dimension of height becomes clearer still upon an examination of the Hebrew word עתיד (atid), which means “future,” and its cognate עתיד (hitated), which is to “be destined.” Destiny, it must be noted, is the opposite of fate, as opposite as meaning is to emptiness or as redemption is to doom. To be fated is precisely to have no future; to be destined, by contrast, is have the future unfold before us as a path to which we are summoned—from on high. Because meaning is constituted by the future, the future is not a blank silence; it is not a fate—what the Greeks called moira—to which we are bound (the difference between Greek and Hebrew thought is the difference between fate and destiny). No, the future calls each of us forth to meet a destiny; the future chooses us for a meaning that we must choose in turn. If the Holy can show itself as an infinite responsibility, it can also resound in an eternal
question, whose secret is couched in the silence of the future: what is your name? Which is to say: what is your destiny?

By now it should be clear that the dimension of height belonging to the Holy is not physical but metaphysical, not spatial but spiritual. Which means: the lemalah (lemalah) or “above” that characterizes this height is also penimah (penimah) or “within.” It is the lemalah that opens up when we encounter the pamin (pamin), which is the “face,” whose outer visage is the image of a deep interior; penimah (penimah). Coming “before” or lifnei (lifnei) another—that is, before the pamin or the face of the other—we receive a command from “beyond” the face, from meever (meever), to act with loving kindness toward the other. In this word we discover another key to the Good: as we act on the command, we enter a maavar (maavar) or a “passage” that connects us with the other and with the One who commands our goodness and loving kindness. It is the lemalah that takes us into the dimension of height, into the relation where we draw nigh unto the Holy, precisely by way of the human. Determining who we are already, according to the destiny that calls our name, this movement toward the other is a movement of return, a teshuvah (teshuvah), which means not only “return” but also “response” and “redemption.” It is an aliyah (aliyah), a movement of “ascent,” by which we enter the heights to answer with our lives for all there is to hold dear in life. That accountability to the One who is above me is what imparts meaning to my response to the one who stands before me.

Hence the good deed is a passageway not only through which the Holy becomes present in the world but also through which we become present before the Holy, where we answer with our lives for our lives. Here the Holy manifests itself not as an idea or a category but as a living presence, whose life inheres in the life of the Good.

The life of the Good

The Torah teaches that G-d places before us good and evil, life and death, and that He enjoins us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). Choosing life, we do not choose merely to be alive—we choose to affirm the holiness of a life that has its origin in the Holy One, in the One who is called Torah, in the Torah that is called Life. Making this choice does not mean that we no longer pass away from the earth. Rather, it means we understand death to be part of the process of sanctifying life, the testimonial outcome of a life steeped in the Good. In the prayers of remembrance for one who has passed away, we refer to him as one shehalakh leolamo (shehalakh leolamo), “who has gone to his world,” as in the prayer El Male Rachamim (G-d Full of Compassion). The phrase suggests not a demise but a movement into another realm.

But it is not just any other realm; it is the realm of the one who has lived his life, the world that he has opened up through the life he has led. Because this movement is his to undertake, death is not a natural phenomenon that befalls a human being after three score and ten years; rather, it is part of the task that he is summoned to engage in from the moment he is called into being. Yes, animals
die. But for an animal, death is not a task—it is a natural phenomenon, part of a natural cycle in the course of natural being. In other words, an animal does not die the death, so that for an animal death is not a moment of testimony. That is why living the Good is not an issue for an animal. Therefore, Joseph Albo reminds us, the “perfection” of an animal lies in existence itself, whereas for a human being it lies in fulfilling a purpose or a destiny—unto death (see Sefer HaIkkarim 3:2). Hence dying the death makes living the Good an issue for a human being. And it makes death otherwise than a natural phenomenon.

There is an important teaching from the Midrash in this connection. On each of the first five days of the Creation (except the second day) G-d pronounced His labor to be good; but on the sixth day He declared it to be דוהמ ב/ף (tov meod), that is, “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The word דוהמ means “more”; its cognate, the verb דוהמ (himid), means to “increase.” What could possibly be more than good? How can the Good be increased? The Good that belongs to Creation is increased with the creation of the human being; the human being is more than being. What is the sign of his being more? It is his death, which, conceived as a task, becomes his infinite offering for the sake of the infinitely dear. Therefore Rabbi Meir maintains that the דוהמ in דוהמ ב/ף signifies death, a category belonging to human life alone (see Bereshit Rabbah 9:5; see also Zohar II, 103a). To choose life is to choose this דוהמ that distinguishes the animate from the inanimate, the human from the animal, and a living Good from a conceptual good. Choosing the דוהמ ב/ף means understanding that the basis of our relation to another human being—underlying the commandment to love our neighbor—is our fear for his death. Only others lie in the cemeteries.

Choosing life over death does not mean choosing to stay alive at all costs. On the contrary, it means choosing “martyrdom”—a קדוש 합니다 (kidush HaShem) or, literally, a “sanctification of the Name”—that attests to a good that is higher than our own survival. Indeed, the task of life is to sanctify the Name from which every life derives its sanctity. And we engage that task precisely by doing good. For the Name is the Name of the Good. A קדוש 합니다, then, is a קדוש טוב (kiddush HaTov), a sanctification of the One who is the Good. Left with nothing but ourselves to live for, we have nothing left to die for; with nothing to die for, we have nothing to live for. When we choose the life that is very good, death is situated within the contexts of the Good, as a culmination and not as a negation of life. The קדוש that is death is the death that is a קדוש 합니다. Murder is evil; in itself death is not. Standing by while people die is evil; in itself dying is not. Thus taking death to be part of life, we begin the mourner’s Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, with a magnification and sanctification of the Holy Name, in which all life has its origin. And we end by declaring, “Amen.”

The sanctification of the Name in this prayer is a commitment to the Good. In the words of Joseph Soloveitchik, prayer “consists not only of an awareness of the presence of G-d, but of an act of committing oneself to G-d and accepting His ethico-moral authority” (Soloveitchik 1965: 65). The life of prayer, then, is an essential feature in the life of the Good. Because prayer is part of the Good—part
—it is not we alone who utter the prayer or choose the deed. That is why we begin the Amidah by crying out to G-d, sfatai tiftach ufi yagid tehilatekha, “Open my lips and my mouth shall declare Your praise” (from Psalms 51:17). Without this movement of G-d there is no prayer. Indeed, the Baal Shem Tov maintained that prayer and the Shekhinah, G-d’s Indwelling Presence, are of a piece; in the words of a tsaddik, “Men believe they pray before G-d, but this is not so, for the prayer itself is divinity” (see Buber 1969: 27). Said the Koretzer Rebbe (1728–1791), a disciple of the Baal Shem, “G-d and Prayer are One” (quoted in Newman 1963: 147).

As we pray, G-d engages us, as He engaged Jacob in a wrestling match at Peniel (see Genesis 32:25–33). For the word meaning “prayer,” tefilah, is a cognate of naftulim, which means “struggles” or “wrestlings,” so that here we discover the intimate connection between prayer and a strife of the spirit—between prayer and action. Says the Baal Shem, “Prayers without deeds are not prayers” (Keter Shem Tov 358). Through prayer we do not simply speak to G-d—G-d speaks to us, wrestles with us, declaring “Hear, O Israel” through our own lips, just as He speaks to us and commands us through our study of Torah. And hearing—heeding—means doing.

That is why Jewish tradition regards Torah study as a form of prayer; and yet, the Talmud teaches, the deed born of Torah study is greater than the study itself (Berakhot 7b; see also Avot 1:17). Hence, says Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745–1812), the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, “Whoever says that he has nothing but Torah—thus no deeds of kindness—he has not even Torah” (Zalman 1981: 415; cf. Yevamot 109b). And if he has not even Torah, he has not even prayer. If, as Heschel argues, the true content of prayer is the response to it (Heschel 1954: 16), then there is no prayer without the deed. For the response to prayer is not G-d’s reply to a request but our own engagement in action. Therefore Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Pshyskha (1762–1827) teaches that when we pray for forgiveness, the sign that we are forgiven is that we sin no more (see Buber 1948: 253). Again, the life of the Good lies in doing good, and doing good is part of our dialogue with the G-d who is the Good: what we do, we say to G-d. Thus the phrase naaseh venishma, “We shall do and we shall hear,” of Exodus 24:7 becomes naaseh venomar, “We shall do and we shall say,” since that is how we hear when we hear by doing. There is no other way to say, “Hineni! (Hineni)—Here I am!” to the One who asks each of us, as He asked Adam, “Where are you?”

This brings us to a deeper understanding of what it means to be chosen. Contrary to the Greeks’ view that they were better than the barbarians—that is, the non-Greeks—the Jewish view of being chosen has nothing to do with being better than others. Rather, realizing we are asked, we realize we are chosen by the living Good to live the Good. Thus when we stand before the Torah, we bless G-d as asher bachar banu (asher bachar banu), as the One “who has chosen us,” where the word banu is used to mean “us,” instead of the object pronoun otanu, which means “us.” Written with the preposition bet (bet), the phrase is literally “who has chosen within us” or “who has chosen through us”: being chosen...
is being moved from within to serve the Good so that we may become the instrument or means by which the Good may come to life. Therefore Kant’s categorical imperative to always treat rational beings as an end and never as a means does not quite hold up, inasmuch it includes oneself (see Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, 433). For in the life of the Good the self is precisely a means, and not an end. In Kant’s thinking there is no “becoming as nothing” before G-d; hence in Kant’s thinking there is no בושם, nothing of the martyrdom that is central to Jewish thought (cf. Heschel 1951: 194).

The character of Schindler from Spielberg’s film once more provides us with an illustration. The measures that he takes to save lives do not arise from personal inclination or self-satisfaction, and there is no “philosophical” position more shallow than the view that there is no such thing as an altruistic action. Contrary to acting out of self-interest, Schindler acts in a moment of forgetting himself. Contrary to thus regarding himself as an end, he is able to save those lives only because he regards his own life as a means to such an end. Further, he does not choose to behold the sanctity of the human being—he is overwhelmed by it, both from within and from beyond. Thus the saving of lives is summoned from him, in such a way that he cannot do otherwise. Something alive takes hold of Schindler; he is like a man possessed. What lays claim to him? It is life itself, which is the life of the Good: and so he comes alive by doing good. We do not decide whether this life is at work within us and beyond us any more than we decide whether our heart shall beat. That is why we are healed by the help we offer, saved by the salvation we bring.

Does this movement of the living Good mean that we have no responsibility, that it is out of our hands? No. Just the opposite: it means that everything is in our hands, that our responsibility is neither of our own making nor of our own choosing, and that a world turns on our every action. Because we are not free of responsibility, we are not free to choose between good and evil; we must choose good. That does not make it impossible to choose evil; it makes it wrong. Therefore our deeds of loving kindness are more precious than our prayers. And every bit as mysterious. For in doing good we participate in the life of the Good, in the life of the Infinite, so that the finite becomes a vessel of the Infinite, where the Infinite is manifested not as the infinitely vast but as the infinitely precious, the infinitely urgent. Thus the ברך, or the “Without End,” that is G-d is revealed in the realization that the good we must do is without end. We do not “believe” in G-d—we “do” G-d by living the Good.

Here the life of the Good unfolds in a process of transformation that is as mundane as it is mysterious. Water, dirt, and light get transformed into a stalk of wheat, which in turn gets made into a piece of bread. We take the bread, say a blessing, and place it in our mouths to set another transformation into motion: what had appeared in the form of הדמ (adamah), or “earth,” now assumes the form of דם (dam), or “blood,” as if at the core of the הדמ the דם of life had awaited the transformation all along. But there is more: דם is transformed into laughter and tears, into a word or a thought, into an embrace of another being,
into an act of loving kindness. That is why we pray when we eat: the act of eating is a sacred act in the life of the Good.

Or better: the act of eating together is a sacred manifestation of the life of the Good. Partaking of one bread is an affirmation of one humanity, one divinity, one sanctity. When we eat together, this oneness that lives in the living Good is most profoundly revealed not by our own eating but by our offering the other human being something to eat. The cliché “you are what you eat” does not apply to those who would join their lives to the life of the Good; rather, you are what you snatch from your own mouth and offer the other person to eat. And so we find that, if being good is tied to doing good, then the link is established in a being-for-the-other that is a doing-for-the-other. With this for-the-other, there opens up between two people a space in which a Third appears. That is why the tradition teaches that the deed born of Torah is greater than the study of Torah: each living soul who lives the Good becomes an ענף (anaf), a “branch,” of the עץ חיים (Ets Chayim), or the “Tree of Life,” that is Torah. Growing in the soil of loving kindness, the עץ חיים lives in the doing good that constitutes being good. Thus becoming an ענף, not only our deeds but also our very being becomes ענף (anaf), which is “branchy” or “far-reaching.” Only in this living of the living Good do we have the life that is drawn from the Tree of Life. Thus the talmudic sages Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar taught, “The Torah was given in forty days, and the soul is formed in forty days: whosoever keeps the Torah, his soul is kept, and whosoever does not keep the Torah, his soul is not kept” (Menachot 99b). The living Good that is Torah is the life of the soul.

This living Good that is the substance of Torah comes to the world על פי ה-صال ה-פרטי (al-pi HaShem beyad Moshe), “on the lips of G-d and by the hand of Moshe” (Numbers 9: 23). Which means: the Good that issues from the mouth of G-d finds its way into the world through the hands of human beings. We receive the Good by living the Good, which is not a principle, an idea, or a rule to follow but is a living Presence that enables us to become present. And it manifests itself as such a Presence each time we declare, “אני—Here I am!” standing face to face with another. Contrary to Heidegger’s Dasein, “being there” means being there for another. Thus it is written in the Torah, yalnız is not good (see Genesis 2:18). As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) once said, two are required for the Good to exist (quoted in Glazerson 1997: 118). The living Good is the being that is a being there for another; and being there for another is how we live the living Good.

Let us consider more closely, then, what the holy tongue tells us about living for the sake of the other human being.
FOR THE SAKE OF ANOTHER

In our discussion of the verb הָיָה (hitkayem) in the previous chapter we determined that to “exist” or “live” also means to “take place”: existence or being is not something that simply is—it happens. If we consider other verbs that mean to “happen,” we find that what transpires in the event of existence is an encounter. Contrary to the Cartesian cogito—the “I think, therefore I am” (see Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, 27) that characterizes modern thought and that situates the thinking ego at the center of reality—the holy tongue suggests: I encounter another, therefore I am. Both כָּרָה (karah) and מֶטֶס (matsa), for example, mean to “happen,” as well as to “meet” or “encounter” (the common meaning of matsa, of course, is to “find”). Noting that מֶטֶס (metsiut), a noun derived from matsa, means “reality” or “existence,” we see that reality consists of encounter: we do not experience reality—we meet it. That is to say, the meeting is itself reality.

Which is to say: being does not lie in thinking. Rather, it is a process of engagement, a continual entering into a relationship in which the Voice of a Thou—or better, the Voice of I Am—addresses us. Here still another verb meaning to “happen” comes to mind: it is הרָכָש (hitrachesh). It comes from רָכָש (rachash), which means not only “whisper” but also “prayer,” as in the expression רָכָש העֲלָה (rachashei halev); literally meaning “whispers of the heart,” this phrase translates as “prayers of the heart” and indicates a person’s deepest thoughts and emotions. If existence lies in engagement, then it is dialogical, and, in its depth dimensions, the dialogue that constitutes existence is prayer. What happens—in the happening that is existence is a רָכָש, a prayer that, like the angels on Jacob’s ladder,1 moves from below to above and from above to below.

Jewish thought, then, regards the human being not as a res cogitans, a thinking thing, but as a “speaking being,” as a מֶדֶבֶר (medaber),2 who responds to a summons in prayer—where prayer is regarded both as words and as deeds. Hence there is no “Jewish concept” of G-d; rather, there is a divine concept of the Jew and of every human being, to whom and for whom each of us must answer. As Abraham Joshua Heschel states it, Torah is “G-d’s anthropology,” not “man’s theology” (Heschel 1955: 412). The two notions are as opposed to each other as the word מֶדֶבֶר is opposed to a word spelled exactly the same: מִדְבַּר (midbar), which means “desert” (as well as “speech” or “talk”). Benjamin Blech explains the connection
by saying that the Torah was given in a מדבר (midbar) to show that humanity must choose “between the barrenness of the desert or the beauty of the spoken word” (Blech 1993: 113). I would go further and say that the choice is between the emptiness of the desert and the meaning of the Word. The Torah transcends the desert by commanding us to transform emptiness into meaning, the desert into a dwelling place.

Recall in this connection that one of the ways of referring to G-d in the holy tongue is מְצִיעָה (Mechuyaw-HaMetsiut), the One who “Obliges Reality” in the ongoing event of creation. Which is to say: if reality consists of an encounter, the encounter lies in our being commanded by G-d—that is what happens in the creation that constitutes our existence. Whom, then, do we encounter in the encounter that is existence? The Holy One, who, as He commands by a Voice (cf. Deuteronomy 5:19), creates by a Voice. And what happens in that encounter? We meet the Holy One in the one who is created in His image. That is what makes the encounter with another בִּישוּל (bishuil) or “for the sake of” another, which is literally a movement along the “path,” or the שובל (shvil), toward another. Another word meaning “for the sake of” is לֵמָן (lemaan). Its root is the noun מָן (maan), which means “address,” so that a literal meaning of לֵמָן is “to the address,” to the מון (maon) or “dwelling place,” of someone. Still another term worth noting is בָּאוּר (baavur), as in the phrase בָּאוּר העתינוּ (baavur avoteinu), “for the sake of our forefathers,” that appears in the daily prayers. Its verbal root is בָּא (baa), which means to “go over,” “cross over,” or “go beyond.” This word suggests that being there for the sake of another entails going beyond the isolation—beyond the illusion—of one’s own ego. To be sure, wisdom lies in the negation of the lie of the ego.

What is common to all these terms that designate being there “for the sake of” another is a movement לִקְרָת (likrat) “toward” another, as in welcoming or greeting the other human being. The movement toward the other person, then, is a crossing over the confines of self, into a transcendent reality. Thus Abraham is known by another cognate of בָּא, as the אִיבִּר (Ivri), which is a Hebrew or a Jew: not because he crossed over into a new land but because he crossed over into a relation to and for the sake of the other human being. To be sure, he is the first person in the Torah to use the word אַל (al), or “you” (Genesis 12:11) (see Neher 1981: 112–113), and, as Emmanuel Lévinas has shown, “man made in the image of G-d” is announced in the you, not in the I. “The very movement that leads to another,” he argues, “leads to G-d” (Lévinas 1998: 148). In the relation to the you I approach my who, which is not mine at all. Recall here the teaching from the Zohar cited in Chapter 3, where it is written that the Holy One was primordially manifested as מְישהָו (Mi), or “Who” (Zohar I, 2a). The cry of מָּי לָעַל (Mi khamokhah), “Who is like You” (Exodus 15:11) is not a question; it is the assertion that the divine You is like the Who encountered in the Who of the human you. And the essence of the Who is rooted in being there for the sake of another. The Who is between two.

Who, then, is a Jew? He is the one whose relation to G-d is rooted in a life lived for the sake of another. And what does it mean to be there for the sake of another?
another? It means drawing nigh unto another in such a way that he or she may be assured of a place to dwell. How do we do that? By moving beyond the deadly solitude of our own being, which is the solitude of the self—or of the self-delusion—that would be only for itself. If my own being, my own survival, is all that ultimately matters, then my being here ultimately usurps the place that another person might have in the world. To the extent that I am here for the sake of another, I no longer stake out my territory or insist on having my space. Rather, I affirm the avenue where another may reside.

If the commandment (mitzvah), the commandment, that we receive from G-d is a tsavta (as we found in Chapter 4), it connects us to G-d by drawing us toward the place where the other human being appears. No commandment arises from what is simply “out there.” Nor can it arise from one’s own thinking: reason may deduce, but it does not command, despite the invocations of the “categorical imperative” or the “dictates of reason,” which in the end are merely dictatorial. For reason most certainly will not be commanded. Entrenched in the “autonomy” of his “self-legislation” (see, for example, Kant’s Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, 440), the ontological thinker is locked into a radical isolation from the other human being; thus isolated, he is spiritually and morally bankrupt. The one thing that can penetrate this ontological isolation is the commandment that comes to us through the other human being, from beyond being. The other human being, therefore, is more than an instance of “being”—the other human being is a breach in being. Encountering another person, we come into contact with other worlds, and the connection is the commandment.

What is the commandment addressed to us in the encounter with the other human being? It is precisely the one we receive from G-d in Leviticus 19:18: וְהָיוּ לְךָ הַעֲדָנָה לְרֹאֲכֶךָ כְּמוֹ לִשְׁנָכֶךָ (“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”) Or better, as we recall from Chapter 2, “You shall love your neighbor, for loving the other is your self”: that loving (and not your thinking) is the who that transpires at the core of your being, from the depths of your encounter with the other human being. That is why G-d tells Moses that in his cry of “Here I am [for you]!”—“Here I am [for you]!” lies his very life (see Tanchuma Shemot 15). And, inasmuch as the substance of our life is rooted in the holy tongue of Torah, “through genuine loving relationships to one’s fellow Jews,” Yitzchak Ginsburgh states it, “one strengthens his bond to the letters of the Torah” (Ginsburgh 1991: 9). Love of neighbor and love of Torah are of a piece—גָּם כַּן: that is who you are.

Joseph Albo notes that love for oneself is impossible because the self is not other; any true self is constituted by the love that draws a person into the oneness of a relation with another. Thus, says Albo, the words for “love,” אהבה (ahavah), and for “one,” אחד (echad), have the same numerical value of 13 (see Sefer HaIkkarim 4:45). And, as we declare in the Shema each day, the One who is אחד is precisely HaShem, who precisely because He is One, commands the love for the neighbor. From the standpoint of speculative philosophy, such love has no “place” in being, since being may “call,” to use Heidegger’s term (see Heidegger 1929: 271–272), but it does not command. The holy tongue, however, reveals to us that we do not choose
the exigency of loving our neighbor any more than we choose the reality we live in. For our reality is this exigency; our identity is this responsibility.

Thus our exploration of the Good in Chapter 4 brings us to this insight: creation is declared to be good—בָּרוּ אֶצְלוּ (ki-tov)—precisely because the human being who transpires in the event of creation is commanded to love the other human being. Only in that relation, says Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno (c. 1470–1550) in his commentary on Genesis 2:18, can the purpose of our being created in the image and likeness of the Holy One be realized: to live in that image is to live in relation to another, for the sake of another. How, then, can we tell whether what we are doing is good? The Chasidic master Moshe Leib of Sassov (1745–1807) answers, “Ask yourself whether it brings you closer to your fellow human being” (quoted in Wiesel 1982c: 105). The good is the proximity to the other attained through deeds performed for the sake of the other. Hence it is בָּרוּ אֶלֶךָ (lo-tov), “not good,” for the human being to be alone (Genesis 2:18): alone, the human being may enjoy the autonomy of reason and will, but in that autonomy he has no identity, no reality, and—what is the same thing—no love. Love, then, is the first of the fundamental considerations to be addressed when examining what the holy tongue reveals to us about being there for the sake of another.

Love

As already noted, the Hebrew noun for “love” is אהבה (ahavah); the verb is אָהַב (ahav), to “love.” The numerical value of אהבה is 13, which is half the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton, that is, 26. Hence, where there is love between two, thus doubling אהבה, there HaShem is also, the One who is called אמת (emet), or “Truth.” What is Truth? It is the commandment: thou shalt love. Where there is no love, there is no truth. Hence the letters in the word for “love,” ה-ב-ה-א, parallel the letters of the Name of the Holy One, ה-ב-ה-י: the two heyss are in the same position, the א (alef) begins, as it were, with the י (yud) in its upper right-hand corner, and the ב (bet) has the same sound as the ו (vav). One will also recall that, like אהבה, the revelation at Mount Sinai begins with א, in G-d’s utterance of א-נו-ק א (Anokhi). Since this “I” is the “I” of the Tetragrammaton and since the Tetragrammaton parallels אהבה, the substance of revelation—the substance of Torah—is love. What is the א that precedes the ב of the beginning? It the א of the divine אהבה. Therefore, as Lévinas points out, it is “not that there is love first and revelation next: revelation is love from the start” (Lévinas 1994: 57). And what is revealed—what is given in a moment of grace—is the commandment to love.

Still another level of love’s affinity with creation and revelation, with Torah and the Holy One, can be seen in the root for the word אהבה, which is the verb לֵב (hav), meaning to “give”: loving is giving, and giving is a manifestation of the holy. For the holy is the ground of meaning, and meaning happens in the act of giving: any meaning or significance that my life may have lies in my becoming a sign of the depth and dearness of the other human being. And I become such a...
sign precisely by giving. This giving, this \( zav \), that lies at the root of \( havaah \) is otherwise than being because it sanctifies being; it is an \textit{irruption} of being, something “unnatural.” Inasmuch as it is natural to eat, rather than to snatch the bread from one’s own mouth and offer it to another, love is not part of a “natural” scheme of things; love is “supernatural,” or spiritual. Only a being who eats can be a spiritual being, because only a being who eats can offer up his own being for the sake of another. This “offering” is precisely a \( havaah \) (\textit{havaah}), a word whose root is also \( zav \) and whose essence is \( havaah \).

A consideration of the word \( zav \) (\textit{rea}) will help us to understand more clearly the relation between love of neighbor and meaning in life. Translated as “friend” or “neighbor” in the commandment found in Leviticus 19:18, in certain contexts \( zav \) can also be rendered as “meaning,” as in the phrase \( banta lereiy \) (\textit{banta lereiy}), that is, “you got my point” or “you grasped my meaning.” To have a neighbor is to have meaning. Why? Because to have a neighbor is to enter into a relation with another for the sake of another, and meaning is always for the sake of another. Meaning unfolds in the realization of a responsibility that I am summoned to fulfill. So many of us are without meaning because we are without a neighbor, which is to say, we are without someone to give to—or so we suppose. Who is my neighbor? \textit{This} human being now before me. What is the meaning of my life? Simply stated, it is to help. Therefore the issue of being a friend does not fall on the other; no, \textit{I} am the one commanded to be a friend to \textit{him}. That is why the commandment to love the neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 is in the singular.

What it means to be a friend to the other human being becomes clearer still upon an examination of the word \( roeh \) (\textit{roeh}), a cognate of \( zav \); it means “shepherd,” as in \( HaShem roiy \) (“the L-rd is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). Vulnerable and exposed to danger, my neighbor is entrusted to my care. Which is to say: the “other,” or the \( acher \) (\textit{acher}), is the one for whom I am \( acharai \) (\textit{acharai}), “responsible,” as a shepherd is responsible for his flock. If I take the L-rd to be my shepherd, then, as one who is responsible for my neighbor, I must be for the other what G-d is for me, a \( tselem \) to my \( rei \). And so in the Talmud we are taught that, as G-d clothed the naked (Genesis 3:21), so must we clothe the naked; as G-d visited the sick (Genesis 18:1), so must we visit the sick; as G-d buried the dead (Deuteronomy 34:6), so must we bury the dead (see \textit{Sotah} 14a). Commanding by example, G-d teaches that we must not only \textit{do} what is commanded—we must \textit{be} what we are commanded to do. For G-d’s being is of a piece with His doing. Hence the \( tselem \) (\textit{tselem}) or “image” of the Holy One in which we are created is not a shape or an object—it is an action. And so, the Zohar teaches, if we do not live by Torah we lose the holy likeness; and when we lose the holy likeness, we lose our human likeness (see \textit{Zohar} I, 191a).

Because G-d’s commandment comes to us through our encounter with the other human being, the other human being is primary: he or she is in a position of height, a position of authority, with respect to myself. Therefore, Heschel asserts, “The concern for others is not an extension in breadth but an ascension, a rise” (Heschel 1951: 139). As Lévinas argues, “To recognize the Other is to
give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height” (Lévinas 1969: 75). Hence, to the extent that I insist on my “equal rights” (for which there is no word in the holy tongue) or assume an attitude of excuse, I do so at the expense of the other human being. As I approach the other human being, then, the revelation of his or her infinite dearness becomes more and more pronounced. Seeing that the other is infinitely dear, I see that my responsibility is infinitely deep. Thus there is a reversal in the relation: the one for whom I must be what G-d is to me turns out to be my “lord,” an insight that comes to us through the word הָלִין (aluf), which means “close friend,” as well as “chief” or “lord.”

The root of הָלִין is הָלִין (alef), the first letter of the alphabet, signifying the one who comes first; here “looking out for Number One” means attending to the need of the other. Which need? His physical need. For attending to his physical need is my spiritual need. Therefore the other is more than my friend; as the one whom I am commanded to love, he is my יָדִיד (yadid), my “beloved.” Made of the word for “hand,” יָד (yad), written twice, the יָדִיד emerges not as the one with whom I hold hands or shake hands but as the one to whom I offer a helping hand. This becomes clear when we recall that being there for the sake of another is a movement toward another. The movement of what? The movement of the hand. “The extended hand of each friend to his companion,” Rabbi Ginsburgh points out further, “is the secret of the extension of the soul’s power of מַלְכֻּה (kingdom)” (Ginsburgh 1991: 160). Which is to say: this world emerges and takes on its divinely intended reality through the extension of one hand to another.

Here we see a connection between יָד and the letter י (spelled י is the first letter in the Holy Name. For according to the mystical tradition, with the contraction of this letter a finite reality emerges from the Infinite One without being swallowed up by His infinity. In the contraction of the Infinite One into the י, Rabbi Ginsburgh explains, “finite manifestation begins from a zero-dimensional point, thereafter developing into a one-dimensional line and two-dimensional surface. This is alluded to in the spelling of the letter יyd (vav): point (ו), line (י), surface (ד)” (Ginsburgh 1991: 154). What Rabbi Ginsburgh describes here is a movement from יָד (ein) to יָדִיד (yesh), from “there is nothing” to “there is something.” G-d creates “something” by becoming as “nothing”; from an ontological standpoint, G-d is “nothingness,” since G-d is other than all there is. Commanded to be holy as G-d is holy (cf. Numbers 15:40), the individual is commanded to do a kind of turnaround, shifting from יָד (ani) to יָד (yad), from “I” or “ego” to “nothing.” How does one go from יָד to יָדִיד? By extending a hand to another human being.

Looking more closely at the letter י, Michael Munk notes that its three parts are also significant: it has “a prong pointing upwards to the One above, a prong directed downwards to earth and the middle part uniting both” (Munk 1983: 126–127; see also Zohar III, 147). If creation unfolds through the contraction of the י, it is an unfolding that is also a reaching out from above to below, from below to above: the יyd becomes a יד, as when the hand of each friend is extended to his companion—to his יָדִיד. Not only is creation an act of love on the part of the
Holy One; it is the manifestation of love between two, hand extended to hand, אֶת הַזָּרְעַת. This word signifying the beloved also has a telling gematria. Its numerical value of 28 contracts to 10 (2 + 8), which calls to mind the Ten Utterances of Creation, as well as the Ten Commandments of Revelation: in the words that call heaven and earth into being a hand reaches out to a hand to command us to extend a hand to our neighbor. Ten, in turn, contracts to 1, which signifies the Oneness of G-d. That Oneness underlies the oneness between oneself and the אֶת הַזָּרְעַת; it is a oneness that includes and encompasses otherness. Where there is a אֶת הַזָּרְעַת—two joined together, hand in hand—there is a single life that arises and flourishes in the love between them. This between space is the realm of oneness, and yet it requires two in order for it to become manifest. That is why holding a person’s hand is never like holding an object.

Thus the Holy Name bespeaks a reaching out of hand to hand: just as two poles create a magnetic field, two hands open up a “field” of Divine Presence. Two hands, then, are required for two people to enter into a “spiritual relation” to one another. Which means: the spiritual relation between one another, including both oneness and otherness, is not merely a meeting of minds or a bonding of souls. It is one hand seeking another, as the word אֶת הַזָּרְעַת implies. Hence the transformation of matter into spirit that was discussed in the previous chapter takes place in the hand: if the food we consume is transformed into deeds of loving kindness, it is the אֶת הַזָּרְעַת that works the transformation into an act of offering. Whereas magic is a sleight of hand, mystery is this offering of the hand. One would manipulate the world; the other transforms the world.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe (d. 1782), the noted disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, makes a striking statement in this connection. “The principal purpose of the creation of man, who was made out of form and matter,” he writes, “is that he should strive all his days to turn matter into form” (quoted in Dresner 1960: 137). The words translated as “matter” and “form” in this passage are חומר (chomer) and צורה (tsurah) respectively. Significantly, צורה also means “face”: if the aim of the human being is to turn matter into form or spirit through deeds of loving kindness, it is to transform matter into a face (we shall explore in more detail the significance of the face below). While matter is merely physical, form—or the face—is both physical and metaphysical. The face within the form speaks, so that when matter assumes form it takes on meaning. Meaning, in turn, lies in the summons to do something with our hands, that is, to extend a helping hand in an act of loving kindness.

Here the word for “loving kindness,” חסד (chesed), and its corresponding adjective חסיד (chasid), reveal something about love. If you consult any dictionary, you will see that חסד means “love,” “kindness,” “grace,” “mercy,” “charity,” and the like; similarly, חסיד means “kind,” “charitable,” and “graceful,” but it also means “righteous” and “pious.” A loving relation, therefore, has both horizontal and vertical dimensions: to treat another with kindness in the human-to-human relation is to a devotion to the Holy One in the human-to-divine relation. Another cognate of this word, חסד (chisud), meaning “act of kindness,” tells us that to be loving, kind, righteous, and so on lies not in feeling a certain way but in performing a certain
action. What sort of action? One that creates an opening between two human beings, through which a living presence may enter the world from on high—a teaching utterly alien to the Western ontological tradition steeped in Greek thought, where, outside of “knowledge,” there is no relation between god and humanity, since for god, as Aristotle states it, there is no question of “love being returned, nor at all of loving” (see Magna Moralia 1028b, 29–32). For Jewish thought, by contrast, the movement of ḥesed is a moment of revelation, as taught by the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman: “Through charity a sort of Divine revelation occurs in the soul” (quoted in Aron 1969: 126). It is, in the words of Rabbi Ginsburgh, “the means through which G-d’s presence is ultimately revealed” (Ginsburgh 1991: 88).

For these reasons, Martin Buber maintains that love is not a feeling but a living presence between two (Buber 1970: 66). If that is the case, it is because the body of each person creates such a between space. The body is what makes possible the caress that seeks what it can never touch, the nearness that can never be near enough. As the shape of the suggests, the relation that arises when hand is extended to hand is a reaching from above to below, from below to above, in a movement that connects the physical with the metaphysical. Therefore we do not simply wash our hands to prepare them for the performance of mitsvot each day; as the blessing pronounced upon washing the hands, יד יד אלו (al netilat yadaim), indicates, we elevate our hands for the task of extending a helping hand to the other human being. Once again we see that this reaching out to help another is a reaching up. That is why our physical being—the body—is essential to this metaphysical movement.

The body

Bound to the space and time that constitute being, ontological thought poses the question as to whether the body that occupies space and time has a soul. Such a question is body-centered in the same way that Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” is ego-centered. Just as the focus on the ego renders the self empty and meaningless, so does the focus on the body devalue and dehumanize our physical being. Examples of this humiliation of the body range from pornography to the fitness craze, inasmuch as the interest is more in groping than in caressing, more in looks than in health. The body is elevated and sanctified not by cosmetic surgery or diet pills but by the soul; as the body is thus sanctified, the life of the soul is enhanced, and as the life of the soul is enhanced, the body is sanctified. Although the soul is distinct from the body, it is connected to the body, as a flame is both distinct from and connected to a wick. It turns out, however, that, in the case of body and soul, the wick does not have a flame; rather, the flame has a wick.

We come to this inversion of the metaphor through a reflection on the noun הָרָג (peger), which is the Hebrew word for “corpse,” and its corresponding verb הָרַג (piger), which is to “drop behind” or to “lag.” If a corpse is something the soul leaves behind, like an item of worn clothing, then the body does not have a soul—the soul has a body. Further, the soul elevates and sanctifies the body by using a body part, the hands, to physically reach out and meet the bodily need of
the other human being. Said the Koretzer Rebbe, “Take care of your own soul and another man’s body, but not your own body and another man’s soul” (quoted in Newman 1963: 451). To be sure, taking care of another person’s body is precisely how we take care of our soul, for “the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs,” as Lévinas has pointed out (Lévinas 1990b: 99).

To heed the command that comes from the mouth of G-d is to extend a hand for the sake of another—that is how physical being gets elevated. The body is not the enemy of the soul, as Greek thought suggests (see, for example, Plato’s Phaedo, 80a–81a). Created in the image and likeness of the Holy One, both the body and the soul are instilled with sparks of holiness, with the form of the former related to the substance of the latter. Hence the ten sefirot through which G-d manifests Himself in creation correspond to parts of the body, as do the 613 commandments. Made in the image of the Holy One, the human being is made in the image of the commandments, in the image of Torah. Or better: the human being is made precisely of Torah, body and soul.

Because each part of the body is linked to a commandment, each part of the body is connected to Torah and, through Torah, to G-d. Indeed, the Kitsur Shulchan Arukh compares death to the burning of a Torah scroll (194: 6), so that when returned to their resting place, both the Torah scroll and the human body are placed in an ארון (aron), a word that means both “ark” and “coffin.” The body of a human being, therefore, is both physical and metaphysical. While a human being has a physical heart, one who has a לב בשר (lev basar), literally a “heart of flesh,” is a person of “compassion,” and compassion for another transcends the confines of the physical body. Compassion, the לב בשר, is metaphysical, for the human heart is never merely physical. This thinking about the body is generally guided by the Hebrew word for “body,” which is גוף (guf), a word that also means “substance,” “being,” and “essence.” The word גוף tells us that the body is more than a conglomerate of muscle, blood, and bone. Although it may go the way of all flesh, the body is not reducible to flesh. Embracing the body of another, we encounter far more than the flesh. And that “far more” is what embraces us. Thus the being and substance of one connects with the being and substance of another through the body. Which is to say: גוף connects with גוף through גוף.

It is worth noting that the Aramaic equivalent of גוף, גוף גוף (gufa), is a term used in the Talmud to mean “let us return to the essential subject,” which suggests a relation between the body and an essential teaching. Suddenly we realize that the essential teachings of Torah, from which the soul derives its life, are teachings that concern the body—what we do with it, how we care for it, what we put on it, what we put in it, how we position it, and so on. Similarly, the phrases גוף כל תורא (gufei halakhot) and גוף כל תורה (gufei Torah), literally meaning the “bodies of law” and the “bodies of Torah” respectively, translate as “essential laws” and “basic laws of Torah.” While גוף underscores the importance of the physical in the relation to the other human being, it does not imply the primacy of the physical relation. To be sure, if sacrificing oneself for the sake of another is the highest affirmation of the dearness of the other, what is offered up in
sacrifice is more than the body. And yet the body is offered up: sacrifice is always physical, as well as metaphysical.

Consider here the Hebrew expression for “sacrifice.” The root verb for being sacrificed or making a sacrifice is בַּרְצָה (karav), which also means to “approach” or “draw near.” The noun that means “sacrifice” is בַּרְצָח (karban), which can also mean “offering” or “gift”; its cognate בַּרְצָה (karov) means “near” and can also refer to a “kinsman” or a “relative,” that is, to a physical, blood relation that is part of a deeper relation between relatives. Another cognate, the noun בַּרְצָה (kerev), denotes an “interior” or “inward part” that belongs to the dimension of the within, as in the phrase בַּרְצָה (מְכֶרֶב-לֵב), “from the depths of the heart.” When a person offers himself up in sacrifice for the sake of another, he offers up not only his body but also the inner depths of his being. From these variations on the root בַּרְצָה we learn that where between is synonymous with within, within is synonymous with above. For the proximity sought in the sacrifice is a proximity to the Most High.

Sacrifice for the sake of another, therefore, attains nearness to the other, and nearness to the other summons ever more profoundly the sacrifice for his or her sake—both from within and from beyond. Sacrifice entails not only the dramatic offering up of one’s life for the sake of another; it can be as simple as snatching the bread from one’s own mouth and giving it to another, thus placing the sustenance of another’s life before one’s own. To be sure, that is how an eruv, or a realm of communal Sabbath observance, is established. “On Friday,” the Kitsur Shulchan Arukh instructs us, “one of the tenants takes a whole loaf of his own bread, and makes all the other tenants of the court acquire a share in it by handing it to another tenant” (94:6). When each thus offers bread to another, a community is created, and with it a place where the holiness of the Sabbath can enter the world. Without the offering of bread to another, there is no holiness in the world. Thus, according to the fourteenth-century sage Rabbi Israel ibn al-Nakawa, the Jewish leaders of France used to have “their coffins made out of the boards of the tables upon which they gave food to the poor” (quoted in Maimonides 1967, Vol. 2: 221). Nor was this practice a mere medieval custom or quirk, for it is written in the Kitsur Shulchan Arukh: “Benevolent people who in their lifetime fed the poor at their table should be interred in a coffin made out of the boards of that table” (199:1).

Once again, we see that only a being who eats—only a bodily being who is one day laid to rest in the earth—can be a spiritual being, for only one who has a body can live and die for the sake of another in a kidush HaShem (kiddush HaShem), a sanctification of the Holy One, which is also a sanctification of the one created in His image. Here, says André Neher (1914–1988), “everything receives a meaning through the ultimate testimony of man who accepts that meaning to its very limit. Everything is oriented in relation to that testimony” (Neher 1969: 338–339). In the ultimate testimony of a finite, bodily being the greatest proximity to the infinite is attained. Spirituality is about that proximity; it is about the attainment through the בַּרְצָה, the expression of בַּרְצָח, in the simple act of offering bread to another human being. Perhaps that is why in the Talmud both Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish teach that, since the destruction of the Temple, the table in our home, where we
invite guests to eat, takes the place of the sacrificial altar (see Chagigah 27a; Menachot 97a). As it happened at the altar, in the offering of bread to another—in the nourishment of the body of another—we engage the holy by bringing help and healing to our fellow human being. To be sure, in Hebrew to “serve food” to someone is הִיסִיע (hisiid); its root verb שָׂאָד (saad) means to “help,” “aid,” or “assist.”

This offering of help in the offering of food to another is the most fundamental way of being with another, a point that becomes all the more clear in the Hebrew expression יִהְיֶה אִם (hayyah im). Like יְהַעַר, this expression may be translated as to “help.” It literally means to “be with” another, but it is a “being with” that is not just a “being alongside” but is a being involved with another, for the sake of another. That is how the “presence” that is תַּקְוָה (nakhechut) is established; it is a cognate of לַכָּחַד (lenokhach), which may mean “considering,” “in consideration of,” or “seeing that.” Hence presence before another lies in the consideration given to another. It is a יָהּ הָיָה (im), a “being with” someone that is a “being a brother” to someone, as the preposition יָהּ suggests: written with a פְַתֵּח (patach) vowel sign, יָהּ (im) or “with” becomes יָהּ (am), which means “people” or “nation,” as well as “kinsman” or “relative.”

The point is reinforced by the expression יָהּ אִם אִשַּׁי (ish et achiy), which translates as “each other” or “one another” but literally means “a man with his brother.” Being with is being with another human being, who, as a human being, is my blood relative. Being with, in other words, is being there for the sake of another, affirming an internal connection between us that is prior to our being with one another. That is why in Hebrew the words “stranger” and to “know” or “recognize” someone—(provider) and וְקִהֵר (hikir) respectively—have a common root: וּכְרֵה (nakhar). In a very important sense, none of us is a stranger to anyone. We are all family.

This fundamental relatedness between self and other lies not only in the one earth of which both are made but also in the divine spark by which both are animated. Offering up to another the bread we harvest from the earth, we affirm our connection to the earth and to one another: as there is one earth, so is there one bread, one body. Offering up our prayers over the bread, we affirm our connection to the source not only of bread but also of life’s very radiance, and, through that source, to one another. As we have seen in Chapter 3, we refer to that source by many names. The radiance that emanates from it—the eternity that finds its way from beyond the world into the world, also has a name: it is called time. Time is to space what the soul is to the body; it is the presence of the eternal in space. That is why time is between two: the “space” we refer to as “between” is made of the entry of the eternal into time. For time is the being with another, for another, that is commanded by the Eternal One. And because it is commanded by the Eternal One, it is a “being with” that can never be deep or close enough, a being with something more, forever yet to unfold.

**Time and the other**

Rosh Hashanah, the “New Year,” is, among other things, an observance of the creation that took place in the beginning. Yet its date, the First of Tishrei, is not
the first day of creation—it is the last day of creation, the day when Adam and Eve were created. That is why, as we have seen, on the sixth day G-d declares creation to be not just “good” but הָוָה בֶּשָּׂד (tov meod), that is, “very good” or “good and more” (Genesis 1:31). The “more” here is the human being who is more than being—more than being because through human relation time enters being. Said Nachman of Breslov, “You must know that time does not exist of itself, and that days are made only of good deeds. It is through men who perform good deeds [for the sake of others] that days are born, and so time is born” (quoted in Levin 1975: 344). Why? Because in order for a human being to be who he is, he must become more than he is, for the sake of another, and thus must be what he is not yet. That is to say, he must change. For no other creature inhabiting the landscape of being is such change an issue. The beginning of the “year” or the שנה (shanah) is the beginning of the “change” orシン (shinui, a cognate of shanah) that introduces time to creation through human relation. Thus Rosh Hashanah—the beginning of the year or the beginning of the change—begins with the day of humanity’s creation. On that day, and not on the first day, time begins.

A consideration of the Hebrew word for “time,” זמָn (zman), turns up some striking insights into the relation between time and being-for-the-other. We discover, for example, that the time that begins in the beginning unfolds most fundamentally around the dinner table. We have noted the Talmudic teaching that, since the destruction of the Temple, the table in our home takes the place of the altar. The Mishnah teaches further that when three have sat at the table and eaten bread, they are faced with a duty: חָיָּאִים לְזָכַּמְנ (chayyim lezamen), that is, “they must bench,” or together say the prayer known as “Grace after Meals” (Berakhot 7:1). The verb meaning to “say grace after a meal” is זִמֵּן (zimen), a word that also means to “invite” or “summon together.” In its הלעפָא (hitpael) or reflexive form, חָזְדָה (hizdamen), it means to “happen” or to “occur” (yet another verb in an array of verbs with such a meaning). And its root is זָמ (zma’), the word for “time.” Occurrence implies time; where there is occurrence there is a summons to gather together and give thanks to the One who sustains life. As we learn from the manna that the Israelites received in the desert—as we are taught in the Grace after Meals—bread comes not only from the earth but also from the heavens.

One can see that the implications of what is revealed through this word and its cognates are huge. First, the verbs זִמֵּן and חָזְדָה confirm what the holy tongue has already taught us, namely that to exist is to transpire, that what transpires in our existence is an encounter, and that the encounter harbors an invitation or a summons. Or better: as the word חָיָּאִים implies, the encounter that happens in gathering together to eat harbors a commandment to pray. If sharing bread creates a bond with one another, praying together affirms the substance of that bond by affirming the higher relation that sanctifies it. In the form of זִמֵּן, moreover, the root חָזְדָה conveys the idea that the summons is a commandment not only to pray, but, through prayer, to enter into time: entering into time, we are called to be here now for the sake of the other human being. And because it happens with prayer, entering into time is a drawing of the eternal into time. Only in relation
to the other human being—who transcends the coordinates of space and time—do we have time, for only in the relation to the other person does the eternal come to bear. Left to our isolation—to the solitude that is שָׁוְא—we merely kill time. Killing time, we are drained of existence.

From what has been said, it can be determined that in the form of מז, the root מז suggests that those who give thanks for their sustenance are sustained by their prayer. For the prayer is not only a means of addressing G-d—it is also a means of hearing G-d, a means of receiving the Word that nourishes the soul just as bread nourishes the body. Therefore, as was noted in the last chapter, we think we pray to G-d, but that is not exactly the case, for the prayer itself is divine. Therefore, to invoke a variation on Heschel’s teaching on the relation between time and G-d’s presence in space, time is the presence of prayer in the realm of space, where space is the between space created when human beings eat together and pray together—affirming not only a horizontal between but also a vertical between. As Martin Buber has said, the prayer is not in time, but rather time is in the prayer (Buber 1970: 59), so that מז is indeed in מז. Time is in the prayer because the prayer opens up the relation to G-d and humanity that lies precisely in the invitation to join together in prayer. Prayer thus elevates space from the physical to the metaphysical. For the height of the One On High is not a matter of altitude.

Recall at this juncture another word that means to “summon” or to “invite,” the word ברק (kara). Reinforcing what has already been said with regard to being as an event and existence as an encounter, we note that ברק also means to “happen” or to “take place”; we note further that the passive or בַּקַּרֶּה (nifal) form of the verb, ברק: (nikra), means to “encounter” (cf. the verb בֹּקֶה mentioned above). An insight to be derived from the verb ברק that we do not get from other verbs, however, lies in its other meanings: to “name,” to “call,” or to “read.” A person who chants Torah in the synagogue, for example, is a ברק ר (“master of reading.” The ברק ר is also a “master of calling,” for as he reads Torah, he calls upon his listeners to heed Torah. One who is thus called to the encounter with the “text” or the ברק (mekora), suggesting that the reader, the text, and the one summoned to the encounter with Torah are all interwoven, as these Hebrew words are interwoven. Those who are summoned, moreover, are summoned by name. To be summoned by name is to be marked with a responsibility to and for another. And to be marked with a responsibility for another is to be turned over to a future—to a time—that has yet to be consummated. Each time we are called to the Torah, we are implicated with regard to a human relation that we have yet to fulfill. Thus the reader, the ברק ר, makes heard a Voice other than his own.

The time of my life—my life time—lies in this yet that belongs to the Torah’s injunction to love G-d and neighbor. Having time, I have time for the other. Living out my time, I live in the movement toward the other, which is a movement into the future, drawing nigh unto the other in a movement of response and responsibility, according to my calling—all of which lies in the alphabetical ordering of the roots ברק and ברק, with the former, ending in ב, preceding the latter: first I am called, and then I draw nigh, only to realize that I had always been called and that
I am eternally too late. Here too, in this “too late,” time and the other are knotted together, merging in the one task *more* that I must *yet* engage for the sake of the other. Time is made of this “more,” of this רות (ָד), because the responsibility to be met for the sake of the other is one responsibility *more*, to be met once *more*, forever yet to be accomplished. Therefore in the time of being there for the sake of another—in the time of our lives—we encounter a trace of “eternity”—a point that becomes clear when we observe that רות also means “yet” or “still” and that its cognates רות (ָד) and רות (ָד) mean “eternity” and “time” (in the sense of “period” or “era”) respectively. All of them come together in the “testimony” or רות (ָד) offered to another for the sake of another. When we declare to another, “Here I am for you,” we attest to the dearness of the human that derives from the divine, and thus to the urgency of the time that contains—yes, *contains*—eternity.

Because the testimony in which time and eternity intersect is an act of response, it is an instance of answering. What lies in the depths of this “answering” or רות (אִיְיָה) becomes clear upon a consideration of the verb רות (ָאָה). Meaning to “answer” or to “hearken” in the light of having heard something, רות signifies an answering that is a hearing, or a hearing in the midst of answering. Also meaning to “be humble,” רות here indicates a consciousness of the One before whom we stand and to whom we answer when we say, “Here I am for you,” to our fellow human being. Because this answering is also a hearing, each time we answer we hear more profoundly the summons to answer yet again and realize more deeply that we are רות (ָעָד), “assigned” or “destined,” for one responsibility *more*. And so we come back to the רות, the “yet” and its cognate רות, meaning “eternity”: in this answering that eternally summons yet another answer we encounter the Eternal One. Indeed, our lives are made of that eternity, of the eternal “while” and “until” that constitute our lives as lives made of responsibility. That is the meaning of the psalmist’s assertion of “I shall sing praises unto my G-d רות ( LORD),” that is, “with all my being” (Psalms 146:2): with all my רות, meaning with all my time and eternity, all my response and responsibility. This רות signifies the open-endedness of a life lived for the sake of another, a life that is never enough, and therefore a life in which eternity is continually at work.

In a very important sense, then, our lives go “on and on,” as endless as our field of vision, which is delineated by our “responsibility,” by our דָשָעַת (אָחָרְיוּת), to another and for the sake of another. And because only *I* can meet *this* responsibility, my responsibility is what defines who I am: responsibility is subjectivity. Which means: I am the “not-I”—the “other” or רות (ָאָרְך) of דָשָעַת. When I fail in my דָשָעַת, I become רות to myself, “other” than who I am, hence absent from my fellow human being. Absent from my fellow human being, I have no time, a point underscored by the verb רות (אָרָר), meaning to “be late,” to “tarry,” or to “lag behind,” and by the noun רות (אָרָה), which means “end” or “future.” The other human being is my end, is my future: is my meaning. Hence only through the responsibility that defines me do I generate a presence before the other, where I have time because I am on time.
In this responsibility to and for the other person—a responsibility that exceeds the horizons of our time in this world—we have life נֵּדֶד (laad) or life “eternal.” For Jewish thought, life eternal is precisely life conceived as responsibility; life eternal is life נָדָד (noad), or “destined,” to use another variation on the root נֵדֶד: taken from the verb נָדָד (yaad), meaning to “appoint,” to “assign,” or to “destine,” the eternal life that is נֵּדֶד is part of a life summoned and assigned in time. Here one realizes that נָדָד (yiad), meaning “mission” or “destiny,” is precisely the opposite of the Greek μοίρα or fate (μοῖρα) is the usual Hebrew equivalent). For a person’s fate has no particular purpose. It is pointless, for example, to ask why Oedipus has to murder his father and marry his mother; he simply has to do it, and there is nothing that man or god can do to change his fate. Like the Being that is the object of ontological speculation—and unlike the destiny that is נֵּדֶד—the fate that is μοίρα simply is, and it is necessarily so. Fate entails neither responsibility nor relation; to be sure, it undermines all responsibility and relation by making every choice—including the choice we are summoned to make between life and death (Deuteronomy 30:19)—into a mere illusion. Stealing away all genuine choice, fate is the equivalent of doom. It is your lot, the short straw you have drawn, despite anything you might have chosen.

Destiny or נֵדֶד, on the other hand, is a being chosen for the sake of another, in the light of which we must make a choice. It is the נֵדֶד that belongs to נָדָד (yaad), which is “mission,” “purpose,” or “aim.” Whereas fate strikes us dumb, destiny demands a “testimony,” an נְדָד: for where there is נֵדֶד, there is נָדָד, the נְדָד that attests to the נָדָד, to the eternal. And where does the eternal manifest itself in the time? In the face of the other human being. Inasmuch as time is constituted by a summons to be there for the sake of another, time has a face. For the face speaks. It is the face that summons our being there for the sake of the other.

The face

The Hebrew word for “face” is פָּנִים (panim), a word that is plural because, according to one tradition, each of us has two faces: the face of Adam and our own individual face. The face, therefore, is both universal and particular, harboring both a human and a divine presence, inasmuch as Adam comes from the hand—and from the mouth or face—of G-d Himself. To be an individual is to have one’s own unique face, which in turn is to be irreplaceable: only I can meet this responsibility here and now for this human being. Fundamentally linked to one another, on the other hand, we live in community, that is, in a oneness that inheres in the Oneness of G-d, each sharing the same sanctity, living in testimony to the absolute dearness of every human being.

A community, therefore, is the opposite of a crowd, where it is every man for himself. It should be noted, however, that for the Hebrew language and Jewish thought, this opposition between crowd and community is not so radical. The word for “crowd” is קָהָל (kahal), and the word for “community” is קֶהִילָה (kehilah); both derive from the verb קִהֵל (kihel), which means to “assemble” or “gather.”
Both nouns, in fact, can be translated as “assembly” or “congregation.” And it is precisely in the community, from the midst of the congregation orミחְל (mikhel), that we come into a relation to G-d, as it is written in the Psalms: יָם הָאָרֶץ (bemakhelim evarekh Hashem), “Within the congregations I shall bless the L-rd” (Psalms 26:12). At the heart of the congregation or theミקְלָם is theミקל (makhelah) or “choir,” suggesting a definitive interweaving of community and choir. Which tells us that where there is community there is song raised up to offer blessings and thanksgiving to the One on High. The isolation of the self from every other self, which is part of being lost in the crowd, is not part of the thinking couched in the holy tongue. This utter solitude of being that characterizes Western ontological thought, is alien to Jewish thought. Theミקְלָם is much closer to the Hebrewミקְלָם than it is to the English “crowd.” In Hebrew both words suggest a coming together for the sake of another, either above or below.

Ontological, postmodern thought, on the other hand, indicates that the human condition is a crowded condition, in which each human being is no more than a number, faceless and nameless, a mere “face” in the crowd. In the crowd there are no people, for there is no face—there are only competitors, only the facelessness of the animal, all in a rat race that no one can win, each preying upon the other. Therefore when Hillel tells us that in a place where there are no men one must be a man (Avot 2:5), he means that one must step before the countenance for the sake of another and thus create a community, aミקְלָם, of human beings. Which is to say: one must heed the cry for help that arises from the face.

As a “speaking being,” as aברְדֶם (medaber), every human being is defined by the face, not by the brain, because the face speaks. In that phenomenon we have the trace of the divine that distinguishes the human. Therefore, unlike Greek thought, which sees creation in terms of mineral, vegetable, and animal realities, Jewish thought adds a fourth dimension, one that transcends the “natural world”: here we have the mineral, vegetable, animal, and speaking aspects of creation. For Jewish thought, language is not a natural phenomenon. Nor is it a human phenomenon. It is a divine phenomenon. That is why words create angels. Recall, too, the Talmud’s teaching that when G-d created the heavens and the earth, His first utterance broke into seventy sparks, and from those seventy sparks emerged the seventy languages of the world (Shabbat 88b). Those seventy sparks of the divine utterance correspond to seventy names of G-d, so that each of the seventy languages is itself a name of G-d. Similarly, the Midrash teaches that there are seventy avenues through which one may approach G-d’s Torah, and these paths to G-d are called theפיים (shivim panim) or “seventy faces” of Torah (see Bamidbar Rabbah 13: 15–16). To encounter the face is to encounter Torah; it is through the face that Torah enters this world. Through the face, Torah commands us to be there for the sake of another.

That is the meaning ofתפילין, which eludes speculative thought. Each morning a Jew binds himself to the Torah by binding hisתפילין to his arm and to his forehead, as commanded in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:8). At what hour in the morning shall a Jew put on hisתפילין? When it is light enough for him to recognize the face
of his neighbor (Kisur Shulchan Arukh 10:2). Putting on tefillin, we affirm that there is no Torah without the face, no face without Torah. Putting on tefillin, therefore, is no mere ritual; far more than that, it is, in the words of Lévinas, the confirmation of “the conception of G-d in which He is welcomed in the face-to-face with the other, in the obligation towards the other” (Lévinas 1989: 204).

This presence of one human being before another, for the sake of another, is couched in the face, in ובנים, and its cognates. These include ובב (bīnei), meaning “in the presence of” or “in front of,” and ובו (līnei), also meaning “before” or “in front of,” as well as “ago.” Both words, especially in conjunction with one another, have profound and complicated implications for an understanding of exactly what is meant by הבן. The former, for example, has a spatial connotation, while the latter has a temporal meaning, suggesting that our relation to the face defines our presence both in space and in time: we are everywhere and forever both ובב and ובו one another. Recalling once again Heschel’s statement, we find that if time is the presence of G-d in the realm of space (Heschel 1981: 100), time is also the presence of the face in the realm of space, which is the presence of the Holy One, with whom we enter into a covenant. To be sure, the one who has entered into the Covenant is the one who is מִלּוֹ (mul), that is, “circumcised” or “facing” the other (human being or G-d). Which means: when we step before the face of another, we come before the face of Another, the One who at Mount Sinai, in the realm of the “ago,” spoke the commandment that comes to us through the face of the other human being here and now. Like the Sabbath that is an insertion of the holy into time, the face—and the coming before the face—is a manifestation of the holy in space. Hence the ובו is always ובב: where the face is concerned, what is behind us is always before us.

In this connection we note that the ב in ובו suggests a movement toward the face, while the ב in ובב implies a relation that unfolds within or by means of the face. When we consider the two together, we find that there is no human relation for the sake of another without a movement toward the face that is sustained by the face. Relation, therefore, is always face to face; to betray the relation is to turn one’s back on another. Thus the face summons, and we respond precisely by showing our face. That is why the Voice from Sinai is not behind us—it is before us, contemporary with us, resounding from the face of this human being to call us into the between space of a relation defined by the responsibility that defines our face. Only in the response to this summons from the face and by moving toward the face do I assume a face.

It was noted in Chapter 2 that Lévinas rightly sees that the most fundamental commandment to arise from the face is the prohibition against murder, which issues from on high. For inasmuch as the face summons us to be there for the sake of another, it is the most direct manifestation of the dimension of height (Lévinas 1985: 86). The face, however, not only forbids us to kill—it commands us to open the door, offer a word of encouragement, or do any number of small, mundane things for the sake of another. And yet, like every act of kindness, the face is laden with mystery. Indeed, what emerges from the philosophical insight of Lévinas is revealed from the beginning through the holy tongue in phrases such as הלופך הראות...
“hisbir panim,” which means to “welcome” or “be kind to,” and מְכַרְכֶּרֶת פָּנִים (hasbarat panim), meaning “friendly treatment,” “welcoming face,” or “a smile of greeting.” These expressions are from the verb סִבְרָה (sibra), which means to “suppose,” “interpret,” or “explain”; the corresponding noun is מְכַרְכֶּרֶת (hasbarah), meaning “explanation” or “interpretation.” To סִבְרָה פָּנִים, that is, to “welcome” another, or to offer a מְכַרְכֶּרֶת פָּנִים, a “smile of greeting,” is to correctly understand what the face signifies. And what it signifies we learn from the Mekilta: “When one welcomes his fellow man, it is considered as if he had welcomed the Divine Presence” (Amalek 3). Anything less than a welcome, anything less than kindness shown toward another, is not only to mistreat another—it means we have failed to fathom the holiness that the face signifies.

Another expression meaning to “welcome” or to “greet” is also quite revealing; it is מְכַבְּל פָּנִים (kibbel panim), which is literally to “receive the face.” Bearing in mind that a cognate of קְבָל (kibal), the noun קְבָלָה (kabalah), refers to the received mystical tradition, we see that the mystical encounter transpires not in flights of ecstasy or in meditations upon the navel, but in the greeting that one human being offers to another. This greeting characterizes the encounter with reality and the reality that consists of encounter. That reality, moreover, is made of numerous worlds. It is not for nothing that the mystics refer to the emanations that permeate the various worlds by using another word for “face,” the word פּוֹרְצָה (partsuf), or, in the plural, פּוֹרְצִיִּים (partsufim). Through the partsuf the Torah finds its way into the world. To receive the face, in other words, is to receive the text—the Torah—that reveals the meaning and the sanctity of all the worlds gathered into the face. And that reception happens in an act of response. That is what קְבָלָה is about.

Where this reception of another for the sake of another takes place, a between space arises. But because it is the space of relation, and not just a spatial relation, this between is also a within. Here the holy tongue reveals yet another mystery about the face, for the word פּוֹנִים (penim), from פָּנִים (panim), means “inside” or “interior.” Nothing that meets the eye belongs to the face: the face is the exposure of the utterly interior without the loss of interiority. As Lévinas states it, “the best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!” (Lévinas 1985: 85). And yet, Robert Haralick reminds us, the Hebrew word for “eye,” which is עֵין (ayin), also means “face” (Haralick 1995: 229). If we behold the sanctity of the other human being by looking past what meets the eye, it is because that sanctity oozes from the eyes. To look another in the eye is to be drawn into the “inside,” which is בִּפְנֵי (bifni), or literally: “in the face.” Taking us to this inner depth of human being, the eyes lead us to the face by taking us to the interior source of the word. For a cognate of עֵין, יָנָן (mayan), means “spring” or “source,” suggesting that in the depths of the eyes we encounter the source from which the face emanates into the world. If the face is expressive, the eyes make it so.

Thus moving from the eye to the source, the word עֵין leads us to another dimension of meaning in the word פָּנִים. For פָּנִים means not only “interior” but also “primary text,” as distinct from commentaries that come afterward; ultimately, פָּנִים signifies the word that is anterior and interior to every utterance. To “explain the
essence of the law” or the Halakhah, for example, is הֶרֶחַ אֶפֶן בַּחֲלָקָה (herah panim bahalakhah), which is literally to “reveal the face in the law;” that is, to reveal the Truth that makes possible the very notion of law. To understand the law is to behold the sanctity of the human being, for whose sake law exists; to understand the law is to behold the light of the Holy One that emanates through the face and commands us to be there for the sake of another.

Once again we see that the face signifies the first utterance, the utterance והראה פני, that lends sense and significance to all utterance; it is the text that is the context of every relation. Therefore Lévinas maintains,

The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily, . . . the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself.

(Lévinas 1985: 86–87)

Why does the face have meaning all by itself? Because וּנְיַנֵי is ניין: the face is the interior aspect of every relation; it is what makes the relation for the sake of another, regardless of context. Hence the phrase חַוֵלָה לְפַנֵי (lifnai velifnim), signifies a realm “in the innermost” of our being; in certain expressions it refers to “the holy of holies.” What does this mean? It means that the Holy of Holies within—קַרְוֵה—the Temple corresponds to a realm within the soul from which the face emerges. To be sure, the Temple, like the Mishkan, or the Tent of Meeting, in the Wilderness is a model not only of heaven and earth but also of the soul. And the soul is gathered into the face.

Just as this innermost dimension of our being cannot run deep enough, our proximity to the other, for the sake of the other, cannot be close enough: the face-to-face relation is forever fulfilling but never fulfilled. For that proximity to another, for the sake of another, constitutes the dimension of depth within the soul, and, created in the image of the Infinite One, it is infinite. That image, says the Maharal of Prague, “is a spark that flows from G-d and infuses Divinity into each person. It is an aura, the radiance of life that lights a person’s face” (Loeve 1997: 186). Thus we come back to קָרוֹב (karov) or “near” and its cognate קֶרֶב (kerev); meaning “interior” or “inner part,” קֶרֶב is a synonym of בִּנְשָׁן. The holy tongue teaches us that through the face there is revealed a being-for-the-other that cannot be enough, a nearness to the other that cannot be near enough, so near that it is within. It turns out that the soul is not my essence; neither self nor ego, it is not me at all. Rather, the soul is the other in me.
What is the soul and where does it come from? According to a mystical tradition, G-d creates every soul from the letters of the holy tongue. He puts those letters together to form an utterance, so that, in the words of Adin Steinsaltz, “the soul of a [person] is the Divine speech that speaks the [person]” (Steinsaltz 1989: 32). The soul, therefore, is more an action than an object: it is a *speech act* of the Holy One. What we make of our souls lies in whether and how we join our speech to that Divine speech through our thoughts, words, and deeds. What is the Divine speech that is the substance of the soul? It is Torah. And the Torah is made of fire, as it is written in the Or HaChayim’s commentary on Genesis 23:2: “When man cleaves to G-d all his elements become transformed into the element fire, which forms the basis of the soul.” Thus the great sage and mystic Solomon ibn Gabirol (1022–1070) wrote a poem—or a prayer—on the soul, saying:

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Thou hast imparted to it the spirit of wisdom
And called it the Soul.
And of flames of intellectual fire hast Thou wrought its form,
And like a burning fire hast Thou wafted it
And sent it to the body to serve and guard it,
And it is as fire in the midst thereof yet doth not consume it,
For it is from the fire of the soul that the body hath been created,
And goeth from Nothingness to Being,
“Because the L-rd descended on him in fire.”
(Solomon ibn Gabirol 1952: 104–105)
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The last line in Ibn Gabirol’s poem is an allusion to G-d’s descent upon Moses as Moses ascended Mount Sinai (from Exodus 19:18). And what came down from On High when the fire descended upon him? It was Torah, and, through Torah, the revelation of the soul.

Just as the Torah is made of black fire on white fire (*Tanchuma Bereshit* 1; *Devarim Rabbah* 3:12; *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:11:6; *Zohar* II, 226b), so does the soul originate “in fire, being an emanation from the Divine Throne” (*Zohar* II, 211b). Therefore, it is written in the Midrash, when the angel tried to frighten Jacob as
they wrestled at Peniel by making fire shoot up from the ground, Jacob cried, “Do you think you can frighten me with fire? Why, I am made of that stuff!” (Bereshit Rabbah 77:2). For even prior to the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai, Jacob knew that he was made of Torah. Therefore each day in our prayers we ask G-d, וּנְתֶנָה בְּלַעֲרָתָךְ (voten chelkenu beToratekha), “Grant us our portion in Your Torah” (from Pore Avot 5:20)—a portion in Your Torah, not of Your Torah, which, as the Or HaChayim teaches in his commentary on Numbers 16:1, means that “the very letters in the written Torah represent the various souls G-d has planted in His people.” Similarly, Levi Yitschak of Berditchev (1740–1809) taught that every Jewish soul is like a letter that goes into the making of Torah, each one a syllable in G-d’s utterance (see Rabinowicz 1988: 61). To be sure, in the Talmud Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar teach that, just as the Torah was compiled and given in forty days, so is the soul formed in forty days (Menachot 99b). Thus when the soul burns with the fire of Torah, the Light of G-d that is called Torah emanates into the world through that soul.

Two key verses in the Book of Proverbs underscore this point: נֵרָה הַמְּצֻוָּה וְהַתּוֹרָה הָלָא (ner mitsvah veTorah or), “The commandment is the candle and the Torah the light” (6:23), and נֵרָה הַשֵּׁמֶה נִישְׁמַת אדָם (ner HaShem nishmat adam), “The soul of the human being is the candle of HaShem” (20:27). Accordingly, it is written in the Talmud: “Said HaShem: ‘The soul [נֵפֶשׁ] that I have placed in you is called a lamp [נֵר], wherefore I have commanded you concerning the lamp’” (Shabbat 32a). Rabbi Schneur Zalman comments:

The soul is referred to as a ner, and the commandment is called a ner. [In the metaphor] where the commandment is the candle, the soul is the wick and the commandment is the oil, producing two aspects of light, as it is written Veahavta (“and you shall love” [Deuteronomy 6:5]), which is twice the numerical value of or (“light”).

(quoted in Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 355)

Why is the commandment itself called a candle? Because, says the Midrash, when we perform a mitsvah or commandment, it is as if we had kindled a light before G-d and have thus revived our soul (Shemot Rabbah 36:3). For the soul is made of the commandments or mitsvot of Torah; when G-d creates the soul, He commands it. If knowing G-d means knowing what must be done, as Emmanuel Lévinas has argued (Lévinas 1990a: 17), then for the soul made of Torah, knowing what must be done is the key to knowing who you are. The human being’s who lies in the human being’s mission. And, as Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson has taught (Schneerson 1986b: 3–4), that mission is given to us in the first utterance of creation: יְהִי אוֹר (yehi or), “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). As the candle of G-d, the soul’s task is to transform darkness into the light of Torah.

The soul transforms darkness into light by transforming isolation into relation. Just as the darkness of Egypt was such that no man could see his brother (see Exodus 10:23), the light of the soul is such that it reveals the face of our neighbor.
To be sure, the darkness of Egypt is precisely the darkness of philosophy’s ontological tradition, which cannot determine any fundamental connection between one soul and another. In contrast to Jewish thought, such speculative thought locks itself into what Lévinas describes as “the solitude of being” (see Lévinas 1985: 53–62). Jewish thinking about the soul, on the other hand, knows nothing of this isolation: like a beam of light connected to the sun—and, through the sun, to every other beam of light—the soul is linked to G-d and, through G-d, to every other soul. The soul is that linkage. Further, just as the light of the soul is a manifestation of Divine speech, so is human speech a manifestation of the light of the soul. As Saadia Gaon (882–942) once said, the soul “attains luminosity as a result of the light which it receives from G-d . . . . That is how it came to be endowed with the power of speech” (Sefer Emunot Vedeot 6:3). What is this “luminosity?” Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneersohn, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, tells us: because a human being is a “speaking being,” he says, “only through its interaction with another does the simplicity of the soul, its undefinable essence, come to the fore” (Schneersohn 2000: 36). Whatever the soul is, then, unfolds in the midst of a relation to another, for the sake of another.

Understanding that the substance of the soul lies in a relation to the other human being, we understand more clearly the truth of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s statement that the ego or self is a self-deception (Heschel 1951: 47). The deception inheres in a preoccupation with my person, my space, my status, my material being, and even my spiritual being, as if anything that belongs to the essence of my soul could belong to me, me, and more me. Foundering in the egocentric illusion, a life lived with “me” at the center is a life lived in the lie of the dative case, forever trembling over the questions of what will happen “to me” and what is in it “for me.” If the self is understood in such terms, then the soul is just the opposite of the self. As Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh states it, הֶגֶד (bitul), or the “obliteration of self” is the one doorway to truth; “bitul/produces a ‘cavity’ in the self, a opening and ‘vessel’ for truth to enter” (Ginsburgh 1991: 72). And truth enters the soul when the soul enters into a relation with another.

Constituted by a relation to another, the soul is what Lévinas describes as “the other in me” (Lévinas 1981: 69), which suggests the teaching from the Torah that refers to your רַעֲקָה (reakha)—your “friend” or “neighbor”—as the one אשר נַעֲקַש (asher k‘nafshekha), the one “who is like your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:7). The “other in me” is a certain disturbance arising in the encounter with the other. It stirs when I discover that I am not who I thought I was, that the self is a self-delusion, and that whoever I am lies in my responsibility to and for another. If, as Rabbi Schneur Zalman teaches, the soul is “the Supreme Will to which it is surrendered” (Zalman 1981: 95), then the soul and the source of its disturbance are of a piece.

If the Infinite One manifests Himself in the disturbance of His witness, as Lévinas claims (Lévinas 1985: 109), it is a disturbance in which the Infinite One makes an infinite claim upon the witness. Precisely this assignation, this infinite responsibility, constitutes the infinite dearness of the soul. Without G-d’s claim on the soul, the soul has no “covenant,” no ברית (brit), with G-d. Recalling
Nachmanides’ argument that "bar" is a cognate of "bara", the verb meaning to “create” (Nachmanides 1971, Vol. 1: 112), one sees that G-d’s creation of the soul implies a covenantal relation to it. And the soul expresses its covenantal relation to G-d through its care for the other human being, as when Abraham rushed out to greet the three strangers approaching his tent (see Genesis 18:2)—his first action after sealing the Covenant of Circumcision.

It is not, however, as though there were no covenantal relations prior to taking upon oneself the sign of the Covenant. No, the divine image is made of a covenantal relation that is always already in force, so that I am already responsible before I have responded. This “already” means: I do not determine who I am—rather, the One who chooses me determines who I am by choosing me for a specific mission. “Each man is destined from on high,” Nachman of Breslov states it, “to be in a particular place at a given time. At that time and place there is something he must correct” (quoted in Nathan of Nemirov 1973: 196). Not knowing exactly which action might be the one to bring about the mending needed, we must be forever on the alert. For the soul is already chosen.

Just so, when Jacob awakens from his dream of the ladder laden with angels and cries, “G-d was in this place all along, and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16), he awakens to the responsibility that already defines him, for he realizes that the angels ascending the ladder are the angels he has created with his words and deeds. Those angels go into the world and ascend to heaven to do their work, for good or for ill, to the enhancement or to the detriment of the soul. Awakening to the truth that G-d was there all along, therefore, Jacob awakens to the truth that his soul—his life—is not his own. Which is to say: his time is not his own to do with as he pleases.

To say that neither his soul nor his time is his own is to suggest a link between the soul and time: in a sense, the soul is made of time. Or better, time is made of the soul: like the life that inheres within the body, the time of that life is the presence of the soul in this world. Further, if time is made of the soul, then we come to another implication of the teaching that the soul is made of Divine speech: as a speaking being, the soul is made of words, and its life time inheres in those words. For the words we speak and to which we respond situate us within the responsibility we have yet to meet. This point takes on more depth if one recalls Martin Buber’s insight that the prayer is not in time, but rather time is in the prayer (Buber 1970: 59). When words are indeed words—when words are connected to meaning, which in turn connects one human being to another—words assume an aspect of prayer, always uttered and heard in the light of a higher relation. Thus words are not in time, but rather time is in words, the stuff that souls are made of.

The holy tongue and the human soul

As a speaking entity comprised of the holy tongue, the soul is itself like a “prayer,” a tefilah; and, like prayer, it is characterized by a niftal, which means “struggling” or “wrestling.” What is the strife of the spirit that
defines the life of the soul? It is a struggle to become a prayer, in thought, word, and deed. In the *ḥalah* to become a *ḥalah*—in the struggle to become a prayer—we come before a *ḥalah* (*pliliyah*) or “judgment,” which is another cognate of the word for “prayer.” The struggle that constitutes prayer brings us before a judgment because it is a struggle not only to address G-d but also to hear G-d’s address to us, as in the Shema, the prayer in which G-d cries out to us, “Hear!” even as the word forms itself on our lips.

G-d’s address to the soul through the prayer imparts to prayer a “soul” or life of its own. Just as prayer has such a life of its own, so does the soul have a life of its own. The words that go into the life of the soul, therefore, are not only or even primarily our words—they are the words of the Holy One. And the words that the Holy One uses to constantly create the soul begin with a single word: the soul’s name. It was stated above that as G-d names the soul and thus creates it, He commands it. Commanding the soul, G-d inscribes a destiny in the name of the soul—not its fate, mind you, but its destiny, the purpose and mission for which it was created. Hence, in a moment of *ḥalah* or judgment, the Angel of Death asks us our name before bringing us into the presence of the Holy One: he wants to determine whether we have heard and heeded the destiny inscribed in our name.

The Angel’s question concerning our name is a question concerning our connection to G-d and neighbor—not as two distinct relations but as a single relation. A brief consideration of the word *yachas* may be help to see this point. Meaning “relation,” “connection,” and “ancestry,” *yachas* designates our “relation” both to others and to our origins. In the oneness of the relation to G-d and neighbor we see that G-d’s unique Oneness is just this binding of each soul to Him and, through Him, to every other soul, both in this world and beyond. The point is not that a person is one with his neighbor, for the *yachas*, the relation, is still there, and relation requires a difference that has been transformed into non-indifference. The point, rather, is that our essential identity lies in loving the other human being. If creation arises from *chesed*, or “love,” as the sages teach us (see, for example, Aron 1969: 160), creation is definitively tied to relation, between G-d and humanity, between human and human. Indeed, as children of Adam, we are all related as a family is related.

In an effort to articulate the oneness of these interconnections, we have already used the metaphor of the beam of light linked to the sun and, through the sun, to every other beam of light. At this point we note that light in this instance is no mere metaphor. Joseph Albo points out, for example, that, according to tradition, our souls were brought into being on the first day of creation, with the utterance of “Let there be light” (*Sefer Halkkarim* 4:30; see also *Shushan Sodot* 1995: 6). Like a star that has light only to the extent that it gives out light, the soul takes on life only to the extent that it emits life through the radiance of being there for the sake of another. Where the life of the soul is concerned, we have only what we give.

In Hebrew this profound truth is manifested in something so mundane as one person saying *boker tov* (*boker tov*), “good morning,” to another, who in turn replies *boker or* (*boker or*), literally “morning light.” Answering *boker or* to another, we emit
light to another. Now the light of morning comes with the **rj'ç** (shachar), a word that means both “dawn” and “darkness”: it is the edge of darkness about to be transformed into light, the horizon where life’s “meaning” or “significance”—two other meanings of **rj'ç**—struggles to come to light. The verb **rj'ç** (shachar), moreover, means to “seek out” or “diligently search for,” reminding us that meaning lies much more in the seeking than in the finding. A “lover of truth,” for instance is a **shocher emet** (seeker of truth), and not someone who has the truth in hand. The alternative meaning of **rj'ç**, to “grow dark,” tells us, then, that our seeking takes place in a kind of twilight that we struggle to transform into light. And the seeking is never-ending—that is what it means to have a soul.

Which brings us back to the **bikur** and the **biker** in **or Torah**. One cognate of **bikur**, the word for “morning,” is the verb **biker** (biker), which means to “visit”: with the coming of the morning—with the dawning of the day—there is a **bikur** (bikur), a “visitation.” A visitation of what? A visitation of **or Torah** of light, couched in the response to the greeting and commanding us through the morning light to pursue the mission for which the soul is created. Simply stated, that mission is to greet the other. Both time and light—the constituents of the soul—unfold in the greeting offered to another. For in the greeting of **or Torah** do we offer the **panim** or **or Torah**, the “light of the face,” to one who greets us and who thereby seeks our response. And, from what was said about the face in the previous chapter, we realize that in the **or Torah** abides the **Torah** (or Torah), the “light of Torah,” of which the soul is made. To have a portion in the Torah is to be part of the light of Torah.

We also realize that the soul takes on the life that inheres in the **or Torah** by emitting the light in a response of **or Torah**. To receive the light of Torah is to emanate its light: the soul does not simply live—it shines. In Hebrew a verb meaning to “give out light” or to “shine” is **halal** (halal). Its cognates include **hilel** (hilel), meaning to “praise” or “glorify,” and the noun **hilah** (hilah), which is a “crown of light,” a “halo,” or “glory.” The soul that lives by emitting the light of glory is a soul that illuminates its Creator through praise; greeting the other, we praise G-d. Considering another word for “praise,” **hodayah** (hodayah), we find that the soul lives by the thanks it offers, for **hodayah** also means “thanksgiving.” If the soul is the candle of G-d, it shines with a halo of gratitude, offered to G-d in the greeting offered to another. For that greeting affirms the light that links us to G-d and, through G-d, to the other, who is my brother.

Thus, when G-d asks Cain where his brother is, He asks Cain, “Where is your soul?” When He asks Cain what he has done, He asks him, “What have you made of your soul?” Indeed, in his very name, **Kayin** (Kayin), one discovers the ruin of his soul. For words related to his name include **kanah** (kanah), which is to “acquire” or to “possess,” and **kinah** (kinah), the word for “envy.” Obsessed with a longing to possess, Cain flounders in the deadly confusion between being and having, as if his soul were made of whatever his hands can grab. But the more he grabs, the more his soul slips through his fingers. Entrenched in this egocentric delusion, Cain drowns in his envy to have what his brother has: G-d’s favor. The soul that would have G-d’s favor rather than engage in G-d’s service loses
precisely what it seeks. The more he clambers to possess, therefore, the deeper he sinks into despair. Squandering his days in envy and despair, Cain lives in a state of קינאה (kinah) or “lamentation,” until he ruins his soul altogether by taking the life of his brother and casting himself into utter isolation. Thus, just as the creation of light teaches us something about the relation that constitutes the life of the soul, so does the first murder, a fratricide, teach us something about the isolation that destroys the soul. The question that we shall address in the remainder of the chapter is: what is the nature of the relation that belongs to the life of the soul?

We shall approach this question by examining the five levels of linkage to G-d that Jewish tradition identifies as five levels of the soul: they are נפש (nefesh) or “soul,” רוח (ruach) or “spirit,” נפש (neshamah) or “living soul,” חayah (chayah) or “life force,” and יחיד (yechidah) or “oneness” (see, for example, Bereshit Rabbah 14:9; Sefer Yetzirah 1:14; Zohar II, 94b; for a detailed explanation, see Scholem 1991: 2301–2331). The five levels of the soul, moreover, pertain not only to what is “within” us but also to what is “beyond” us. Forming a model of creation, the five levels of the soul correspond to the five worlds identified by the mystical tradition: אסייה (Action), יטסירה (Formation), בירה (Creation), אﺘﺴ斠 (Emanation), and אדמ קדמון. We point this out not in order to go into the mystical aspects of the soul but rather to note that the soul and all of creation are interconnected (see Vital 1999: xxxii).

Before proceeding, we should also note out that only the three “lower” aspects of the soul—הנפש, הרוח, and הנשמה—are associated with this world, with the הנשמה acting as a transition point between the upper and lower realms. To be sure, Rashi observes that, as a living soul, the substance of a human being is of both realms. In his commentary on the first chapter of Genesis, he notes that land appeared on the third day; the luminaries appeared on the fourth day, providing light for the heavenly beings; and on the fifth day the world swarmed with earthly beings. “Consequently,” says Rashi, “on the sixth day there had to be created a being composed of both, of heavenly and earthly matter.” As we have seen, on the sixth day G-d declared creation to be תוב מקודם, that is, “very good” (Genesis 1:31). This תוב, this very, designates a line of ascent within the soul, from נפש to נשמה, as the Zohar affirms:

\[ \text{Nefesh, ruach, and neshamah are an ascending series of grades. The lowest of them, nefesh, has its source in the perennial celestial stream, but it cannot exist permanently save with the help of ruach, which abides between fire and water. Ruach, in its turn, is sustained by neshamah, that higher grade above it, which is thus the source of both nefesh and ruach.} \]

\[ \text{(Zohar I, 206a)} \]

This mystical model of the three lower levels of the soul is also manifested in our lives and in our histories, so that the vertical dimension that belongs to the soul is not only spatial but is also temporal: because the soul’s height is metaphysical, it is reflected both in the time of my life and in the stature of my body.
In the words of the sages, “it is for this reason that man walks upright—because of his *neshamah*” (*Orchot Tsadikim*, Gate 27). Indeed, the Torah itself is arranged like the human body, as Judah Halevi points out when he notes that, just as the belly is at the center of the body, so is the word גחון (*gachon*), or “belly,” at the center of the Torah (*Kitav al khazari* 3:31). In fact, as shall be discussed below, these three parts of the soul—הנשמה, נשמה, and הנפש—correspond to three essential organs of the body: the מוח (moach) or “brain,” the לב (lev) or “heart,” and the מקר (kaved) or “liver” respectively. Rabbi Daniel Lapin observes that the word מלך (melekh) or “king” is an acronym of the words for “brain,” “heart,” and “liver,” suggesting that when the order of life’s flow is from above to below, then the King is in His place; when we reverse the order, with the appetites ruling from below to above, we have the word כלם (kalem), which means “shame” (Lapin 2001: 138–139).

Thus, touching on some points that we shall examine in detail, Saadia Gaon associates הנפש with the soul’s “appetitive faculty,” נשמה with the ability to “become bold and angry,” and הנשמה with “the faculty of cognition” (*Sefer Emunot Vedebot* 6:3). Abraham ibn Ezra, the great sage of the Middle Ages, explains:

*Nefesh* is found in humans, animals, and plants. The nefesh is corporeal and it is that part of the psyche that desires food and sex. The *ruach* is located in the heart. It animates man and governs movement. The *ruach* is found in man and beast. The *ruach* is corporeal. When the *ruach*, which is airlike, leaves the body, the person dies . . . . The *neshamah* is the highest-ranking soul and its power is manifest in the brain.

(Abraham ibn Ezra 1995: 96–97)

In his commentary on *Pirke Avot* 2:2 the Maharal of Prague teaches that הנפש is associated with hunger and the appetites; נשמה is tied to the need to communicate and have companionship; and הנשמה manifests itself in the longing for wisdom. Further, in his commentary on *Pirke Avot* 4:28, he notes that *ruach* maintains bodily functions; *nefesh* is the basis of will and emotions like jealousy and hatred; and *neshamah* embraces perception, reason, imagination, memory, and understanding. We should keep the teachings of these sages in mind as we now explore Jewish thinking about the soul.

**The animating spark**

Understood as הנפש, the soul is the divine spark that ignites life by combining inanimate matter with something beyond material reality: contrary to mainstream Western thought, which sees living things strictly in terms of a physical evolution, Jewish thought takes all life to have a share in the *meta*-physical. Stated differently, הנפש is a manifestation of the Divine Presence wherever that Presence is intense enough to animate the inanimate. To be sure, the verb הנפש (nipesh) means to “animate,” suggesting that the movement of the physical body is “caused” by a movement of the metaphysical soul. The word הנפש denotes this most fundamental
unfolding of life and has meanings that signify not only the intangible soul but also the altogether tangible human being. For in its possibilities of meaning can refer to the flesh-and-blood person, as well as to the living soul. Inasmuch as animation indicates movement, it is the body that moves, and not just the soul. In this connection Rabbi Chayim ben Attar writes, “Although the body is essentially a material phenomenon, G-d has created a force called whose nature is to develop liaison with material forces” (Or HaChayim on Leviticus 17:13).

It is written in the Torah that is in the blood (Genesis 9:4). While the word (nafshi) is often used as an antonym to (gufani, from [guf], the word for “body”) to designate a contrast between the “spiritual” and the “physical,” belongs as much to the physical as it does to the spiritual. In fact, the Hebrew language does not always make a clear distinction between the two, suggesting that life is an interweaving of both. Contrary to the Greek tradition that views the body either as the enemy of the soul (a theme that runs through Plato’s Phaedo, for example), the Hebrew tradition tends to view body and soul as somehow unified and yet distinct. “The Bible,” Heschel elucidates, “knows neither the dichotomy of body and soul nor the trichotomy of body, soul, spirit, nor [even] the trichotomy within the soul” (Heschel 1975, Vol. 2: 37). While Jewish tradition does indeed view the appetites of the body as something that might threaten the soul, they are not inherently evil. Our purpose is not to suppress our “animalistic” nature but rather to elevate it. In that way we make this world into a “Kingdom” or (Malkhut), and not just a jungle. That is why the is associated with the sefirah of (see Vital 1999: 270), which is a receptacle of holiness from the upper worlds. If the sefirah of is where body and soul interweave, the is where the warp meets the thread.

Considering some examples of this interweaving of the physical and the spiritual suggested by the word, we note, for instance, that one who has come into physical contact with a corpse is (tame lenefesh), that is, in a physical state of spiritual impurity. To violate the laws of Sabbath observance for the sake of means saving a physical life, not saving a soul in any redemptive sense. Further, the phrase (asaf nefesh) means to “take a life” or to “kill” someone, rather than to remove or kill their soul. And to “sacrifice oneself” for another, (masar nafsho), literally to “transmit the soul,” entails not losing one’s soul but gaining it by offering up one’s own physical life for the physical life or the of another. It is this physical offering of oneself that affirms the spiritual connection.

This union of the spiritual with our physical being can be seen in its mystical association with the “liver” or in Hebrew (see Vital 1999: 32). For also means “heavy” or “burdensome.” Linked with the , the is what imparts to life its gravity. It provides life with ballast, thus enabling us to keep our feet on the ground, lest we forget the plight of our neighbor in an empty flight of ecstasy. Here it will be recalled that a cognate of, (koved), means “weight,” “heaviness,” and “gravity.” It is not, however, a weight that weighs us down but rather a gravity that lifts us up and provides us with stability. This point can be
seen in the juxtaposition of the noun ידית (netel), which means “weight” or “ballast,” and the verb נלבן (natal), which means to “lift up.” It is the ballast that holds a vessel up—or rather holds it upright—so that it will not drift from its “course” or מלש (mesilah).

Without the weight that is ידית or הבכש, one could not walk the מסלلة ישרים (mesilat yesharim), the “path of the upright.” And walking the path of the upright is a matter of some gravity, for that is what guards the soul, as it is written: ידית ישרים הואֵש המר השמר מהפاصر (mesilat yesharim sur mera, shomer nafsho notser darko), that is, “The path of the upright turns away from evil; he who keeps his way guards his soul” (Proverbs 16:17). Keeping the way that sustains the soul entails walking in the path of Torah. Noting that a cognate of the verb to “walk,” הלך (halakh), is הטל (halakhah), which means “law” or “tradition,” we may establish a connection between the weight or הבכש associated with הבכש and the כבוד (kavod) that is “honor” or “respect.” Jewish law or הטל deals with the life of the soul by addressing the very concrete, material matters of הבכש and כבוד. Which means: every detail of our physical life has its spiritual significance, and every spiritual reality has its physical manifestation. It is not for nothing that the great codifiers of Jewish law were also great mystics.

Wherever הטל guides the הבכש, life grows heavier, but it is laden with meaning. This growing heavier, therefore, is a rising up; it is a recuperation or a being refreshed. And so in its verbal form, where הבכש becomes הבש (nafash), we have the verb meaning to “recuperate” or to “be refreshed”—a verb used to describe an action of G-d Himself, who on the seventh day השבעת וניפש (shavat veyinafash), “rested and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17). In his commentary on this verse Sforno explains that the word השבעת is a reference to an additional soul that a person receives on the Sabbath in order attain the purpose of G-d’s creation: to live a life in keeping with Torah. Manifested in a way of life, that additional dimension of soul or הבכש shows itself in the work of our hands and feet: we have something to do and a path to walk, so that the weight of the soul is felt in the seriousness of a life endowed with a mission.

In the Jewish tradition and particularly in the Chasidic tradition, one place where the soul and its weight, the הבכש and its כבוד, come together most powerfully is in the dance, and here we find a striking contrast between the Hebrew and Greek outlook. It is said, for example, that Socrates once stood perfectly still for twenty-four hours as he struggled to work out a philosophical conundrum, so intense was his concentration. Moshe Leib of Sassov, on the other hand, once declared, “When someone asks the impossible of me, I know what I must do: I must dance!” (quoted in Wiesel 1982c: 110). For Jewish thought, the dance is a mode of thought, because in the dance the spiritual descends and the physical ascends to arrive at new levels of insight. That is why the “dance,” המהלח (machol), is a means of praising G-d. That is why Rabbi Barukh, the son of the Great Maggid of Mezeritch (1704–1772), once exclaimed to Rebbe Leib, the Shpole Zeide, “What you achieve by dancing, others do not attain by praying” (quoted in Wiesel 1991: 360; see also Wiesel 1973: 46).
That the weight of the soul, the יֶלֶד of the נֶפֶשׁ, may be associated with the dance, then, is extremely significant to the nature of Jewish thought. In the dance thought takes the form of praise, so that the psalmist enjoins us to praise G-d through the dance, through the לֵילָה (see Psalms 150:4). Thus becoming a “dancer,” a מֶחוֹל (mechol), we affirm the greatness and dearness of G-d. An alternative meaning of לֵילָה, however, is “doer,” or one who makes things happen in this physical realm: as it makes things happen in the physical realm, the נֶפֶשׁ starts to dance. Because the נֶפֶשׁ is the point where the spiritual life intersects with the physical life, where we either elevate or desecrate the physical realm, the Zohar teaches that, of the five levels of the soul, only the נֶפֶשׁ is subject to sin (Zohar I, 81b; see also Zohar I, 226a-226b). Here is the connection: the לֵילָה elevates not only the physical realm but also the נֶפֶשׁ that is engaged in the dance. Through the לֵילָה, then, the soul attains מְכִלָה (mechilah) or “forgiveness.” And how are we to be “forgiven,” מַחְעֵל (machul), for our transgressions? By becoming a מֶחוֹל, a doer who actively engages in the very concrete matter of נֶפֶשׁ. For we attain the forgiveness, the מְכִלָה, that renews the נֶפֶשׁ at the core of our spiritual being by saving physical lives of others.

In our daily prayers we beseech G-d: מָלַךְ לוֹקֵד מִלֶּכֶנֵנוּ קִי מָשְׁחַנֻ (mechol lanu malkenu ki fashanu), “Forgive us, our King, for we have sinned.” And yet פֶּשַּׂה (pesha), which is “sin,” also designates “punishment for sin.” Just as the reward for a good deed is that we shall do another good deed—מִיסְוָה גְוֶרֶט מִיסְוָה (mitsvah goreret mitsvah), as it is written (Devarim Rabbah 6:4)—so does פֶּשַּׂה result in פֶּשַּׂה, both as sin and as punishment for sin. Hence it is written in the Midrash that “a wicked man does not leave this world until he has pronounced sentence upon himself” (Midrash Tehilim 27.3). Punishment here is not a matter of behavior modification or of establishing power or authority from above; contrary to Zeus, the G-d of Abraham is not the wielder of thunderbolts. Rather, it is a matter of consequence, as the word פֶּשַּׂה tells us: sin is the punishment for sin. For, just as the מִיסְוָה (mitsvah) draws the flow of life from the “spirit” or רוח (ruach) into the נֶפֶשׁ, so does פֶּשַּׂה obstruct it. This brings us to the second level of the human soul, as understood in Jewish thought: רוח.

**The spirit that moves**

Referring not only to “spirit” but also to “wind,” רוח is the invisible presence manifested in movement. Indeed, as Aryeh Kaplan indicates in his commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah, the word רוח generally refers to motion and to communication; the word רוח (orach) or “path,” he explains, is a cognate of רוח (Sefer Yetzirah 1990: 69), suggesting that רוח is a path through which holiness flows through the soul from above to below and from below to above. If, in its tie to the body, moreover, נֶפֶשׁ belongs to space, רוח belongs to time. Better still: רוח is time, or rather the life time, of the soul. For time too is the invisible presence that is manifest in spatial movement, and רוח is the spirit that moves us, body and soul. Thus one of the primary uses of the word רוח, says Heschel, “is to denote pathos, passion or emotion—the state of the soul” (Heschel 1975: Vol. 2: 95). And the state of the
soul—understood as a “mood” or “state of mind”—is רוח (halakh-ruach), which literally means “movement of the spirit.” Because it pertains to the state of the soul, the word רוח is found in many expressions that indicate either an elevated or a degraded mood within the soul. The phrase רוח רוח (ruach sarah), for instance, means “sullen spirit” or “depressed”; רוח-רוח (erekh-ruach) means “patient,” literally having a “long spirit.” The phrase רוח-רוח (govah-ruach) or “height of spirit” translates as “arrogance,” while רוח-רוח (ruach nemukhah), literally a “low spirit,” means “humility.”

Heschel goes on to explain, however, that...

...while spirit includes passion or emotion, it must not be reduced to either. Spirit implies the sense of sharing a supreme power, will or wisdom. In emotion, we are conscious of its being our emotion; in the state of being filled with spirit, we are conscious of joining, sharing or receiving “spirit from above” (Isa. 32:15).

(Heschel 1975, Vol. 2: 97)

Here too we see the idea of “path” at work: as that which is received from above, spirit or רוח, is the intermediary between נשמה and נשמה (neshamah). The key point of contact is the very core, the very heart, of our being. Here Maimonides helps us to see the connection between רוח as movement and the movement of the heart. “The heart,” he writes, “is in constant motion, and is the source of every motion noticed in the body; it rules over the other members, and communicates to them through its own pulsations the force required for their functions” (Moreh Nevuchim 1:72). The movement and, even more so, the communication that Maimonides associates with the heart also characterize רוח.

As already noted, in terms of its association with parts of the body, just as the נשמה is connected with the בנד or “liver,” so is the רוח connected with the לב or “heart.” When the channel between the נשמה and רוח, between the בנד and לב, is open, life flows in both directions, and the heart and the liver retain their distinctive functions. When, due to sin and despair, however, the flow of life is occluded, the heart grows heavy and resembles the liver, as in the case of the Pharaoh, who was moved neither by the word of G-d nor by the cry of Israel. Indeed, the Midrash takes the phrase הבש את בנד לב (kaved lev Pharaoh), “Pharaoh’s heart is stubborn” or “unmoved” (Exodus 7:14) to indicate that Pharaoh’s heart had become like his liver (Shemot Rabbah 9:8). Which is to say: his evil lay in the fact that he had no רוח, nothing that could be moved to alleviate the suffering of another human being.

There are other associations that run deeper still. Recall, for example, that the letters forming the word לב are the first and last letters of the Torah, suggesting that the לב contains Torah. Inasmuch as the Torah is engraved in the heart, the לב is Torah; the Torah, moreover, is the Divine רוח that in the beginning hovers over the face of the deep (see Genesis 1:2). Which means: the hovering of the beginning—the movement of רוח or spirit over the face of the deep that obtains at
every instant—abides at every instant in the heart: that is where creation hangs in the balance. If, as we have noted, heaven and earth are made of Torah—if we ourselves are made of Torah—it is because all things come into being upon the movement of בורא. The connection between the movement of the בורא and the beat of the בות, whose numerical value is thirty-two—transpires through the Torah that lies between the לא and the בות of בורא. Those thirty-two paths consist of the twenty-two Hebrew letters and the ten utterances of G-d at the time of the creation, which in turn correspond to the ten сфירות and the Ten Utterances of Revelation, as taught in the Pesikta Rabbati (1:3–2:18).

The link between spirit and heart, between heart and Divine utterance, suggests that the “word” or דבר (davar) is rooted in spirit. When the spirit engages in the movement that makes it manifest, it speaks, and when the spirit speaks, it speaks in a meaningful, relational manner. The movement of the spirit, then, is a movement toward another, and fundamental to that movement is the “word” or דבר, which also translates as “message” or “command.” Here we have a key to the words of the prophet Zechariah: לא לא בורא ולא בות ולו וקוחך ולעך (lo vecheqyil velo vekhoach ki im-beruchi), “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit” (Zechariah 4:6). What transpires neither by might nor by power but by spirit? Creation itself. There is no Big Bang, no explosion of might or power. Rather, there is the commanding utterance, the דבר, of HaShem. And what does He create and at every instant renew by His word? Our daily prayers tell us: HaShem is He who mechadesh b’khol yom tamid maaseh vereshit, who “every day continually renews the deeds of creation,” that is, who at every instant of every day renews the day itself.

And so we come to another knot in this weave of interconnections: the day that is spirit—the life time of the human being—inheres in every word that proceeds from the mouth of G-d in the continual creation of heaven and earth. The event of creation, in other words, does not transpire in time; rather, it entails the creation of time from Torah, as suggested by the word לוח (luach), which is both a tablet of time, that is, a “calendar,” and a tablet of Torah. That is to say: the creation of heaven and earth from Torah does not take place in time, but rather time itself issues from the creation. Therefore the question of whether the creation took (is taking) six days or sixteen billion years is not a question, for such a question rests on the false assumption that time precedes the creative act and utterance of G-d. How much time does the creation take? No time and all of time. What, then, are the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest? They are the movement and the manifestation of בורא or spirit, and not a “duration” in the “natural” world.

And yet, within the בורא of the soul lies a microcosm of all creation: the space-time continuum that physicists identify with all of reality parallels the בורא-לוח continuum within the human being. History itself is constituted by בורא, as we see, for example, when we bear in mind the linkage between time, word, and spirit in
the Hebrew phrase for “history,” דביה רואים (divrei hayamim), literally the “words of the days” or the “deeds of the days.” In the words and deeds of the days lies the spirit that constitutes the days themselves; time is made of the movement of the spirit, both human and Divine. This does not mean that history is to be understood as “spirit” in any Hegelian sense, where “history” (for which there is no Hebrew word) is a systematic merging of the human and the divine in accordance with a dialectical principle of reason. In his first published work The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) Hegel argues that philosophical thought is the ultimate form of Spirit, since there, in systematic speculative thought, one has an ultimate reconciliation of the infinite and the finite, of Spirit and the other-than-Spirit that arises in the “self-othering” of Spirit.

By contrast, the spirit that is יָדוֹ is defined in terms of the soul of the human being, who seeks the performance of the commandments of Torah, not the dialectical “union of union and non-union.” Being “spiritual” or רוחֵי (ruchani) is not about thinking in accordance with reason or feeling a certain way; rather, it is about acting in accordance with a certain commandment and transmitting a certain message. Whereas the יָדוֹ may at times be guided by instinct, יָדוֹ is guided by the commanding word, by the בְּרִできた of Torah. History, both personal and global, is made of our success or failure to act according to the commandment and to bear witness to the truth of who we are, the truth of יָדוֹ, which is the truth of Torah.

Of the six sefirot that correspond to יָדוֹ, then, the key sefirah is תְּפִכָּה (Tiferet), which is the sefirah of “Truth” (also “Harmony” or “Beauty”). The verbal root for תְּפִכָּה (peer), which means to “adorn,” to “beautify,” or to “praise.” How is this beauty that is truth attained? Through the proper combination of the sefirot of חסיד (Chesed) and גְּדוּר (Gevurah), which are “Loving Kindness” and “Strength,” or “Mercy” and “Judgment.” Combining these qualities, we transform the world into a “dwelling place” or a מִשְׁכָּן (Mishkan, which was the Holy Tabernacle) for the אֱלֹהִים (Shekhinah, G-d’s Indwelling Presence)—that is the goal of spirit. Therefore the Midrash teaches that a person’s aim in life is to make his heart into a מִשְׁכָּן for the אֱלֹהִים: if the heart is the favorite dwelling place of the אֱלֹהִים, then the מִשְׁכָּן is the heart of the world. Maimonides teaches, moreover, that the structure of the מִשְׁכָּן corresponds not only to the world but also to the human body, where, within the מִשְׁכָּן, the ארון (aron) or the “ark” corresponds to the heart (quoted in Weissman 1980, Vol. 2: 243–244). Once again we have a very tight association between the heart and the Torah, as the ארון is the vessel that contains the Torah.

The מִשְׁכָּן that harbors the ארון is also known as the אוהל מוֹדֵע (ohel moed), or the “Tent of Encounter.” Significantly, מִשְׁכָּן, meaning “encounter,” is a cognate of מִשְּׁתָע (edut), the word for “testimony”: defined by testimony, יָדוֹ lies in moment of encounter. Since מִשְׁכָּן also designates a festival or an “appointed time,” the מִשְׁכָּן is not just a place but is also a designated time of encounter between G-d and humanity. Thus the מִשְׁכָּן is where Moses receives an “inspiration” or רוחֵי-אֱלֹהִים (shar-ruach), literally a “remnant of spirit” or a “piece of spirit,” from G-d. In the life of the soul, the יָדוֹ within the human heart is the “tent” where we encounter
G-d in the vibration of the word upon the breath of life that G-d breathes into us from above. Therefore, says Buber, spirit is not like the blood that flows in our veins but rather like the air that we breathe (Buber 1970: 89). The breath itself, however, is drawn from above. That “above” is the realm of the נפש.

**The breath of life**

Every Sabbath morning we cry out, “The soul of all life shall bless Your Name . . . and the spirit of all flesh shall glorify and exalt Your remembrance,” that is, נפש kol chai tevarekh et shinkha . . . veruch kol basar tefaer utromem zikhrekha. In this prayer we discover the link between the spirit that is נפש and the soul that is נפש. We have seen that נפש is a point of transition between the נפש below and the נפש above. While נפש is here linked to the “flesh” or the basar (basar), which is also the “mortal human being,” it elevates the flesh of the mortal human being toward the נפש that is the breath of life within the human being. For the נפש emerges in a נשמה (neshimah), or a “breathing,” from the mouth of G-d into the human soul.

And what does the breath of the Holy One contain? The Holy Name, in the image of which the human being is created: the living soul, the נפש, is made of the Divine Name. Which means: G-d takes a portion of Himself—a portion of His Name—and creates every soul by uttering the name of that soul. Therefore it is said that, when a new mother and father name their child, they are given a moment of prophetic insight into the name that G-d has breathed into the child’s soul, the name from which that soul is made. Our name is not something we have or carry around like a label. No, it is an exhaling of G-d, which we inhale and then return in an act of response: we breathe our name, in and out, in a נשימה of our נשימה. To be sure, it is in the middle of the נשימה that G-d breathes into the human being is the שם (shem), the “name” that constitutes the soul and its destiny.

Other morning prayers suggest ways in which the Hebrew language might inform Jewish thinking about the soul. There are Jews in the world, for example, who begin their morning prayers with these words from the Talmud: אַלְבֶּאים יְדִיבֵה נְשָׁמָה (neshamah shenatata bi tehorah hi), “the soul that You have given me is pure” (Berakhot 60b). Now in this phrase the soul is not something that G-d gives to me; rather, as the expression ב (bi) indicates, G-d gives me my soul within me. That is to say, the soul, the נשימה, is the depth or inwardness of our inner being, which is also the height of our being—not so much an entity as a dimension of being that exceeds being. Further, if we read the ב (beit) as “through” or “by means of,” it suggests that G-d gives me my soul by means of the י (yud), that is, by means of “ten,” which is the numerical value of the letter yud. Such an interpretation may lead us to see that we receive the נשימה through the Ten Utterances of Creation and the Ten Utterances of Revelation, for in the Bahir it is written, “יуд is the Ten Sayings with which the world was created. What are they? They are the Torah of Truth, which includes all worlds” (Bahir 118; see also Y. L. Alter 1998: 169).
In both instances, moreover, the Ten Utterances come to a single utterance that belongs to the Oneness of G-d, as Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, has taught:

He, G-d, is One, and His word is One. The whole Torah was included in the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments were uttered in one word, as is written in the Midrash (see Mekhilta Bachodesh 4; Bamidbar Rabbah 11:7; Yalkut Shimoni 250). Likewise, G-d’s word at the creation of the world and G-d’s word at the giving of the Torah are the same, one word . . . . The word of the ten statements [of creation] and the word of the Ten Commandments are also one word, because He and His word are One.

(Shapira 2000: 291)

Says Rabbenu Chayim ben Attar, “We may therefore view the revelation at Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments as a re-enactment of the creation of the universe” (Or HaChayim on Exodus 20:1). And the word of revelation is the Divine אֲנֹכִי (Anokhi), the “I-saying” of G-d: when G-d says, “I,” the אֶתְנָה comes into being. It is the human Thou to the Divine I.

The prayer cited above states that the אֶתְנָה that G-d gives me is纯净 (tahor) or “pure”; just so, it is written in the Tosefta that “what is human in the human being is what is pure in purity; the human being lies in what is pure, and what is pure lies in the human being” (Tohorot 6:3). The word纯净 pertains to a ritual purity, thus designating what is fit for entering into service to G-d. What makes the אֶתְנָה fit to enter into service to G-d is its devotion to Torah and to the commandments. Therefore it is written in the Zohar that the纯净 finds its way into this realm only where the human being is devoted to righteousness (see Zohar I, 206a; II, 141b; III, 70b); for most of us, the纯净 never enters this realm.5

Because the纯净 is associated with the upper realms, it corresponds to the sefirah of הבינה (Binah) or “Understanding,” which is the point of transition from the upper realms to the lower realms. To be sure, at the root of הבינה is the preposition בין (bein), which means “between.” The纯净, then, is conceived as a spark of the Divine intellect emerging from the “stream” or נהר (nahar) of the Divine light from above to below; in fact, in its feminine form, נַהֲרָה (neharah), this word means both “little stream” and “light.” And so the Hebrew language brings us back to纯净, with its cognate טוב (tohar), which means both “purity” and “brightness”: the纯净 is that portion of the human soul through which the light of the Holy One illuminates His creation. When G-d declared, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), He declared, “Let there be soul.”

Because the纯净 does at times find its way into this world through certain righteous individuals, it too, we recall, is linked with an organ in the body. Just as the纯净 is tied to the liver and the לב to the heart, the纯净 is associated with the “brain” or מוב, a word that also means “marrow,” once again suggesting both the height and the inwardness of our being. Similarly, just as the纯净 in the纯净 corresponds

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to the heart, so does the מֵנֶורָה (menorah), the “lamp” that eternally burns with the Divine Light, correspond to the brain (see Weissman 1980, Vol. 2: 244), which in turn is associated with the הנשׁתָּם. Thus, to paraphrase the verse cited above from the Book of Proverbs, the נִשְׁמַת עָנָן (nishmat adam) or the “soul of the human being” is the Menorah of G-d that emanates the light of Divine wisdom.

Further, whereas in their association with the seven lower sefirot the הנשׁתָּם and הָרְאוּם are subject to shifts in appetite and emotion, the הנשׁתָּם that corresponds to Binah or Understanding belongs to the realm of יַסְכָּל (sekhel), a word that translates as “intellect,” “reason,” “intelligence,” “wisdom,” and “insight.” One must be careful not to confuse this link between the הנשׁתָּם and understanding or reason with the Stoic teaching that the soul is an instance of the logos or the Kantian distinctions between a universal principle of Vernunft (reason) and a particular instance of Verstand (understanding). The reason, understanding, intellect, and so on manifest through the הנשׁתָּם consist of the teachings and commandments of the living Torah, which is revealed to humanity in an act of love on the part of a G-d who suffers each time we darken the light of Torah. No teaching on logos or reason that comes to us from Greek ontology or from German Idealism suggests any such thing. Further, from the Greeks to the Germans, the rationalist ontological tradition generally views emotion or passion in strictly negative terms, as something that threatens intellectual understanding; from the standpoint of Jewish thought, passion can inform and stimulate intellectual understanding, which in turn can stoke the passion. Just as the life of the soul goes awry when the direction of influence is only from the heart to the mind, so too can the soul go astray when the direction is only from the mind to the heart. After all, Torah may harbor profound concepts, but it is also made of fire.

As a dimension of the soul, then, יָסְכָּל is a capacity not so much for analysis, problem solving, or scientific method as for fathoming the depths of Torah on the levels of פְָשַת (pshat), רָמֶץ (remez), דָּרֶשׁ (drash), and סְוד (sod), which are the “literal,” “allegorical,” “homiletical,” and “mystical” dimensions of meaning. Likewise, the verb הִסְכָּל (hiskil) means to “become wise,” to “acquire wisdom,” to “understand,” or to “comprehend,” in the sense of acquiring a deeper and deeper understanding of Torah. It can also mean to “teach” or to “enlighten,” suggesting that, where Torah is concerned, wisdom and understanding are acquired only where they are transmitted, mouth to mouth, from teacher to disciple. Therefore, when in our daily prayers we ask G-d to teach us, we ask Him to breathe into us the understanding or הנשׁתָּם of Torah that is הנשׁתָּם. As the point of transition in the flow of the Divine light from above to below, the essence of the הנשׁתָּם lies in the transmission of light and life into the world. Here Jewish thought understands the soul neither as a faculty of reason nor as a ghost in the machine but rather in terms of a flow. Hence, if the הנשׁתָּם is the seat of intellect and understanding, then it is manifest not so much in knowing as in teaching. According to this view, teaching is a matter not of imparting information but of transmitting the soul: as G-d breathes life into the human being, so does the teacher breathe life into the student. In fact, a word for “father,” הָרְאוּם
(horeh), is a cognate of חכם (moreh), the word for “teacher”; hence the Talmud compares a person’s teacher to his father (Sanhedrin 19b). More than someone you learn from, a good teacher is someone you want to be like. The הנפש, moreover, is not just the breath but, more precisely, is the breathing. What is transmitted in the transmission that is הנפש is more than a content or a theme that the intellect contains; it is more than this world can contain. More than life, it is the sanctity of life, which is a living presence that transcends this world. With regard to the levels of the human soul, that living presence is חי (chayah).

The living presence

Here we come to a corollary to the idea that the body does not have a soul, but rather the soul has a body. In its very movement and “essence” the soul manifests a living presence, a חי, that, as the fountainhead of the soul, is both beyond the soul and part of it. And so we realize that the soul is not in the body, but rather the body is in the soul; the body, in other words, is but a moment or a vestige in the life of the soul. As Rabbi Shapira has noted, חי and נפש do not correspond to any part of the body, because they “are far greater and holier than the body, and they are unable to use the body as a vessel in which to clothe themselves and take on form. They encompass and surround it from above” (Shapira 1991: 143). Similarly, in the Orchot Tsaddikim it is written, “Though a man’s body is very small, his soul is greater and broader than heaven and earth, . . . —all is encompassed by the soul” (Gate 27). Subsequently, whereas the נפש is linked to time in the soul—it is the soul’s capacity to exist in time—the חי is situated outside of time, beyond all the coordinates of “nature” or “being.” Which means: the soul has no age. Properly speaking, then, the חי does not exist; that is to say, it is never outside itself, as the rest of the soul is when it enters this world. Thus the الحي of the soul—the living presence that ignites the soul—is more than what is present; it is more than the present can contain, more than the future can exhaust. It is where the being and the doing of the soul come together as potential, that is, as the potency to be and to do. If the הנפש is the lamp, the חי is the enkindling.

Which brings us to its verbal form: the noun חי, which means “spirit of life,” also appears as the verb חי (chayah), which means to “live” or “be alive”; in its ביטוי (piel) or intensive form, חי (chiyah), it means to “animate” or to “restore to life.” It is a verb that appears in the prayer we pray three times a day, when we embrace G-d as the One who תשימיה (mechayeh hametim), that is, who “restores the dead to life.” Without the חי that belongs to the soul, the resurrection of the dead cannot happen. It is, therefore, central to the doctrine of resurrection. Indeed, it is the basis of that doctrine, for the resurrection of the dead is not so much about cadavers rising from their graves as it is about the soul’s assumption or re-assumption of a body. Although the חי is not in the body, it is what “launches” the soul into the body and, through the body, into this world.

How, then, does this Hebrew word inform Jewish thinking about the soul? It tells us, for example, that at the level of חי the soul is neither a “thing” nor an
“action” but an ḥeshaḥ (efshar) or a might, in every sense of the word, a possibility and a potency, both within and beyond the realm in which things and actions come to bear. To be sure, this possibility and potency characterize the entry of the beyond into the within, of the cannot be into the realm of might be. Where the Greeks are locked into the trap of natural necessity and see no possibility of resurrection—the gods themselves, in fact, are powerless over death—Jewish thinking, as articulated in the Jewish prayer הַיְיָהוָּה הַיְיָהוָּה, sees possibility.

Interestingly—and appropriately—another meaning of הָיְיָהוָה is “midwife.” Here we see that this level of the soul is constantly assisting the soul—assisting the Divine—in an effort to give birth to the image and likeness of the Holy One, so that, through the human soul, holiness may emerge into the world. Just as creation is compared to a birth that transpires at every instant, so is the life of the soul such a birth, with the הָיְיָהוָה drawing forth the life that lies in the union with God at the level of חכֹּם and channeling it through the upper realm, so that it may enter this world as תְמוֹנָה, תַּחַת, and תַּחַת. This “midwife” is the הָיְיָהוָה (chay Yahu), the life of God, where the image and likeness of God is first manifest in the living soul, before the soul itself is manifest. It is the soul’s eternal yet to be, because it is the eternal more of the soul. As the “midwife” of the soul, the הָיְיָהוָה is the “teacher” who imparts to the soul the חכֹּם (Ets Chayim) or the “Tree of Life,” which is the Torah that gives birth to and sustains the soul. Here wisdom and life are of a piece, a point that Matityahu Glazerson underscores by observing that words חכֹּם (chakham) and חָיוֹם (chayim), meaning “wisdom” and “life” respectively, have the same numerical value (69), which suggests a definitive link between the two (Glazerson 1997: 39).

All of these associations with the level of הָיְיָהוָה are further reinforced by the association between הָיְיָהוָה and the sefirah of חכֹּם (Chokhmah) or “Wisdom.” The Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, explains that חכֹּם is חכֹּם (koach mah), or the “potentiality of what is” (Zalman 1981: 77). In other words, הָיְיָהוָה—and the הָיְיָהוָה that belongs to it—is the might and possibility, the potency of what is as being more. Thus opening up the more within the is, Jewish thought exceeds the ontological thinking that merely asks, “What is x?” Therefore, Jewish thought exceeds the question of essence that is couched in such ontological inquiries as “What is history?” “What is the good?” “What is metaphysics?” and, most importantly, “What is a human being?” If a human being is more than he is; if a human being is what he is not, despite the law of contradiction that we inherit from the Greeks; if the human being is the “I am that I am not” in contrast to the divine “I am that I am;” as Heschel states it (Heschel 1951: 48)—then it is because the human being is a manifestation of a living presence that is beyond being, a manifestation of הָיְיָהוָה. And what is the not that I am, in the depths and the heights of my soul? It is the face of the Holy One, which, according to our prayers we must forever seek but, according to Torah, can never behold. It is the union with God that lies at the soul’s ever potential yet unattainable integral limit, which, because it is unattainable, retains the relation of I and Thou between God and the human being. The not that I am is, in a word, the level of soul that Jewish thought knows as הָיְיָהוָה (yechidah).
The singularity at the source

The source of the soul is the י"א (Ezîn Sôf), the Infinite One that some refer to as the Great Nothingness. It is the י"א (Ezîn) or the “nothing” that becomes ג/docs (Anî) or “I” in a shifting of the yud and the nun upon the movement of creation. In the letters that form the words י"א and ג/docs one sees many possibilities behind the mystery of the transformation of one into the other. In Chapter 2 we discussed the levels of meaning of alef as the letter signifying both the One G-d and His movement from above to below. With a numerical value of fifty, one sees in the nun the fifty gates that span creation, as well the ten sefirot that belong to each of the five worlds. And, of course, in the yud, which has a value of ten, we notice the first letter of the Holy Name, the ten sefirot, the Ten Utterances of Creation, and the Ten Utterances of Revelation. When the divine י"א becomes ג/docs, all of this and much more transpires.

Just as G-d shifts from י"א to ג/docs as He approaches Creation, so must we shift from ג/docs to י"א in order to approach G-d. In the culmination of a movement known as a ביטול חيز (bitul hayesh) or “annulment of somethingness,” the complete and utter abrogation of the ego characterizes the י"א of the soul. The “union” that is י"א, however, is not a disappearance of the human “I” into the Divine “I” but rather a joining of י"א with ג/docs and of י"א with ג/docs. Because such a joining surpasses utterance, little can be said about the level of the soul we refer to as י"א. Indeed, we have perhaps said too much already. But a metaphor may help. It is the point where the beam of light is indistinguishable from the star, where the placenta is indistinguishable from the mother, where the soul is י"א (yachad), or “in unity” with its source. In the life of the soul it is where the Oneness that is G-d—the י"א (echad) we ascribe to G-d in the Shema—is, without predicates or modifiers, without words or definitions.

Within the word י"א is the word י"א (yachid), which designates a “singularity.” In the “natural world” a singularity is what cannot be described or accommodated by the “laws of nature,” and so it is with the soul: contrary to the rational thought of speculative philosophy, which ultimately equates thought with being, in Jewish thinking about the soul we have this singularity that transcends thought. From a Jewish standpoint, without this “category” that exceeds thought there can be no thought; without this dimension of the soul that exceeds the soul in a unity with the G-d who is One, there can be no soul. Hence this level of the soul is associated with the sefirot that exceeds the sefirot, with י"א (Keter).

Among the sefirot, י"א (Keter) or “Crown” is such a transcending category that some mystics do not count it among the ten sefirot (in its place they include י"א [Daat] or “Knowledge”). Thus at this level, it is written, the soul is “greater and broader than heaven and earth, knowing its extent and height, the ways of the sun and the constellations and all their satellites—all is encompassed by the soul” (Orchot Tsadikim Gate 27). Like a crown, this part of the soul is not part of the body or even part of this realm but is above both; in a sense, י"א is not even part of the soul but above it—above all “realms”—just as the Unity of G-d is
above all the categories of ontological unity. And yet, from the standpoint of Jewish thought informed by the Hebrew language, the soul has no ontological reality without this metaphysical “unity” or ייחוד (ichud) with the שם הימך (Shem HaMeyuchad) who is ייחוד, that is, who is ייחוד or absolutely singular. Which is to say: in the life of the soul there is no ייחוד without ייחוד—and no יเหนס without יเหนס.

Turning away from that union that is forever yet-to-be—that union which must be and yet cannot be—we divorce the metaphysical יเหนס from the ontological יเหนס, so that we are left with only the ontological, only the animal, aspect of our being. When that happens, we are plunged into a state of exile, as it has come to pass in the postmodern era. Divorced from the metaphysical dimension of height, we languish in the ontological exile, an exile characterized precisely by an ontological philosophical tradition that has erased the dimension of height and left us with only a horizontal relation that amounts to no more than a power struggle. Exile means nothing is true and everything is permitted. Exile means power is the only reality. Exile means there is no soul. Yet even within exile, the soul is felt in its longing to return to the dwelling place. And so in the next two chapters we shall consider first the exile and then the dwelling, as Hebrew language enlightens Jewish thought on these matters of life and death.
One way to understand the spiritual problem that most fundamentally concerns all humanity is to view it as an issue of exile and dwelling. From the Israelite Exodus to the Zionist dream, the issue of exile and dwelling manifests itself in the literature and legends, in the sacred texts and folk traditions, not only of the Jewish people but of all human cultures. Why? Because it is the issue that transforms a crowd into a community, so that people may abide in a meaningful relation to one another, rather than languish in isolation alongside each other. “Isolation negates life,” Rabbi Michael Munk has rightly said. It obstructs “man’s relationship with his Creator,” and not just with his neighbor (Munk 1983: 79). Hence the outcry from the Talmud: “Either companionship or death” (Taanit 23a).

This “existing alongside” each other in a radical isolation of one from the other—this solitude of being that characterizes the “egocentrism,” the aniyyut, of Western ontological thought—is the exile in which the soul endures an eternal longing for the Eternal One. “It is nothing but a prejudice of the last three centuries,” Franz Rosenzweig comments on this philosophical folly, “that in all knowledge the ‘I’ must necessarily accompany it, . . . [for] the standard philosophical claim that the I is omnipresent in all knowledge distorts the content of this knowledge” (Rosenzweig 1999a: 80). And this distortion of knowledge is a distortion of the knower; it twists his soul into a deadly isolation from the One who would know him. Only through being known by the Holy One can the soul overcome the isolation of the ego in itself.

This very ego, says the Chasidic master Yechiel Mikhal of Zlotchov (d. 1786), comprises the distance between the soul and the Eternal One (see Buber 1947: 149). Lost in the lie of our aniyyut, we cry out in the “lamentation” or aniyyah that announces our exile: “Where do we go from here?—aniyyah (anah)?” We fear that no matter where we go, we go deeper into exile: our entrenchment in the illusory self, in the “I” that is our aniyyut, is our sorrow and our lamentation, our aniyyah. Hence, underlying the cry of aniyyah—“Where to?”—is the fear that there is no place to go. Such is the abyss that yawns but does not swallow; such is the death that is never over with. In this exile we curl up in a “fortress,” a metsudah, that would pass for a home, only to discover that it is in fact nothing more than a metsodah, a comfortable “trap.” Waiting for a message that does not come,
we drift from diversion to diversion. We do not live: we merely hope to live. We
do not dwell: we languish. We grow angry. And our being “angry,” our being צאום
(zaum), lies in our feeling as though we mean nothing, as though we were “trifling,” another meaning of ציון. Indeed, we feel as though we were “cursed,”
which is still another meaning of ציון. And we know that it is not good.

One understands, then, why Martin Buber declares that “‘Good’ is the move-
ment in the direction of home” (Buber 1965: 78). Life is the movement in the
direction of home, which is a movement toward the “source” or the “origin,”
toward what in Hebrew is called the מקור (mekor), as in the phrase מקורות
(chayim), the “fountain of life” (as, for example, in Psalms 36:10). Which direction
is the direction homeward? Inward. And upward. Therefore in Hebrew we do not
“go” to our homeland Israel; no, we “ascend,” אל (alah), to Israel, and within
Israel we “ascend” to Jerusalem—not simply because it is nestled among the
Judean hills but because it is the soul’s source of life. Jewish thought, therefore,
views the spiritual death that is exile as a disconnection, and not as a “fallen condi-
tion,” to use a Christian expression. The key to overcoming that exile—the
movement homeward—lies in the מצווה (mitsvah), which, as we recall from Chapter
4, is derived from the Aramaic word תִּסְדָּמָה (tsadta), a term that means “connection.”
The soul is not eternally tainted by Adam’s sin and therefore in need of a human
sacrifice; rather, it is exiled from its origin and is in need of the מצווה (mitsvot)
that reconnects it to the origin.

Who among us has not experienced this fundamental need, this thirst, for the
fundamental connection? Who among us has not collided with this longing in
the homelessness, aimlessness, and rampant emptiness of our world? Abraham
Joshua Heschel captures our condition of exile when he cries out, “We have
bartered holiness for convenience, loyalty for success, wisdom for information,
prayers for sermons, tradition for fashion” (Heschel 1978: 106). Recalling similar
insights from Bachya ibn Paquda (c. 1090–1156) and the talmudic sage Rabbi
Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (see Pesachim 50a), we realize that
exile is not just a modern problem but is an issue for all eras. Describing those in
a state of exile, Bachya, for example, writes:

The further they were from the light of truth, from which they were
parted by their close association with the evil inclination, the more did
the darkness curl about them like a pillar of smoke; the more highly this
world was esteemed in their hearts, the more beautiful its strength
seemed to them. They improved the condition of this world to the
destruction of their own understanding. The more the world was
improved, the greater was the destruction of their understanding, till
each of them thought that his evil was the good way, and his erring path
the right direction. This view they turned into a statute and moral prin-
ciple. Parents bequeathed it to their children; their instructor stirred
them to adopt it; the masses were charged to observe it; the nobles vied
with each other about it till the [evil] inclination became firmly fixed in
them and the pitcher [of iniquity] was full. What had been strange in their world became known to them, while the right way was strange to them.

(Chovot HaLevavot 9:2)

That this scenario applies not only to the nations but also—or even especially—to the Jews is clear in Emil Fackenheim’s description of “liberal Judaism”:

Jewish prayer, once between a “subjective” self and an “objective” G-d, is viewed as the self’s disport with its own feelings, conducive to aesthetic or therapeutic benefit. Halakhah, once a way walked before G-d, is reduced to “custom and ceremony,” performed for the sake of warm emotions within or wholesome relations without. Judaism, once a covenant involving a singling-out G-d and a singled-out Israel, is seen as a man-made civilization, created by Jewish genius in its human solitariness. And the human person, who once believed he actually mattered to G-d, is now engineered into the mere feeling that he matters, on the ground that such feelings banish anxiety and alienation.

(Fackenheim 1968: 178)

Of course, the result is just the opposite.

A moment’s glance into the soul, then, makes it clear that exile is neither a spatial nor a geographic category; it is not an ontological exile, as though we were stranded somewhere in the desert of being. No, the ontological thought of the Western tradition is itself a defining feature of the exile; it is itself the wasteland. Hence our exile is a metaphysical condition. Or rather: it is the exile of the metaphysical or of holiness from the world, the exile of HaShem, in whose holy image the soul is created. And it is the exile of the Shekhinah within the world. For the very reality of the Holy One is manifest in our infinite longing for holiness from the depths of a reeling unreality. Which means: even in exile there is revelation. Or perhaps better: only in exile is there revelation.

**Exile and revelation**

The Revelation took place at Mount Sinai: not in the erets hakodesh (land of the holy), but bemidbar (in the wilderness), “in the wilderness.” Nor can it be otherwise. In a very important sense, there is no revelation in the Holy Land, inasmuch as the Holy Land is itself part the Revelation; only in the wilderness of our exile is revelation an issue. Further, since exile is a metaphysical and not a geographical condition, one can be in exile even within the walls of Jerusalem. To be sure, in the Book of Lamentations, which we chant on the anniversary of the destruction of the two Temples, the city itself is said to have become a nidah (wanderer) from the verb nad (wander), which means to “wander” (see Lamentations 1:8): Jerusalem itself follows us into exile, so that within our very
exile the One we long for cries out to us in His own great longing. For in the midst of the “wilderness,” of the יִבְדָא (midbar), is the דָּבָר (davar), the “word,” that we seek, the word that at every instant brings heaven and earth into being and G-d and humanity into a relation. To be sure, another meaning of דָּבָר is “speech.” Just as there is no speech without silence, there is no word without a wilderness, no דָּבָר without יִבְדָא. After all, the wilderness too has a name, and by virtue of its name it harbors a divine spark: it too is a creation of the Holy One.

The Hebrew word for “exile” is גַּלְגַּל (galut), a noun derived from the verb גָּלַח (galah), meaning to “wander” or to “go into exile.” It also means to “discover” or to “reveal” and is a cognate of the noun גַּלּוּת (gilui), “revelation,” as in גַּלּוּת שֶׁכְּרוּת (gilui Shekhinah), “Divine Revelation” or “Revelation of the Shekhinah.” As stated by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, the true meaning of גַּלּוּת is הָיְתָת גַּלּוּת (hitgalut) or “revelation,” so “that the glory of G-d’s kingdom [may] be revealed in every place” (Alter 1998: 86). One implication of these possibilities of meaning found in the word גַּלּוּת is this: from the standpoint of Jewish thought, revelation is not just a word that we receive—it is a condition in which we live, the condition that makes life possible, in that it makes possible the movement of return homeward. To the extent that we are aware of our exiled condition, we come to a certain realization about the need to emerge from that condition: living in the גַּלּוּת, we do not simply live somewhere else—we live away from home. In that realization lie the seeds of redemption.

“What is the difference between גָּלַח (galah) and גֶּוֶל (geulah), [one who is in] exile and redemption?” asks Rabbi Benjamin Blech. And, echoing a teaching from the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Isaac Meir (d. 1866), he answers: “The letter ג (alef) of גֶּוֶל (Anokhi), the One representing G-d, who is the source of revelation—whose utterance of אֱלֹהִים (Exodus 20:2) is the Revelation (Blech 1993: 213). Those of us who are blind to our exile are deaf to the revelation that reverberates from within the depths of that exile, deaf to the דָּבָר in the midst of the יִבְדָא. What renders us so blind and deaf? It is the ego that eclipses the divine I-saying, the דָּבָר, of HaShem. In this eclipse we slip into the most insidious exile, which is the comfortable exile, the exile that passes for normalcy. That is where our eyes grow so used to the dark that we no longer notice the darkness, our ears so deaf to the word that we ignore the deafening outcry of an anguished G-d. The evidence? Behold how we turn our backs on the cries of children wracked with hunger and worse, how we hold our hands over our eyes and ears as innocent people are slaughtered and maimed, how we then silence the innocent when they attempt to cry out, “Enough!”

As Adin Steinsaltz expresses it, the true horror of the exile in Egypt “was that the slaves gradually became more and more like their masters, thinking like them and even dreaming the same dreams. Their greatest sorrow, in fact, was that their masters would not let them fulfill the Egyptian dream” (Steinsaltz 1995: 22). And their greatest wretchedness, like our own wretchedness, was that they saw no sin in dreaming the Egyptian dream, a dream of power and possessions, of pleasure and prestige. Examining the Hebrew word for “Egypt,” מִצְרַיִם (Mitsraim), Rabbi Steinsaltz notes that it is a cognate of מֶטְשָׁר (metsar), which means “narrowness” or “anguish.” Says Rabbi Steinsaltz,
Egypt symbolizes narrow-mindedness. Ancient Egypt and its paganism form the model for the individual who fabricates an entire system to refute real knowledge. The system upholds its false reality in the face of Divine reality. Egypt is the prototype of a world that proclaims itself to be autonomous and announces that it owes nothing to others because it is self-sufficient.

(Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 126)

In terms of modern thought, the Egyptian outlook, with all its idolatry, is reflected in the Kantian moral autonomy and in the Hegelian rational system. Fackenheim rightly points out a devastating implication of the Egyptian dream of autonomy in modern philosophy when he says, “The G-d of traditional Judaism can be present to man. If man is autonomous then G-d can be present only in man, as ‘conscience’ or ‘insight’ or ‘creative genius.’ But to accept this is in the end to fall prey to idolatry” (Fackenheim 1968: 139). On both a societal and on a personal level exile is the dream of autonomous freedom and the illusion of rational systems. It is the dream that clouds our postmodern vision of the world, the illusion that characterizes our postmodern madness.

Perhaps here we have a key to a prayer that we say every Sabbath during the morning services. Praying Psalm 34, we recall the time when King David feigned madness in order to save himself from the Philistine king Avimelekh. The Psalm opens with the words לְדֵי דוֹר מַעֲמַת אוֹן (leDavid, beshanoto et tam), that is, “A Psalm of David, when he feigned madness.” The literal translation of מַעֲמַת however, is “when he changed his understanding,” that is, when he altered his “judgment” or “discernment.” David feigned madness in order to be spared from the threat of being trapped and murdered by the Philistines. In our condition of exile, we too often feign madness or alter our discernment in order to make our way in the realm of exile. And on the Sabbath we recall King David in order to remind ourselves that the ways of the nations are madness. There are times, however, when we have gone mad without realizing it—that is the difference between us and King David: we come to think like the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Greeks, and the Romans without noticing. And so, like all madmen, we do not even realize that we have gone mad. But, in his righteousness, King David knew when he was feigning madness.

One who succumbs to the perfidious promises of the dream of Egypt, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch states it, views all living beings not as the creations of G-d but as

... independent forces; seeking power and pleasure, he soon ceases to look upon the pursuit of power and thrills as bestial and unworthy of man, but deems it divine and man’s most worthy goal. Polytheism becomes the grave of all that is human within him.

(Hirsch 1969: 45)
Thus pursuing the lie of the dream that drains him of his soul, a Jew may become a lie by becoming a convert to an alien religion only to be devastated, as the verbal root השמד (nistemad) tells us. Written as השמד (nistemad), it means to “be converted” or “baptized”; written as השמד (nishmad), it means to “be devastated.” Thus the punishment for the sin of pursuing the dream is the fulfillment of the dream: as we saw in the previous chapter, the Hebrew word פשה (pesha) means both “sin” and “punishment for sin.” So does the word הנש (onesh). Therefore when the Midrash says that “a wicked man does not leave this world until he has pronounced sentence upon himself” (Tehilim Rabbah 1.27.3), we may take that to mean that his own sin is the punishment he pronounces.

Another word that has such a meaning is עון (avon), as in the phrase באהון לטבל תורה (baavan bitul Torah), “in punishment for neglecting Torah.” Its cognate עון (avah) means “destruction,” “desolation,” or “ruin,” which tells us that sin is not just a matter of wrong doing; it is a matter of destroying lives and souls, creation itself. Because exile is not a geographic category, we can descend into exile simply through the destruction or עון of the place where we are. And yet, as Rabbi Steinsaltz indicates above, this destruction goes unnoticed; indeed, we squander our lives in the pursuit of it. For in exile our perception has become perverted and distorted, and that too is the nature of sin, as we see from the verb עון (avah), which is to “sin”: its עון (piel) or intensive form, עוה (ivah), means to “distort,” to “twist,” or to “pervert,” to the point where good is evil and evil is good—or at least very cool. As we pervert, so are we perverted; the soul suffers what it inflicts—that is the punishment. Exile is always a condition of our own making.

A teaching from the Talmud illustrates this point. According to Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Yehudah (second century C.E.), two angels, one good and the other evil, accompany a person each time he returns home from the synagogue on a Sabbath eve. When he enters his house and finds the candles burning, the table set, and all in good order, the good angel says, “May it be the will of HaShem that the next Sabbath be like this as well,” and the wicked angel must answer, “Amen!” But if the house has not been made ready for the Sabbath, then the evil angel declares, “May it be the will of HaShem that the next Sabbath be like this as well,” and the good angel is forced to respond, “Amen!” (Shabbat 119b). The reward, therefore, for Sabbath observance is Sabbath observance, and the punishment for the עון of desecrating the Sabbath is the עון of Sabbath desecration (cf. Tanchuma Vayakhel 1). And exile is precisely this realm of Sabbath desecration. For the desecration of the Sabbath, like all sin, obstructs the flow of life from above; once that flow is obstructed we are stranded here below.

As a metaphysical category, then, exile pertains not only to space but also to time, or to the loss of the eternal in time, as when we desecrate the Sabbath. It lies in this obstruction, this perversion, that renders us unable to distinguish the Sabbath from the other six days of the week, light from darkness, or the holy from the profane. Exile is this collapse of everything into an undefined sameness. It is the “confusion,” the בלב (bilbul), that characterized the confusion of tongues in the time of the Tower of Babel, which is the Tower of Confusion. The confusion

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of Babel, the confusion that defines our exile, lies not in the inability to understand an alien tongue but in the blindness to our fellow human being, which renders all language alien to itself.

Therefore we have the reading of Genesis 11:7 from Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1689–1732), who notes that in the phrase חֲלָלָה שַׁמְאֵם סְפָתָם (navlah sham sfatam), “let us confuse their tongues,” the word חֲלָלָה (navelah) may also be read as חֲלָלָה (nevelah), which means “corpse.”¹ Read in this way, says Rabbi Culi, the verse means “let us make their speech produce corpses” (Culi 1977: 420). Which means: in the confusion that tears word from meaning, people die. Recall in this connection the midrashic teaching that when a man fell to his death during the construction of the Tower, no one even noticed; but when a brick was dropped and broken, a great lamentation went up and a cry of, “Where shall we find another like it?” (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 24). As always, the punishment for this sin illustrates the sin itself: the builders of the Tower were punished by being exiled, scattered throughout the earth. For they were torn from their homeland the moment they tore the word from meaning and thus fell into a deadly confusion between people and things.

In a similar fashion, in the time of the “flood” or מָבֻל (mabul), which is a cognate of מָבֶל (mever), the disaster that befell the world illustrated the crime, the שֶׁגֶנֶת or מַשְׁגַּנֶּה, that men and women had brought into the world. So great was the מָבֻל, the confusion of the flood, that the waters from below rose up and the waters from above fell down; according to Rashi, moreover, “there was no distinction between day and night” (commentary on Genesis 8:22). The sin at the root of the confusion that is the מָבֻל that is מַשְׁגַּנֶּה (chamas), a word that means “violence,” “injustice,” and “cruelty” (see Genesis 6:13). And if anything is a defining feature of exile, it is מַשְׁגַּנֶּה. Violence, injustice, and cruelty plunge us ever deeper into exile by separating us ever farther from our neighbors, as when Cain was punished with exile for the crime of creating an absolute separation of himself from his brother and his family. Where was he sent? Into the land of נָד (Nod), a word that means “wandering” or “exile” (see Genesis 4:16).

The revelation couched in these cases of exile, the מָבֻל within the מָבֻל, is that exile is not a punishment for our sin, but rather that our sin is the condition of exile, and it is always self-imposed. If exile is a condition of “captivity,” which is another meaning of מָבֻל, we are our own jail keepers. We are held captive by the illusion of having been set loose from the bonds of Torah and tradition. But our illusory freedom is precisely our enslavement; the only true freedom—the only freedom that has absolute meaning—lies in our bond with the Absolute. The breaking of that bond results in a radical breaking of one’s own soul.

The broken soul

The verb most commonly translated as to “break” is שָׁבָר (shavar); it can also be translated as to “tear” and to “ruin” or “destroy.” In the contexts of exile or מָבֻל, however, the verb פָּרַת (parats), which also means to “break” or “break through,” may be more appropriate for getting at the nature of Jewish thinking about these
matters. Its cognate הֶזַרְעָה (pirtsah), a noun meaning “breach” or “gap,” for example, is used in the phrase הֶזַרְעָה של גָּלוּת (pirtsah shel galut), which translates as the “calamity of exile.” The breach becomes a calamity when it is a breach between heaven and earth, which is a breach between a person and his neighbor. What distinguishes this radical collapse is not just a breakdown in one’s physical condition but also a tearing of the soul, which, as we have seen in the last chapter, abides between two—that tearing is the calamy of exile. To have one’s soul broken by exile, moreover, is not the same as being heartbroken or blue. A “broken heart” is a לֶב נִשְׁבָּר (lev nishbar), and, as Rabbi Steinsaltz has said, “if one does not have a broken and contrite heart”—a heart aware of the suffering of G-d and humanity—“one cannot be said to have a heart at all” (Steinsaltz 1988a: 169). But the broken soul of the exiled is broken by oblivion—that is the breach suffered in the הֶזַרְעָה של גָּלוּת, the calamity of the soul broken in exile and by exile.

The ramifications of this breakdown for Jewish thought become clear when we consider some additional meanings of המֶלֶך. This verb, for instance, can mean to “demolish,” as well as to “entreat,” to “beg,” or to “plead.” One who is cast into exile is demolished inasmuch as he is reduced to a state of begging; the Messiah, whom we keep in exile as long as we keep ourselves from Torah, is often disguised as a beggar or a leper, that is, as one who is in need of others. Thus when the talmudic sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked Elijah when the Messiah would come, the prophet directed him to a leper at the gates of Rome, saying, “Ask him yourself.” And so Rabbi Yehoshua asked the Messiah, “When will you come?” And the Messiah answered, “Today”—that is, “Today, if you heed the Voice of HaShem” (see Sanhedrin 98a). And what would heeding the Voice of HaShem amount to? It would at least entail helping the leper or the beggar, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. In figures such as these lies the Messiah’s pleading to heed the Voice of HaShem. The question that decides whether we shall emerge from exile is the question of whether the Messiah’s pleading with us will fall on deaf ears. Our own exile, then, is tied to the exile of the Messiah.

In our exile, however, we are not always reduced to wearing a beggar’s rags; or rather a beggar’s rags are often disguised as three-piece suits. It is obvious enough that for one who is forced to wander in a wilderness, homeless and destitute, exile is indeed a calamity. What is not so obvious and much more dangerous is the crushing nature of the spiritual exile, where we hold to our breast the very “viper”—the אֶפֶה (efeh), which is the אפֶה (efah) or “nothingness”—that preys upon us. In this homelessness that passes for home we enjoy an affluent life but are incapable of rejoicing: thus we are poisoned by our possessions. We are awash in information but empty of insight: thus we are in the throes of nothingness. Dreaming the Egyptian dream, we weigh, measure, and count all that we have. And yet we are beggared by our abundance, because the more we weigh, measure, and count, the more we feel cheated. Hence the truth of the talmudic teaching that blessing does not fall upon what can be weighed, measured, or counted (Bava Metzia 42a). Hence the intricate connection between קְסֵף (kesef) and קְסֶף (kosef), between “money” and “yearning.” As the two intersect in our confusion between
being and having, we wake up one day to find that the world and the people around us have suddenly grown strange and unfamiliar. The fixed formulas and ready answers prove to be so many lies. The stars vanish, and we cannot find our way. We cry out only to collide more deeply with the silence. And we do not know how to respond.

That is where the היטפאל (hitpael) or reflexive-passive form of הירד (hitpats) comes in: it is הירד (hitparets), meaning to “rebel,” to “become dissolute,” to “act without restraint,” to “be insolent.” The first reaction of the soul broken by exile is often to rebel; exile is a realm of corruption, and the rebel insists on purity where purity is impossible. Here rebellion for the sake of the world soon turns into a vengeance against it. An extreme example from Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s memoir Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land illustrates this point. She relates the tale of a sweet young girl named Cyla, who became a murderous monster in charge of Block 25 in Auschwitz, the Death Block, where women awaited their turn for the gas chamber. Once inside Block 25, the women were regarded as though they had already crossed over to the other realm; they received no food, no clothing, no comfort. Cyla saw to that. When asked how she could be so evil, she answered,

You probably know that I put my own mother in the car that took her to the gas. You should understand that there remains for me nothing so terrible that I could not do it. The world is a terrible place. This is how I take my revenge on it.

(Nomberg-Przytyk 1985: 57)

In this instance we see how the broken soul of the one in exile becomes הירד (paruts), which means “crushed,” yes, but it also means “lawless,” “dissolute,” “obscene,” “shameless,” and “wanton” (see Horowitz 1960: 292). Here the human being—or what is left of the human being—will become הירד (prits), that is, “violent,” a word that also means “tyrant” or “oppressor.”

This is where the exiled soul, the broken soul, most fully imitates the Egyptian dream, which is a dream of conquest and oppression; it is the dream of ontological Western thought, which is both totalizing and totalitarian, as Emmanuel Lévinas has correctly understood. And, of course, at the height of that speculative, ontological tradition we have the unrepentant, card-carrying Nazi and father of postmodernism Martin Heidegger. Says Lévinas,

A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice . . . . Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.

(Lévinas 1969: 46–67)
Obedience to the anonymous is not obedience to the Nameless or to the Nameless One; it is the idolatry of bowing down to namelessness as such. The exile that breaks the soul is precisely this state of tyranny and of tyrannizing thought, which is the contrary of Jewish thought. For its highest aim is to think the Name—HaShem, G-d Himself—into exile, so that the counterfeit self may reign supreme. Once again Cain comes to mind. Murdering his brother, Cain set out to murder G-d; his sacrifice refused, he usurped G-d by making his brother a sacrifice unto himself (see Wiesel 1976: 58).

Part of what is “demolished” in the state of exile, then, is G-d’s authority and sanctity, G-d’s very Name, as it is written in the Zohar:

When the community Israel was exiled from its home, the letters of the Divine Name became, if one may say so, separated, the hey flying apart from the vav. We can thus understand the sentence, “I was dumb with silence” (Psalms 39:3), as through the separation of the vav from the hey there was no Voice and thus Utterance was silenced.

(Zohar I, 116b)

Israel’s home is not just the Land of Israel, although that thin strip of land is most certainly its home, just as a body may be the home to a soul—or the soul to the body. Beyond the matter of geographical borders, Israel’s home is Torah. And so here we have it: the condition of exile is a state of being overwhelmed by the silence of these infinite spaces that threaten to swallow us up—not the silence between the words of Torah but the silence that eclipses the words of Torah. The letters of the Name unravel, until we lose our own name; they unravel because we have lost our own name, having changed our name into an Egyptian name. And this unraveling is a sign of our exile. Being rendered nameless—or worse, assuming Egyptian names, identifying ourselves by Egyptian standards of prestige, popularity, and power—is the desolation that befalls us in exile.

### Desolation

Just as נִשְׁמָה is indicative of a verbal state of being in exile, so is the condition of desolation tied to a verb: it is שָׁמָם (shamam), which means to “be desolate.” In a word, in exile I am desolate. So what is the Jewish thinking about exile that is couched in this word? The cognate verb שָׁמָה (nasham) means to “be ruined” or to “be devastated”; in its וְהָסִפֵּל (hitpael) form, וְחָסִיתוֹמָה (hishtomem), it means to “be horrified” or to “become desolate.” Indeed, the state of desolation that defines exile is a state of horror, as suggested by the word for “desolation” or “wasteland”: it is שֵׁמָמָה (shemamah), and it also means “astonishment” or “horror.” This word reveals to us that the horror of exile is the horror of Kurtz, for instance, in Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), where the renegade who had thought to become a law unto himself dies repeating the words, “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 1983: 111). The desolate horror he experiences is not that
there is so much evil in a world cast into exile; on the contrary, the horror is that there is no evil. Nor is there any good; the world is simply there, as blank, neutral, and void of value as a lunar landscape: as empty as the “I.”

Reflecting further on the horror that is קאествה, we recall another insight from Buber, written twenty years after Conrad’s novel:

When man is for once overcome by the horror of alienation and the world fills him with anxiety, he looks up and sees a picture. Then he sees that the I is contained in the world, and that there really is no I, and thus the world cannot harm the I, and he calms down; or he sees that the world is contained in the I, and that there really is no world, and thus the world cannot harm the I, and he calms down. And when man is overcome again by the horror of alienation and the I fills him with anxiety, he looks up and sees a picture; and whichever he sees, it does not matter, either the empty I is stuffed full of world or it is submerged in the flood of the world, and he calms down. But the moment will come, and it is near, when man, overcome by horror, looks up and in a flash sees both pictures at once. And he is seized by a deeper horror.

(Buber 1970: 121–122)

The time of which Buber speaks, when both the substance of the world and the sanctity of the soul vanish with the erasure of good and evil—the time of the deeper horror—has long been upon us. It is the time of our most horrendous exile. Once again we see that exile does not designate a mere geographical condition: creation itself, reality itself, is in exile, and we, the culprits, are caught in the maelstrom. The desolation and horror of exile lie in this state of being empty of all value, all substance, all meaning. In exile there is a loss not only of one’s bearings but also of one’s being, of one’s sense of reality, of one’s senses as such. In exile we go mad.

Hence we have another cognate of קאestead, the adjective קאאא (shinem), which means “crazy,” “demented,” or “insane.” How many times has any one of us looked upon the world and taken it to be insanity? Its insanity is a symptom of its exile. The insanity of exile, like all insanity, lies in mistaking the unreal for the real, the darkness for light, desolation for abundance, good for evil, and evil for good. What is most insane about the exilic insanity is that it passes for the calm of normalcy, yet it is a calm haunted by an underlying panic. Thus the horror and insanity, the קאאא and קאאא, of exile seethe in a state of מוקבבל (behalah), which is “fright,” “panic,” or “confusion.” It is a condition that may at first seep through and then overwhelm the makeshift bulwark that we erect against it. This is where we encounter what modern philosophy calls “the absurd,” where the fixtures prove to be not only just so many props on a stage but part of the crumbling dam itself. And as the waters rise, we suck air.

A cognate of מוקבבל, the verb מוקבבל (nichal), applies very well to this state of not-so-quiet desperation; it means to “be terrified” or “disturbed.” In this state we are
constantly \( \text{bāhu} \) (bahul), that is, “worried” or “puzzled.” Another word for “worried” or “troubled” perfectly articulates this exilic condition. It is \( \text{mūtra} \) (mutrad), which also means “banished,” from the verb \( \text{tā'arad} \) (taraad), meaning “drive out” or “expel,” as well as to “trouble” or “distress.” In exile we are \( \text{bāhu} \) and \( \text{mūtra} \), worried and banished, so that we suffer lapses of memory, as when we move to a city, buy a new house, or walk into a room and cannot remember why; as when we turn around and cannot recall where all the years went because they went for naught. The most pervasive symptom of this anxiety and confusion, this horror and insanity, is that all our bustling, all our busyness, is indicative of a spiritual paralysis: we live in a chronic state of flight, desperate to escape we know not what, and we cannot escape it any more than we can run from our own shadow.

In exile, therefore, we are forever “in a hurry,” which is another meaning of \( \text{bāhu} \). Without a sense of direction, we dash from one thing to the next, pursuing a dream that is nothing more than a delirium. And the more we rush, the less time we have. Like Alice and the Red Queen in Through the Looking Glass, we frantically run in place, from place to place, just to stay in the same place. In this running that gets us nowhere, in this clambering just to stay where we are, we are \( \text{bāhu} \) or “in a hurry,” from the verb \( \text{chātaf} \), which means not only to “be in a hurry” but also to “kidnap”: we hasten to kidnap a time and a place that is not our own. Following every fashion and fad, high and low, we pretend to be more than we are and in doing so become less and less. As ever, we do not live but merely hope to live—to live a life not our own, the life of a ghostly other. For in our hustling and bustling we become estranged from ourselves, so that a stranger gazes back at us from the mirage in the mirror.

Another verb in Hebrew that expresses this running around and getting nowhere is \( \text{shakak} \), meaning to “run about” or to “bustle.” Significantly, it also translates as to “be hungry” or to “long for.” Exile is the desolation of this aimless wandering that is a plunging headlong, this impatience that is a paralysis, this hastening that is a hunger. It is not that we must learn “to sit still,” as a certain poet puts it (see Eliot 1962: 66). Rather, we must learn to walk. Indeed, the longing that lurks in all our bustling is a longing to walk a path rather than run about.

In the last chapter we saw that life is manifested though movement; in exile, as already suggested, it is spent in “paralysis,” which in Hebrew is \( \text{shituk} \). This word is a cognate of \( \text{shtikah} \), which is “silence”; hence the verb \( \text{shitek} \) means both to “paralyze” and to “silence.” In a state of exile, just as a paralysis overshadows our aimless rush, so does a silence underlie our incessant noise. Even when we find refuge from the noise of the street, we wake up to the radio and dress to the television. Afraid of the anonymous rumbling of nothingness that underlies our exile, we are increasingly incapable of enduring any silence at all. And so we cover it up with noise. To be sure, for many of us, the noise of the world is not enough: we must have our own noise, and so we hide in our headphones and listen to music made into noise, which is a symptom of our longing to be elsewhere, to be anywhere except where we are, for we cannot endure the mute neutrality of what is merely “there,” of what Lévinas refers to as the “there
is.” With the appearance of the “there is,” Lévinas explains, “the absence of everything returns to us as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence” (Lévinas 1987b: 46). The murmur of silence? Perhaps better: the shriek of silence.

Looking up through the veil of our despair, we do not behold the face of the Holy One; no, it is eclipsed by the facelessness of indifferent being, until even the revelation (יהוה) associated with exile (יהוה) is lost. That is the desolation: it is the terrifying silence of the fathomless deep below and the empty space above. Thus terrified by the mute “plenitude of the void,” the voice that would speak and thus breach the silence is rendered mute. Unable to speak, the soul is unable to signify anything. In a vain and desperate search for a sign that would give us meaning, we fabricate our own signs and slogans and mark ourselves with tattoos and piercings, the new signs of a dark covenant, as if to say to the silence, “This is who I am, for Me,” rather than “Here I am for You.” But making myself into my own sign is like picking myself up by my own hair. Perhaps that is why הָשַׁמְלָח (kuka), the word meaning to “be tattooed” also means to “be destroyed” or to “be undermined.” For the silence does not answer to the cry of “I gotta be Me!” Just as mute as the Me, it merely rumbles, like a “noise returning after every negation of this noise,” as Lévinas puts it (Lévinas 1985: 48–49). This noise that is the rumbling of silence, this noise that we cover up with our own noise, is rather like what is suggested in the Hebrew word for “noise,” רעש (raash), which also means “din” or “rumbling.” Just as significantly, it means “earthquake” and calls to mind the “trembling” that we experience as the ground shifts under our feet. Those who live in exile must become good dancers, so as not to succumb to the fear of falling.

As in an earthquake, moreover, in exile there is no place to hide, no “refuge” or “shelter,” no מיקלא (miklat), to use the Hebrew word, from מָכָל (kalat), which means to “absorb” or “take in,” as well as to “comprehend.” Hence the cognate מְכִלָּה (klitah) can mean “reception,” “absorption,” or “comprehension.” How is it that in exile the loss of refuge is tied to a loss of comprehension? In an elaboration of the “there is,” Lévinas explains. In this condition that characterizes the desolation of exile, he says, “anything can count for anything else” (Lévinas 1978b: 59), so that nothing has any meaning and all comprehension is lost. The most notorious of the postmodern thinkers, Heidegger provides a good example of this postmodern leveling of everything into an empty sameness in his assertion that technologically driven agriculture amounts to the same phenomenon as the technologically driven murder of the Jews in the murder camp (quote in Rockmore and Margolis 1992: 265). Thus we have the ontological equation: mechanized agriculture = Auschwitz.

Commenting on Heidegger’s view in this regard, Jürgen Habermas wrote, “Under the leveling glance of the philosopher of Being, the extermination of the Jews, too, appears as a happening, where everything can be replaced as one likes with anything else” (quoted in Neske and Kettering 1990: xxxi). The world in
which everything can be replaced as one likes with anything else is precisely the postmodern world, and the murder camps are part of the landscape of that world. Since everything is all the same, anyone can take the place of another, and everyone is expendable. Subsequently we are turned over to the blank that is the desert, a realm with no shade, so that, in the words of Lévinas, “it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell. One is exposed” (Lévinas 1978b: 59). Hence we come back to ש pneum, to the horror that is desolation: with no place to turn, no relief to await, the human being thrown into the desolation of violent and indifferent being is overcome with horror.

As Lévinas insists, indifferent being is anonymous, impersonal being (Lévinas 1985: 48). It is the being that is weighed, measured, and adored by the Western ontological tradition, empty of any Who; therefore it is “anonymous” or “nameless,” both of which are meanings of אלמוני (almoni). If there is no Who but merely an It pervading and underlying being—if being does not command but merely is—then there is no authentic who about the human being; instead, the human being is mere raw material, an it forever locked into a chain of cause and effect, a commodity to be bought and sold on a market of exchange. And there is no wilderness more desolate than the market of exchange. There, in the marketplace, we have the desperate longing already spoken of, the “longing” or “desire” that is שוק (shuk), which also means “market.” There, in the marketplace, violence is not only done—it is justified and glorified, which is the real terror of a terrorism in which “martyr” and “murderer” are synonyms. Here we recall a word that has the same root as אלמוני, the word אלימעל (alimut), which means both “violence” and “terror.” And it is always perpetrated in the midst of the שות (elem), the “silence” or “muteness,” of exile. For violence happens when words have run out, and words run out when we become deaf to the Who. This deafness leads to the desolation that defines exile. It is the desolation that sinks into isolation—not the isolation of solitude, meditation, or study, from which we return to engage the day, but the isolation of the abyss, from which there may be no return.

The isolation of the abyss

In ancient times the most devastating events to plunge the Jews into the abyss of exile were the destruction of the two Temples, first in 586 B.C.E. and then in 70 C.E. In Hebrew this “destruction” is known as שׁור (churban). This noun is a cognate of the word for “sword,” which is רוח (cherev); both words are from the verb רוח (charav), which means to “destroy” or to “lay waste.” A special word used to refer to the devastation wrought by the destruction of the Temple, שׁור, pertains to the loss of the Divine Presence in the world, without which there is no dwelling in the world. It pertains to a radical assault on the Divine Presence herself through a radical assault on the Jews. Therefore the Yiddish language uses this same word to refer to history’s most devastating assault on G-d through the extermination of His Chosen: the Holocaust.
The abyss that since 1945 characterizes the exile of world and humanity is the abyss of the יָשָׁה (Shoah), a noun that means many things. To be sure, יָשָׁה means “abyss.” It also means “pit,” “destruction,” and “ruin.” And it means “Holocaust.” Connected to this horrendous noun is another noun, שָׁמ (shaw), which translates as “lie” or “nothingness.” And the verb יָשָׁה (shaah) means to “become desolate,” to “be devastated”; the הִתְפָּאֵל (hitpael) form, הִיְשָׁתַּה (hishtaah), is to “wonder,” to “be astonished,” or to “gaze in wonder or awe.”

What is the Holocaust? Exceeding the parameters of genocide, it is the calculated, carefully implemented imposition of the abyss or the יָשָׁה upon the world. It is the lie made truth, the unreal made real, the return of the world to the nothingness, to the שָׁמ, that creation now struggles to overcome. It is the astonishment not over what is unimaginable but over everything imaginable, and that is exactly what the Nazis did in the process of undoing the image of the human being: not the unimaginable but everything imaginable. For there was no limiting principle at work in their actions, hence no possibility of going too far. On the contrary, they could never go far enough—there lay the dimension of the infinite in their assault on the Infinite One, the G-d of the Covenant of Abraham.

In the past, Amalek’s hatred of the Jews for their devotion to G-d and the Covenant has assumed a variety of forms. It can be seen among the Egyptians and the Babylonians, among the Greeks and the Romans—all of whom created great civilizations. And all of whom in one way or another attempted to eliminate G-d from the world by removing the Jewish testimony from the world. But the Nazi effort to remove not only all testimony but every Jew from the world was something unprecedented. It was not the result of economic depression or German resentment over having lost the First World War. Nor was it a case of scapegoating, xenophobia, or even racism run amok. Such facile explanations amount to no more than feeble attempts to evade the specters that rise from the ashes to haunt us. As Elie Wiesel has said, whatever happened in the Holocaust took place within the soul of humanity (Wiesel 1985, Vol. 1: 239), so that its causes lie in matters pertaining to the soul.

Among the chief causes of the Holocaust or יָשָׁה is the Christian doctrine of supersession, which declares Judaism to be now theologically meaningless and Jews therefore to be ontologically superfluous. Hence Jews and Judaism have no place in the world. Both, according to traditional Christian thinking, are archaic. Further, once the Jews have been declared superfluous and Judaism archaic, so too does the Torah become unnecessary and outmoded in any relation to the Holy One. Having thus abandoned Torah, as Rav Abraham Isaac Kook rightly pointed out well before the Holocaust (in 1920), Christianity

... rooted herself in apparent mercy and love that undermines the world and destroys it. By emptying law of its divine content, it becomes seized by the greatest wickedness. The poison invades the private law of the individual and spreads through the souls of nations.

(Kook 1993: 105–106)
And he adds,

Christianity knows full well that if the accoutrement of its pagan style should dissolve and disappear, it would no longer find standing in life for its peculiar setup, and it would be forced to be reabsorbed in Judaism, its source. Therefore Christianity protects its existence and it is filled with lethal hatred toward Judaism and Israel.

(Kook 1993: 148)

Hatred toward Judaism and Israel, of course, is hatred toward the Torah, which Christianity must eliminate in order to be Christianity.

Eliminating the Torah that constitutes the soul, the Christians empty the soul of its essential holiness and purity; hence the doctrine of Inherited Sin, according to which every human being, from infants to old men, is in his or her essence a sinner. Therefore, according to the wickedness that drains the law of it divine content, Jews are most certainly ontologically sinful and therefore eternally damned, since they consciously and explicitly reject “salvation” through “faith” in the Nazarene. This thinking, too, significantly contributed to the annihilation of European Jewry.

More than that, however, this event that most radically isolated the Jews from the world and most irrevocably plunged them into the abyss was the result of a philosophical tradition that set out to free people by making them self-legislating, proceeded to equate them with G-d, and ended by eliminating G-d altogether. With an insight bordering on the prophetic, Franz Rosenzweig caught a glimpse of its beginnings when he declared,

Corresponding to the Copernican turn of Copernicus which made man a speck of dust in the whole is the Copernican turn of Kant, which, by way of compensation, placed him upon the throne of the world, much more precisely than Kant thought. To that monstrous degradation of man, costing him his humanity, this correction without measure was, likewise, at the cost of his humanity.

(Rosenzweig 1999a: 96)

Over against a Jewish tradition that affirms all good, moral and otherwise, to come from G-d, Kant insists that that G-d derives from the rational human reflection on a moral good. Thus perceiving Judaism to be antithetical to his own position, in The Conflict of the Faculties Kant declares, “The euthanasia of Judaism is the pure moral religion” (Kant 1979: 95). Of course, the euthanasia of Judaism amounts to the elimination of the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—a project that would ultimately require the extermination of the Jews. Understanding the human being to be determined by the will and commandments of G-d and not, as Kant would have it, “only by laws which he gives to himself through reason” (Kant 1985: 101), Judaism is the opposite of Kantian idealism. That is why Kant wanted to see it eliminated.
Like Kant, Hegel (1770–1831) associated freedom with human autonomy; also like Kant, he viewed Judaism as a slave religion. Unlike Kant, however, Hegel drew on the Christian notion of the Incarnation to develop a view of G-d that denies the otherness of the divinity. In Hegel, Fackenheim explains, “divinity comes to dwell, as it were, in the same inner space as the human self” (Fackenheim 1993: 190–191). The self that began by appropriating the world through thought now appropriates the divinity. The philosophical result of this incarnation of G-d in the self and the subsequent deprecation of the Jews unfolds in the thinking of atheistic neo-Hegelians such as Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) and Karl Marx (1818–1883), where, Fackenheim points out, “divinity vanishes in the process of internalization, to be replaced by a humanity potentially infinite in its modern ‘freedom’” (Fackenheim 1993: 191). This infinite freedom is necessarily opposed to the Infinite One: because it is infinite, the “modern freedom” eliminates the Infinite One, so that we now may do whatever we have the will and the imagination to do.

Indeed, we are justified by will alone, as Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Heidegger after him proclaimed. “The expression ‘will to power,’” says Heidegger in his study on Nietzsche, “designates the basic character of beings; any being which is, insofar as it is, is will to power” (Heidegger 1979, Vol. 1: 18). What is the title of the most famous of all the Nazi propaganda films? It is Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1933)—not *Triumph of the Good* or *Triumph of Righteousness*, both of which would have invoked either “capitalistic” or “communistic” Jewish notions. At the very least, terms such as “the Good” or “righteousness” harbor an appeal to conscience, which, according to Nazi ideology, is a Jewish invention and is therefore yet another weakness that threatens “humanity.”

Heidegger’s membership of the Nazi Party is well known. Also well known is his proclamation that “the Führer himself and he alone is the present and future German reality and its law” (quoted in Neske and Kettering 1990: 45). What is not so readily admitted is the fact that Heidegger was not a philosopher who happened to be a Nazi; no, he was a Nazi who happened to be a philosopher, as Karl Löwith discovered in 1936. When he expressed his concern to Heidegger that there was an essential “partnership” between National Socialism and Heidegger’s philosophy, he says, “Heidegger agreed with me [about this] without reservation and elucidated that his concept of ‘historicity’ was the basis of his political ‘engagement’” (quoted in Neske and Kettering 1990: 158). The intellect of the philosophers is not the intellect of which our sages have spoken, when they asserted, “Intellect is shame and shame is intellect” (*Orchot Tzadikim*, Gate 3). Determining that power or resolve alone justifies a human being, these thinkers—Heidegger above all—were shameless. Thus the twentieth century’s greatest philosopher of the ontological tradition pledged his allegiance to Amalek. Indeed, he was the philosophical personification of Amalek.

Writing secretly from the Warsaw Ghetto, from the core of the abyss that was the 782, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira makes quite clear the connection between Amalek and this line of German philosophy. One need only turn to his
commentary on Deuteronomy 25:17: 

(zakhor et asher-asah lekha Amalek baderekh betsetkhem mimitsraim; asher karkha baderekh), that is, “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt; that he happened upon you along the way.” The Midrash translates the phrase אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ (asher karkhah), “who happened upon you,” as “who chilled you,” from the root word קָר (kar), meaning “cold” (see Tanchuma Ki Tetse 9). The suggestion is that Amalek cooled the Jews’ passion for G-d and stirred their passion for other things instead—that is the evil of Amalek. Rabbi Shapira recalls also the teaching that בדֶרֶךְ (baderekh), or “along the way;” is a euphemism for “thought.” We must beware of the evil of Amalek, for this evil casts us into the abyss by “chilling our thinking” with regard to anything that smacks of religion. Addressing his fellow Jews, the Rabbi explains:

Before Amalek came to fight with you, there were among you servile people who esteemed the very thinking championed by Amalek. You were impressed with the superficial culture in which Amalek takes such pride. As a result, your response to Jewish culture and the wisdom of Torah was chilly. You were sure that Amalek was very cultured, that his philosophy was quite as good as anything. To be sure, it also had its ethics, and there is profit to be had from it in this world. What did G-d do? He brought you face to face with Amalek and with all the culture and philosophy he affects. G-d allowed him to expose to you his evil, the corruption in his wicked heart, the psychosis of his character, and all the putrefaction of his intelligence.

(Shapira 2000: 56)

But Rabbi Shapira was not the first to perceive the source of this evil that threatens to swallow up the Jews, of this “lie” that is synonymous with “idolatry,” both of which are meanings of the word קזא (kazav). More than one hundred years earlier, with the same clarity of vision that led him to declare that those who burn books will end by burning people, Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) wrote:

The German revolution will not be milder and gentler because it was preceded by Kant’s Critique, by Fichte’s transcendental idealism, and even by the philosophy of nature. These doctrines have developed revolutionary forces that wait only for the day when they can erupt and fill the world with terror and admiration. There will be Kantians forthcoming who will hear nothing of piety in the visible world, and with sword and axe will mercilessly churn the soil of our European life, to exterminate the very last roots of the past. Armed Fichteans will enter the lists, whose fanaticism of will can be curbed neither by fear nor by self-interest . . . . But the most terrible of all would be natural philosophers . . . , [who] can call up the demoniac energies of
ancient Germanic pantheism. A play will be performed in Germany that will make the French Revolution seem like a harmless idyll in comparison.

(Heine 1943: 51–53)

Why are the natural philosophers the most terrible of all? Joseph Soloveitchik explains:

The philosopher, an adherent of *religio naturalis*, envisages G-d as primarily an infinite ideal to which he aspires. His philosophical religiosity is anthropocentric and anthropocratic. The point of departure is not G-d but the inward experience (of Him), which is considered creative, redeeming and inspiring—the maximum bonum of mental life. He is absorbed in his own self rather than in a transcendent G-d.

(Soloveitchik 1986: 78)

The German revolution to which Heine refers, then, is the manifestation of an exile rooted not only in a distancing of the human from the divine but in a usurpation of the divine by the human. And that is precisely what underlies the Holocaust. It is the abyss and the nothingness of אדיש.

Emblematic of our exile, the Holocaust arises not only from the philosophical revolt but also from the Christian silence, both of which cast the Jew into an absolute isolation: an isolation from the protection of the law and from the pursuit of a livelihood, from the safety of the home and from the sanctity of the synagogue—all of which is accomplished through an insidious lie. Indeed, the word for “isolation,” בديثות (bedidut), suggests a link between the lie or the אוש that characterizes exile and the isolation of the abyss. For a cognate of בديثות, the noun בדיאיה (bedayah), also means “lie.” Taken from_badim), which means “vain talk” or “empty words,” we see that the “lie” that is נושב is rooted in the tearing of word from meaning. The word that expresses this tearing is _badud_ (badud): it means both “lonely” and “torn.” What is the emptiness of the abyss? It is the void that remains when meaning has been torn from the word.

Just as the body does not have a soul but rather the soul has a body, so the word does not have meaning but rather meaning has a word. And the meaning of the word abides in the soul of the human being; like the life of the soul, the life of the word shines in the embrace of another human being. Wherever meaning is torn from the word, therefore, human beings are torn from one another in a fundamental assault upon the soul. That is why the capo declared to Eliezer in Wiesel’s Night that in the concentrationary universe there are no fathers or sons, no brothers or friends (Wiesel 1982a: 105)—that is exile in its most radical form, the exile of the Egyptian darkness, as it is written: עלאו את אחיו, “A man did not see his brother” (Exodus 10:23). In the Egyptian exile we are so preoccupied with self-fulfillment and the lie of the
Egyptian dream, so blinded by our own ego, that we are blind to the face of our fellow human being. Thus first isolated, people are then murdered—“legally,” “legitimately,” and en masse.

Hence we come to a crucial realization: simply stated, the abyss of exile is made of murder. It feeds on murder. It insists on murder. It glorifies murder. It is a fundamental feature of the thinking engendered by Amalek in all his forms. And it is fundamentally antithetical to Jewish thought: the principle most basic to human relation, as articulated in the Ten Utterances from Sinai, is “Do not murder.” If anything is more antithetical to Jewish thought than murder, it is suicide, as it is written: “There is none so wicked as the one who commits suicide” (Kitsur Shulchan Arukh 201:1). Most antithetical is the conjunction of the two, where suicide becomes a means to murder. Through the antithetical, however, we come to the fundamental.

**A fundamental feature of Jewish thought**

Albert Camus (1913–1960) opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with one of the most famous lines in modern philosophy: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus 1955: 3). Had he read Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, he would have found the claim that not only is this Western philosophy’s one serious question—it is the only thing Western philosophy can recommend (see Rosenzweig 1972: 4). Camus did, however, read F. M. Dostoevsky (1828–1881) and was quite familiar with Kirilov’s assertion in *The Possessed*: “G-d is indispensable and therefore must exist . . . . But I know there is no G-d and can’t be . . . . Can’t you really see that that alone is a sufficient reason to shoot oneself?” (Dostoevsky 1962: 634). And he understood Kirilov very well. Having thought G-d out of the picture, philosophy thinks itself into suicide. That is reason for Camus’ assertion. But his answer to the problem—the individual’s revolt, freedom, and passion—is no answer at all. For it is a revolt that is mounted only against the void, a freedom that is ultimately the freedom to murder, and a passion that is only for the sake of the elusive self.

For Jewish thought in an age of exile, as Heschel has stated contra Camus, the one truly serious philosophical issue is martyrdom (Heschel 1983: 45). While the Kantian categorical imperative may prohibit murder in order to preclude others from murdering oneself, it cannot command martyrdom, as the Talmud does (see Sanhedrin 74a; Ketuvot 19a). Whereas the Kantian imperative is rooted in a being-for-one-self, the talmudic dictum is grounded in a being-for-the-other, both as G-d and as person. For it commands us to choose to be murdered in an act of martyrdom—not “martyrdom,” precisely, but a קדושת השם (Kiddush HaShem) or “Sancification of the Name”—rather than commit murder, adultery, or idolatry. In fact, the Mishnah teaches that these three transgressions are the cause of exile (Avot 5:9; see also Yoma 82a; Ketuvot 19a). Kiddush HaShem imparts meaning to life. Therefore, explains André Neher, Kiddush HaShem
... is the negation of the absurd. Everything receives a meaning through the ultimate testimony of the man who accepts that meaning to the very limit. Everything is oriented in relation to that testimony. Everything becomes sanctified through it. Jewish tradition calls the sanctification of G-d the martyrdom, which has found its first historical examples in the lives of the prophets.

(Neher 1969: 338–339)

And not in the ruminations of the philosophers.

Even Socrates died for no more than an idea, and his example is the highest philosophy can attain. Why? Because philosophy cannot come to the teaching we receive from the talmudic sage Shimon bar Yochai in the Sifre on Deuteronomy (33:5): “When you are My witnesses,” G-d cries out, “I am G-d; when you are not my witnesses, I am not G-d” (see also Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12:6). And to be G-d’s witness is not to articulate a concept of Him but to live and die according to Torah, in a sanctification of His Name. What is at stake in Kiddush HaShem is not the life of my soul in the beyond but the life of G-d in the world. Contrary to much of the religious and philosophical tradition of the West, Kiddush HaShem is not about me. Rooted not in the fear of my own death but in the fear of the death of the other—not in a fear of dying but in a fear of committing murder—Kiddush HaShem is the diametrical opposite of Christian teleology and Western ontology.

The former seeks my salvation in the belief that the Nazarene has conquered the death that threatens me; the latter, particularly in Heidegger, seeks my authenticity in a fearless being-toward-my-death—which is ultimately in vain, since nobody gets out alive.

Heschel, on the other hand, sees Kiddush HaShem as the one truly serious issue because only through this ultimate being-for-the-other, whereby we choose death rather than inflict death, can we affirm the holiness of the Holy One. In the wake of the Shoah, one soon realizes the bankruptcy of Christian salvation by “faith” alone, of the Kantian categorical imperative, and of the Heideggerian existential resolve. In the wake of the Shoah, one soon realizes that only the commandment to undertake a כוֹנֵנִי הַשָּׁבָע—a commandment from On High, and not from my own rational sensibility—can preclude murder.

This choosing of one’s own death over committing murder, moreover, is just the opposite of suicide. Whereas suicide is an execration and desecration of life, כוֹנֵנִי הַשָּׁבָע is an affirmation and sanctification of life. It is the ultimate testimony to the One who commands us to choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19). In choosing life we do not choose merely to stay alive; rather, we choose not to “die the death,” as it is written: opting for life, we opt against the מֶחֱצָה וְמָה (mot tamut), the “surely die,” or the “dying the death,” about which the first human being and every human being is warned from the beginning (Genesis 2:17). That is what makes כוֹנֵנִי הַשָּׁבָע “martyrdom” or “bearing witness.” That is what makes it the first step in the movement of return from exile. And now we see more clearly the implications of what was alluded to above: as an abrogation of the self, the Sanctification of the
Name is an insertion of the ש of the Divine “I” or אlea into דבר, to transform it into דבר, turning “exile” into “redemption.”

Whereas the problem of suicide is a logical outcome of speculative thought, as Camus and Rosenzweig rightly understood, it is utterly alien to Jewish thought. For the Sanctification of the Name, which is the opposite of suicide, is most fundamental to Jewish thought. Here too we can learn from the Hebrew language, as in Hebrew there is no precise equivalent for “suicide.” Although we do have the modern Hebrew word חיטרﺎס and, which, like the Latin-based word suicide means to “murder oneself,” this verb does not appear in the Holy Tongue, that is, in the language of Torah. Nevertheless, there are other distinctively Hebrew terms for suicide that are extremely revealing. In the Kitzur Shulchan Arukh, for example, the phrase meaning to “commit suicide” is אבד אתמזו (ibed atmo), literally to “lose oneself” or to lose one’s “essence,” one’s “substance,” one’s “strength ṭא)” or “essence” or “substance” or “bone” of the human being? It is the Divine Image, the human soul, in all its dimensions, as explored in the last chapter. There is no self-murder because there is no autonomous, independent “self.” Rather, who and what we are lies in the Divine Image in which we are created. Therefore suicide is an assault on the Divine Image: that is what the suicide murders.

Another phrase for “suicide” in the Kitzur Shulchan Arukh is אבד אתמזו (ibed atmo ladaat), which is literally to “lose knowledge of one’s essence,” as if a person could take his own life only if he had lost all knowledge or understanding of life and of who he is. What is the substance of life, the who or ימי (mi) of the human being? It is HaShem. The closer we are to suicide, the more distant we are from the One who is closer to us than our own skin. And that is what makes suicide the most extreme expression of exile. Noting, therefore, that the root verb for committing suicide is אבד (ibed), which means to “be lost” or to “go astray,” we see that suicide is more than taking one’s own life: as the destruction of the Divine Image within, suicide is the ultimate going astray, a radical manifestation of exile based on a radical confusion. As another verb meaning to “go astray,” נפש (satah) suggests, suicide is an extreme infidelity, a “being unfaithful,” which is another meaning of נפש, inasmuch as it is a turning from G-d to make myself into a god by offering up myself to myself. Just so, it is the most extreme loss of the ימי, or the who, of our being. We retain the who of our being by maintaining our fidelity to the One from whom every ימי derives—by thus knowing that there is no taking my own life. Only in a tearing of word from meaning, of soul from substance, of human from who, can suicide be undertaken.

Another phrase that translates as to “commit suicide,” then, is טמר פלחת (taraf nafsho), literally meaning to “tear one’s soul to pieces”; the root verb in this expression is טמר (taraf), which means to “prey upon” or to “tear to pieces”; it also means to “declare ritually unfit for food.” Here too we see the infinite distance from G-d that is articulated in the act of suicide; for one who is most extremely in exile, suicide is the only infinite movement that remains, the only giving of all for the sake of the All, and yet it is a giving of all in vain, a vain
sacrifice to the void. In exile one cries out, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” (Ecclesiastes 1:1), because in exile the greatest temptation is precisely πρεπέτωφ (ταυτοτροφία). It is a preying upon oneself in a world of predators; hence all predatory animals, all χαγία (chayot teref) or “beasts of prey,” are πρεπέτωφ (taref), that is, non-kosher or not suitable for consumption, which is to say that such forms of life are not fit for joining to our own life, our own νεφεσ (nefesh). Where Jews eat non-kosher they are subject to the πρεπέτωφ πνευμάτων that is characteristic of exile: the dietary laws are therefore a matter of life and death. If what we eat is determined by “taste” or γεύση (taam), then the good is whatever feels good—a stance that is, in fact, the hallmark of exile. For when the good is what feels good, then we have lost all νεφεσ, all “sense” and “discernment.” Thus losing our discernment, we come to suppose that nothing is true and everything is permitted. At that point we take leave of our senses altogether, πνεύματα κλέψαντα, and slip into the anti-world of exile.

Here we see the confusion, the overturning of categories, characteristic of exile—where children are old and old men are as helpless as children, where the righteous have to hide from their neighbors the fact that they save lives (see, for example, Gross 2001: 129), where murderers are deemed martyrs. For the verb προσέπτω, it will be recalled, also means to “mix” or “confuse”; the adjective derived from the passive voice of this verb, προσεπτωμένος (taref), means “confused,” “mixed up,” or “crazy.” And the cognate adjective προσεπτωτός (metoraf) means both “insane” and “exiled.” In exile the insanity that passes for normalcy—the insanity that results in suicide being the number two cause of death among people between the ages of eighteen and twenty—is this confusion that results from the loss of the Divine Image within: in exile, when the good is whatever feels good, our children kill themselves. They are not stupid: in fact, they are very intelligent, so intelligent as to learn oh so quickly from our example. And so they “go mad,” or πνεύματα προσεπτωμένα (nitrefah dato), according to the Hebrew expression, which literally means to have one’s knowledge “confused” or “torn to pieces.” Their knowledge is confused because we have been so long in exile that our own knowledge is confused beyond recognition. It is so confused that there are those among us who train children for a suicide that is murder and then call them martyrs. That is the ultimate sign of exile: the Palestinians and those who support them are not driven to the desperate measure of murder by suicide because they are homeless; rather they are homeless because they have glorified this most radical feature of human exile. This is Amalek in his most insidious form. There is no condition of exile more infinitely distant from dwelling in the world. For there is no action more infinitely self-isolating or more deeply driven by sheer hatred.

What, then, is this dwelling in the world that draws us from isolation into a relation with the Holy One, as well as with one another? What is the dwelling that makes holiness manifest and is therefore the purpose of creation? Of all questions, this question is among the most decisive for Jewish thought. Let us consider it.
In the previous chapter it was shown that exile is essentially a metaphysical, and not just a geographical, concept. It is much more a matter of where the soul abides than of where we hang our hat. The best proof of this point is that exile, as noted, is characterized by the desecration of the Sabbath. Recall in this connection the teaching of the Spanish mystic Meir ibn Gabbai (1480–c. 1540): “The profanation of the Sabbath causes the destruction of celestial Jerusalem and through this [process] earthly Jerusalem was destroyed [and the Israelites were exiled]” (Meir ibn Gabbai 1989: 41). It is not for nothing, therefore, that, when the Nazis invaded Poland, among the first of their decrees was the prohibition against Sabbath observance (see, for example, Huberband 1987: 40). Sabbath observance entails entering into a state of “peace” and “rest,” of “respite” and “repose,” a state of בָּשָׁם (menuchah); significantly, the root for בָּשָׁם is נָחַ (nach), a verb that means not only to “rest,” but also to “dwell.” The Sabbath repose, therefore, is the radical opposite of the radical homelessness that Primo Levi, for example, describes, when he says that in the concentration camp “everything is hostile” (Levi 1996: 42), and “the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone” (Levi 1996: 88). Yes, ferociously alone. The Nazi prohibition against the Sabbath rest was a prohibition against Jewish dwelling, indeed, against human dwelling. It was part of the assault on the Jewish soul that rendered the Jews homeless before they were slaughtered. Living in a camp, in a ghetto, or in hiding, every Jew in Nazi Europe was homeless; not a single Jew had a residential address as a Jew.

Further, while exile is not a geographical category, it is not just a temporal category either; the time of exile is the timelessness of waiting, of biding our time until we have a place to abide. Inasmuch as it pertains to the desecration of the Sabbath, exile is about the obliteration of time through the erasure of the eternal in time. As the Maharal of Prague pointed out, the six days of creation correspond to the six directions of physical space: what was created in the course of those six days was the physical reality of the cosmos (quoted in Peli 1988: 11–12). The seventh day, however, transcends the six days to give them meaning. As expressed by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza (1800–1854) in his commentary on Parshat Behaalotekha in the Mei HaShiloach, the six outer lamps of the
menorah point toward the central flame, just as the six days of the week point toward the Sabbath: the central flame, the seventh flame, “stands for intention for the sake of heaven” (Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza 2001: 281). In Hebraic thinking, of course, “meaning” and “intention” are interconnected, as we recall from our discussion of the word הָנַחּ (kavanah) in Chapter 1. Thus it is the seventh day that makes dwelling viable, because dwelling happens only where there is meaning. If meaning happens—if הָנַחּ transpires—only where we take up a “direction” or קִוּן (kivun), our movement in the direction of dwelling is a movement of “return,” a תְשׁוּוֹת (teshuvah). The “intention for the sake of Heaven” is manifest in a movement of return.

What this has to do with the desecration or consecration of the Sabbath becomes clear when we recall Benjamin Blech’s observation that “the word Shabbat שַבָּת asks שָׁוָה (Shavta)—Did you return?” (Blech 1993: 7). This question parallels precisely the first question put to the first man, as discussed in Chapter 2: “אָֽיְכָה (Ayekah)—Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). For in order to answer, “הִנִּי (Hineni)—Here I am [for you],” we must make the movement of return from exile to a place of dwelling. To be sure, a cognate noun meaning “return,” תְשׁוּוֹת (teshuvah), also signifies a place of “dwelling.” As we shall see, a place of dwelling arises only where one human being is there for the sake of another. And one human being is there for the sake of another only where there is a movement of return.

The movement of return

What exactly does it mean to “return?” The Hebrew verb for “return” is בָּשׁ (shuv). It also means to “respond”; and it means “again.” We do not go home—we return home: it is the repetition that constitutes the movement homeward. That is the meaning of the repetition of “Abraham, Abraham,” when G-d’s angel called out to His servant on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:11) to stay the knife that was poised over the man’s son. Having been twice called, Abraham must make a repeated בָּשׁ, that is, he must respond again and again. Why? Because his response-ability increases with each act of response, and the greater his responsibility, the greater the urgency to respond. How does Abraham respond? By descending Mount Moriah—by making a descent much more difficult than the ascent—in order to dwell in the world again, despite the sword that hangs continually over the beloved. Abraham ascended Moriah in a movement that would transcend the world; he descended Moriah in order to dwell in the world and thereby transcend it. Therefore each day in our morning prayers we recall the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac: the repeated answering to G-d on Mount Moriah is a necessary condition for dwelling in the world, both for ourselves and for the Holy One. That is why Mount Moriah was chosen for the Temple Mount, which in Hebrew is known as the הַר הַבָּיִת (Har HaBayit), literally the “Mount of the House.”

Because the purpose of creation is to create a dwelling place for G-d and because the movement of return is among the things necessary to attain that end, the Talmud teaches that בָּשׁ was among seven things that were brought into
being prior to the creation of heaven and earth (see *Pesachim* 54a; *Nedarim* 39b; see also *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 3).¹ To be sure, according to the Breslover Rebbe, a human being has no substantial existence prior to the movement of return, since prior to that turning he stands in no essential relation to G-d; it is the movement of return that imparts to him life, substance, and existence (see Newman 1963: 382). Which is to say: our existence in the world rests upon G-d’s dwelling in the world, for “whatever is, is because the Shekhinah ‘dwell’ in it” (Steinsaltz 1988a: 343). How do we “enable” the Creator of heaven and earth to dwell in the world and not beyond it? Through the mitsvot, the commandments, as the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, teaches: “Every *Mitzvah* aims to make a dwelling-place for G-d in the world—to bring G-d to the light within the world, not above it. A *Mitzvah* seeks to find G-d in the natural, not the supernatural” (Schneerson 1986b: 242). Thus, as it is often noted, the words for “G-d” and “[the] nature,” אֱלֹהִים (Elokim) and חֲטָא (hateva), have the same numerical value.

When we help G-d to attain a dwelling place in the world through the performance of the commandments, He is manifest as the Indwelling or as the Shekhinah, so that, according to the sages, יְבָשָׁם brings the Shekhinah near (for instance, *Orchot Tsadikim*, Gate 26). As a time and a place void of any dwelling place for the Shekhinah, exile is a realm void of the movement of return. To be sure, in exile such a movement appears to be either impossible or unintelligible. For יְבָשָׁם entails the insertion into creation of what is beyond creation; it entails a remembrance of the immemorial, which is a חֶשְׁבָו הָנְפֶש (cheshbon hanefesh) or a “reckoning of the soul.” Recalling what was said in Chapter 6 about the levels of the soul, it may seem that this reckoning occurs at the lowest level of the soul, at the level of nefesh. The word for “reckoning,” however, חׇשַּׂב, has as its root the verb חַשַּׂב (chashav), which means to “think,” and the seat of thought is in the higher level of neshamah. Like the movement of return, this reckoning, then, originates from above. Still, the movement of return must manifest itself in action, which corresponds to the level of nefesh. Because it is a movement, the seat of movement—ruach or spirit—comes to bear. And because יְבָשָׁם affects not only the history of the individual but also the fabric of creation, as Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has pointed out (Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 55), it involves the three pillars that hold up all creation: Torah, prayer, and deeds of loving kindness (see *Pirke Avot* 1:2).

The first among these is Torah—that is the key to the movement of return. Because the return to Torah is a defining feature of יְבָשָׁם, we see that the movement is indeed a movement: it is not so much a state of repentance as it is an act of restoration,² as in the nineteenth Psalm: יִשְׁכָּב לוֹ הָמֶשֶׁ֣מֶר הַפַּ֖דֶת נָפֶ֣שׁ (Torat HaShem temimah; meshivat nefesh), that is, “The Torah of HaShem is complete; it restores the soul” (Psalms 19:8). Here the word מֵשִּׁיב (meshivat), “restores,” is a cognate of יְבָשָׁם. The Torah is the key to יְבָשָׁם because the Torah restores the soul; the Torah restores the soul because it is יְבָשָׁם (temimah), which means “complete,” “whole,” or “flawless.” And its wholeness includes both the commandments and the performance of the commandments. Rabbi Schneerson explains: “Teshuvah is a return to the self. While repentance involves dismissing the past and starting
anew, _Teshuvah_ means going back to one’s roots in G-d and expressing them as one’s true character” (Schneerson 1986b: 328). Thus in the movement of return everything comes to bear, root and branch, every level of the soul’s sojourn in this world, from thought to action, from _neshamah_ to _nefesh_.

These lines of interconnection lead us to a striking matrix of interconnections that may serve as a model for the movement of return:

Here one notes, for example, that Torah shapes thought, which in turn is manifest first as speech and then as action. Speech is at its highest when connected to prayer or _avodah_, which is consummated in acts of loving kindness. At the level of _nefesh_, where the physical and spiritual are interwoven, the soul is most profoundly manifest as action. How does _ruach_ rise toward _neshamah_? Through the word, through speech. How does speech take on substance? When it is tied to the Torah that commands words of prayer and acts of kindness. Many other interconnections, of course, could also be traced through the matrix.

This matrix forms a kind of blueprint for G-d’s dwelling place in the world. It is also a kind of chart that maps out our movement through the holy days in the season of הַשָׁבֵעָה: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Culminating in Sukkot, the movement of return leads to the creation of a _sukkah_ or a dwelling place (we shall say more about this below). And, just as for everything below there is a corresponding reality above, there is a heavenly _sukkah_ that corresponds to the one we construct in the culmination of our movement of return. It is G-d’s _sukkah_, the שִׂקְעַת שְׁלֹמְךָ (sukkat shlomekha) or “sukkah of Your peace,” that we invoke every evening in our prayers just before the Amidah (see also Psalms 27:5; Psalms 76:3). And, of course, we end the Amidah with the supplication that G-d’s dwelling place in this realm, the Holy Temple, might be rebuilt speedily in our days.

Because the Temple signifies the dwelling place of the _Shekhinah_, the exile of the _Shekhinah_ is most powerfully signified by the absence of the Temple. To be sure, the Midrash teaches that the windows of the Temple were designed not to let light in but to allow the light of the _Shekhinah_ to radiate into the world (Tanchuma Tetsaveh 6). As a movement of return from exile, _תשועה_ is the first movement toward re-establishing the Temple as a dwelling place for the _Shekhinah_. Hence the Temple too is among the seven things that preceded the creation as necessary prerequisites.
to creation. It is the link—the רבי (bayit) or the “house”—where creation and Creator come together; it is the house and home without which there can be no creation.

Resting on the premise that creation transpires through divine utterance, Jewish thought strives to enhance our capacity for dwelling in the world. Therefore its primary reference point—its point of departure and point of return—is house and home, a category most profoundly signified by the Temple in Jerusalem. Taking the Temple or the רבי as its fundamental reference point, Jewish thought is itself a movement of return, a movement homeward in an act of response and responsibility—a movement of responsibility and gratitude, as it is written in the Orchot Tsadikim (Gate 26)—both of which rest upon a relation. Contrary to the ontological thinking, for example, of German idealism, this relation—and not the isolation of an illusory autonomy—is a defining feature of Jewish thought. For if Jewish thought is committed thought, as Emil Fackenheim rightly insists (Fackenheim 1968: 207), it is at once confessional and responsible. It is a thinking through which the thinker becomes more than he is in a realization that he is never enough, for his relation to the other, both human and divine, never runs deep enough. Which is to say: the nearness to the Shekhinah that the thinker seeks in his thinking can never be near enough. Yet it is never so near as in the dwelling place, as in house and home.

House and home

So far we have established that, just as isolation defines exile, so does relation define dwelling. Here we would do well to recall an insight from Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh:

At the level of Divinity the house symbolizes the purpose of all reality: to become a dwelling place below for the manifestation of G-d’s presence. “Not as Abraham who called [the Temple] ‘a mountain,’ nor as Isaac who called it ‘a field,’ but as Jacob who called it ‘a house.’”

(Stus & Ginsburgh 1991: 46)

Because relation is the defining feature of creation, dwelling is the fundamental purpose of creation. That purpose is revealed in the first letter of the first word of Torah, in the ב of בראשית (bereshit); revealed at the beginning of “in the beginning,” the ב makes possible every beginning. Therefore the prophet proclaims: Tếtירא אדום א建设用地, that is, “It is the beauty [טいただいた] of a human being to abide in his home” (Isaiah 44:13). From a mystical standpoint, the sefirah of Tiferet signifies not only beauty or glory but also truth: dwelling in the home, the human being dwells in truth. For the home is the truth that is the aim of creation.

As we recall from Chapter 2, the name of letter ב (beit) is also רבי (bayit), which is to say: the foundational meaning of the רבי that begins creation is the
“house” or “family” signified by the הַעֲרָבָּה (see M. J. Alter 1998: 145–148). Combining these two meanings of הַעֲרָבָּה, we have a third meaning, which is perhaps the most profound meaning of the word: it is “home.” Like the הַעֲרָבָּה situated at the edge of the utterance of the Infinite One, the הַעֲרָבָּה is where the finite comes into contact with the infinite, the human with the divine. Like the site where Jacob had his vision of a ladder linking the heavens and the earth (see Genesis 28:12), the home is where we attain our most fundamental vision of the relation between the heavens and the earth. Erecting a stone as a marker, he called the place הָאֵּרָבָּה (Beit-El) or the “House of G-d” (Genesis 28:19). In this action, Jacob teaches us the meaning of creation, which is to transform the stones of the wilderness into a dwelling place for HaShem. Indeed, the site where Jacob had his vision of the ladder joining together the heavens and the earth was the הַעֲרָבָּה הַדָּוִד (Beit-El), the Temple Mount, that forms the center of Jewish consciousness (this is the basis for what Rabbi Ginsburgh points out about Jacob). Perhaps that is why it is written in the Midrash: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to His world: ‘O My world, My world! Shall I tell thee who created thee, who formed thee? Jacob has created thee, Jacob has formed thee’ ” (Vayikra Rabbah 36:4). Erecting the stones that would transform the wilderness into a dwelling place, Jacob laid the foundation of creation.

Rebuilding the Temple as a place of prayer and worship, moreover, is a task that we undertake not just on the הַעֲרָבָּה but, more profoundly, within our own soul. One means of creating a dwelling place for G-d within our soul is precisely through prayer, and this feature of prayer can be seen in the very preparations for prayer. When we wrap ourselves in the הַעֲרָבָּה (tallit) or prayer shawl, it is as though we were “putting a roof over our heads,” which is a meaning of the cognate verb הַעֲרָבָּה (tallit). Once wrapped in the prayer shawl, we declare ourselves to be יִירְבָּעַנְיִאֵאִיֶּהֶנְיִאֵאִיֶּה (yeireyun mideshen beitekha), that is, “satiated with the delight of Your House” (Psalms 36:9). In the word for “satiated,” יִירְבָּע (yeireyun), we have the verb יָרָא (yarâ‘), which is to “sing” or “cry out” with joy; it can also mean to “pray” or to “chant a prayer.” The abundance of our delight, the overflowing of our joy, the very sense of belonging in our home—all of it arises in prayer. As we see from the Hebrew verb יָרָא (shayakh), this “belonging” means being “related to.” And this verb is at the core of the verb יָשָׁק (shakhan), which is to “dwell,” a point we shall examine more closely below. Here let us simply recall the יָשָׁקמְא (mishkan), or “sanctuary,” in the desert; it was the tent housing the Divine Presence that saw the Israelites through the desert to their homeland. For a יָשָׁקמְא is also a “dwelling place,” a center of sanctity that brings to the human being a sense of belonging, even—or especially—in the desert.

There is no dwelling place, no יָשָׁקמְא, without prayer, and there is no prayer without a dwelling place. Just as the prayer shawl forms a kind of tent where we pray, so is the תֵיְלִינ (tefillin) box that we place on our arms and between our eyes called a הַעֲרָבָּה. For inside the “house” of the תֵיְלִינ is the שֶׁמַּה, the “Hear, O Israel!” prayer (from Deuteronomy 6:4–9) that forms the key to all prayer and therefore to all dwelling. Just as we place these words on our arms to guide our deeds and

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between our eyes to guide our vision, moreover, so do we place them on the mezuzot (mezuzot) or “doorposts” of our houses and thus sanctify the realm—the interior—in which we dwell. To be sure, the prayer that characterizes a realm as a dwelling place is precisely what imparts to that place an interior.

Thus, in addition to designating “family,” “home,” and “Temple,” הביב can also mean “interior” or “within”; it is the depth dimension of our being, which is the dimension of relation, where “within” and “above” become synonyms. The point where “within” and “above” intersect is the point where “holiness” or קדושה (kedushah) is manifest; hence one of the names of the Temple is בית המקדש (beit hamikdash), or “House of Holiness.” In this connection Rabbi Michael Munk notes that “the difference between [bayit] = 412 and [מikdash] = 444 amounts to 32 which is the numerical value of [לב] (lev) or ‘heart’]. This teaches us that only by putting one’s heart into a house can it become מקדש, a sanctuary” (Munk 1983: 67). Which is to say: the home is a sanctuary because it is an interior through which holiness may enter the world. When our heart is in the home, the home forms the heart of our being.

This is why the Talmud teaches that we must move inward even when there is terror within (see Bava Kama 60a–60b). “And even if ‘at home,’” Emmanuel Lévinas comments on this teaching, “there is ‘terror,’ it is better to have a country, a home, or an ‘inwardness’ with terror than to be outside” (Lévinas 1990b: 190). For without the dimension of inwardness, we lose the dimension of height, which, as will be recalled from Chapter 4, is the dimension of meaning and sanctity in life. Here, then, we come to the realization that the home is the height that “ordains being,” as Lévinas puts it (Lévinas 1987a: 100). For in the interiority of the home we may not be free of terror, but we are free of meaninglessness. This interior defining the home, this dwelling that constitutes meaning, is so central to Jewish thought that, if you scan a Hebrew dictionary, you will find the expressions rooted in בית, from בית תרע (beit-av) to בית תפילה (beit-tefilah), to be more numerous than perhaps any other compound expressions. In the next chapter we shall consider in more detail the phrase בית ספר (beit sefer), for example, which translates as “school” but means “house of the book”—a much more profound notion, as we shall see.

For purposes of understanding the issue of dwelling more fully, here are a few other examples worth considering:

- A “court of justice” is a בית דין צדק (beit din tzedek), literally a “house of righteous judgment.” It implies what the Talmud teaches, namely that the judges who pronounce judgment are themselves judged (see Sanhedrin 7a); it also tells us that צדק (tzedek), which is both “justice” and “righteousness,” is essential to dwelling. For צדק is at the root of צדקה (tzedakah), the giving through which holiness manifests itself; that we are able to dwell in the world is an act of צדקה from the Holy One Himself.
- A synagogue is a בית כנסת (beit keneset) or “house of gathering”; it is also a בית תפילה (beit tefilah) or “house of prayer.” Those who are gathered together
for prayer enter into a relation not only to HaShem but also to one another, as a family is related to one another. The prayer that is essential to dwelling takes place in a gathering. Why do we need a minyan, that is, a quorum of ten adult men (in the Orthodox tradition), to utter certain prayers? Because that is the minimum number to constitute a community of dwelling: as prayer is essential to dwelling, so is dwelling essential to prayer.

- A shelter for the poor and homeless is called a beit machaseh (beit machaseh), or a “house of refuge”; the word machaseh (machaseh), which translates as “shelter” or “refuge,” is from the verb chasah; it means to “seek refuge” or to “trust” and suggests that even the poor and homeless are not (or should not be) without a place to go, without a place—without someone to trust. Having a place where they can find trust, they have a place where they belong. Which means: instead of being in need, suddenly they are needed. For every person in a household is needed; that is what it means to belong.

- Those who fall ill go to a beit cholim (beit cholim) or “home for the sick,” that is, to a “hospital.” To be sure, a cognate of the English word hospital is the word hospitality, something we offer someone in our home; to have a home is to be able to offer hospitality to another. It is the same in Hebrew. The “guests” we invite into the sukkah, the temporary shelter that we construct for the holiday of Sukkot, are ushpizin (ushpizin), a cognate of the verb ishez (ishpez), which means to “accommodate” or to “hospitalize.” That is why a hospital too is a home. The ones who operate the hospital, however, are not the hosts. Interestingly, the “hosts” are the ones who go to the hospital to visit the sick and thus perform the mitzvah of bikur cholim, or “visiting the sick,” which G-d commanded not by word but by example: He visited Abraham in his tent when he was recovering from his circumcision.

- When people grow too old to care for themselves, they may take up residence in a beit avot, which is usually translated as “old age home” but is more literally a “house of our fathers,” suggesting a place where we maintain a relation to our parents, and not a place where we keep them isolated and out of sight. Indeed, in our time and in our society an old age home or nursing home is often the antithesis of a home. The Fifth Commandment, however, is to honor not the “elderly” but our mothers and fathers. The difference lies in the how the phrase “house of our fathers” implies the relation that distinguishes dwelling from mere surviving or care taking. It is where we honor our fathers and our mothers. Without that honor there is no dwelling.

- When people pass on to the next world they are buried in a beit chayim, which means “cemetery” but is literally a “house of life,” reminding us that our relation to the dead shapes our view of the living and is essential to our being at home in the world. Other terms for “cemetery” are also made of the beit compound. The expression beit moed lekol chai (beit moed lekol chai), for example, refers to a cemetery but literally means “house of the appointed time for all life.” In Hebrew we do not see a flight from death but a going out to meet death as part of our testimony to the dearness of life, as if this last
rite of passage were an entry into a home. But this “home” contains more than an appointed time; or rather, because the time is appointed, this house is a beit olam (literally “house of eternity,” as though a house might contain the eternal. And yet, as a vessel of holiness, a home is precisely a vessel of the eternal. That is why a homeland is so crucial to a human being.

In Chapter 2 we found that the tyBe is the womb out of which creation is born. With these expressions referring to a cemetery we are reminded that, just as we are born into the world through the womb of the home, through the tyBe, so are we born into the next world through the womb of the grave—that is what makes the cemetery a tyBe. Who are the people that make up our family? They are the ones who bring us into the world and lay us into the earth. House and home, therefore, constitute a point of passage that is essential to dwelling, and essential to that passage is the womb of the feminine. Thus, according to the Zohar, the letter ב symbolizes the female principle (Zohar II, 234b), woman: the one whose interior is the womb is the key to the interior of the home as a dwelling place.

**Woman**

In the Talmud it is written that Rabbi Yose never referred to his wife as his “wife” but always as his “home,” his tyBe (see Gittin 52a), thus suggesting a definitive relation between woman and dwelling. Written in Hebrew, “woman” is ישה (ishah), which breaks down into יש ה (Esh HaShem), the “Fire of G-d.” Indeed, the word ישה (ishel) means “burnt offering” or “sacrifice”: it is the fire that belongs to G-d. Woman is near to G-d, for she burns with the black fire on white fire of Torah. As we recall from Chapter 5, “sacrifice” is קרבן (karban), which is a cognate קרוב (karov), meaning “near.” As the “Fire of G-d,” woman draws us nigh unto G-d. And what is the Fire of G-d? It is not a conflagration that may burn a house down; rather, it is the fire of the hearth that lights a house up. Unlike a coat, which only warms the illusory self, the hearth warms all who draw nigh unto it, warms them physically, and not emotionally or psychologically. And the hearth is the center of the home, as suggested by a Hebrew word for “hearth,” מוקד (moked), from the verb מוקד (miked), meaning to “focus.” The word מוקד also refers to the “altar” in the Temple: the center of dwelling in the world is the center of dwelling in the home, which itself is the center of dwelling in the world. It is worth noting further that the more common word for “hearth,” אח (ach), also means “brother,” which may imply that this center of the home is the center of the human relation that makes dwelling possible. At the core of that center is woman.

In order to take our understanding of the relation between woman and dwelling to a deeper level, however, we must first understand the significance of the feminine in Jewish thought. In modern times the Jewish thinker who most profoundly articulates that significance is Emmanuel Lévinas. In *Ethics and Infinity*, for example, he states that “the feminine is described as the of itself other, as the origin of the very concept of alterity” (Lévinas 1985: 66). Thus understood, the
feminine comes to bear not only in the relation between man and woman but in any relation between one human being and another. And relation, as we have seen, is a defining feature of dwelling.

As the origin of alterity, the “feminine,” or נקבה (nekevah), makes possible the establishment of a difference from which all issues of meaning and sanctity—everything essential to the sanctuary of the dwelling place—may be derived. For, in accordance with the meanings of the cognate verb בקע (nakav), the feminine “marks” or “distinguishes” a person for this relation to this other human being. Therefore it is a Jewish mother, and not a Jewish father, that makes a Jew a Jew. To have an origin—to have a mother—is to be already marked for a mission: origin implies destiny, when that origin is seen as a mother and not as some primeval ooze. And, as the history of ideas in the West has demonstrated, the speculative philosophical tradition cannot get past the ooze as the origin. What does a mother have to do with dwelling? As the origin, she imparts destiny to dwelling: the feminine is the future.

Woman lies at the center of the sacred and the meaningful because, as the presence in the midst of the dwelling place, she represents not only an immemorial past but also an open-ended future and therefore the mystery of what is forever yet to be born, yet to be revealed, and yet to be consummated. The relationship with the feminine, Lévinas explains, is a relationship “with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything else is there—not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity” (Lévinas 1987b: 88). The alterity represented by the feminine, then, is not an otherness already contained in being; it is the otherness of what is better than being. The feminine is both what already is and what is yet to be. Thus, like meaning, dwelling unfolds where a future designated by the feminine unfolds. As we saw in Chapter 1, to have meaning is to have a direction, and to have direction is to approach a realm where we have yet to arrive: meaning is what is yet to be realized. And what designates this direction as a direction for a life is the origin of life situated in the home: to have meaning, in other words, is to have a mother, which is what it means to be chosen from the “womb,” from the רחם (rechem).

When we recall that the cognate verb רחם (racham) means to “have compassion” or to “show loving kindness” toward another, we realize that woman transforms a house into a home by introducing into the home the love and compassion of a mother. In his commentary on the Sefer Yetzirah, Aryeh Kaplan points out that the Feminine Essence belongs to the sefirah of Understanding or בינה (Binah) (Sefer Yetzirah 1990:16), a word derived from בין (bein), which means “between.” Understanding arises from the difference between two, and, as the highest manifestation of the Feminine Essence, the mother transforms the radical difference that underlies understanding into the absolute non-indifference of love. As some might put it, nobody loves you like your mama loves you.

What, then, makes a home a home? It is a mother’s caress, which is the caress of creation; it is the “caress,” the לטיפת (letifah), as such. This point becomes clear when we observe that the adjective cognate of לטיפת, יליב (latif), means “kind.”
Embodied in the feminine, the kindness of the caress draws us into a relation with what is forever sought but never touched. Like the act of loving kindness performed “for nothing,” the caress, says Lévinas, “consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches” (Lévinas 1969: 257–258). Here one may recall that the two words that form the center of the Torah are תָּשַׁ כָּרָשׁ תָּשָׁ כָּרָשׁ (darosh darash), which translates as to “search diligently” but which means to “search and search again.” Which is to say: the Torah ends its first half with searching and begins again with searching: the Torah, like woman, is about searching; it is about what is revealed only in the caress. This searching that characterizes the caress, this searching that frames the Torah itself, is a defining feature of dwelling. For it is a searching sustained by what it seeks. The searching that belongs to the caress is the caring that belongs to dwelling. Both are nourished by the truth that transpires in the caress and that defines the dwelling place.

What woman signifies in the Jewish tradition that informs Jewish thought can be seen in the tale of the creation of the first woman. Here Lévinas comments by saying,

Woman does not simply come to someone deprived of companionship to keep him company. She answers to a solitude inside this privation and—which is stranger—to a solitude that subsists in spite of the presence of God; to a solitude in the universal, to the inhuman which continues to well up even when the human has mastered nature and raised it to thought.

(Lévinas 1990a: 33)

Of course, woman mitigates the solitude of being not as a mate but as a wife; it is not for nothing that the creation of woman includes the commandment to get married (Genesis 2:24). Therefore the Midrash teaches that when He created Eve G-d plaited her hair, brought her to the wedding canopy, and performed a marriage (see Bereshit Rabbah 18:2 and 18:4; see also Eruvin 18a–18b). Thus exceeding the ontological landscape of הָאָדָם or “nature,” woman exceeds thought. She is the one who cannot be possessed, who is beyond the projects of our labor in the world. Created from the side of man, which is hidden even when he stands naked, she consists of the hidden, of the נְיסַר (nistar): she is the one beyond our grasp (see Bereshit Rabbah 80:5). Here we have the secret of the Megilat Esther, the Book of Esther, which is literally the “Revelation of the Hidden,” revealed as that which is hidden. Just as Esther saved the Jewish people, it is thanks to woman, who is the embodiment of the holiness hidden from the eye, that the Jewish people endure.

That is why woman is the Sabbath Bride, who sanctifies our thought and our labor by eluding our thought and our labor, for she is both within the world and beyond the world. We have said that dwelling happens where the Sabbath is observed; here we see that the Sabbath is observed where we come into a relation

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with the feminine. And the Sabbath, it will be recalled, is outside the mundane conception of time. Recall in this connection Jiří Langer’s (1894–1943) explanation of a Chasidic teaching:

The souls of women come to this earth from higher worlds than the souls of men. The Law therefore sets women free from those commandments whose fulfillment is limited to a particular period, to a particular time of day or season [Rosh Hashanah 30a; Chaggigah 4a; Kiddushin 29a]. For the world in which the souls of women have their origin is raised above the conception of time.

(Langer 1976: 136)

And, according to the Midrash, the Sabbath is one-sixtieth of that upper world (see Bereshit Rabbah 17:5; see also Sforno’s commentary on Exodus 31:16). Inasmuch as the Sabbath was created for humanity, the feminine lies at the core of the human.

Woman, then, is not just the other; rather, she opens up the very otherness of the interrelation that defines humanity, as well as the mystery of divinity, as a giving, over against a conquering. Forever sought and eternally future, the feminine is otherwise than being, more than being, better than being. In a word, she is the one through whom holiness enters the world, as conveyed in the teaching of the talmudic sage Rabbi Chelbo that only through a man’s wife does blessing come to a home (Bava Metzia 59a). “A man who has not wife,” it is written in the Midrash, “lives without good, help, joy, blessing, and atonement”; in fact, says the Midrash, without woman a man is not an adam (Kohelet Rabbah 9:9:1).

As we have seen, in the Jewish tradition the feminine manifestation of the Holy One is represented by the Shekhinah, who enters the world through the marriage between G-d and Israel, between husband and wife. As it is written: “At Mount Sinai G-d went forth to meet them; like a bridegroom who goes forth to meet the bride, so the Holy One, blessed be He, went forth to meet them to give them the Torah” (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 41). Says the great mystic of Safed, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero,

As long as a man has not married, the Shekinah is not with him, since she relates to man mainly via through the female aspect. For man stands between two female aspects—his wife below in the physical world, who receives “sustenance, clothing, and conjugal rights” from him [see Exodus 21:10]; and the Shekinah above him, who blesses him with all these so that he will give again and again to the wife he has chosen in the covenant of marriage.

(Cordovero 1993: 128)

The thirteenth-century mystic Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla asserts that the Shekhinah “in the time of Abraham our father is called Sarah and in the time of Isaac our
father is called Rebecca and in the time of Jacob our father is called Rachel” (Gikatilla 1994: 204). Therefore, says the Zohar, “when a man is at home, the foundation of his house is the wife, for it is on account of her that the Shekhinah departs not from the house” (Zohar I, 50a)—or from the world. And what comes into the home, into the world, through woman? It is Torah, as the Maharal of Prague has taught: “If the home possesses Torah it possesses that which sustains it. Understand this” (Loeve 1994: 322).

Because the Shekhinah accompanies Israel into exile, the Jews are able to endure life—that is, they are able to dwell—without succumbing to the alienation of exile. What is the sign of this accompaniment? It is the Torah itself, which the Jews bear with them in their wanderings. According to an ancient teaching, the Torah had to be accepted first by the women at Mount Sinai before it could be received by the men. For the House of Jacob, the בית יעקב (Beit Yaakov) mentioned in Exodus 19:3, precedes the reference to the Children of Israel, and the House, the הוב, of Jacob refers to the women among the Hebrews (see, for example, Rashi’s commentary on Exodus 19:3; also Zohar II, 79b). It is through the feminine, who is the mystery of value and meaning, that we have the Torah and a dwelling place in the world. And so the Maharal declared,

Woman is the consummation of man’s existence, for through her, man becomes complete. When a man has his own woman [a bride], his existence is essential, not casual. When he has an illicit relationship with a woman, however—when the lust strikes him—his very existence is casual. Thus “He who has illicit relations with a woman lacks a heart” [Proverbs 6:32]. The Torah, too, completes man; it is often compared to a woman [see, for example, Kiddushin 30b] because, like woman, it makes man complete.

(Loeve 1994: 106)

Therefore only with the advent of Jacob, as it is written in the Zohar, “did the worlds take their final form, and were not again demolished as heretofore” (Zohar I, 154b), since only with the House of Jacob—with woman—is there room for a world and a space for dwelling. The mystery of value and meaning unfolds wherever I make room for another—that is the meaning of dwelling: I do not usurp the place of another. For woman opens up space—she has space—where there is no physical space. Hence she is precisely the one who does not usurp the place of another. Rather, miraculously, she creates room for another life within herself, in the very depths of her physical being. What she embodies metaphysically, then, is the radical opposite of the ontological interest—ultimately the Nazi interest—in Lebensraum.

Lévinas has pointed out that the being of the ego is always suspect because, as ego, I must always “ask myself if my being is justified, if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody’s else’s place” (Lévinas 1989: 85). As the one who harbors a womb, which is the hidden inner space of the origin, woman is
the one who precisely does not usurp the place of another but rather makes room for another to dwell in the world, quite literally and quite graphically, by giving birth. There is no giving more profound, no giving more holy. Dwelling happens where woman is because a dwelling place or מַקְוָם (makom) does not usurp the place of another but rather opens up a place for the other, as when we set a place at the table. That is why מַקְוָם is one of the names of G-d. Like G-d, woman, or the feminine, as such is other-oriented; she is the opposite of the ego and is the essence of presence.

The place and the presence

By now we realize that a dwelling place is a place open to the other human being; if the dwelling place is the Place where HaMakom, the Holy One, is present, it is because it is a place that makes room for that Presence between two human beings. Perhaps that is why the word for “dwelling” or “residence,” מִגְוָר (megurim), is plural: it takes more than one person—it takes a between space that only two can open up—for dwelling to happen. And where does that space open up? In the mitzvah, particularly in one of the most fundamental of the mitzvot, namely the commandment to treat the גֵר (ger), the “stranger,” as one of our own (see Deuteronomy 10:19). Because it is a commandment, the relation to the other person has two dimensions, one horizontal and one vertical: it is both a relation to the fellow human being and a relation to the One who commands the relation. From this caring and kindness toward the גֵר—who is not an alien “other,” as modern thought would have it, but is one who is closer to us than our own shadow—we have the verb מֵגְוָר (megurah), to “dwell.” We dwell inasmuch as we deliver the stranger from the “fear” or the “terror,” from the מֵגְוָר (megurah), of what is alien. For another meaning of מֵגְוָר is to “fear”: the גֵר is the one whose fear we are commanded to allay by welcoming him with a בָּרוּךְ הַבָּא (barukh haba), “Blessed be the one who comes [here].” Blessing the stranger, we allay his fear. Allaying his fear, we dwell.

For by allaying that fear, as when a mother says to a fearful child, “It’s all right, I’m right here,” we make way for the presence of the Indwelling Presence, of the שֵׁהָקִינָה (Shekhinah). Therefore whenever Rabbi Yosef heard his mother’s footsteps, he would stand and say, “I rise before the approach of the Shekhinah” (Kiddushin 31b). Therefore the Midrash takes the commandment to Jacob to שָׂחֵהַ בַּארֵטס (shakhon baarets), “dwell in the land” (Genesis 26:2), to mean “open up a place for the שֵׁהָקִינָה to enter the land” (Bereshit Rabbah 64:3). Where do we open a place for the שֵׁהָקִינָה to enter? Just where the holy tongue tells us: through our relation to the other human being as a שַׁחְהַנ (shakhen), as a “neighbor.”

Only Jewish thought, informed as it is by the holy tongue, can make this connection between שֵׁהָקִינָה and שַׁחְהַנ; hence only for Jewish thought is dwelling a category. Languishing in the solitude of being, Western ontological thought is interested in power and control; therefore it cannot conceive of dwelling, which is a relinquishing of power, as a category of thought. For ontological thought
confined to the isolation of autonomy and locked into the illusion of the thinking ego, the neighbor next door is as distant as the farthest reaches of the universe. That is what makes ontological thought exilic thought: it can never approach the (shekhen), or the “dwelling,” that Jewish thought opens up. On the contrary, it thinks the (Shokhen Ad), the Holy One, out of existence, and with Him the neighbor, the: the outcome, if not the aim, of the Western ontological tradition is to make G-d superfluous, except as the projection of one’s own psyche, as in Feuerbach (see Feuerbach 1957: 12–13), or as what one aspires to become in a self-apotheosis, as in Nietzsche (see Nietzsche 1966: 154).

The opposite of such thought is Jewish thought, which does not think G-d into existence but rather derives its thinking from the “existence” of G-d. Which is to say: Jewish thought arises from the issue of dwelling as defined and commanded by the Holy One. Just as dwelling is central to Jewish thought, so is the Temple, as we have seen, central to creation. Therefore we come to yet another Hebrew phrase designating the Temple: it is (beit-HaShekhinah), the “House of the Shekhinah.” The Midrash, however, makes it clear that the Temple is a House of the Shekhinah not because it is the site of rite and ritual but because it is a center attesting to the sanctity of human life, beginning with the children. According to the Midrash, when the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and took away the priests and the Levites, the Shekhinah nonetheless continued to dwell in Jerusalem: the Holy City was still holy. But when they took away the children, the Shekhinah herself went into exile: emptied of her children the Holy City was no longer holy because it was no longer a place of dwelling (see Eichah Rabbah 1:6:33). Hence the Tikunei Zohar refers to children as “the face of the Shekhinah” (quoted in Polen 1999: 102).

If, as the Talmud teaches, the world is sustained thanks to the breath of the little ones (see Shabbat 119b; see also Zohar I, 1b), it is because, as the source of the future and therefore all meaning, children are the basis of dwelling in the world. And here we see a radical departure from the Greek thinking that lies at the root of a Western tradition that has come to understand reality solely in terms of power: for Jewish thought, the immense weight of the world rests not upon the shoulders of a mighty Atlas but upon the breath of a child. For upon that breath vibrates the sum of meaning.

With this linkage between children and the as the source of any meaningful future, another Hebrew word comes to mind: (maayan), which translates as “spring,” “fountain,” or “source”; it is a cognate of (maon), which means both “dwelling” and “the Temple,” reminding us once again of the centrality of the Temple to dwelling in the world; in Psalms 90:1, in fact, is a term used to refer to the Holy One Himself. Aryeh Kaplan points out that has the same root as (onah), which means “time,” “season,” or “period,” suggesting yet another link between time and dwelling, between dwelling and meaning (see Sefer Yetzirah 1990: 50). Another cognate, (maan), means “address,” which is a place of residence, the place where we live, where we receive our “mail,” or (doar). Here too the cognates are revealing for Jewish
thought. We receive our יד (dirah) or place of “residence,” from רָד (dar), yet another verb meaning to “dwell,” a verb that leads us to yet another link with children and childbearing.

The connection of the Place and the Presence with children and childbearing comes together in a cognate of רָד: it is רָד (dor), the word for “generation,” as in the frequent refrain from our prayers, יד רָד (ledor vador), “from generation to generation.” The הָעָיו that is HaShem, the Presence that is הבש, is manifest in the relation not only between human and human but also between generation and generation—between the living and the dead, the living and the yet-to-be-born. For them too I am responsible, so that my being is not limited by the horizons of my time in the world. Which means: the “being-toward-death” championed by the likes of Heidegger as the mark of “resolve” and “authenticity”—the ontological limit that isolates me from both preceding and subsequent generations—undermines the relation that is essential to dwelling in the world. As the phrase יד רָד suggests, the relation essential to dwelling belongs to a being that is both beyond death and prior to birth. Only from the standpoint of such a network of relations—only from the categories of יד רָד—can one think dwelling. For only the categories of יד רָד bring together what is near and far, now and then, so that we all emerge from Egypt to stand at Sinai here and now.

With its accent on the Place of dwelling and the Presence of the holy, Jewish thought establishes the vital bond between what is both most distant and most near, a connection revealed in the word הָעָיו (etsel). Meaning “near” or “at one’s home,” this word is also the root word for הָעָיו (atsilut) or “emanation,” as in the kabbalistic term designating the highest of the four worlds of creation, הָעָיו (Olam Atsilut), or the “World of Emanation.” And so we discover that in our own home we are most near to the Most High: the הָעָיו is at once the nearest and the farthest from where we are—the nearest when we are dwelling, the farthest when we are wandering. Where do the two meet? In הָעָיו (haatsalah), in the moment of “inspiration,” when the wholeness of all the worlds is gathered into the moment of an embrace. One need not go off into the desert or up to the heights in search of the Olam Atsilut; it is right here at home. The problem is that we are not at home. For we have forgotten how to sit.

It turns out, then, that there is nothing more simple than dwelling in the world. It is as simple as “sitting,” which is the meaning of the verb יָשָׁב (yashav), a word that also means to “dwell.” Where do we sit when we dwell? Not just in a house or in a chair but at a table, where we serve as a “host,” as a מֶאֶרָכ (meareach), to another person. And there is nothing more sublime, as the talmudic sages remind us in their teaching that since the destruction of the Temple, the table to which we invite guests in our home takes the place of the altar (see Menachot 97a; Chagigah 27a). For the host is always a host to the stranger or רגא, a term that in this case has nothing to do with how well we know the one whom we invite to our table. No matter how well we know the one at our table, he is from elsewhere, not from our home; therefore we must make him feel at home, just as we must make the Holy One feel “at home,” if we are to fulfill the purpose of creation. Where is
the meaning of heaven and earth revealed? At the dinner table. Perhaps that is why the Rashbatz, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (1361–1444), taught that it is better to offer a commentary on the Torah at the dinner table than in the synagogue (quoted in Abrabanel 1991: 163).

As one who is from elsewhere, the guest who comes to our table is one who has been “traveling” or “wandering,” from the verb רָעַח (arach), which, of course, is a cognate of רָעַח (arachah), that is served at the table where they sit. That is what makes the traveler an רָעַח (oreach), or a “guest”: dwelling happens—the Place opens up and the Presence enters—where a guest, the רָעַח, comes before the host, the רָעַח. And how does the host become present before the guest? By offering him something to eat. Defined by being there for the sake of another, dwelling is an issue only for a being who eats. For only one who eats can snatch the bread from his own mouth and offer it to another; only one who eats can serve a meal (רָעַח) and thus be a host (רָעַח) to a guest (רָעַח). To be sure, the Baal Shem Tov once pointed out that the word for “guest,” רָעַח, consists of the word for “light,” רָעַ (or), plus the letter כ (chet), which has a numerical value of eight. In the mystical tradition, the letter כ corresponds to the sefirah of Binah or Understanding, since Binah is the eighth sefirah if one counts from the bottom upward. Hence where a guest is welcomed, the light of understanding—of what is most precious—opens up. Further, Binah is known as the source of all blessing, so that welcoming a guest is a fundamental means of drawing blessing into the world. That is what makes eating a sacred act; that is why we pray when we eat. It is the most basic of all testimony to the essential connectedness of each human being to every other.

Therefore we have a better understanding of why Abraham was chosen for the Covenant that brings the holy into a relation to the human: as it is written in the Talmud, he was the host of all hosts, the host of heavenly hosts. Known for his “hospitality” or רָעַח (eruach), he would seek out travelers to whom he could offer a place at his table and thereby draw the presence of the Holy One into the world (see Sotah 10b; see also Bereshit Rabbah 48:7). From this, in the words of Rav Yehuda, we learn that “hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shekhinah” (Shabbat 127b). Thus Abraham interrupted a revelation from the Holy One Himself in order to rush out and welcome three strangers (see Genesis 18:1–2). Thus Abraham understood that hospitality was his only means of dwelling in the Land. He understood that hospitality is always something that we return to another, even if he or she is our guest for the first time. For hospitality, the hallmark of dwelling, is central to a movement of return, to the_rb that is a response to HaShem. Thus it is written that while Abraham “was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day,” G-d appeared to him, when he lifted up his eyes and saw three men (see Genesis 18:1–2). Rushing out to greet them, Abraham engages in the testimony that the Covenant requires of him; engaging in the testimony, he establishes a community. The Hebrew language will explain.
As we consider the meaning of community, we can establish some deeper connections among these key categories discussed if we recall a teaching from Rabbi Yohe that appears in the Zohar: “The Community of Israel is also called ‘Sabbath,’ for she is G-d’s spouse. That is why the Sabbath is called ‘Bride’” (Zohar II, 63b). If the embrace of the Sabbath is essential to dwelling, as maintained at the outset, it is because the embrace of the Sabbath is essential to a communal embrace. To say that blessing comes to the home only through a woman, moreover, is to say that blessing comes to a home only through the Sabbath. Only through the Sabbath—through the Bride—is a home situated within a community. And there is perhaps no more radical distinction between Jewish thought and ontological thought than this key notion of the Sabbath.

At least part of what has been established so far about dwelling Martin Buber affirms in a statement regarding the two things required for the creation of a community: each member of the community must live in a relation to a transcendent center, and each must live in a relation to the other that is expressive of the higher relation (see Buber 1970: 94). These two realms of relation are the points of reference that define for human life a “direction” and a “meaning,” a קיון (kivun) and a קבונה (kavanah) respectively, as has been noted. Reminded of another cognate of the root קבון, the word קבון (mikhvan), we see what this meaning and direction characteristic of community have to do with dwelling. For קבון is a word for “aim” or “purpose”; written as קבון (makhon), it means “site” or “dwelling.” Dwelling in the world and having a sense of purpose are two aspects of a single human condition to which every human soul aspires. And every human soul aspires to dwell in the world because every human soul transcends the world. To borrow from the words of Buber, the soul’s

. . . longing for G-d is the longing to prepare a place for Him in the true community; its consciousness of Israel is the consciousness that out of it the true community will emerge; its wait for the Messiah is the wait for the true community.

(Buber 1967: 110–111)

Community is an otherworldly phenomenon in the midst of this world. Ants are social animals; people are not. That is why, unlike ants, people can dwell in the world.

Looking further into the holy tongue, we find even tighter connections between dwelling, purpose, and community. Recall, for example, that קבון (yaad) is another word for “purpose” or “mission”; and observe that it has the same root as קבון (edah), a word meaning both “community” and “testimony.” Hence, for Jewish thought informed by the Hebrew language, there is no community without testimony, and the testimony concerns something about the nature of dwelling in community; indeed, as we have seen, all dwelling is in community. To engage in the
testimony central to community is to answer, “Here I am,” in response to a commandment to attend to the need of the other human being. A member of an הָדֶדֶר or community, then, is an רֵא (ed) or a “witness” to a commandment or “precept of G-d” (which is yet another meaning of הָדֶדֶר), without which we live not in a community but only in an inevitably futile struggle for survival.

**Inevitably futile,** I say: without community, the struggle is no more than a game played out in the solitude of our being, a game that, from a strictly ontological perspective, everyone loses since no one gets out alive. Recalling in this connection that it is through the mitsvah or commandment that G-d enters the world, we may better understand Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s comment on Isaiah 43:10 (“You are My witnesses and I am G-d”): as was cited in the last chapter, he takes it to mean “When you are My witnesses, I am G-d; when you are not My witnesses, I am not G-d” (*Sifre* 33:5; see also *Pesikta de-Rab Kahanah* 12:6). G-d is G-d, as it were, only when he is at home in His creation. And He is at home in His creation only when our adherence to the mitsvot bears witness to His Divine Presence.

Because רֵא means not only “witness” but also “testimony,” we realize that the witness is his testimony—a testimony to community through word and deed, offered before the הָדֶדֶר (Shokhen Ad), that is, the “One who Dwells Eternally” within the testimony, within the הָדֶדֶר, that is community. Therefore the הָדֶדֶר or sanctuary of the Divine Presence that the Israelites erected in the wilderness was called an הָדֶדֶר (ohel moed), which may be translated as “Tent of Encounter,” “Tent of Congregation,” or “Tent of Testimony.” The Eternal One dwells within human encounter, congregation, and testimony. As a testimony to the Eternal One, moreover, this dwelling is a testimony to the little one, to the יֵלֶד (yeled), or “child,” who imparts sanctity and therefore meaning to life. Essential to dwelling, the child imparts meaning to life by drawing down from above the memory and continuity that go into the making of a life. In a word, the child is the fulcrum of “history” or תּוֹלַדוֹת (toladot), which is a cognate of יֵלֶד.

And yet תּוֹלַדוֹת is not what we normally understand to be history. To be sure, as noted in Chapter 6, there is no Hebrew word for “history,” as that word is generally used to refer to a chronology of political and cultural events that unfold over the ages—what Leo Baecck (1873–1956) describes by saying, “History is the ruin heap of power and to work for its triumph is to work for ruin” (Baecck 1948: 234). Fackenheim correctly describes the notion of history in modern thought as “the self-realization of human freedom, a process which redeemed itself” (Fackenheim 1968: 84), and for which G-d therefore became superfluous. Although history is a category often invoked by Jewish thinkers, it is, strictly speaking, a category alien to Jewish thought. Unlike the English word history with its modern connotations of relating an account of an event, the word תּוֹלַדוֹת means “generations,” which are “brought forth,” from the verb יָלָד (yalad), meaning to “give birth.” And birth is something that happens in a partnership between husband, wife, and G-d (cf. *Kiddushin* 30b). Which is to say: just as there is no community without the child, there is no community without marriage, a category that will be more fully explored in Chapter 11.

**DWELLING**

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Here, however, this much must be said: the centrality of the child to community and therefore to dwelling in the world rests upon the centrality of another dwelling place, another יבנ. It is one mentioned above: the רמב or “school,” literally the “house of the book” where our children spend a good deal of their days. Just as there is no school without a community, so is there no community without a school. That is why more than two thousand years ago the sage Shimon ben Shetach insisted that there should be mandatory school attendance for all children (see Jerusalem Talmud Ketuvot 8:11). As the defining reference point for the Jewish people, the Book is a defining reference point for Jewish thought. Jewish thought, then, not only arises from but also dwells upon the learning, teaching, and seeking that go into education. Let us see how the Hebrew language may enable us to explore this crucial point in depth.
In the year 70 C.E. the Roman general Vespasian laid siege to Jerusalem. In order to prevent undue bloodshed and avoid the destruction of the Holy City, the Talmud relates (Gittin 56a–56b; also AvoT d’Rabbi Natan 20a), the rabbis urged the people to go out and make peace with the Romans. Among the most powerful groups in the city, however, were the Zealots, who refused to allow anyone to approach the Romans with offers of peace.

Now Abba Sirka, the leader of the Zealots was the nephew of one of Israel’s greatest sages, Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai. Fearing for the lives of the Jews, the Rabbi sent for his nephew and told him, “I want you to devise some means for me to get past the city walls. Once outside, I may be able to persuade the Romans to save at least a remnant of the people.”

After giving his uncle’s request a few moments of thought, Abba Sirka instructed him, “You must pretend to be dead. Take some foul-smelling meat and hide it next to you, so that when people come to pay their respects prior to your burial, they will not suspect otherwise. Then have your disciples come to carry you outside the city for burial. So far the Romans have allowed us to bury our dead.”

Rabbi Yoḥanan did exactly as his nephew told him. His disciples Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua took the two sides of the bier and obtained permission from the Romans to go outside the city and bury their teacher. Once outside, Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai lost no time in making his way to the Roman camp. As soon as he caught sight of the general Vespasian, he cried, “Peace be unto you, O King!”

To which Vespasian replied, “Your life is forfeit, Jew, on two counts. First because you have addressed me as a king when I am not a king. And second because, believing me to be a king, you did not come to me before now.”

Just at that moment a messenger from Rome arrived in the camp and shouted, “All rise! For the emperor is dead, and the leaders of Rome have declared that you, Vespasian, are to be his successor!”

Hearing these words, Vespasian turned to the Rabbi and said, “You are wise indeed. I must leave for Rome immediately, but first I shall grant you a request.”

“All I ask, sire,” answered the Rabbi, “is that you allow me to go with our sages to the city of Yavneh, so that we may build a school, now that the Holy City is about to be destroyed.”
Vespasian agreed. Thus, when the בית המיקדש (beit hamikdash) or “House of Holiness” was destroyed, Israel’s sacred center was lost. It was reconstituted, however, in the school, that is, in the בית הספר (beit sefer), which is literally the “house of the book.” (from Patterson 2001: 127–130).

In the previous chapter we explored the בית (beit); we begin this chapter by considering the ספר (sefer), the “book,” and what it means to put the two together. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, the “house of the book” is not the place where the “book” is housed; rather, it conveys the distinctively Jewish teaching that the book is itself the place of the house, that is, the place of dwelling in the world. The “house of the book,” then, is the house that the book itself is. “The open book occupies only a little space on the table,” Edmond Jabès has observed, “yet the space it engages is huge” (Jabès 1990: 27). More than spatial, the space that the book engages is the space where thought emerges and is transmitted, the space occupied by the soul and by the Divine Presence. Even more vast than this space is the time that the book encompasses. It is a time exceeding any person’s time, a time that includes a trace of the immemorial. Indeed, the book opens up space and time as such, the space and time of creation and memory, of tradition and future, of teaching and testimony.

Twenty-five centuries of speculative thought, however, have transformed the house into a mere structure and the book into a mere “text.” Having thought G-d out of the picture, ontological philosophy has thought the divine image out of the human being. Once the view of the human as one created in the image of the divine being is lost, learning is lost; all that remains is training. The result is graphically illustrated by the men who convened for Wannsee Conference: of the fourteen men who met on 20 January 1942 to discuss the logistics of murdering the Jews of Europe, eight had doctorates. And they all received their training from the finest universities in Central Europe. At that meeting men who had erased the divine image from man began the creation of the Muselmann. The Muselmann embodies those whom Primo Levi describes as

... the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death.

(Levi 1996: 90)

Levi sees in the Muselmann “all the evil of our time in one image” (Levi 1996: 90), the image emptied of the divine image. Similarly, Emil Fackenheim regards the Muselmann as the Nazis’ “most characteristic, most original product” (Fackenheim 1994: 100), and the Nazis are the end product of a philosophical tradition forever hostile toward the Jewish tradition.

Whereas Kant merely called for the euthanasia of Judaism (Kant 1979: 95), he was part of a thinking that led to the “euthanasia” of the Jews. Thus, if “the mentality of modern science is what made the Holocaust possible,” as George
Kren and Leon Rappaport argue (Kren and Rappaport 1980: 133), that mentality is derived from modern philosophy. It is a mentality that drains higher learning of all its height and signals what Martin Buber calls the “progressive increase of the It-world” (Buber 1970: 87). Its premise lies in what the Germans termed Voraussetzunglose Wissenschaft, that is, a “learning” that operates with no assumptions—moral, religious, or otherwise. In a cosmos that is silent and neutral, learning, too, is utterly indifferent. Proceeding from the ontological view that “what is” is simply “there,” with no particular value outside of our will, our view of the human being is increasingly material, quantitative, and pragmatic. Thus the Jews became raw material for textiles, fertilizers, and soap, factory units that were “processed” in the death factories as quickly and efficiently as German ingenuity would allow. And the Germans are known for their ingenuity. What became of German genius? In its effort to become godlike, not just knowing but also legislating good and evil, it transformed the German people and other peoples into murderers. What began as a philosophical assault on the gates of heaven ended at the gates embossed with the sardonic slogan Arbeit Macht Frei.

And so we see what is at stake in our assessment of the house of the book, in the very notion of the house of the book, a notion both alien to speculative thought and characteristic of Jewish thought. The former leads to the anti-world of the concentrationary universe, while the latter opens up a world that comes from the mouth of the Creator. What is at stake, then, is creation itself, both conceptually and concretely. If the house of the book has a place in creation, creation unfolds in the house of the book.

The book as a vessel of creation

As noted in Chapter 1, tradition teaches that the Book—the Sefer Torah—is the blueprint, the soul and substance, of all creation: four times, says Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Holy One looked into the Torah before beginning His work of Creation (Zohar I, 5a; see also Bereshit Rabbah 1:1; Tanchuma Bereshit 1). Unlike a blueprint, however, the Torah is itself the stuff of Creation. This teaching from the Zohar and the Midrash is central to the ancient mystical teachings found, for example, in the Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Creation, where it is written that HaShem “created His universe with three books (sefarim): with text [סֵפֶר (sefer)], with numbering [סָפָר (sfar)], and with storytelling [סָפָר (sipur)]” (1:1). Judah Halevi explains these concepts by saying,

Sefar means calculation and weighing of the created bodies . . . . Sipur signifies the language, or rather the divine language, “the voice of the words of the living G-d.” This produced the existence of the form which this language assumed in the words: “Let there be light,” “let there be a firmament.” The word was hardly spoken, when the thing came into existence. This is also sefer, by which writing is meant, the writing of G-d
means His creatures, the speech of G-d is His writing, the will of G-d is His speech.

(*Kitav al khazari* 4:25)

Significantly, the verb נשרים (siper) means not only to “tell a tale” but also to “cut,” particularly to “cut hair.” Mystically speaking, creation entails a process of נשרים (nesirah) or “cutting” the upper worlds from the lower, the male from the female, in order to form the distinction crucial to the relation that defines creation. How do we enter into that relation? Through the other meaning of נשרים, by relating a tale—in other words, in the transmission of life from one human being to another and from G-d to humanity.

Recall in this connection the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson 滢:

> Speaking and saying come from the surface, not from the depth of the soul. The mouth can sometimes speak what the heart does not feel. Even what the heart says can be at odds with what the man truly wills in his soul. . . . But “relating” comes from the depths of a man’s being.

(Schneerson 1986b: 74)

Rabbi Schneerson goes on to note a teaching from the *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 11:22: “You wish to recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being? Learn Aggadah [the tales] for in Aggadah you will find G-d” (Schneerson 1986b: 74–75). Therefore, according to the fourteenth-century Spanish sage Rabbi Yitzchak Abohav, *Agadah* is concerned with

> . . . the description of the true nature of the universe and the ideals toward which one should strive. It speaks allusively of mysteries and mysticism. It speaks of ethics and character and human nature. It speaks of purification of the body and sublimation of the soul. These are absolute truths.

(Abohav 1982: 246)

After all, the Book begins not with a catalogue of commandments but with the tale of creation: as part of Torah, *creation itself is made of the tale of creation*. Perhaps that is why the Torah includes the tale of the Torah in the Book of Deuteronomy: the teaching is not complete without the tale of the teaching. Because Moses relates the tale of the Torah to the Israelites, they are able to bear the Torah into the Land, where they will build a school and relate the tale to their children in the *תלמוד בְּיַעַר*.

The most fundamental subject matter studied in the *תלמוד* is the tale of creation as the unfolding of a relation between human and G-d, between human and human. Further, each of the ten סְפִּירֹת (sefirot), or avenues of divine manifestation, incorporates the three “books” of creation into its emanation of holiness into the world: text, numbering, and storytelling.
Indeed, tied to these three building blocks of creation are the “three R’s”: reading the text, writing the tale, and calculating the numbers. These three “skills” interweave to open up our access to the Book that is the key to all creation. They sustain all creation. That is why the Talmud teaches that all of creation endures thanks to the breath of little school children studying the three R’s (Shabbat 119b), and not by the pillars of power, as invoked by the Greek image of Atlas holding up the world on his shoulders.

In the previous chapter it was maintained that there is no community without a school or “a house of the book.” Here we maintain that there is no school without the Book that serves as a house of being. Which is to say: there can be no house—no בית, no home, no dwelling in the world—without the book, without the ספר. Indeed, as we have seen, there can be no world without the Book. If all that exists, exists by the Word of HaShem, then every quark of creation is an utterance that addresses us; if all is made of Torah—that is, of the Book—then the Word is inscribed in all things. The world is not a blank; the world is not silent, despite Pascal’s dread (see Pascal 1966: 95). An “open book,” all of creation speaks to us. Hence the Scripture says that Adam did not simply name the animals but rather “read their names”—(yayikra haadam shemot)—as he peered into the essence of their being to behold what words they were made of. In the ספר, then, we learn not only how to read books but also how to read creation and its meaning as it is inscribed in creation.

What we receive, moreover, is not just information: “reading” creation, we learn the teachings and commandments of Torah as they unfold in the natural world and in the course of human events. “Man can learn a lesson from all existing things which he perceives with his senses,” as Joseph Albo states it, “a lesson concerning conduct” (Sefer HaIkkarim 3:1). Of course, there are those who insist that there is in fact nothing “out there”; what we “read” is merely the prejudiced projection of our ego reading into and not reading from the landscape of heaven and earth. This, however, is a position one would expect from the egocentric thinking that equates thought with being. To the extent that we are free of the shell of the ego, we are free to receive the Word of revelation that addresses us everywhere and all the time.

A tale of the Chasidic master Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadgora (1820–1883) will illustrate this point. “Know that G-d never leaves off speaking to us,” he would tell his disciples. “Not only in the works of nature does He call out to us but also in the works of humanity. For those who are created in the image of their Creator participate in His creation. Which means: their works are part of His utterance.”

There was a young man among the Rabbi’s disciples who had complete faith in the truth of his teacher’s every word. No sooner would an utterance come from the Rabbi’s lips than the student would struggle to learn from it. But he had trouble with this particular teaching, especially when he looked around and saw the state of the world. So one day the young man gathered his courage and went to the Rabbi to question him about this teaching.
“Rabbi,” he said, “you have told us that G-d addresses us and teaches us in all things, both in the wonders of nature and in the actions of men. But when I look around at the new inventions that have come into the world, I cannot see anything of value to be learned from them. The railroads that cut across the land foul the air with their smoke and their noise. The telephone removes us from the face of our neighbor. And the telegraph reduces words—the most holy of things—to mere dots and dashes. What can G-d possibly be teaching us through these things?"

The Rabbi answered, “Oh, but the Holy One, blessed be He, is revealing to us His wisdom even through these new inventions. You may have noticed that people who tarry in idleness often miss their train. So you see, the railroad teaches us that a moment’s hesitation will cause us to miss everything. As for the telephone, it enables us to speak with others over long distances. Therefore it reminds us that what is said here is heard there. And the telegraph? Here we have perhaps the most important lesson of all. The telegraph teaches us that every word is counted—and charged. Thus even in these new and strange inventions G-d is speaking to us.”

And, hearing his teacher’s words, the young man could hear G-d’s voice where he had thought there to be nothing (from Patterson 2001: 341–342).

Is this a reading from, or is it a reading into? Is there something more than all there is, which addresses me from beyond, or is it just “you and me against the world,” with nothing more that our petty prejudices? If it is merely the latter, then there is no word worth counting, and we have no accounting. And, having no accounting, we are permitted anything we have the resolve to perform. Therefore, even if we fear the latter, we must embrace the former, if we are to have any hope for any life in the world.

Rabbi Avraham Yaakov’s way of thinking leads us to a deeper understanding of the teaching that “man lives not by bread alone, but by every utterance from the mouth of G-d does man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3). From the standpoint of the body/mind duality that has characterized speculative thought ever since Plato, we might take this to mean that there are two separate realms of existence: a material realm and a spiritual realm, so that we meet our base physical needs through bread and our higher spiritual needs through the Word. From a Jewish standpoint, however, the physical is an extension of the spiritual, part of a single continuum, all of which derives its being from divine utterance. Says the Chasidic master Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza, “As with bread, where the principal sustaining force exists within it, so it is the issue of G-d’s mouth” (Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza 2001: 92). The bread we eat, then, is the word of G-d. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz explains:

Man does not live only from the calories provided by bread, but from Divine energy. This is what the Torah calls the “utterance from the mouth of the Lord.” It makes the bread “live” and forms its true essence. In other words, although superficially I am only eating matter, in fact I am ingesting language, because the raw material of bread is the Divine word. (Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 147; see also Keter Shem Tov 194)
Again, when the language we ingest is the Divine word, we ingest teaching. The Book is the vessel of the house, because the Book is the vehicle of learning, without which there is no dwelling in the world. And it is inscribed in the very bread we eat.

Only a place of learning can be a place of dwelling; where learning happens, people dwell. And people dwell where people share bread—that is what learning is about. The phrase הָעַסְנַיָּהּ שֶל תּוֹרָה (akhsanyah shel torah), which is a “meeting place for study,” conveys this point. Here the noun rendered as “meeting place” is הָעַסְנַיָּהּ (akhsanyah), a word that also translates as “hotel” or “inn,” a place of food and shelter. Without such a place of learning, we have no food or shelter; without learning, there is neither hospice nor hospitality. That is why when three are seated at a table to break bread, they are required to learn Torah. Without this linkage between הָעַסְנַיָּהּ and הָרִים (aksanyah), between hospitality and learning, we are left to wander the world as scavengers, even though we may sit at sumptuous tables.

On both occasions when הָיִם (HaBayit)—the Temple or the House—was destroyed and the Jews were cast into exile, that holy center of dwelling in the world was reconstituted through the Book: first through the Bible and later through the Talmud. If, as Rabbi Levi Yitschak of Berditchev has taught, the “Book is life beyond life” (quoted in Newman 1963: 22), it is because the Book is the center of life, the basic constituent of community. Recall Martin Buber’s insight that two things are required for the creation of a community: each member of the community must live in a relation to a transcendent center, and each must live in a relation to the other that is expressive of the higher relation (Buber 1970: 94). The transcendent center is the Book. That is why there can be no community without a הָיִם. In an age of exile, when we have no house or home, we also have no book; to be sure, by now one can see that we are homeless precisely because we are without a book. It is not merely that the book has been replaced by television sets and computer screens. No, even when we hold a volume in our hands, instead of the book we have the “text” that we subject to “hermeneutics” and “critical theory,” all of which amounts to nothing more than the empty narcissism of academic game playing.

One good example can be found in so-called Holocaust scholars who fabricate a distance between themselves and the diaries of the Jewish victims by reducing them not only to documents, evidence, and sources of information but to problematic documents, evidence, and sources of information. They accomplish this task in two ways: first they raise epistemological concerns that discredit the diarist, and then they assume a phenomenological stance that renders suspect the diary itself. And the fact that the diaries are written by Jews in the midst of the annihilation of the Jews is all but incidental to both approaches; as these scholars see it, any relation this testimony—this authoring of books—might have to the Book is irrelevant. From an epistemological standpoint, James Young, for instance, argues that the diarists “necessarily convert experience into an organized, often ritualized, memory of experience” (Young 1987: 414). Hence it is
... difficult to distinguish between the archetypal patterns the ghetto diarist has brought to the events, those he perceived in or inferred from them, and those that exist in the narrative. As raw as they may have been at the moment, the ghetto and camp experiences were immediately refined and organized by witnesses within the terms of their *Weltanschauungen*.

(Young 1987: 414)¹

This is the “study for the sake of scholarship” that the Baal Shem Tov describes as “desecration; it is a transgression of the commandment against bowing before alien gods, the idol being mere learning” (quoted in Newman 1963: 456). And “mere learning” can never come from the Book. When is learning “mere learning?” According to the Baal Shem, it is when we become so absorbed in learning that we forget “there is a G-d over the world” (quoted in Levin 1975: 116).

Emmanuel Lévinas states the problem well:

We are no longer acquainted with the difference that distinguishes the Book from documentation. In the former there is an inspiration purified of all the vicissitudes and all the “experiences” that had been its occasion, offering itself as Scripture whereby each soul is called to exegesis, which is both regulated by the rigorous reading of the text and by the unicity—unique in all eternity—of its own contribution, which is also its discovery, the soul’s share.

(Lévinas 1999: 75–76)

Regarding “being” as what is merely and neutrally “there,” Western ontological thought reduces everything to a sameness that is no longer able to distinguish Scripture from any other text. Therefore, as the postmodern theorists will tell you, there is no intrinsic difference between the critic’s text and the text he is critiquing. All texts are basically the same, appropriated by the ego’s totalitarian Same in a leveling of good and evil into the Same. Subsequently, the school, the house of the book, is nothing more than a repository where skills and information are disseminated with the aim of imparting to students a greater power for plundering the world of its goods.

Such a way of viewing the Book is as alien to Jewish thought as Jewish thought is to the Western ontological tradition. Commenting on the difference, Abraham Joshua Heschel asserts that the Bible “is not a book to be read but a drama in which to participate; not a book about events but itself an event, the continuation of the event” (Heschel 1955: 254). So viewed, the Book is not the object of my questioning but a living voice that puts to me the questions that decide who I am and what my life means. The attempt to reduce the Book to a mere “text” or cultural artifact is an effort to flee from that voice, just as Cain sought to flee from G-d by fleeing from his responsibility for his brother. Indeed, Cain loves to disguise himself as the scholarly exegete. Freely translated, “I am not my brother’s
keeper” means “the Book is a cultural invention.” And both positions lead to murder. How we understand the meaning of education, therefore, is a matter of life and death.

**The meaning of education**

The Hebrew word that means to “be educated” is קָנָם (neeman); it also translates as to “be found true” or “trustworthy,” implying a certain fidelity to something. It is from the verb קָנַה (aman), which is to “foster” or “bring up”; in its intensive or piel form, קָנֵן (imen), it means to “educate”; and in its causative or hifil form, קִנּוֹן (heemin), it is to “believe” or “entrust.” Hence we have the adjective קָנָם (aman), which means both “faithful” and “educated.” Also worth noting are its cognate nouns קָנָם (amanah), meaning “covenant” or “trust,” and קִנּוֹן (emunah), meaning “conscientiousness” or “honesty,” as well as “faith” or “trust.”

All of these words tell us something about Jewish thinking with regard to what education is and what it means to be educated. One who is educated in the house of the book has been fostered and cared for in the light of something very precious, something that requires a conscientious honesty and a profound faith in the very faithfulness of the one being educated. For he or she is entrusted with the care of what makes the whole educational endeavor meaningful: the truth. One who is educated, then, has received a teaching and a tradition that may include but certainly surpasses issues of skill, analysis, and information. To be educated is not merely to be skilled in critical thinking, as is so often touted: no, it is a capacity for a critical thinking that we pursue in the light of a certain value, a value that is critical indeed. To be educated has nothing to do with the ability to prove the Pythagorean theorem, appreciate a fugue, or engage in clever cocktail conversation. No, it entails a realization that I stand in a relation of responsibility to and for a living truth that is as fragile as it is dear. It means, therefore, that I must answer for what I have learned. It means that I have been summoned as a witness.

Other dimensions of these matters will come to light if we examine the Hebrew word for “education,” חינוך (chinukh), which also means “consecration,” as in the consecration of the Temple, and “dedication,” as in the dedication of a home. In each instance—in the education of a child, the consecration of the Temple, and the dedication of a home—education is about something that transpires in a בית (bayit), a “house” or “home”: in a בָּית, in בַּיָּתִים itself, or simply in a בָּית. For Jewish thought, all three are interrelated, as Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira has explained:

The root CH-N-KH [קר] implies the initial entry of a person or an object into a trade or path that is his destiny. Thus we find the root CH-N-KH referring to the education of a child, the consecration of the altar in the Holy Temple, and the dedication of a house.

(Shapira 1991: 4)
With its tendency to compartmentalize, speculative thought separates Temple, home, and school into three distinct and different realms; indeed, we work hard to keep the Temple out of the school. Jewish thought, on the other hand, takes these three realms to be interconnected in definitive ways.

In the passage just cited Rabbi Shapira associates הִנֵּה with a person’s destiny; seeking an education is as much part of person’s mission in the world as are the prayers in the Temple or the family in the home. Having a destiny is not the same as having aims or aspirations; nor is it the same as being fated or predetermined. Predetermination is an ontological category that pertains to being locked into a chain of cause and effect that operates strictly within the world. The notion of destiny, on the other hand, is incomprehensible to the ontological thinker. For destiny opens up a category that lies outside all there is. To be destined is to be created (not caused) from beyond the world in order to do something in the world. To be destined is to be summoned and assigned a mission. The house of the book is where we learn how to hear that summons.

As Rabbi Shapira suggests, the Hebrew concept of הִנֵּה establishes a link between school, Temple, and home. Each one is referred to as a house or a home because in all of these places we are there for the sake of another, both as G-d and as person, and not for ourselves; in all of these places we declare, הִנֵּה (Hineni)—Here I am, for you!” Each of these three spaces, then, constitutes a fundamental realm in which the relationships to G-d and humanity are articulated, adhered to, and lived by. In these realms we have a very specific way of speaking and acting, quite distinct from how we act and interact at work, in a nightclub, or at a ball game. In Martin Buber’s terms, when entering the school, the Temple, or the home we leave behind the It-world and enter into the purity of the I-Thou relationship. Not that every school, synagogue, or household is perfect; what is crucial is the idea of a school, synagogue, or home conveyed by the Hebrew word. For that idea harbors an aspiration and a commandment with regard to what these places ought to be.

One sees a parallel, for example, between these three spaces and the three pillars that, according to the Pirke Avot, hold up the world: תּוֹרָה (Torah), אָבוֹדָה (avodah), and גֵּ двигות צֵדֶק (gemilut chasadim), that is, “Torah,” “worship service,” and “acts of loving kindness” (1:2). Torah, which literally means “teaching,” is studied in its many forms in the school; indeed, that is often where we begin to develop a mode of Jewish thinking shaped by the Hebrew language. The Temple is the place of worship and prayer, where the duties of the heart merge with the service of G-d. And the home is where we first encounter and first perform acts of loving kindness, beginning with the utterance of our name in tones overflowing with love. Each of these “houses” is essential to the other, and the meaning of education lies in attesting to their interconnections. Places of worship are also places of learning and family gathering. Homes that are homes, and not just a place to stay, are places of prayers such as grace after meals or the Sabbath kiddush; they are also places of learning, if only when the kids have homework. That families are—or should be—involved in the school is evident enough, but in our time we seem
to think that schools must be purged of prayer. To rid the school of prayer, however, is to rid the school of learning, inasmuch as learning—or at least anything that might pass for higher learning—entails entering into a higher relation that consecrates the human endeavor.

Just as prayer is necessary to higher learning, so is it an essential aspect of Jewish thought. To the extent that Jewish thought seeks to understand the ultimate on deeper and deeper levels, it is itself a form of prayer. For in our Jewish learning and Jewish thinking we do not just understand the ultimate—we respond to Him. From the standpoint of Jewish thought, then, learning is a form of prayer, and not mere analysis or inquiry. Where the study of the Book is concerned, Heschel writes, “it is not enough to read the Bible for its wisdom; we must pray the Bible to comprehend its claim” (Heschel 1955: 251). In Chapter 4 we noted that the word for “prayer,” תפילת (tefilah), is a cognate of מתִּפְלָל (naftulim), which means “struggles” or “wrestlings.” Here we may add that the root verb טַפֵּל (pilel) can mean not only to “pray” but also to “think” and to “judge.”

Putting these cognates and their shades of meaning together, we see that praying is much more than supplication; it is a mode of response and of hearing, as when we pray the Shema: crying out, “Hear, O Israel,” we hear G-d’s outcry. Praying the Bible, to recall Heschel’s phrase, entails not only thinking about the Bible but also coming under a certain “judgment” or הָלְפָל (plilah) before the Bible. Hence, in the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, “prayer consists not only of an awareness of the presence of G-d, but of an act of committing oneself to G-d and accepting His ethico-moral authority” (Soloveitchik 1965: 65). That is why each morning before beginning the prayers we assert, “I hereby take upon myself the commandment to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” This commandment cannot be learned without prayer. And one who has not learned this commandment cannot claim to be educated.

As a process of learning, therefore, becoming educated is a process of reckoning, as well as a process of transformation. Here the Hebrew verb לָבֵשׁ (garas) comes to mind; it means to “learn,” to “study,” and to “grind.” That learning is a grind most students will confirm. But what do we grind when we learn? It is Torah itself. Thus in the Jewish tradition Torah is often called the “wheat,” כִּיתָה (chitah), from which we must make bread. In the Eliyahu Zuta, for example, it is written, “When the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, He gave it to them as wheat out of which the fine flour of Mishnah was to be produced” (Tanna debe Eliyyahu 1981: 409). To be sure, learning begins with the alef-beit, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, and, as Simcha Benyosef has noted, the numerical value of the word כִּיתָה is twenty-two (Benyosef 1999: 84). Learning is a process of grinding the wheat of the letters of Torah into the flesh and blood—into the bread—of life. This process obtains not just in the study of Torah, but, since all things are made of Torah, it also comes to bear in the process of learning anything. Most fundamentally, what we grind in the course of becoming educated is our own souls. For our souls are made of Torah. And, just as we must translate the words of Torah into the deeds that constitute our lives, so
must we transform our souls into something that will nourish other souls and that will thus consecrate life. That, and not the credentials we accumulate or the schools we attend, is the mark of being educated.

Hence what Heschel says of the Bible applies to learning in general: if all of creation is divine utterance, it is all Torah—literally. This too makes learning a form of praying. As prayer, learning is not a study of the word but an entry into the word and the word’s entry into the soul. Therefore, Rabbi Steinsaltz states it, “in Torah study, it is not only that one thinks in terms of Torah, but also that the Torah thinks within oneself. It is an object that becomes a subject, capable of expressing itself in one’s own thoughts and actions” (Steinsaltz 1988a: 28). Here we have the link between learning and prayer, between being educated and having a capacity for prayer. Prayer, says Heschel, “is an event that comes to pass between the soul of man and the word” (Heschel 1954: 27). And that event is often a wrestling match, as suggested by the relation between הוי and פנוי. It is a wrestling that takes the wrestler—the one studying Torah—into the realm of תפארת (tiferet), which is the “beauty” of truth, as it is taught in the Zohar; by contrast, says the Zohar, the prophets attain only the lower realms of נצח (netsach) or “victory” and Hod (hod) or “splendor”; and “those who merely speak in the spirit of holiness stand lower still” (Zohar III, 35a). So we see the regard that Jewish thought has for learning.

As the complement to learning, moreover, teaching is far more than a matter of one person’s imparting knowledge to another; teaching, rather, is a process whereby the very meaning of education, of מורה, is made manifest. Says Lévinas, “Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality” (Lévinas 1969: 171). Stated differently, the education that emerges from teaching and learning is a consecration of G-d and humanity, of Torah and creation. From a Jewish point of view, then, the process of teaching and learning exceeds even the relation of disciple and master. For there is always a third party involved in the process, the One who gives it meaning. Let us consider more closely this process that unfolds in the house of the book.

**Teaching and learning**

Derived from the root הור (yarah), the verb meaning to “teach” is הורה (horah). Its cognates include תורה (Torah), הורה (horeh) or “parent,” and מורה (moreh) or “teacher.” Recall, for example, the line from the Psalms: הורنى חשם ורבד (horeni HaShem darkeka), that is, “teach me, L-rd, Your way” (Psalms 27:11). Inasmuch as G-d is our Father, He is our Teacher, a truth we affirm every day in our prayers: He does not simply command or issue decrees and judgments—He teaches. The link between teacher and parent, then, is particularly noteworthy. To be sure, the Talmud requires a parent either to be a teacher or to find a teacher for his child (Kiddushin 29a). Here Rabbi Nachman of Breslov holds that “when a disciple learns the Torah’s laws, his face takes on a resemblance to the one teaching him. This is because the law is the
wisdom which makes a person’s face shine” (Nachman of Breslov 1986: 219–220). Thus “taking after” our teacher, we are rather like the teacher’s own progeny. The Talmud, in fact, compares one who teaches Torah to a parent, since such a teacher participates in giving birth to the student’s soul (see Sanhedrin 99b).

I say “participates in giving birth,” and not “gives birth,” because the teaching does not belong to the teacher. Whenever I compliment my own teacher, Rabbi Levi Klein, on the brilliance and the insight of a lesson he has taught, he always smiles and answers, “It isn’t mine.” After examining the holy tongue on the matter, I understood why: “teaching” in Hebrew is הָרָה (horaah), a word that also denotes “meaning” or “significance,” which belongs neither to the teacher nor to the student. For הָרָה is nothing less that the trace of a living presence that imparts life both to the teacher and to the student. As הָרָה, meaning and significance are not exactly learned; rather, they happen within, between, and above teacher and student wherever teaching and learning transpire. And the space in which teaching and learning transpire comprises the house of the book. For the book opens up these spatial relations within, between, and above.

We have seen what Lévinas has to say about the insertion of the infinite into the totality of the finite in the process of teaching. He goes on to say, “Teaching is a way for the truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority” (Lévinas 1969: 295). Because the knowledge transmitted in the process of teaching does not come “from my own interiority,” we see more clearly that the process of learning and teaching is a single event that transpires in a space between two. And because it is between, it is reciprocal. Thus, said Rabbi Chanina: “I have learned much from my teachers; from my colleagues I have learned even more; but from my students I have learned more than from all the rest” (Ta'anit 7a).³ No thinker in the Western speculative tradition, from Aristotle to Heidegger, ever made such a statement, at least not in the same sense that Rabbi Chanina intended it. For in making such a statement, Rabbi Chanina did not refer to the brilliance or intelligence of his students; he does not imply that he learned more from his bright students than from his teachers and colleagues, who were themselves utterly brilliant. No, he implies that he learned from all his students.

What could a sage as great and wise as Rabbi Chanina possibly learn from a student? In a word, he learns the meaning of the יד 주 (adayín), the “yet to be,” that the student embodies. Teeming with possibility, the student overflows with the future and therefore with life: the student is precisely the one who is opposed to death. Hence the Talmud tells us that as long as King David was engaged in Torah study, the Angel of Death had no power over him (Shabbat 25b). Perhaps that is why Lévinas describes the relationship between teacher and student as “the first radiant sign of messianism itself” (Lévinas 1990: 86). With the coming of the Messiah there will be a coming of wisdom and Torah that will transform all of creation into a house of the book, so that when faced with a decision all will choose life over death. There lies the consummation of the creation yet to be consummated, and this yet to be emanates from the student. A teacher cannot engage this yet to be, this יד 주, without transforming his teaching into יד 주 (edah),
into a “testimony” to what there is to love. And that testimony is precisely an expression of love: you cannot teach people you do not care about, because you cannot learn from people you do not care about.

Because teaching requires caring, a good teacher must be a good listener, able to attend to the words that come both from the student and from beyond the student. That is how the great sage Rabbi Chanina could learn so much from his students. He exemplified the wisdom Ben Zoma describes in the *Pirke Avot*, where he teaches, “He is wise who can learn from every human being” (*Avot* 4:1). Every human being. Not just from really smart human beings. Not even from just average human beings. No, from every human being. That includes infants and Alzheimer’s patients, Down syndrome babies and schizophrenics, autistic children and drug-addicts. Every human being.

If that is the case, then who is the teacher, who is the learner, and what is the wisdom transmitted? If that is the case, then both parties are teachers, both are learners, and the wisdom transmitted concerns something about the holiness of the human being, the infinite responsibility of each to and for the other, something about the infinite dearness of the one before whom we stand. Teaching and learning are two words for a single event. Wisdom, then, is both an “inner light” and an “embracing light,” both ראת אלמיס (or pnim) and חלק קרא איס (or makif), that pulsates between two poles, each of which is both teacher and learner. Note well this difference between Jewish thought and the ontological speculative tradition: nothing could be more alien to the ontological tradition, or more familiar to the Jewish tradition, than the idea that a learned man can learn from a little child. Socrates says nothing of learning from Plato, nor Plato from Aristotle, nor Heidegger from Hannah Arendt.

The Hebrew language reveals the fundamental oneness of teaching and learning in the single root ד"ל, from which both words are derived. The words for “teacher” and “student,” for instance are מ"לד (melamed) and מ"אלא (talmid). Just so, למד (limed) is to “teach,” and למד (lamad) is to “learn.” The first letter in the root, the letter ל (lamed), is itself about teaching and learning: like a good student, it reaches higher than any other letter, and, like a good teacher, it points toward a dimension of height. Says Rabbi Michael Munk, “That the tallest letter in the Aleph-Bais is the one that implies למד, learning and teaching, implies that this quality is man’s highest endowment” (Munk 1983: 139). Given this link to the letter ל, the root verb ד"מ"ל suggests that the teaching-and-learning experience entails an ascent toward a life and a truth that transcend both teacher and student. In other words, where teaching and learning take place, there is always a third party involved. Thus, in the *Pirke Avot* Rabbi Chananiah ben Teradion teaches that when two sit and study Torah together, the Divine Indwelling Presence is with them (3:2; see also *Berakhot* 6a). It is she who resides in the place, the מקומ (makom), called “the house of the book.” For this reason Ahitophel urged King David to study with another person: “Just as one cannot take counsel by himself, so one cannot study Torah by himself. The study of Torah requires debate and dialogue” (*Kallah Rabbati* 8; see also Abrabanel 1991: 431).
Like the root לְמָדָה, the verb נָח (shanah) can mean both to “teach” and to “learn. Unlike the לְמָדָה root, however, it implies a movement inward rather than upward. And yet, like the inner light and the embracing light, the two movements are of a piece. We see the movement inward implied by the verb נָח when we recall that it suggests a process of inculcation and internalization through תַּשְׁנֵן (tashmun) or “repetition”; the word נָח (shani), meaning “second,” for example, has the same root as נָח and תַּשְׁנֵן. The movement inward that characterizes teaching and learning comes with repetition not because the same thing is repeated over but precisely because, as it is repeated, the same thing is no longer the same. Thus we study a text for the hundredth time and come to an insight for the first time; therefore, according to the Talmud, we have not fulfilled the obligation to study until we have gone over the text yet another time, a hundred and first time (Chagigah 9b). Both teacher and student are transformed every time, with every repetition, as each repetition leads to new depths of insight. It is not a transformation that he, the teacher, has brought about on his own; rather, it is a transformation of both teacher and student that has been brought about by the encounter with the book.

Which brings us to another meaning of נָח: it is to “change” or to “become different.” To learn is to be changed: there is no learning that does not transform. That is why learning can be so uncomfortable. It is not merely a matter of passively soaking up knowledge; no, we must live by that knowledge and thereby transmit it in order to receive it. And as we transmit it, we are transformed. Hence in the Pirke Avot it is written, “He who studies Torah in order to teach is given the opportunity to study and to teach; he who studies in order to practice is given the opportunity to study and to teach, to observe and to practice” (4:6; see also Sotah 37a–37b). Where observance is part of learning, practice is part of teaching; he who studies in order to practice will teach through the example of his own observance. As it is stated in the Talmud, “Anyone who says, ‘I have nothing but the study of Torah,’ even Torah is denied him” (Yevamot 109b). Similarly, to teach is to be changed: there is no teaching that does not transform. It is not merely a matter of mouthing information; no, we must live according to the learning entrusted to our care. That is what the word נָח teaches us. Therefore a נָח (mashnehi), which is another word for “teacher” [especially a teacher of נָח (Mishnah)], is one who undergoes a “transformation” or נָח (shinui) as he participates in the transformation of his student.

We have spoken of how the student opens up the yet to be. Viewing the teaching-and-learning process in terms of transformation, we see that in this process time itself—that is, the life time of the human being—comes into being. Only for the human being is time an issue because only the human being is a learning being. For the inanimate and the animate realms of non-human being there is no issue of transformation, no imperative to become better or otherwise than what already is—in short, no need to learn. While the forms may shift, everything in the non-human realm of reality remains essentially the same, essentially changeless, essentially timeless: there is nothing new under the sun. Time happens only in the realm of human being because teaching and learning happen only in the realm of human being. And it draws on what is above the sun.
For all these reasons we should not be surprised to find that הָנָן—the verb meaning to “teach,” to “learn,” and to “change”—is also the word for a primary unit of time: it is the word for “year.” This word indicating both change and year is, of course, the word in the expression הָנָן יֵשָׂר (Rosh HaShanah). We normally translate this phrase as the “New Year,” but, in the light of what has been said, we can see many other possibilities for its translation. Noting the shades of meaning for the word יֵשָׂר (rosh), our sages have pointed out that it is the “head” of the year, the seat of יֵבָנָה (binah), of “understanding” and “insight,” that shapes the entire year (see, for example, Schneerson 1986b: 323–324). Indeed, that is when we seek to be inscribed in the Book, not in such a way as to have our names registered but rather so that our being may be part of the very being of the Book. That is when we have our portion not of the Torah but in the Torah, in such a way that our life and our learning are of a piece.

From what has been said about the word הָנָן, we can see Rosh Hashanah as the beginning of a change, of teaching and learning, the beginning of a transformation of our lives in the light of what we engage in the Book. Indeed, if G-d “created His universe with three books” (Sefer Yetzirah 1:1), as we noted above, then at Rosh Hashanah the renewed engagement with the Book comes not only on this anniversary of the creation of the first human being but in a reenactment of that creation—that is, in a reenactment of the creation of time. Coming under the judgment of the Eternal One, as we do at Rosh Hashanah, we face the need not only to act better but to know better. We face the need for הָנָן, the need both to change and to learn, to change by learning from the Book. Coming before the Eternal One, we come before the Book.

Conceived as Torah, the Book is the point of intersection between time and eternity, and it enters creation on the sixth day, as the talmudic sage Resh Lakish points out. He teaches that the very in the “very good” pronounced upon the sixth day of Creation (Genesis 1:31) refers to the giving of the Torah on the Sixth of Sivan (see Avodah Zarah 3a). Because this day corresponds to the giving of Torah, on this day time, so to speak, comes into being. Of course, on the sixth day the human being was created, and for that reason, too, it may be said that on the sixth day time comes into being. There too, within the human being, we see an intersection of time and eternity, inasmuch as the human being is created in the image and likeness of the Eternal One. We discover, therefore, that there is no time—no הָנָן, no change, no teaching, no learning—without eternity. And we arrive at one of the secrets of הָנָן יֵשָׂר: it is not only the anniversary of the creation and the beginning of the year but is also the anniversary of the creation of the year itself, the creation of time. For Rosh Hashanah falls not on the first day of creation but on the sixth day of creation, when the Book is given and the human being comes into being.

Time comes into being with the human being, moreover, because relation comes into being with the human being. Just as the creation is about relation, so too are teaching and learning about relation; indeed, teaching and learning are the very stuff of human relation and therefore of human being. And the
house of the book is the house of relation. Therefore the house of the book is a primary site of our participation in the creation. Because the house of the book is a house of relation, the talmudic sage Rabbi Chama bar Chanina teaches that, just as iron sharpens iron, two students should always study together, each a teacher to the other (Taanit 7a). Taking this Jewish thought a step further, Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid maintains that there were two cherubs on the ark “to teach you that Torah should be studied by two people learning together as study partners” (Sefer Chasidim 959). The cherubs also teach us that teaching and learning transpire not only in this world but in the upper realms as well. Further, the Talmud tells us that when heaven and earth, teacher and student, are in sync with the flow of holiness from above, the cherubs atop the ark face one another; when they are not in sync, they turn away from each other (Toma 54a). All of creation rests upon what takes place between teacher and student.

One again we see that G-d is not only our Father and our King but is also our Teacher. Therefore in the ahavat olam (Shema) prayer immediately preceding the Shema we ask HaShem to teach us, invoking the One who taught them the laws of life eternal—not who gave them the rules but who taught them the laws. And, as Moshe Idel has noted, in the mystical tradition Metatron, the angel who rules over the universe, “appears as a teacher, and the mystic as a disciple, the vision being one of the divine teacher” (Idel 1988a: 119). How does He teach? By example. For it is written in the Talmud that the Holy One spends three hours each day studying Torah and three hours each day teaching Torah (Avodah Zara 3b). Thus when we invoke the Ribon kol haolamim (Master of all the worlds), each morning, we understand G-d to be the Master in the sense of being the teacher of all the worlds, and we are His disciples. For the root of רבי is רב (rav), which means “teacher.” Indeed, so great is the status of teacher that we refer to our religious leader as “my teacher,” that is, as רב (rabbi).

Still, inasmuch as the house of the book is the house of Torah, the teacher is always and ultimately HaShem Himself, and not the professor who stands before the class. That is why the one who stands before the class must stand for something. That is why Heschel insists,

> Everything depends on the person who stands in front of the classroom. The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages maybe obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? He must be able to answer in the affirmative.

(Heschel 1983: 62–63)

These questions are put to all parties involved in the teaching and learning process, not just from within but also from above, from the Giver of Life. Indeed,
the process of teaching and learning that unfolds in the house of the book is the giving of life: where teaching and learning happen, life happens.

Here too we see a participation in creation by joining our voices to the utterances of creation, particularly in the utterance of the הֵמוֹת (ki-tov), the “it is good.” If, as noted above, the Divine Indwelling Presence abides between two who are gathered to learn, it is because the two who learn join their voices to the voice of the Shekhinah. And the Shekhinah, says the Maharal of Prague, “dwell only in an atmosphere of joy. A teacher therefore must be joyful” (Loeve 1994: 147). That joy, in fact, lies at the core of the teaching itself: one who is learned is one who knows how to rejoice and thus ignite joy in the student. Hence the teacher’s endless seeking unfurls in song and erupts in dance. How do we rejoice in the Torah each year on Simchat Torah and thus celebrate the completion of the annual cycle of learning? Through song and dance. As Lévinas has said, “the glory of the Infinite reveals itself through what it is capable of doing in the witness” (Lévinas 1985: 109). It is He—the One who spoke in the beginning and who was before the beginning—who dwells in the house of the book. It is He whom we seek in the house of the book, making the בית מדרש (beit midrash), which is a “house of learning,” yes, but literally means a “house of seeking,” from the verbibir (darash), to “seek,” as mentioned in the last chapter. And one of the first things we learn in the בית מדרש is this: the Eternal One, whom we eternally seek, is eternally seeking us.

**Eternally seeking and seeking the eternal**

As we have just seen, bir means to “seek” or to “investigate.” It is a cognate of the wordדרש (drashah), which is “interpretation” on all its levels: (1) פֶּשַׁת (peshat), or the literal meaning; (2) רֵמֶז (remez), a word that translates as “allusion,” “suggestion,” or “allegory”; (3) דְרַשׁ (drash), which is the moral message or homiletical meaning; and (4) סָוד (sod), referring to the “hidden” or “mystical” meaning, the infinite and inexhaustible truth. The point in moving through these levels of interpretation is not to come up with an increasingly clever critical analysis. Rather it is to seek the Eternal One, whose eternity lies in His eternally, even desperately, seeking us. In our relation to one another G-d cries out, “Where are you?” and we must answer, “Here I am, for You,” which means “Here I am for my fellow human being.” In our attempts to fathom Torah, we cry out to G-d, “Where are You?” and, at every level of meaning, He shouts, “Here I am, for you.” Since the fourth level, the mystical level, is inexhaustible, our seeking is eternal. And, since G-d cries out to us in our very seeking after Him, His seeking is eternal as well.

One is often asked whether Jewish thought takes Torah on a literal level or on a symbolic level. The answer is: yes. We take Torah on all these four levels of truth. The question that guides our seeking is not “Which interpretation is correct?” but rather “What does each interpretation teach us about Torah?” These four levels of learning that transpire in the house of the book, or in the בית מדרש, form the acronym פָּרְדֵּס (pardes), which means “orchard.” This word itself is a euphemism for...
the house of the book, or the house of seeking. For what we ultimately seek in the house of the book is entry into the orchard of learning and insight, the orchard of Torah, which is Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden. If Adam is to work the garden, as he is commanded (Genesis 2:15), he is to generate meaning from Torah as one might make bread from wheat (cf. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 13). Whereas some religious traditions may view this realm on the other side of death as one in which one enjoys the carnal pleasures of seventy virgins—indeed, Islamic leaders teach young men to murder Jews as suicide bombers in order to enjoy such a state—Judaism views the orchard as a paradise of understanding. In a word, from a Jewish standpoint, paradise is not a harem—it is a school.

Because we are taught that Gan Eden is among the seven things that precede the creation, we realize that the house of the book is an essential component of creation: there can be no creation without the house of the book. Therefore in the process of learning that transpires in the Garden of Eden, there is not only an eternal return to the beginning, to the ב at the beginning of the Torah. There is also a return to the silence curled up inside creation and quietly hovering above it, to the א (alef) that encompasses all beginnings, all worlds. If the letter א denotes not only the silence but also the meaning of all tongues, as we said in Chapter 2, then this single letter is the subject of all teaching and learning. For the א is clothed in the ב, as the Baal Shem Tov has taught (Keter Shem Tov 86), and the ב gives birth to Torah. Which is to say: the א is clothed in the Teaching that is Torah.

Here we recall that the verb אֶלֶף (alaf)—the same word as the letter אלף (alef)—means to “learn.” Like דעת (piel) form, אֶלֶף (ilef), it means to “teach,” as in the passage אֵלֶף אֵלֶף אֵלֶף אָלֵף (ve’aalefha chakhmah): “I shall teach you wisdom” (Job 33:33). It is, however, a distinctively Hebrew teaching and learning, as implied by the noun אֶלֶף אֵלֶף (alpan), which means “teaching” or “instruction” and in modern Hebrew designates a program specially designed for intensive Hebrew study. Signifying what Buber calls “the silence of all tongues” (Buber 1970: 89), the א points up what is sought in all seeking. It points up the essence of the holy tongue as it exists prior to the Divine Utterance, from which, as we saw in Chapter 1, every tongue emerges. Therefore the teaching and the learning designated by אֶלֶף and אֶלֶף are bound to our eternal seeking after the Eternal One. If Gan Eden precedes creation and if Gan Eden is a school, then, couched in the א, teaching and learning precede creation. Hence Jewish thought regards teaching and learning as a form of prayer, inasmuch as prayer is an eternal seeking after the Eternal One.

In a commentary on Psalms 105:8, אֶלֶף אֵלֶף אֵלֶף אֵלֶף (davar tsivah lelef dor), which means “the Word that He commanded to teach the generation,” the Pesikta Rabbati confirms this point. “The basic meaning of אֶלֶף,” according to the sages, “is ‘to teach’” (Pesikta Rabbati 21:21). The Word that brought and continues to bring heaven and earth into being is not only a commandment—it is a teaching. It is Torah. It is the Word conceived as teaching. Thus, Lévinas writes, “the presence of the Other is a presence that teaches; that is why the word as teaching is
more than the experience of the real, and the master more than a midwife of minds” (Lévinas 1994: 148). More than a “midwife of minds,” the master is a servant of the One whose Word at every instant brings heaven and earth into being. What do we seek in the house of the book in our eternal seeking after the Eternal One? The Word.
Since the beginning of the twentieth century the link between word and meaning has been the focus of much of the discourse in analytical and speculative thought. While what follows is in no way exhaustive, it may be helpful to briefly consider just a few examples of how the issue of language has been approached in the last hundred years.

There is, for instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (1889–1951) famous assertion from the *Philosophical Investigations* that the meaning of a word lies in how it is used (Wittgenstein 1971: 139), with the implication that the only real philosophical problem is a problem concerning language. The idea is that meaning is generated from within linguistic contexts, and not through the association between a word and an object, and certainly not within a context of human or Divine relation. Here the Angel’s question would not be “What is your name?” but “How is your name used?” And there is nothing more than the philosophical interest at stake in how we respond.

Unlike Wittgenstein, his contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) sees the word or discourse (*slovo*) as the key to the life of the soul and the basis of all identity. He maintains that

> . . . the word is transindividual. Everything said or expressed lies outside the “soul” of the speaker and does not belong to him . . . . The author (speaker) has his inalienable rights to the word, but his rights are also the listener’s; his rights are the rights of those whose voices resound in the word offered up by the author.

*(Bakhtin 1979: 300–301)*

Hence, like the word, the *who* of the human being, is situated neither “in here” nor “out there” but is rather in a constant state of flux in a *between* space. The “I,” in other words, is the “I” of a relation and nothing more, so that the most crucial word is the word *yet* to be uttered. “A word already spoken,” he says, “is the dead flesh of meaning” (Bakhtin 1979: 117). The meaningful word lies in the response about to be made. The link between word and meaning, then, soon becomes tenuous, inasmuch as meaning is always yet to be manifest. Still,
Bakhtin insists upon a definitive relation between subjectivity and ethical responsibility: who I am lies in a capacity for answering, “Here I am.”

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), on the other hand, suggests that such a response to another is impossible. Indeed, Lacan maintains that

. . . the function of Language is not to inform but to invoke. What I seek in the Word is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question . . . . I identify myself in Language, but only to lose myself in it like an object.

(Lacan 1968: 299–300)

Here meaning is tied to word not through the response I offer but through the recognition I receive. The difficulty of the word, then, is that it is both necessary and undermining, forever losing the very thing it seeks to pin down, reducing the “I” to an “It”—precisely because it turns the self over to a between space outside the self. For Bakhtin, this positioning of the word is what makes the self accountable to someone or something beyond itself. For Lacan, it leads to various problems with the psyche that the psychoanalyst must address. In either case meaning appears to be elsewhere.

Addressing such a constant shifting in the bond between word and meaning, the postmodern deconstructionist Jacques Derrida (b. 1930) asserts, “As soon as there is meaning, there are only signs” (Derrida 1976: 50), as if we were trapped in the anxiety-ridden situation of saying, “I see the sign, but where am I?” Here signs merely point to other signs, words to other words, in a process that ultimately looks like little more than Wittgenstein’s game playing and that renders the notion of responsibility meaningless. To be sure, Derrida calls into question the capacity of the word to contain any meaning at all; for Derrida, meaning shifts with the shifting of discourse and viewpoint, so that “Being” is always under “erasure” (Derrida 1976: xvii). Commenting on one implication of Derrida’s position, Emmanuel Lévinas correctly points out that

. . . it is not only the worlds behind our world that are without meaning, it is the world spread out before us that incessantly escapes. It is lived experience that is postponed in lived experience. The immediate is not only a call to mediation, it is a transcendental illusion.

(Lévinas 1998: 116–117)

With the world thus rendered meaningless, I never have to answer for who and what I am: response itself becomes problematic, as does any responsibility that the human being might assume in the declaration of “Here I am.”

The most influential of them all, of course, is Martin Heidegger, whose claim that “language is the house of being” (Heidegger 1959: 166) is among his most famous statements. It is a seductive remark, but, like every seduction, it harbors a lie. Like the other thinkers briefly mentioned and despite all the differences
among them, Heidegger ties word to being without understanding it to be derived from a higher meaning from beyond Being. As he states it, “where the word fails there is no thing” (Heidegger 1959: 163). To the question of “Who speaks the word?” he answers that it is language itself: “Language is: language. Language speaks [Die Sprache spricht]” (Heidegger 1959: 30). Which amounts to saying: nothing speaks. Or rather: nothingness speaks. “Language is the peal of silence,” says the Nazi of Freiburg (Heidegger 1959: 30), with the implication that neither the word nor the silence belongs to anyone. Both amount to nothing but the blank neutrality of being, which, indeed, is the inevitable conclusion of ontological thought: here the word is a blank that tries to fill in a blank.

Therefore, says Lévinas, in Heidegger “the Being of the existent is a Logos that is the word of no one” (Lévinas 1969: 299). The word of no one, it is a non-word, a being that is non-being and that summons no one to answer, an empty, unreal, and meaningless being that is justified only by resolve and a will to power—that is how “meaning” here is forced into a word that is otherwise merely a sound. It is true that Heidegger states, “The original thanksgiving is the echo of Being’s favor, through which the single individual is illuminated . . . . This echo is the human answer to the word of the silent voice of Being” (Heidegger 1967: 105). But this thanks is given to no one and to nothing—to nothingness itself; indeed, “Da-sein,” says Heidegger, “means being projected into nothingness” (Heidegger 1967: 12). Why? Because Being neither addresses nor can it be addressed. It remains a deaf and indifferent It. The thanksgiving of which Heidegger speaks, then, is empty, the very opposite of the thanks that a Jew offers each morning upon returning to consciousness, saying: מודה איני לראני (modeh ani lefaneikha), “I give thanks before You.”

As we shall see in the pages to follow, the notion of the word conveyed through these thinkers is quite unlike the teaching revealed through the Hebrew “equivalent” דavar (davar). Note, for example, that דavar means both “word” and “thing,” with the implication that the thing is a word: it is the word of the Divine utterance that constantly brings it into being. And, like the human being is created out of his or her name, it has a divinely determined meaning. From the standpoint of Jewish thought informed by the holy tongue, therefore, language is not a phenomenon within being; rather, being is a phenomenon within language. This is not to say, with Heidegger, that language is the house of being, since Heidegger does not take language to have anything like an “origin” in the One who is beyond being.

For Hebrew thought, language is not the house of being within being—it enters being from beyond being through the Word of the Creator of being. As we said in Chapter 1, the word is a breach of being, the avenue through which being is sanctified and thus made meaningful through the Utterance of the One who contains all of being. It is above all the word of someone who, through His word, sustains all of being. Therefore acquiring a new language is akin to acquiring a new dimension of what is beyond being. The Hebrew phrase that expresses the “suffering one goes through in learning a new language” is חטולبيان (chevlei lashon).
Since the word ח벨 (chevel) refers not only to suffering or pain but also to birth pangs, the phrase suggests that acquiring a new language is like giving birth to a new dimension of the soul, from above. And so it is.

Recall in this connection the teaching of the talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan, who maintained that when G-d created the heavens and the earth, His first utterance broke into seventy sparks, and from those seventy sparks emerged the seventy languages of the world (Shabbat 88b). To learn a new language is to acquire new sparks, and each spark corresponds to a dimension of Torah, the Word that precedes all utterance. Recall, too, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz’s commentary on the biblical verse “man lives not by bread alone, but by every utterance from the mouth of G-d does man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3). The verse, says the Rabbi, means that

... man does not live only from the calories provided by bread, but from Divine energy. This is what the Torah calls the “utterance from the mouth of the Lord.” It makes the bread “live” and forms its true essence. In other words, although superficially I am only eating matter, in fact I am ingesting language, because the raw material of bread is the Divine word. (Steinsaltz and Eisenberg 2000: 147)

Every “item” or “thing,” every “tool” or “utensil,” is also a “vessel,” as these possibilities of meaning for the word כלי (kli) suggest. A vessel of what? Of the Divine teaching and commandment, of the Divine word, by which it exists. Characteristic of Jewish thought, such an understanding of the word is completely foreign to Western speculative thought.

Further, none of the thinkers mentioned sees the word as a Divine commandment expressive of a Divine covenant. For Heidegger, language may speak; it might even call; but it does not command. Therefore, as Heidegger sees it, we may have the word, but we stand in no absolute relation to the Absolute. Hence we stand only in an existential relation, and not an ethical relation, to other human beings. With regard to Bakhtin, it is true that he has some sense of the Absolute; after all, he is a Christian. It is also true that Bakhtin has an interest in ethics that these others do not have. Heidegger, on the other hand, is a pagan who wantonly invokes “the trace of the fugitive gods” that is the object of the poet’s attention and the need for “the gods” to bring us to language (Heidegger 1971: 94), so that the word may take on its “naming power” (Heidegger 1951: 42). But it still has no ethical or commanding power. It certainly has no creative power, in the sense that Rabbi Steinsaltz points out. Neither Heidegger nor Bakhtin, then, connects the transcendent reality of the Divine word with the very concrete reality of bread as Rabbi Steinsaltz does.

As for Lacan, he speaks of the word as situated in a third position between two participants in a dialogue, in “a position of truth,” as he calls it (Lacan 1968: 269). For some of us, this may bring to mind the teaching from the Pirke Avot that when two are gathered together to study Torah, the Divine Presence is
there also (3:2). But for Lacan the word remains conceptual and abstract and conveys nothing so concrete as a Divine Presence. Even if it represents the position of truth, for Lacan it is a truth that is empty of any ethical authority: it may be the truth, but it is not the Good. All of the efforts of these speculative thinkers, then, are reduced to intellectual game playing against the background of what they all take to be a blank silence. But it is not “mere” game playing: the stakes in this game are very high indeed. Let us consider those stakes for a moment.

**Anti-word and the fundamental word**

One outcome of the strictly ontological interest in language has been precisely an undermining of language, a tearing of word from meaning in an undermining of meaning, and it assumes its most radical form when the Nazis tear asunder word and meaning to justify the extermination of a people. Indeed, in the Nazis we see that philosophical curiosity is no mere game playing: the tearing of word from meaning is more than a justification for the annihilation of the Jews—it is a definitive aspect of the Holocaust. This tearing is a tearing of husband from wife, of father from son, of human from human. It shows itself in the assertion from Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, when the head of a block tells the young Eliezer, “Here, there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone” (Wiesel 1982a: 105). Which means: words like *father* and *brother* signify nothing. Here the “signified,” à la Derrida, “never manages to take shape,” so that the human is no longer human and the “entity” now “lives” and “dies” ferociously alone.

This upshot of this Nazi position, which is perfectly in keeping with the postmodernist position, is manifest graphically and concretely one night in the Kingdom of Night, when, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk relates,

> The stillness was broken by the screaming of children, as if a single scream had been torn out of hundreds of mouths, a single scream of fear and unusual pain, a scream repeated a thousand times in the single word “Mama,” a scream that increased in intensity every second, enveloping the whole camp and every inmate. Our lips parted without our being conscious of what we were doing, and a scream of despair tore out of our throats, growing louder all the time.

*(Nomberg-Przytyk 1985: 83–84)*

What is the word that has its meaning torn from it by the roots, both by Nazi ideology and by the postmodern, Heideggerian thought that plays into its hands? It is the word *Mama*, a word transformed into a wordless scream. That scream is the sound of Auschwitz. It is the anti-word that overshadows the postmodern preoccupation with language and discourse, which begins already with the Nazi Martin Heidegger.
The philosophers transform the word into an anti-word by equating the word with being and thus fail to see the word as what Franz Rosenzweig calls “a bridge” between being and what exceeds being, a bridge made of mitzvot, of commandments. “The word is not part of the world,” he writes, “it is the seal of man” (Rosenzweig 1999b: 71). This “seal of man” that “consists of life and speech” is the trace of G-d within the human being. The word, therefore, is not reducible to vibrations of air and vocal cords or language games or systems of signs that refer to nothing but each other. Rather, its very manifestation is the manifestation of the transcendent. The word is the seal of man not merely because man speaks; rather, man speaks because he is created in the image of the Holy One.

Because the human being is created in the image of the Holy One, he or she is a breach of being. Hence, says Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “all things are subdivided into four categories—mineral, vegetable, animal, and man [or] ‘speaker’—corresponding with the four letters of the blessed Name” (Zalman 1981: 183). To the extent that philosophy equates the word with being and being with thought, it cannot get beyond the categories of mineral, vegetable, animal. In its speculative, ontological form, then, philosophy is dehumanizing. Here we realize that the ontological thinking of Western philosophy can make no more of the human being than a “highly evolved animal.” “But the notion of development,” Rosenzweig rightly points out, “deprives him [the human being] of the privilege of being human—a privilege which is also a duty. Evolution takes the place of man” (Rosenzweig 1999b: 89). Philosophy ultimately does not know what to make of language, because it does not know what to make of the human being.

If the word is the seal of man, moreover, it is addressed to man before any human utterance of the word, as Rabbi Steinsaltz indicates: “When we try to grasp the essence of Divine speech, we are conscious of something beyond man addressed to man, to which we can only give the name: the Word” (Steinsaltz 1989: 119). And what is the word that bridges worlds in a breach of being? What is the word that announces that the human being is created in the image and likeness of the Holy One? What is the word that eludes the philosophers of language and discourse? It is the word הָאָתָה (atah), the word “You,” the very one swallowed up by the Same, by the counterfeit I, which stands at the center of ontological, postmodern thought. That is why philosophy, particularly in its postmodern garb, is dehumanizing. That is why it does not know what to make of the word or of the human being: unable to see past the “I” that is in truth “nothing,” the אני (ani) that is יָאָתָה (ein), it does not know what to make of הָאָתָה.

“The word הָאָתָה (atah), You,” explains Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “indicates all the letters from Alef to Tav, and the letter Hey, the five organs of verbal articulation, the source of the letters” (Zalman 1981: 291). The five organs he refers to are the larynx, the palate, the tongue, the teeth, and the lips. Since ה (hey) is an abbreviation of the Divine Name, we might also read the addition of the ה to the א (alef) and the ת (tav) as the addition of the Divine Presence to all the words made of all the letters, from א to ת. The word הָאָתָה, then—and not the I of “I think, therefore I am”—would be the seal of the human being, the trace of the transcendent
Being within being, manifest in the word. The word תָּאָה is the word of the beginning that dispels the darkness over the face of the deep. It is not exactly the opposite of nothingness; rather, it is a category that is beyond the distinctions of being and nothingness. Just so, André Neher describes Abraham as “the inventor of the word,” because Abraham is the first figure in the Bible to use the word you (Neher 1981: 111): Abraham said תָּאָה (at), the feminine form of תָּאָה, to Sarah (Genesis 12:11).

If we consider further this feminine form of “you,” we find a striking possibility for interpreting the first four words of the Torah: תָּאָה וּבֵרֶשֵׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים (bereshit bara Elohim at), “In the beginning G-d created the ‘you’” (Genesis 1:1). Or: “In the beginning G-d created the letters from א to ת, the stuff of the word, which is תָּאָה: You.” In the beginning G-d created the avenue through which we may enter into a relation to Him.¹ For “in every You,” as Martin Buber has said, “we address the eternal You” (Buber 1970: 57). The trace of the divine in my fellow human being is the You in my fellow human being. Thus “the You knows no system of coordinates” (Buber 1970: 57). That is why “the face is signification, and signification without context” (Lévinas 1985: 86). To be sure, the face is the origin of the word: the face speaks. It speaks by declaring to us, “I am a You,” and in so saying, the face commands us to treat that human being with loving kindness. Says Lévinas, “A face enters into our world from an absolutely foreign sphere, that is, precisely from an absolute” (Lévinas 1987a: 96). Which is to say: the word תָּאָה that constitutes the face derives its meaning not from the relative reference of one sign to another or from a being that is under erasure, but from the Divine Presence that abides silently within the word, that abides in the silence of all tongues.

The word, then, is not just a sound but rather entails a tension between sound and silence, a tension that can assume a variety of forms. Let us explore what the Hebrew word reveals about that tension.

**Word as silence**

When Elijah retreated to his cave and sought a manifestation of G-d, the Holy One was not in the רוח (ruach), not in the “wind” or “spirit,” which is the wind of the emotions that stir within us; He was not in the רעש (raash), not in the “earthquake” or the “noise” that rages all about us; He was not in the אש, not in the “fire” that burns in the heat of passion. No, he was in the קול דממעה דקאה (kol demamah dakah), a phrase usually mistranslated as “still small voice” but which means “the voice of a thin silence” or the “thin voice of silence” (see 1 Kings 19:11–12).

As it happens everywhere, the holy tongue is here laden with revelation. First of all, notice that, contrary to Goethe’s claim (Goethe 1954: 281), the voice of G-d does not emerge from “feeling”: the רוח associated with the heart is not the seat of Divine utterance. Hence in the שמע G-d warns us velo taturu acharei levavkhem (velo taturu acharei levavkhem), that is, “not to follow after the heart” (Numbers 15:19). Which
means: the encounter with the word of G-d is not about feeling a certain way—it
is about receiving a certain understanding, a certain commandment, a certain
teaching, a certain meaning and mission. Indeed, the word for “feeling” or
“emotion,” רָגֶשׁ (regesh), can also mean “noise,” “commotion,” or “tumult.” The
point is that feelings can take us in all sorts of directions, so that we lose our way.
Fire or שָׁנָה has similar associations: what is needed is not so much a swoon of
passion as a concentrated capacity for listening. That capacity comes with the
insertion of the letter ו (yud) into the midst of the שָׁנָה to make שָׁנָה (ish), which is
“man”: with its numerical value of ten the yud signifies the Ten Utterances of G-d.
A man becomes a man when his fire becomes the focused fire for the G-d who is a
consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24). And G-d? He is not love; He is the command-
ment to love. The thin voice of silence is a summons not to get in touch with
yourself but to draw nigh unto G-d by way of the Divine commandment.

As for רָעָה, which translates as “earthquake,” G-d is not in the “din” or the
“roar” or the sheer “noise” of the world. To be sure, when all we hear is noise, the
earth shifts beneath our feet, and we plunge into the despair of wordlessness. This
rumbling of the void echoes in the noise we create, as Wiesel suggests: “The world
has become increasingly noisy. Society has never used so many means to tell,
report, investigate, explain, comment, articulate, reveal, expose, and criticize; no
generation has ever been more talkative—and no generation has managed to say
less” (Wiesel 1982c: 179). The opposite of this sound and fury signifying nothing,
the word abides in the הוד (kol), which translates not only as “sound,” as in the
phrase חַיִל שּׁוֹפַר (kol shofar) or “the sound of the shofar” (for example, Psalms 98:6),
but also as “voice”: from the standpoint of Jewish thought every sound is a voice.
And within every word there is a Voice other than our own, as Meir ibn Gabbai
has taught: “There is no uttered word that does not have a ‘Voice’” (Meir ibn
Gabbai 1989: 55). Laden with meaning and message, the הוד that is both sound
and voice cries out for a word, a thought, and a deed in response to the Divine
Word that speaks in the mode of silence, in the הוד הוד, which is the silence
that abides within every word uttered.

Abiding within the word, the Voice within the silence—the Voice in the mode
of silence—speaks from the depths of the cosmos, as Neher has said: “The silence
of the cosmos is simply the most eloquent form of the Divine revelation”
(Neher 1981: 10). Silence, therefore, is not the absence of sound any more than
darkness is the absence of light. In the daily prayers we bear witness to G-d who
יָטֵסָר אוֹ וַעֲרָךְ הַכֵּשֶׁךְ (yotser or uvore choshekh), who “forms light and creates darkness.”
This is understood to mean that G-d forms light out of the substance of Himself
and creates darkness out of nothing—or perhaps out of nothingness—as a
distinct reality. In a parallel manner, G-d forms the word out of the substance of
Himself and creates silence out of nothing. Here we realize that when the Torah
relates, “And G-d said, ‘Let there be light’” (Genesis 1:3), G-d’s saying is itself the
light. And yet, like the light hidden in the darkness, the word is hidden in the
silence. As both are made of Divine utterance, both emerge from the holy
tongue: even when He is silent, G-d is silent in Hebrew. Of course, where G-d is
concerned, silence is not a blank—it is Divine utterance. Silence, too, is Torah. Hence the talmudic teaching of the sage Rabbi Sheshet: “G-d’s appearance is announced by a deep silence” (Berakhot 58a).

Recall in this connection an insight from Resh Lakish cited in the Midrash: “The Torah scroll that was given to Moses was made of a parchment of white fire, and was written upon with black fire and sealed with fire and was swathed with bands of fire” (Devarim Rabbah 3:12). The black fire is word. The white fire is silence. Neither is merely fire: they are fire as word, fire as silence, each defining the other, each harboring meaning. As Rabbi Levi Yitschak of Berditchev has taught, when G-d gave Moses the Torah, He gave not only the words but also the silence between and around the words (quoted in Wiesel 1985, Vol. 2: 82). What, then, do the Hebrew words revealed tell us about the revelation of the silence?

**Word over against silence**

“If language and silence were not in conflict,” Wiesel has said, “language would not be poetic, literary, or truthful” (Wiesel 1985, Vol. 3: 109). “Poetry” or “song”—the הライ(שִׁיר) of language—is about imparting extraordinary meaning to ordinary words. It is about releasing the divine sparks of meaning from words. It is about attending to the שִׁירְאָל , the voice of silence. In very specialized philosophical terms, Lévinas expresses this idea by saying,

Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts. This possibility is laid bare in the poetic said, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum.

(Lévinas 1981: 169–170)

One begins to see why the most mystical book of the Bible is called the מִשְׁרַע (Shir HaShirim), the “Song of Songs,” of which Rabbi Akiva declared, “All the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies” (Mishnah Yadayim 3:5). Singing of the relation between G-d and humanity, the מִשְׁרַע שִׁיר sings of the relation between word and silence, between word and meaning, so that its words overflow with meaning. More than the word can contain, meaning arises from a realm of “speech before speech,” as Rosenzweig states it, “the speech of the unspoken, the unspeakable” (Rosenzweig 1972: 80). Hence meaning belongs to silence: the word is uttered and defined, while the silence that belongs to the word opens up its mystical dimension of meaning, which is inexhaustible.

For the same reason that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson 鋆ז, teaches that our aim in life is to transform darkness into light (Schneerson 1986b: 4), so is it our aim to transform silence into utterance—not to hide or fill the silence, however, but to transmit it, so that we “somehow charge
words with silence,” as Wiesel puts it (Wiesel 1985, Vol. 2: 119). For similar reasons Rosenzweig asserts that he who has not written poetry is not human (Rosenzweig 1972: 245–246). Here, as everywhere, the conflict between word and silence is one in which each needs the other in order to be what it is, as the white fire needs the black fire. If the word should utterly overwhelm the silence, we would have nothing but noise, nothing but the sound of the ground crumbling from under our feet; if silence should completely swallow up the word, we would be turned over to the nothingness of the beginning, to the chaos (tohu vavohu, from Genesis 1:2), which is broken and thus ordered by the word. “Truth” or אמת (emet) lies in a tension, in an embrace, between the word and silence; it is made of the conflict Wiesel refers to. Consisting of the beginning, the middle, and the end of the alphabet, אמת contains the whole alphabet, all words and silences that are connected to meaning. It contains the silence of all tongues.

As we have seen from the passage in 1 Kings, one word for “silence” or “stillness” in the holy tongue is אָמַם (demamah). A cognate that also means “silence” or “stillness” is דמוא (dumah), which is the name of the guardian angel of the dead, who sits in judgment over the souls of Gehinnom. The implication? That the judgment of HaShem lies not so much in pronouncing a sentence as in refraining from pronouncing anything: to be judged for our sin is to receive the Divine silent treatment.

Here silence is a condition of being isolated from the word: the word animates, while silence renders inanimate. This is the lesson we learn from the word דומא (domem), which means “inanimate.” Where there is word, there is life; where there is silence, there is death. Hence the verb נדָם (nadam), which is to “be silenced” or “rendered mute,” also means to “be destroyed.” And the word that destroys us comes not from beyond us but from our own lips. Each time we judge another we condemn ourselves; each time we turn another over to silence, we are ourselves rendered mute. When G-d enjoins us to choose life over death (Deuteronomy 30:19), He summons us to choose word over silence—or a word that transmits silence—by offering a word in response to His word. As the animating dimension of human being, then, the word that imparts life to us comes not only from the Giver of Life beyond but also from the Giver of Life within.

Another Hebrew word for “silent” is איל (ilem); it also means “mute.” In this word we find a silence that is opposed to the eloquent silence of the Divine utterance. It appears, for instance, in the psalms of King David, where he gives voice to this very silence, crying, אני איל (neelamti dumiyah), “I was mute, silent” or “I was struck dumb with silence” (Psalms 39:3). Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira explains the meaning of איל by describing it as a silence that overcomes a person . . . so broken and crushed that he has nothing to say; who does not appreciate or understand what is happening to him; who does not possess the faculties with which to assess or assimilate his experiences; who no longer has the mind or the heart with which to incorporate the
experience. For him, silence is not a choice; his is the muteness of one incapable of speech.

(Shapira 2000: 22)

Because this muteness is the muteness of a human being, however, within it lies hidden an outcry. Indeed, the muteness itself “stands erect,” as Rabbi Shapira says (Shapira 2000: 23), like Joseph’s “sheaf,” which, in a play on רוח, is רוח (alumah). The muteness of רוח is more than deafening; it is defiant and accusing. It announces a certain dialectic between word and silence.

One finds an illustration of this dialectic in the holy tongue itself: while宁静 (sheket) means “silence,” “hush,” “quiet,” or “calm” and implies a certain peacefulness, 和静 (shatkan) is more like an imposed “silence.” The latter’s cognate 和 (shitek), for instance, means to “silence,” as well as to “paralyze.” One implication of what is revealed in this word becomes clear in an example from a novel by Elie Wiesel, in which his main character, the Russian Jewish poet Paltiel Kossover, collides with a paralyzing silence. Listen to Paltiel, as he speaks from the solitary confinement of a Soviet prison cell:

As an adolescent in Liyanov, I yearned for silence . . . . I spent hours with a disciple of the Hasidic school of Worke, whose rebbe had turned silence into a method . . . . Later, with Rebbe Mendel-the-Taciturn, we tried to transcend language. At midnight, our eyes closed, our faces turned toward Jerusalem and its fiery sanctuary, we listened to the song of its silence—a celestial silence and yet terrible silence in which both voices and moments attain immortality. No master had ever warned me that silence could be nefarious, evil.

(Wiesel 1981: 207)

Here we recall the insights from Lévinas, in his discussion of the “there is” cited in Chapter 7. With the appearance of the “there is,” says Lévinas, “the absence of everything returns to us as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence” (Lévinas 1987b: 46). That “murmur” of silence is a death sentence—or worse, as Paltiel discovered: it is a being sentenced to languish under the gaze of Dumah, the angel who silently presides over the dead, for whom death is not the last but is continually the last. Like the horror of the “there is,” silence means: there is no getting it over with.

A slogan associated with a famous horror film comes to mind; it speaks to what is truly horrifying to any human being. It is: “In space no one can hear you scream.” To ponder this line is to feel the horror grow: in space not only does no one hear you scream—in space you hear no one scream. Not even yourself. In space the silence that overwhelms you is the silence not only of the cosmos and your muteness, but also of your being שורש (charash), that is, “silent” as in “deaf.” Here, to recall the words of Paltiel Kossover, silence “acts on the imagination
and sets it on fire. It acts on the soul and fills it with night and death” (Wiesel 1981: 209). Thus we are reminded once more that just as darkness is not the absence of light, silence is not the absence of sound. And we are reminded that death is not the absence of life. A passage from Josef Bor’s *Terezín Requiem*, a novel about the camp at Theresienstadt, drives this point home:

The silence had penetrated here, Schächter realized, from outside, from above, from everywhere, and now it spread throughout the room, strident and imperative; it overwhelmed everything, froze the walls into dumbness, maimed the people; not even a quiver of air moved here now. The murmur is silenced, the hum of everyday life, which at other times flows everywhere, in the streets, in the house, even in yourself, though you are solitary . . . . And suddenly the hum has ceased. At first you don’t even realize that something has happened. There is only a chill somewhere in the marrow of your bones, as though the coldness of the dark night had touched you. As though the breath of death itself had wafted over you . . . . Then suddenly you are aware of the silence.

(Bor 1963: 41–42)

Like darkness and death, silence is a veil that hides the light, the life, and the word of G-d. In order to make manifest the holiness of the Holy One, we must transform silence into the word—not by “filling” the silence with words, words, words, but by making the silence itself speak. But how? Lévinas suggests one way. “In giving,” he says, “silence speaks” (Lévinas 1998: 74), and “giving,” הַו (hav), is at the root of “love” or אהבה (ahavah). Love leads us to write poetry because love improves our hearing; like prayer, poetry is every bit as much about listening as it is about speaking. To “get” the poem is to hear the eloquence of the silence that it calls forth through its manifestation of love. It is not for nothing that when we pray aloud the קְרִאָת שֵׁם (kriat Shema)—the “recitation” or “calling forth” of the “Hear, O Israel” prayer in the morning service—the line that opens the שֵׁם (shema) or “hear” is both preceded and followed by forms of the word אהב or love: having chosen us with love, G-d cries out to us that if we love, we shall hear, and if we hear, we shall love. For love is the giving, the הַו, that makes silence speak. Once again we find an illustration of this insight in Wiesel’s *The Testament*, where Paltiel’s son Grisha gives himself over to a muteness that cries out louder than any word. For his father, silence was a prison; for Grisha, silence was a living sanctuary, a sanctuary over which he kept a most stern vigil: in order to protect his father at a moment when his father was threatened—when the KGB wanted him to “talk”—Grisha bit off his own tongue (Wiesel 1981: 304–305). Thus Grisha became a singing mute who pursues silence in words and words in silence, a poet “not like his father” but “in place of his father” (Wiesel 1981: 17). For Grisha, silence was the language of prayer and the substance of language (cf. Wiesel 1982b: 171–172).
As noted in Chapter 4, before we stand to pray in silence, we utter the words that King David cried out: אֲדֹנָיָ֖ו שֵׁפֶטָ֣י תַףּ֑א יִתְנַלְּכ֞ה יֵ אוֹר נַיִּי תֵּהלֶֽכָּהוּ (Adonai sfatai tiftach ufi yagid tehilatekha), “Lord open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise” (Psalms 51:17). But why do we ask G-d to open our lips, when we are about to pray in silence? This prayer that precedes the prayer calls upon G-d to do more than open our lips: we ask G-d to open up our “languages,” for the word שפה (safah) also means “language.” Which “language?” Both the language of our own utterance and the language of the Divine silence, our two “lips,” so to speak.

The one in prayer asks G-d to help him make heard the “silent Voice” that Rabbi Eleazar describes as “the supernal Voice from which all other voices proceed” (Zohar I, 210a). What is the silent Voice from which all other voices proceed? It is the voice of the א (alef) that precedes the ב (beit) in the first utterance of creation. It is the א that abides silently in every utterance, in every word, as the Baal Shem Tov has said (Keter Shem Tov 45: 355).

When in gematria, or numerical interpretation, we sometimes calculate the numerical value of a word and then add the kollel or one more, it is not simply one for the word itself, as some suppose; no, it is one for the א, for the silence, within the word. It indicates, as Matityahu Glazerson points out, that the root of the word is still in the upper realms, in the silent realms (Glazerson 1997: 68), where the א silently abides prior to the utterance of the ב in בראשית. And the upper realms, according to Chayyim Vital, are the inner realms (see Shaarei Kedushah, Part 3, Gate 1). The א, therefore, resides in every word, indeed, in every letter. Thus in the Psalms it is written, יומ יומ יב Yom leyom yabiya omer velailah lelailah yechveh daat; ein omer veein devarim, “Day utters speech unto day, and night expresses knowledge unto night; [yet] there is no utterance and there are no words” (Psalms 19:3). But there is a silence that makes possible the psalm itself. It is the silence that makes possible the word as utterance. And it is the word that makes possible the world.

**World and utterance**

In the kabbalistic metaphor for the unfolding of creation, the ten sefirot “condense,” as it were, from the first sefirah of Keter to the tenth sefirah of Malkhut; it is the process by which all the worlds come into being. As pure Divine Will, Keter, or the “Crown,” belongs to the uppermost of the upper realms. In the process of creation, which transpires at every instant, spiritual worlds come into being with the contraction or withdrawal, with the תִּסְכָּמ (tsimtsum), of the Holy One, until finally our own world appears, the world associated with Malkhut, which is Sovereignty or the “Kingdom.” Just as the Divine Will is couched in Keter, so is speech manifest in Malkhut in the form of the Shekhinah, the Divine Indwelling Presence. “On the day the Shekhinah was affixed with speech,” says the great mystic Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, “she was affixed in her place below” (Gikatilla 1994: 337). Speech cannot happen until this world happens, and this world cannot be sustained without speech. Hence, says Rosenzweig, “where
there is world there is speech also. The world is never without the word. Indeed it only exists in the word, and without the word there would be no world” (Rosenzweig 1972: 295). In a word, both world and speech require the Divine Presence of the Shekhinah.

Once she is affixed to her place through speech, moreover, the Shekhinah opens up the dimension of time. The world is never without the word, because the world requires time in order to be, and time unfolds through the word that draws two beings into a single relation. “The other is the future,” Lévinas states it. “It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration” (Lévinas 1987b: 77). Therefore, requiring time, the world requires relation in order to be a world. Where there is world enough, there is time, as time is rooted in the responsive utterance of the word, in the light of having been addressed by another. In a very important sense, therefore, G-d does not create time—we do. That is why Rabbi Nachman of Breslov does not count time among the things created in the beginning; creation is a beginning outside of time (see Nachman of Breslov 1980: 88). It is not until the sixth day, with the appearance of the human being and human relation, that creation culminates in the emergence of time. Therefore Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary not of the first day of creation but of the sixth day, when humanity came into being: it is the anniversary of the beginning of time.

Whereas ontological thought first assumes time and then pursues the word, Jewish thought proceeds from the word and then seeks time in the utterance of the word, in the word that summons the utterance yet to be uttered. Articulating a future, this yet to be articulates the essence of time, which is the “future” or the atid (atid). This word articulates time by suggesting a “time sure to come,” as in the phrase atid l- or atid she-. Why “sure to come?” Because, as Lévinas has rightly said, the “future world” is “the possibility of rediscovering the first meaning, which would be the ultimate meaning of every word” (Lévinas 1990a: 66). Therefore the future does not derive from the past and present; rather, the past and present derive from the future, where the meaning of the word is waiting to be revealed. The future is the realm of meaning and mission, so that, inasmuch as they are meaningful, the past and present as such derive from the future. If, as Abraham Joshua Heschel maintains, sacred history lies in seeing the past in the present, so that we are forever contemporary with the past (Heschel 1955: 211–212), it is because the future imparts meaning to both. From the standpoint of sacred history, then, past, present, and future parallel creation, revelation, and redemption. It is the redemption we seek that makes our seeking matter.

This point brings to mind the teaching from the Baal Shem Tov that, as oblivion is tied to exile, so is memory tied to redemption (quoted in Wiesel 1973: 227). Recall, too, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh’s insight that “the word ‘memory’ [zikaron] itself, in Hebrew, means ‘a source of speech’” (Ginsburgh 1991: 4). And the source of speech is not just a voice buried in the past but a summons that calls from the future. As Rav Kook states it, “the future does not desist from demanding of the present its role, and the present becomes interesting to the
degree that it knows the future is in need of it” (Kook 1993: 157). The movement “forward,” toward the future is an answer to the call, the demand, and the need of the future. Thus from what has been said—and contrary to the logic of speculative thought—we see that memory is memory of the future. It is a mindfulness of what I shall have been, in the light of what I am becoming, even after my death. Why? Because I must answer for what I shall have been, especially after my death. Because what I shall have been lies in a responsibility that exceeds the temporal horizon of my life. That is why time is in the word, and not the word in time; the word is an invitation to utterance, which is an invitation to becoming.

Hence, as we saw in Chapter 5, זמַן (zman), the word for “time,” is also הזמֵן (zi’men), a word that means to “invite” or “summon together,” as if to say, “Someone would like to have a word with you.” The idea that time is in the word is also made clear in the word פָּאַמְי (paami), which means “time,” in the sense of occasion or occurrence (as in one time or two times), as well as “beat” or “tempo.” Inasmuch as the word is a vessel of time, it contains a rhythm or a beat, like the beating of a heart. More than anything else, tempo or beat is what distinguishes poetry from prose. And poetry is from the heart. To be sure, from the standpoint of Jewish thought informed by the holy tongue, the heart beats not because it is in time but because it contains time. And because the heart contains time, it is a portal to the One who is beyond time. When do words connect with meaning? When they come from a heart inscribed with Torah.

The world we live in, on the other hand—the postmodern world that has emerged from ontological speculative thought—is heartless. Which is to say: it is a world without exit, a Humpty-Dumpty world in which a word can mean anything and therefore means nothing. In short, it is a world in which we have no sense of time or future because it is a world in which everything is “all the same.” Lévinas describes it by saying,

The contemporary world, scientific, technical, and sensualist, sees itself without exit—that is, without G-d—not because everything there is permitted and, by way of technology, possible, but because everything there is equal . . . . Everything is absorbed, sucked down and walled up in the Same.

(Lévinas 1998: 12)

Having no exit, we have to time. Where shall we find the “exit,” the מֹצַע (motsa), that returns us to time? In the “speech” or “utterance” that returns us to the “origin” or “source”—all of which are other meanings of מֹצַע. Walled up within the Same, where each hour is the same as the other, we languish in a timeless indifference. In vain we wait for a word, for a message in the bottle, for something to happen. But nothing ever does. Every day is Groundhog Day. No matter what happens.

What Lévinas describes as a world without exit is also a world without entry, so that in our wordless despair we do not dwell in the world; rather, we are “thrown”
into the world only to eternally stand before it like a stranger forever waiting outside. Such is a world in which the finite equates only with the finite, so that there is no room for the Infinite One, no room for word and utterance. It is a world shut up and shut off, in which each human being is utterly alone. Where does an entry open up? Drawing on a theme already established, we must say that a portal opens up wherever we open up by offering another human being a word of loving kindness. An utterance that has meaning is an utterance of love. If “speech is the breath of the lips of the Holy One, blessed be He,” as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches (Nachman of Breslov 1983: 75–76), it is because speech is the first manifestation of love in the world. Therefore, says Rabbi Nachman, “the roots of speech lie in charity” (Nachman of Breslov 1983: 238), in תְּשֵׁדָקָה (tsedakah), which is also “justice” and “righteousness.” “Who is it that ‘makes’ the Holy Name every day?” the Zohar asks. “He that gives charity (tsedakah) to the poor makes the Holy Name complete as it should be above, since tsedakah is the Tree of Life” (Zohar III, 113b). And the Tree of Life is precisely the tsedek that G-d enjoins us to seek, saying, בַּעֲשֵׂיָתָנוּ תְּשֵׁדָקָה (Tsedek, tsedek tirdof): “Justice, justice shall you seek” (Deuteronomy 16:20). As the realm of “being,” the world is not couched in thought, as thinkers from Descartes to Heidegger have argued; it is couched in תְּשֵׁדָקָה and תְּשֵׁדָק, in the charity about to be offered, in the justice about to be done. Therein lies the righteousness that “makes” the Holy Name.

Examining the word תְּשֵׁדָקָה more closely, we find that the “righteous ones,” the תְּשִׁדְּקִים (tsadikim), are precisely the ones who preserve the Holy Name by watching over the word. In the Midrash, therefore, it is written, “There is no difference between the righteous [כְּפַרְכִּים] and the wicked except the power of speech” (Kohelet Rabbah 9:10:2). And from where does speech derive its power? From the Holy Name, which signifies not the power of megatons but, in a sense, the power of “nothing,” as the Chasidic master Aharon of Karlin (1736–1772) learned when he went to study with the Great Maggid of Mezeritch. “When asked what he learned in Mezeritch, Aharon said, ‘I have learned nothing in Mezeritch. Or to be more precise: I have learned the meaning of the word “nothing”—the mystery which envelops all words’” (Wiesel 1982c: 38). The mystery that envelops all words is “nothing,” because the Holy Name is nothing that can be named. It designates nothing within the landscape of being but rather signifies precisely what makes that landscape meaningful. It is the שֵׁם הָמִיתְרָש (Shem Hameforash), which is the “Ineffable Name” that transforms silence into eloquence. As it is written in the Sefer Yetzirah, “All that is formed and all that is spoken emanates from one Name” (2:5), from the Name that surpasses utterance. In the light of the Holy Name, the word is not a signifier that merely refers to another signifier, until no sense can be made of it; no, the word is a silence signifying sound and sense.

This brings us to an insight into the link between the word and the חַשְׁמָל (chashmal) in Ezekiel’s vision, the “electrum” that the prophet saw amidst clouds of flame (Ezekiel 1:4). In modern Hebrew חַשְׁמָל translates as “electricity”; biblical scholars maintain that the word designates a brightly polished metal. On a deeper level, however, the sages of the Talmud teach that the word חַשְׁמָל is
made of the words שָׁחַשׁ (chash)—from רָשָׁחַשׁ (chashai), meaning “silent”—and מָלַק (mal), which means to “speak” (see Chagigah 13b). The word מָלַק, of course, is the root of מִלַח (milah), meaning “word” or “speech.” What, then, did Ezekiel “see?” He saw a “speaking silence.” Which is to say: he saw the word that gives utterance to the world and thus confers meaning upon the world.

In this speaking silence that is מִלָּח (milah), the “word” that is the “covenant” (brit) articulated through “circumcision” (מִלַח). If, as Rosenzweig says, where there is world there is word, it may also be said that where there is world there is covenant. That is what the “word within the word” is: covenant. And that is the entry that is also the exit of which Lévinas spoke: covenant. This point becomes clear if we note that the difference between מִלַח and מִלַח, between word and covenant, is the insertion of a י (yud) into the word, which is the addition of ten to the word, which is the revelation of the Ten Utterances. Revelation transforms the word—any word—into a sign of the Covenant. Revelation makes silence speak, and when silence speaks, covenant happens. That is why it is written in the Tosefta that circumcision weighs as much as the deeds of creation (see Nedarim 2:5): as covenant—as מִלַח—that is מִלַח, just as מִלַח points to bara, the word meaning “[He] created.”

If מִלַח or circumcision weighs as much as the deeds of creation, then, it is due to the interrelation between world and utterance: as we have seen, where there is world there is word or מִלַח. And where there is the מִלַח that is מִלַח there is “language” or לשון (lashon), which derives from the Divine Utterance of the לשון הקדוש (leshon hakodesh), the “holy tongue.” Inasmuch as language is itself revelation, and not merely the medium of revelation, this מִלַח is a circumcision of the word itself; that is to say, it is an opening up or laying bare of the לשון that is both “language” and “tongue.” Such is the meaning of what is known in the Sefer Yetzirah as the מִלַח חַלָּשֶׁן (milat halashon) or the “circumcision of the tongue” (see Sefer Yetzirah 1:3). The “circumcision of the tongue,” Aryeh Kaplan explains, “refers to the ability to utilize the mysteries of the Hebrew language. It also refers to the ability to explore the mysteries of the Torah” (Sefer Yetzirah 1990: 35). The two mysteries are of a piece: the revelation couched in the Hebrew language is the revelation of Torah. Therefore, if we seek the essence of Jewish thought revealed through the Hebrew language, we seek the essence of Torah, which, as we have seen, is the blueprint of the world (Zohar I, 5a). Sounding the depths of the holy tongue, we probe the dimensions of meaning that go into the world.

One realizes, then, why the talmudic sage Rabbi Eleazar associates the abuse of the word with idolatry (see Sanhedrin 92a). As the worship of a false god, idolatry is the worship of a false word, a word that has been torn from meaning. Likewise, it is the worship of a false world, of a world that is לֹ-מָמָשׁ (lo-mamashi), “unreal” and without “substance.” As it is written in the Psalms, the idol has eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear. Above all, the idol has lips that do not speak (see Psalms 115:5). Its language is the anti-language of “violence” or שָׁחַשׁ (chamas), a word that
also means “injustice,” “oppression,” “wrong,” and “cruelty.” Idolatry, therefore, is the 실탄 (ed chamas) or “false witness”—literally the “testimony of violence”—that threatens both world and utterance. It is what the Talmud calls עבודה זרה (avodah zarah), the “strange” or “alien worship” that Bachya ibn Paquda refers to when he writes, “What had been strange in their world became known to them, while the right way was strange to them” (Chovot HaLevavot 9:2). Its radical manifestation in the twentieth century is the anti-world of the concentrationary universe created by the Nazis, when the world fell silent in the face of an imposed silence. As Emil Fackenheim has said, “Once idolatry is mentioned, there appears the spectre of Auschwitz, and with it the end of the age-old Christian claim that idolatry is vanquished” (Fackenheim 1994: 71). Why the association between Auschwitz and idolatry? It is not merely because Auschwitz signifies a worship of the word of the Führer. More than that, it is because, as André Neher has said, “Auschwitz is, above all, silence” (Neher 1981: 141). With Auschwitz the world loses its utterance. With Auschwitz the world becomes unreal.

The most sophisticated spokesman for the silence that is Auschwitz is the twentieth century’s most famous philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who declared that the “will to power” designates the basic character of beings; any being which is, insofar as it is, is will to power” (Heidegger 1979, Vol. 1: 18). Auschwitz is the ultimate manifestation of humanity reduced to a “will to power.” It is the end and culmination of Western civilization. And Heidegger is its herald. In the face of the ontological meaninglessness that characterizes a world in which power is the only reality—a world awash in the ashes of the dead—the question cries out: how shall we effect a return to life?

**Language, life, and meaning**

The question of the interrelation of language, life, and meaning is a question concerning not only the nature of reality but also the *significance* of reality. And yet, strictly speaking, there is no word in Hebrew for “reality.” Yes, in modern Hebrew there is the foreign word מציאות (realiyut), but it is just that: a foreign word. The Hebrew word for “reality” is מציאות (metsiyut), a noun that derives from מצא (matsa), which means “find,” to “discover,” “reveal,” “meet,” and “happen.” From the standpoint of Jewish thought informed by the Hebrew language, reality is *about something*. It is not merely something we happen upon; it is something that happens upon us. It entails receiving a message through an encounter with *someone*; it is not what merely stands mutely before us. In this connection Heschel writes,

To the Western man, [reality] is *a thing in itself*; to the Biblical Man, it is *a thing through G-d.* Looking at a thing his eyes see not so much form, color, force and motion as an act of G-d. The world is a gate, not a wall.

(Heschel 1955: 97–98)
If the world is a gate, it is because the world is a word: to behold an act of G-d is to receive a ד"ר (davar) or “word.”

Since ד"ר also means “thing,” we see that there is indeed no “thing in itself” that abides in the solitary silence of being; rather, the thing or ד"ר is a Divine utterance. Other meanings of ד"ר are “matter,” “saying,” “message,” and “command.” Which suggests: the Divine message is precisely a command. Lévinas makes this point when he says, “The attributes of G-d are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of G-d comes to us like a commandment, like a Mitzvah. To know G-d is to know what must be done” (Lévinas 1990a: 17). Just so, the ד"ר that is a thing through G-d is a commandment received from G-d. And life is made of that commandment. Strictly speaking, life does not have meaning; life is meaning, because life is ד"ר. To receive meaning in one’s life is to receive a ד"ר that is a summons to a mission. And there is no sound—no event or phenomenon—that is not a ד"ר. So we see why the Zohar states that there is nothing in the world “which does not produce a certain sound” (Zohar I, 92a). And, in the words of Lévinas, “to really hear a sound is to hear a word” (Lévinas 1994: 148). Hearing, we hear a ל"ק or a “voice,” as suggested above: in every sound, Someone speaks. Here too we see the Jewish thinking of “Biblical Man,” that is, of the human being fashioned in the image and likeness of the holy tongue.

To hear a word, moreover, is to hear more than a commandment; it is to hear the commandment to hear. And so we are commanded each day in the utterance of the Shema, the prayer in which G-d cries out through our own lips, “Hear, O Israel!” Indeed, the verb שמע (shama) means not merely to “hear” but to “heed” and to “understand.” The Shema is more than “Hear, O Israel!” It is saying, “Pay attention, O Israel, and receive meaning!” Therefore, Rosenzweig has rightly noted, “the commandment is the first content to drop into this attentive hearing” (Rosenzweig 1972: 176). Hearing the commandment to hear, we hear the words that follow, the וָהֲוָת” (veahavta), which is the commandment to love the One who commands. The message? It is this: if you hear—if you fathom—that G-d is One, then you will realize that you already love G-d. For you are made of that love. And where there is such love, there is language, life, and meaning.

To hear the commanding word of G-d, moreover, is to burn with the consuming fire of G-d and yet not be consumed. Made of language, life, and meaning, the soul is made of that fire. Hence the teaching from the Book of Proverbs discussed in Chapter 6: נר חם אדם (ner HaShem nishmat adam), “The soul of the human being is the candle of HaShem” (Proverbs 20:27). Recall, too, the related teaching that נר מצויה ותורה (ner mitsvah veTorah or), “The commandment is the candle and the Torah the light” (Proverbs 6:23). Saadia Gaon connects this light of meaning with life and language, saying, “[The soul] attains luminosity as a result of the light which it receives from G-d, except that its substance becomes . . . even finer than that of the spheres. That is how it came to be endowed with the power of speech” (Sefer Emunot Vedeot 6:3). The light from G-d is Torah, and Torah is the commanding word. The human being attains the “power of speech” inasmuch as he or she hears and heeds the commanding
word through an act of response: the organ of hearing is the tongue, the لسانُ which is language. If Abraham was not whole until he was circumcised, as it is written in the Talmud (Nedarim 31b), then the tongue too is not whole until its circumcision. It becomes whole when it becomes the organ of hearing, and not just of speaking. And it becomes the organ of hearing when it becomes the site where language, life, and meaning come together.

A striking Hebrew expression comes to mind in this connection. While הבarking (navach) is the usual verb meaning to “bark,” the expression חרטס לשונו (charats leshono) also translates as to “bark” or to “snarl” but literally means to “cut” one’s tongue, as if one had lost the capacity for language or speech—as if one had lost his very humanity. This idea unfolds in graphic form in Silvano Arieti’s Holocaust novel The Parnas, where the title character suffers from a fear of dogs. When the Nazis invade his native town of Pisa and proceed to beat him to death, he realizes what the fear is about, what G-d would have him hear in his very fear: it is a fear of those who have lost their humanity. Over and over, as the beasts pound him, he repeats, “Animals with a snout, fur, four claws, and a tail,” as though in a hypnotic trance:

But what was to be hypnotic for others was for him the stupendous unveiling of his life secret. Yes, G-d was with him. By making the Nazis appear as animals, G-d was revealing that his past fears were indeed the fear of human evil, of which the Nazis were the most perfect representatives in all of human history.

(Arieti 1979: 140)

Reduced to the barking of animals, the Nazis embodied not just human evil but the radical human evil that robs the human being of his human image. In the Nazi the snarl of the beast took over the tongue.

Read in this context, a teaching from the Midrash takes on an even deeper meaning: “Everything depends on the tongue, even death and life. A man who gains Torah gains life, for Torah is called a Tree of Life . . . . It is Torah that is a healing for the tongue” (Midrash Tehilim 2:52.2; see also Devarim Rabbah 1:1). To heal the tongue is to regain the human image by transforming the bark into speech, which is precisely what happens when G-d breathes the word into the human being. Here the word נפש, which means both “language” and “speech,” once again comes to mind, for נפש also means “edge” or “border.” As the stuff of life and meaning, language traces a border between the physical and the metaphysical, between the barking being that characterizes profanity and the breach of being that constitutes our humanity. Emerging from the edge of another realm, language is a border that is also an opening. It both separates the physical from the metaphysical and joins the two together. That is precisely why language is the stuff of life and meaning: it is the house both of being and of what transcends being—that is, being as we know it, what the kabbalists call the World of Action, the Olam Asiyah, which is the realm of speech. For speech is an action.
Because life is saturated with meaning, moreover, it is permeated with promise. Not only does life speak and command—it promises. Here we come to another word for “speech,” the word רמר (omer), which also translates as “utterance,” “word,” and “saying”; it is from the verb רמר (amar), which is to “say,” to “tell,” to “name”—and to “promise.” To have a name is to have a promise, which in turn is to have a future. And, as we have seen, to have a future is to have meaning. Meaning is not given—it is promised to the one who seeks it. To be named and thus to be promised, then, is to receive a word, an רמר, from beyond being in an affirmation of being: it is to receive the word ים. To answer to one’s name and thus seek what is promised is to cry out the word ים. Yes to what? To the Divine pronunciation that creation is good, worthwhile, and meaningful. Yes to the truth, so that those who seek the truth speak the truth. Yes to the One who at every instant says “Yes” to us in His saying of “Here I am.” For “Here I am” means “Yes.”

Once again the holy tongue opens our eyes to these interconnections. In Hebrew ים (ken), the word for “yes,” also means “sincere,” “honest,” and “truthful,” as in the word ים (kenut). Related words include רמר (nakhon), which is “correct” or “true”; כה (kinah), a verb meaning to “name”; מוק (mukhan), which means “ready” or “prepared”; and קוב (kavanah), meaning “intention” or “purpose,” in the sense of being focused on a goal. All of these meanings underlie Rosenzweig’s comments on the primal significance not just of “yes” but of ים when he says,

Such is the power of the Yea that it adheres everywhere, that it contains unlimited possibilities of reality. It is the arch-word of language, one of those which first make possible, not sentences, but any kind of sentence-forming words at all. . . . It is the silent accompaniment of all parts of a sentence, the confirmation, the “sic!” the “Amen” behind every word.

(Rosenzweig 1972: 27)

Meaning is not only in the word; the word is in meaning. The word—every word—contains the cry of meaning ready, ים, to burst forth: the word uttered with ים and ים, with honesty and intensity, is pregnant with meaning. Or better: it is the word about to be uttered that forever seeks to join with meaning. And to join with meaning is to say ים.

Looking more closely at the cognates ים, read as “true,” and ים, to “name,” we see that, inasmuch as the word harbors a “yes,” the word pronounces a truth. And if having a name entails living up to a name, then to have a name is to be summoned to live in such a way that your name itself pronounces a truth. For we are named precisely in order to pronounce a truth. The word is never without the truth. That is what makes it possible to lie. And truth, ים, is never nameless: it is a who, not a what, a living presence and not a dead datum. Containing the beginning, the middle, and the end of all letters, ים contains all utterance and every name. It bespeaks the Holy Name without naming the Name.
Here we come to הַנִּמְנָן, which Buber describes as “a ray of G-d’s glory that abides in every human being and means redemption. And this is redemption: that the Shekina returns home from exile” (Buber 1969: 33). Buber goes on to conclude, “This is the meaning, the definition of kavana: that it is given to man to raise the fallen and to free the captive” (Buber 1969: 35). Once again we find that freedom lies not in doing whatever we want to do; rather, it lies in the realization of what must be done. Or better: it lies in the intensity, in the הַנִּמְנָן, with which we pursue what must be done. The word הַנִּמְנָן, therefore, does not designate a wish or a desire; it is not the will to power espoused by Nietzsche or the resolve invoked by Heidegger. It is the devotion to a purpose and a meaning not of our own making. No one can make up a word or a language; a code, yes, but a language or a word? No. The word is the manifestation of a purpose and meaning, a הַנִּמְנָן, that says “Yes” to us in a calling out of our name before we know our name. It is the determination to step before the Countenance, face to face, seeking the Face we cannot face, as the Scripture summons us to do (see 1 Chronicles 16:11).

Seeking the Face of the Holy One, we seek what Lévinas calls “the primordial face to face of language” (Lévinas 1969: 206). For the face is the origin of the word: the face speaks. The Hebrew expression that translates as “face to face” is הַנִּמְנָן (peh el peh). This is where we stand “in front of” or “in the presence of” another, as expressed in the preposition רֶאוֹ (neged), and “tell,” “say,” or “relate” who we are, all of which are meanings of the cognate הִגִּיד (higid). To be sure, Eve was created as the one who would stand הַנִּמְנָן her husband Adam, as an אֶזֶר (ezer kenegdo) or “helper corresponding to him,” after G-d had determined that it was לֹ-טוֹב (lo-tov), “not good,” for the human being to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Why does Adam need an אֶזֶר הַנִּמְנָן? Because without entering into the presence of another—of his wife—he has no presence. And the stuff of presence is the word that each relates to the other, face to face. It becomes even more clear that presence requires the presence of two when we consider the literal meaning of הַנִּמְנָן: it is “mouth to mouth.” The groom “may now kiss the bride” not merely as a show of affection but as an affirmation of presence in the joining of word with meaning and meaning with word through the bond of holy matrimony. Kissing his bride, the husband emulates the Divine kiss that breathes the soul—breathes the word—into Adam. As bride and groom kiss each other, both receive a kiss from G-d. Just as it takes three to create a human being—husband, wife, and G-d (see Kiddushin 30b)—so it takes three to enter into marriage. So it takes three to utter a word.

We have another suggestion of who these three are in a teaching from Nachmanides, who maintains that the threefold harmony of voice, spirit, and speech constitutes the רוּחַ חֲקָדֶשֶׁה (Ruach HaKodesh) or the “Holy Spirit” (Nachmanides 1978: 528). Each of these is a dimension of the other, just as each member of a marriage is an expression of the other. Where all three are at work, we have not just the word: we have the holy tongue. And so in sounding the depths of the holy tongue, this exploration of Jewish thought arrives at where it started to know the place for the first time. And so we come to the holy.
In the first chapter of this volume I stated that Hebrew is the holy tongue not because it is the language of Torah; rather, Hebrew is the language of Torah because it is the holy tongue. Having arrived at the end of our explorations, we may realize what the holy tongue conveys that can find no other vessel: it is holiness itself. But what is holiness?

The category of the holy, as understood in Jewish thought, is alien to Western speculative philosophy. When the speculative thinkers address the topic of the holy, it generally has something to do with some ultimate form of being, supreme in morality or might or beneficence or reason. They often see G-d as distinct from the holy and do not understand Him to be the Holy One. In the *Euthyphro*, for example, Plato argues that god loves the holy because it is holy and rejects the idea that it is holy because god loves it. And Kant maintains that god is deduced from morality, not morality from god. While it is true that Jewish philosophy has its rationalists such as Saadia Gaon, Bachya ibn Paquda, and Gersonides, it must not be forgotten that no matter how deeply they were influenced by Greek philosophy, these scholars all adhered to Torah-based thinking about creation, revelation, and redemption, and therefore about holiness.

Viewing the holy as a *who*, and not a *what*, Torah-based thinking is as foreign to Western ontological philosophy as it is essential to Jewish thought. The fundamental view of speculative thought is that nothing can come from nothing. The fundamental position of Jewish thought, by contrast, is not exactly that something comes from nothing, but rather that יִתְנַה (anî), or “I,” emerges from יֵה יְה (ein), or nothing, as noted in the last chapter. Where does it emerge? It emerges in the beginning with the manifestation of the *Who*, as stated in the Zohar (*Zohar* I, 2a). It emerges at Mount Sinai, in the utterance of יִתְנַה (Anokhî), the “I” first uttered at Sinai. More about this will be discussed below. For now let it be noted that what is revealed at Mount Sinai is the I: as the Zlotzover Maggid, Rabbi Yechiel Mikhal once taught, “The word *I* only G-d can utter” (quoted in Newman 1963: 423). If, however, this is what is revealed about G-d, what is revealed about the human being? Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz offers a helpful insight:
When a person contemplates this truth that He is our very life [cf. Deuteronomy 30:20], then the thought takes us beyond the fact of His greatness to the core of one’s own self . . . . Thus, when we say, “He is our life,” the intention here is not that He is the giver of life, but that He Himself is our life. When I search for the I in the body, I find the I of the soul; when I search for the I of the soul, I find the I of the Divine.

(Steinsaltz 1989: 6)

The premise for such thinking is that G-d is not the projection of my ego or I-saying; rather I am a projection of the Divine I-saying. G-d says, “I,” therefore I am.

The difference between רָאָה and בְּאוֹתָהּ, of course, is the insertion of the letter כ (khaf) in the midst of G-d’s transformation from ד to ב. With a numerical value of twenty, letter כ reminds us that the value of one of the notations of the Divine Name, the double י (yud), is also twenty. From the perspective of Jewish thinking, one may take this double י to refer to two avenues of connection between the Holy One and humanity, the two sets of ten sefirot, one ascending and one descending. That is where the holy and humanity—Creator and creation—meet. With the revelation at Mount Sinai, G-d says בְּאוֹתָהּ in such a way that it means הִנֵּנִי (Hineni)—Here I am, for you!—as Creator and as the One who reveals Himself at Mount Sinai. In this way the Holy One demonstrates the true I-saying, an I-saying that is an offering up of the self in an embrace of the other. The I-saying of the Holy One, then, is just the opposite of the I-saying of the ego. This should be kept in mind when we discuss the event at Mount Sinai below.

By now it should be clear that the nature of the thinking about the holy is the most crucial distinction between Western ontological tradition and Jewish thought in their understanding of G-d, world, and the human being. Western philosophy sees G-d as a first principle of Being; Jewish thought sees G-d as the Holy One beyond Being, the Creator and not the cause of all things. Western philosophy sees the world as a composite of natural phenomena and human events; Jewish thought sees the world functioning according to the will of G-d, not the accidents of nature, and views human events as an avenue of Divine revelation. Western philosophy takes the human being to be a “highly evolved” animal among many animals in the natural world; Jewish thought sees the human being not as an animal but as the bearer of the image and likeness of the Holy One, what I have referred to as a “breach of being.” Hence the holy is most immediately manifest in the human being.

Because the holy is a category that lies outside of speculative thought—a kind of non-category or anti-category—the value of a human being lies outside of anything that speculative thought can conceive. We can esteem, honor, and admire moral integrity, intellectual acumen, athletic ability, professional accomplishment, courage in the face of danger, and simple loving kindness. But the
notion of holiness tells us that the value of a human being is determined by none of these things of the world, by nothing that can be weighed, measured, counted, or otherwise determined by circumstance or observation. Holiness circumvents all circumstance.

Hence, from the standpoint of Jewish teaching, a human being has infinite value—or rather a human being is *holy*—whether he or she is moral or immoral, intelligent or stupid, strong or frail, a success or a failure, brave or cowardly, nice or mean. That is why the Torah and the Talmud teach that we must come to the aid of an enemy before we come to the aid of a friend (see Exodus 23:4–5; Bava Metzia 32b): it is G-d, and not my personal opinion, that determines the dearness of the human being. Such a view of the human being can be derived only from the notion of the holy that is couched in the holy tongue. Why? Because, like the holy tongue, such a view of the human being comes from beyond being.

Contrary to most speculative thinking on the topic, the holy is not what is very, very, very, very good. It is not an extreme degree of goodness, a moral ideal, or a principle of reason, and to refer to it as the “infinitely precious” is already misleading. As stated in the “holy tongue” [the שֶׁכֶרֶנָא יָנָא (leshon hakodesh)], the holy is what is שֶׁכֶרֶנָא (kadosh). In this chapter we shall explore a number of ideas that are associated with what is שֶׁכֶרֶנָא. The verbal root of שֶׁכֶרֶנָא, for instance, is שֶׁכֶרֶנוּ (kodash), which means to “be consecrated,” to “be made holy,” or to “become holy.” It is a word that implies setting something apart and making it distinct from everything else in the world, not as a “special thing” among things in the world but as a vessel of what is beyond the world. Just so, the word for “holiness,” שֶׁכֶרֶנָא (kodesh), also refers to the “Holy Temple,” the site where being finds its tangent with what transcends being. Further, the intensive or בּהֵשָׁל (piel) form of the verb, בּהֵשָׁל (kidesh), translates as to “hallow” or to “sanctify”; it also means to “betroth,” as in the phrase בּהֵשָׁל בּהֵשָׁל (kidesh ishah), to “betroth a woman.” Hence the word for “marriage,” בּהֵשָׁל (kidushin), is a cognate of שֶׁכֶרֶנָא, the word for “holiness.” These are some of the possibilities of meaning tied to the root שֶׁכֶרֶנָא that will be examined in the pages that follow.

The categories that shape Western ontological thinking cannot accommodate these interconnections that are rooted in the Jewish “category” of the holy. We shall see, however, that without these interconnections human life loses its dearness. And so we come to a life-and-death stake, and not just a philosophical exercise, in sounding the depths of the holy tongue. We come to the defining core of Jewish thought.

**Separation: where within and beyond meet**

Both King David and the prophet Jeremiah cried out to G-d: יָאִמְנָא זָא (ein kamokha), “There is no one and nothing like You!” (see Psalms 86:8; Jeremiah 10:6, 7). Understood as the Holy One, G-d is not a supreme being or an omniscient being or an omnipotent being or any other sort of extreme, supreme being. Nor is He a first cause or an unmoved mover—just the opposite: as the Creator
who at every instant creates in an act of love, He is the continual “Cause,” and, in His passionate love for His creatures, He is the Most Moved Mover. The Holy One is the One who saturates and sanctifies all there is, from within and from beyond, and yet who is quite distinct from all there is, as the ocean is distinct from and yet permeates every fiber of a sponge. Rabbi Yehuda Loeve, the Maharal of Prague, provides an illustration of this point from the Hebrew alphabet: “The [letter] י [yud] turns the [letter] ד [dalet] into [the letter] ה [hey] without touching it. In the same way, holiness is present in this world, but does not merge with it” (Loeve 1997: 294). This distinction is the key to the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of the Divine. Of course, the letter ר is also an abbreviation for the Divine Name; the letter י is the first letter in the Divine Name and signifies the Ten Utterances of Creation, as well as the Ten Utterances of Revelation; and the letter ר is a דלת [delet], that is, a “door,” through which the One who is more than all enters the all to give it meaning. Made of the ה, this world is made of the holiness that enters it but never merges with it.

Only what is separate from all there is—only what is more than all there is—can impart to existence something more than a contingent meaning of the sort that one sees in postmodernist efforts to ground everything in culture, class, race, or gender. Such thinking is not only antithetical to Jewish thought; it is anti-Jewish thought, anti-Semitic thought, since it has to oppose the testimony to the Absolute that enters the world through the Jews. Nachmanides, by contrast, illustrates a Jewish way of thinking in his commentary on the Torah, where he states that “holiness signifies separateness” (Nachmanides 1971, Vol. 3: 329), something that stands outside all categories of speculative ontological thought. Something that alone can call for a קדושה (Kiddush HaShem).

As we saw in Chapter 7, the phrase קדושה or “Sanctification of the Name” refers to martyrdom, where martyrdom is understood not as a sacrifice of one’s life but rather as an affirmation of the One who makes all human life sacred and therefore distinct from anything else in nature. Hence קדושה, in its most fundamental form, is oriented not toward the self but toward the other: I must die before I would murder another human being. There is no martyrdom, no קדושה, either among the animals or for the animals, nor for human beings regarded as animals. The very notion is unintelligible—not because the lives of animals are not dear but because they are not created in the image and likeness of הקדושה, of the Holy One. Similarly, the rite of קדושה (kidush), which is the blessing on the wine, is a way of separating and thus sanctifying holy days, especially the Sabbath, from all other days. Of course, just as the Sabbath begins on Friday evening, so does it end on Saturday evening; hence we have the חבדל (havdalah) ritual of “separating” the Sabbath upon its departure. Because both rituals are crucial to setting the Sabbath apart from the other days of the week, the Talmud maintains that the two constitute a single observance (Pesachim 102b). Here too holiness is tied to the idea of separation.

The verbal root for קדושה is בדהיל (badal); in its causative or רבים (hifil) form, בידיל (hidil), it means to “separate” or “set apart.” Similarly, the nouns קדושה

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(hevdel) and יַבדיל (bedilah) mean “difference” and “separation” respectively. The point is that יבדיל is not about separation simply for the sake of privilege or isolation. No, the aim of יבדיל is to make the distinction that is necessary to a sense of meaning; meaninglessness arises when everything is “all the same,” when there is no vertical dimension, no absolute, no good or evil, no יבדיל, and therefore no holiness or sanctification, no קדושה. The passive or ניחל (nifal) form of the verb, נבידל (nival), adds further to our understanding of the elusive nature of the holy. Meaning to “depart from” or to “withdraw,” נבידל suggests that we may affirm the sanctity of the Sabbath by setting it apart, but that there is no laying our hands on the holy. Each time someone would possess it, it withdraws, so that we encounter it as a trace of what was just there, like the lingering scent of spices.

In this idea of separation we have the meaning of the chosenness of the Chosen People, a people known as קדושים (am kedoshim), or a “nation of holy ones” (see, for example, Otzer HaMidrash, Zerubavel 4). What makes Israel a chosen people—what makes them an קדושים—has nothing to do with their merit or anything intrinsic to their “race” (a completely bogus term from a Jewish point of view). Rather, it is the holiness of the Holy One, who chose to separate the Jews from all other nations, as it is written: יברט רב שלי היהים קדושים שכל הלאים (viheyitem li kedoshim ki kedosh ani HaShem vaavdil etkhem min-haamim), “You shall be holy, for I HaShem am holy, and I have separated you from the nations” (Leviticus 20:26). “You shall be holy” means “you shall be separate.” And what is the distinction that separates them? It is their mission: the Jews are chosen to attest to the chosenness of every human being. All nations are a people apart—not apart from each other, however. Rather, bearing a trace of what is more than being, they are apart from the accidents of being. Therefore they are responsible for their conduct, regardless of their station in being. Apart from each other? Just the opposite: since we all derive from a single human being, each of us is tied to the other, body and soul—that, too, is part of the message that the Jews are chosen to deliver.

Recall here the teaching from the Tosefta: “Why was Adam created alone? So that in this world the righteous could not say, ‘Our children are righteous, and yours are evil’” (Sanhedrin 8:4). And: “So that the great among the nations could not claim that the King of kings created the world for them alone” (Sanhedrin 8:5). All nations are a people apart in that every person is a being who is distinct from and hence not reducible to the categories of being. In a word, every human being is holy—that is the testimony that the Chosen People are chosen to bear. That is what makes Israel an קדושים.

The world can harbor no holiness, nothing קדושה, without a people apart. Because postmodern, ontological thought collapses everything into an anonymous sameness, this distinction has become largely either unintelligible or illegitimate. From the standpoint of postmodern thinking, people should be completely equal, with no particular group set apart from another. Here everyone is the same, and, in the end, nothing really matters, because nothing is really holy. Which means: every life is expendable.
Where there is holiness in the world, on the other hand, particularity and universality are interwoven, and every life is infinitely dear. Says Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Holy is otherness as well as non-otherness. That is why it is possible to speak of G-d’s holiness as a pattern for man” (Heschel 1975, Vol. 2: 8), as it is written in Leviticus 20:26. A remark from Martin Buber also comes to mind:

In the relation to G-d, unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one. For those who enter into the absolute relationship, nothing particular retains any importance—neither things nor beings, neither earth nor heaven—but everything is included in the relationship. (Buber 1970: 127)

Stated differently, the holy is where within and beyond become synonyms, where the finite and the infinite intersect, where time and eternity merge to form meaning. The holy is situated in the “face,” in the פנים (panim), that is both “within” and “before” us, both פנים (bifnim) and לפני (bifnei). For to behold the face is to behold just what does not meet the eye.

The word face in Hebrew is plural because the face both exposes and veils the depth dimension of the inner being that is nonetheless distinct from being. With regard to the link between the holy and that innermost realm, the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, writes, “Holy’ refers to the innermost point. Even though this point gives life to all, it remains separated from physical being” (Alter 1998: 341). And the “innermost point” that is both within and beyond being, he adds, is the face of G-d (Alter 1998: 342). To paraphrase Emmanuel Lévinas, the in of the Infinite is “both non- and within” (Lévinas1998: 63), and the face is precisely a manifestation of what is “both non- and within”: in it we encounter the trace of what Lévinas describes as the “otherwise than being” (Lévinas 1985: 109). Commenting on this “trace” in his remarks on Deuteronomy 4:37, Sforno explains that, while G-d’s face is transcendent, G-d’s back denotes nature. Yet just as the face is of a piece with the back, the transcendent is of a piece with nature, as suggested by the numerical equivalent of the words for “G-d” and “[the] nature,” ארוק (Elokim) and הטבה (hateva). Therefore, says Lévinas, “the in- of the Infinite is not a simple negation, but rather time and humanity. Man is not a ‘fallen angel who remembers the heavens’; he belongs to the very meaning of the Infinite” (Lévinas 1998: 51). Just as there can be no people without a people apart, there can be no world without holiness: for Jewish thought, the world and the holy, G-d and humanity, are at once distinct and of a piece.

Hence Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik writes,

Holiness, according to the outlook of Halakhah, denotes the appearance of a mysterious transcendence in the midst of our concrete world, the “descent” of G-d, whom no thought can grasp, onto Mount Sinai,
the bending down of a hidden and concealed world and lowering it onto the face of reality.

(Soloveitchik 1983: 46)

At Mount Sinai G-d reveals Himself as אֲנָשָׁא, and in that revelation of the Divine face we have the revelation of Torah—something we affirm three times each day in our prayers, crying out: (beor paneikha natata lanu Torat chayim), “Through the light of Your face You have given us the Torah of life.” Not through the face, but through the light of the face, and the light of the face is, as it were, G-d’s “back”; it is a brilliance that hides the face itself, a brilliance that is the trace of the face itself. That is what He revealed to Moses (see Exodus 33:18–23). Still, the One who spoke with Moses face to face and yet would show him only His back had been revealing His holiness all along, as both absolutely inclusive and absolutely exclusive. For when He showed Moses His back, Moses saw the knot of the tefillin that G-d was wearing, thus commanding us, through His own example, to do the same (see Menachot 35b)—commanding us through the light of His face.

How, then, does the Holy One transmit His holiness to humanity? Through the mitzvah, the commandment, as Issi ben Akiba explains in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: “With every new commandment which G-d issues to Israel He adds holiness to them” (Nezikin 20). The first of all the commandments is to marry and to bear children (Genesis 1:28; 2:24). Where does the holy unfold as both within and beyond, as both inclusive and exclusive? In the 0y cinéma that is marriage.

The mystery and sanctity of marriage

According to the Torah, G-d’s first act of involvement in human affairs was to perform a marriage ceremony (Genesis 2:22). The talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon ben Menassia, in fact, teaches that G-d plaited Eve’s hair for the occasion and brought her to Adam (Eruvin 18a). It is the Creator who draws the man and the woman into the intimacy of their relation, to sanctify it and make it holy: more profoundly than any other relation, the marital relation articulates the relation to the Holy One. Thus, Maimonides points out, there are only two things for which a Torah scroll may be pawned: “To enable one to study Torah or to marry” (Mishneh Torah: Sefer Ahavah 139a). For each is a manifestation of the holy. Where there is no Torah, marriage is merely an arrangement of convenience, the opposite 0y cinéma. Where there is no marriage, the Torah is nothing more than a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore. If the holy is the foundation of Jewish thought, marriage, as Rabbi Yaakov Culi teaches, “is the foundation of Judaism” (Culi 1977: 123–124).

As always, the holy tongue can help us to better understand Jewish thinking about the point of contact, where the one chosen for meaning in this world enters into the most intimate relationship with the One who chooses him from
beyond the world. A key Hebrew word that articulates the marital relationship, for example, is the verb יָידָה (yied), which, in keeping with what has been said about the holy, means to “appoint,” to “destine,” and to “set apart”; it also means to “betroth.” Similarly, the noun יָיד (yiud), may be translated as “mission,” “destiny,” and “betrothal.” Let us see how these meanings are interrelated.

As we have already seen, a people set apart is a people summoned to engage in a “testimony” or אדハ (edah). Because that testimony entails an affirmation of the chosenness of every human being, it attests to the uniqueness of every human being. The Holy One is not only דרך (echad) or uniquely “One,” as we affirm each day in the Shema; He is also called the ייחדו של עולם (yechido shel olam), “the Unique One of the World.” Just so, the one created in His image is ייחד (yachid)—that is to say, is singled out and irreplaceable—by virtue of the destiny for which he or she is created, a destiny inscribed at the point where the soul is tied to G-d, at the level of ייחד (yechidah), as discussed in Chapter 6. Whereas fate derives from an impersonal what, destiny is appointed by a most personal whoever, by the One to whom we are betrothed. From the standpoint of such Jewish thinking, to be created is to be appointed, and to be appointed is to be betrothed.

Thus each morning when we lay tefillin, we wrap the leather strap around the middle finger of the left hand, like a wedding ring, and declare: הָעְרַסְתִּיק לִי לְמָלְאָכָה וּלְצָרֵד וּלְעָחֵר הָעָיִן הַיָּמִין (veerastikh li leolam veerastikh li betsedek wemishpat wechesed veerastikh li beemunah veyadaat et HaShem), that is, “I shall betroth myself to You forever; I shall betroth myself to You through righteousness and justice, through loving kindness and compassion; I shall betroth myself to You through faith. And You will know HaShem.” How does one “know” G-d? Through a betrothal to Him. Repeating these words spoken by HaShem in Hosea 2:21–22, we enter into the marital relation for which each of us is created. In the verse immediately preceding these lines G-d asserts: ובחרתי להם ברית (vekarat brit), “And I shall make for them a covenant” (Hosea 2:20). Because these words are not dreamed up by human reason or emotion but are spoken by the Holy One, the Jewish idea of ברית or covenant entails much more than a contractual arrangement: it is about כָּרָת, about holy matrimony. One’s wife is not merely an אשה (ishah), or “woman,” but an אשת ברית (eshet brit), a “woman of the covenant,” where “covenant” refers to the covenant of marriage. The Covenant of Abraham, of course, also comes to mind, and the relationship is exactly parallel.

It will be noted that the phrase to “make a covenant,” וברית (karat brit), literally means to “cut a covenant.” On one level, the term וברית (karat), or to “cut,” may come from the custom whereby two parties would cut an animal in half and then “pass between the halves” in order to seal an agreement. On a deeper level, it suggests the Covenant of Abraham, that is, the Covenant of Circumcision or ברית מילה (brit milah), where the cutting of the בילה (arlah) or “foreskin” from the penis is associated with the separation of the holy from the profane; indeed, the word בילה may also be used to refer to what is “profane” or
“forbidden” (see, for example, Leviticus 19:23 on forbidden fruits). Like a man who enters into a marriage, Abraham could not be called “complete” until he had been circumcised, as it is written in the Mishnah (Nedarim 3:11).

Here a very important distinction between ontological thought and Jewish thought comes to light. From the perspective of ontological thinking, the phallus is almost always regarded as a symbol of power, domination, and control. As such a symbol, it posits the illusion that the more fertile we are, the more victorious we are in the struggle of life against death. And perhaps that is indeed the symbolic significance of the uncircumcised phallus. From a Jewish point of view, however, the circumcised phallus is a symbol not of power and domination but of truth and devotion to another, a symbol of the Covenant with G-d and an embrace of the Torah of Life. It affirms the talmudic teaching cited in the previous chapter, that it takes three to create a human life—husband, wife, and the Holy One (see Kiddushin 30b)—and that we enter into this continuation of creation through a partnership with the Creator. Cutting the phallus and thus entering into the relation with the Holy One, then, means that we do not copulate as the animals do; rather, we procreate by joining with the Creator in the act of joining with our husband or wife. We do not mate—we marry, precisely because we are not animals.

 Undertaking the act of creation through love, the Creator enters into a relation with the one created in His image. What sort of relation? Again, it is not a mere contractual arrangement or business deal, no prenuptial arrangement, but a marital relation, in which each is devoted to the other, so that G-d Himself may rejoice even in having been defeated by His children (see Bava Metzia 59b; Pesachim 119a)—or rather by His spouse, the people Israel. With this idea we return to a point raised in Chapter 3. It seems that, like Adam, G-d, too, needs an ezer kenegdo, a “helper against him” (Genesis 2:20). For G-d, too, “it is not good to be alone” (cf. Genesis 2:18). G-d needs humanity in order to be holy, just as humanity needs G-d in order to be human. Thus, as we remember, G-d cries out to His beloved: “Only when you are My witnesses, am I G-d, but when you are not My witnesses, I—if one dare speak thus—am not G-d” (Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 12:6; see also Sifre on Deuteronomy 33:5). To be G-d’s witnesses is to join our voices with His and lovingly affirm: ani ledodi vedodi li (I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine) (Song of Songs 6:3). To be G-d’s witnesses, in other words, is to be His faithful, devoted spouse. One finds no such notion in Greek philosophy or in the Western ontological tradition.

And where does Israel become G-d’s spouse, His וָּזָא? At Mount Sinai, where the Covenant is consummated. Therefore the mystics understand “the day of His wedding” in the Song of Songs (3:11) to refer to the day G-d gave the Torah to Israel at Mount Sinai (for example, S. D. Schneersohn 2000: 26). Therefore the Midrash teaches that the two tablets are bride and groom (Shemot Rabbah 41:6; Tanchuma Ki Tisa 16), signifying, in the words of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, that “the people of Israel are the spouse of the Holy One” (Cordovero 1993: 12). At Mount Sinai G-d visits, commands, appoints, and
entrusts His people concerning the care of His most precious possession, His very essence, His seed and source of life: the Torah. And all of these words—"visit," "command," "appoint," and "entrust"—are possible meanings of the verb פָּקַד (pakad), a word that has one more meaning: to "have marital relations with." At Mount Sinai not only does a wedding take place, but a marriage is consummated.

The Midrash, moreover, compares the two tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain to a קֵטְבָּה (ketubah) or "marriage contract" (Shemot Rabbah 46:1; Devarim Rabbah 3:16; Tanchuma Ki Tisa 16; see also Rashi's commentary on Pesachim 54a), making it quite clear that the Covenant is a covenant of marriage. Thus the two tablets are called the לֹטְכֹת הָבְרִית (luchot habrit), or the "Tables of the Covenant" (see, for example, Vayikra Rabbah 8:3). What is consummated in the consummation of this marriage? The meaning of every marriage that gives birth to life. Through marriage we give birth to the breath of little schoolchildren studying Torah and learning to live by the commandments of G-d, by the connections to G-d; we give birth to the breath that sustains all of creation (see Shabbat 119b). In a word, we give birth to the human being, who is the aim of all being because the human being alone has the capacity for sanctifying being through the commandments of Torah. Hence a human being is compared to a Torah scroll.

To give birth to a child, then, is to open up an avenue by which the holy may enter the world, as we saw in the Midrash cited in Chapter 8. When the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and took away the priests and the Levites, the Shekhinah nonetheless continued to dwell in Jerusalem: the Holy City was still holy. But when they took away the children, the Shekhinah herself went into exile: emptied of her children the Holy City was no longer holy (see Eichah Rabbah 1.6.33). Emptied of her children, the Holy City was emptied of the aim and substance of holy matrimony. With the destruction of the Temple, it was as though there had been a divorce between G-d and Israel. As in every divorce, it was the children who suffered the most—thus, according to a teaching from Rabbi Eliezer, the altar sheds tears when a man and woman divorce (see Sanhedrin 22a). Thus we recall another teaching, this one from the Midrash:

In the hour when the Holy One, blessed be He, was to offer the Torah to Israel, He said, "Preserve My Torah." They told Him, "We shall." He said to them, "Give Me a guarantee that you will keep it." They said to Him, "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be our guarantee." He told them, "Your fathers themselves need a guarantee . . . . They told Him, "Our children will be our guarantee."

(Tanchuma Vayigash 1; Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1.4.1)

And, the Midrash on Psalms adds,

[G-d] asked the nursing infants and the embryos: "Will you be sureties for your fathers, so that if I give them the Torah they will live by it, but
that if they do not, you will be forfeited because of them?” They replied: “Yes.”

(Midrash Tehilim 1.8.4)

Because the children are our collateral, so to speak, in the promise to adhere to the Covenant, in the phrase “our children” our includes husband, wife, and the Holy One. That is what makes children holy. That is what makes marriage holy.

A passage from the Zohar may now become more clear:

Rabbi Eleazar said: “When G-d created the world, it was on condition that if Israel when they came into the world should accept the Torah, it would be well, but if not, then the world should revert to chaos. Nor was the world firmly established until Israel stood before Mount Sinai and accepted the Torah. From that day G-d has been creating fresh worlds, to wit, the marriages of human beings.”

(Zohar I, 89a)

How is it that worlds are created through marriages? Because through the holiness of marriage we create the holiness that defines the human being born of the marital relation: because the human being is holy, each human being is a world. If, as is written in the Mishnah, to save a single human being is to save a world (Sanhedrin 4:5), it is because that human being comes into the world through the gate of holy matrimony. No system of ontological or speculative thought can make such a connection between individual and world, between marriage and holiness. On the other hand, in a society where the sexual relation is taken casually, so is the human being taken casually. Why? Because there is no sense of relation, no sense of covenant. Everyone is locked into the radical isolation of the ego, which has no room for the holy. In such a realm a baby is merely another screaming mouth to feed, and not a vessel of the Infinite. In such a realm there is no holiness; there is only the horrifying solitude of being.

A separation that is the opposite of isolation

While one thing that characterizes the holy is its separation from everything else, it is a separation that makes possible a relation, a difference that establishes a non-indifference. A state of isolation, then, is the opposite of holiness. It is not good for a human being to be alone (Genesis 2:18), because a human being cannot generate his own meaning or his own value. Meaning requires future, and future requires relation to another, a covenantal relation expressive of the holy: meaning requires the holy. With this truth in mind, Matityahu Glazerson writes,

The basic meaning of the word “covenant” [ברית (brit)] is the joining of two separate halves. Kehillat Yaakov points out that the matter of covenant
between husband and wife is symbolized by the fact that the numerical value of “wife” [יוֹהִיָּה (ishah)] is exactly half that of “covenant.”

(Glazerson 1997: 131)

The Midrash tells us that when G-d created the first human being, He made the human being both male and female, so that the creation of man and woman entailed the tearing of the human being into two halves (Bereshit Rabbah 8:1). It is not good for the man to be alone, because only through a relation to another can the man and woman generate a wholeness expressive of a relation to the Holy One. And that relation, again, finds its most profound expression in the marital relation, the relation between the two halves by which each becomes whole. There, in that relation between the two halves, the holy enters most directly into the mundane. There we have a covenant.

It is not good for the man and woman to be alone, in other words, because only through the relation between man and woman—between the two halves of the covenant—can G-d find His way into His own creation and thus consummate His Covenant with humanity. Here we have a most striking implication: the human being is the other half of G-d! This does not mean that G-d and man are one and the same. There is no god-man or man-god in this thinking. Nor is there any mating between man or woman and G-d. For Jewish thought, to be the other half of G-d is to be not only G-d’s mate but also G-d’s hands and arms and legs and mouth and ears. It is to serve another body and soul through our deeds, beginning with the covenant and the consummation of marriage, by which souls are able to find their way into this world. Hence it is written in the Talmud that “a bridegroom is exempt from the recital of the Shema from the first night of his wedding until the end of the Sabbath, if he has not consummated the marriage” (Berakhot 16a). In the Shema we pronounce the Oneness of HaShem; in the consummation of marriage we enact it. For in the consummation of marriage the two halves—“man” and “woman,” יָשָׂ (ish) and יִשָּׁה (ishah) respectively—are returned to the wholeness that is holiness. A “couple,” therefore, is infinitely different from any other purely numerical duality.

One may now understand the teaching from the Midrash:

A man who has no wife lives without good, help, joy, blessing, and atonement . . . R. Yehoshua b. Levi says: He also lives without life . . . . R. Chiyya b. Gamda said: He is also an incomplete man . . . . When they [the first man and woman] were both as one [as the effect of marriage] they were called “Adam,” but when they are not as one they are not called “Adam.” Some say that [when unmarried] a man diminishes the Divine Image.

(Eichah Rabbah 5.5.1)

How is the Divine Image diminished? By divorcing the י (yud) from the ה (hey) in the Divine Name ה-י (ya-h).
The *Kallah Rabbati* comments on what the Hebrew words for “man” and “woman,” יי and הילא, reveal about the connection between the human marital union and the manifestation of the Holy One in the world. In the formation of man and woman, of יי and הילא, the י from יי and the ה from הילא come from the ה-י of the Divine Name (see *Kallah Rabbati* 51b(3)). Both are souls of יי (esh), of “fire.” The ה of the י or fire of the soul is the י of the יי הילא (Brit Esh), which is the “Covenant of Fire” made upon the act of creation. For יי יי (bereshit), “in the beginning,” says the Zohar, means יי יי: “When G-d created the world, it was created only through a covenant” (*Zohar* I, 89a). Thus through the act of creation G-d enters into a covenantal relation with the soul He creates. When G-d inserts the י of His Name into the יי of the soul, it becomes a man; when He inserts the ה of His Name, the soul becomes a woman. But only when the י and the ה of the יי and the הילא come together does the Divine Name הילא enter and thus sanctify Creation. A related teaching is found in the Zohar, where it asserts that blessing rests only where man and woman, יי and הילא, are found together (*Zohar* III, 17a). Which is to say: holiness, what is יי, transpires only within יי יי, only within the marriage of יי and הילא.

Mystically speaking, the י and the ה of the Divine Name correspond to the World of Emanation and the World of Creation respectively. The combination of the two letters for the Name Ya-H comes at the point where the realm beyond creation meets with the realm of creation; it is also where the Supernal Father joins with the Supernal Mother to bring this world into being. The issue of that union is the lower male and female, the Zeir Anpin and the Shekhinah, who, when they face one another, enable the holy to enter this realm. And they face one another most intimately in the marriage of יי and הילא. Symbolizing this holy union are the two מבריאות (kruvim) or angels atop the cover of the ark in which the Tablets of the Torah are kept. With one angel male and the other female, the two face each other when G-d and Israel are in a harmonious relation with one another. When that relation becomes problematic, the angels turn away from each other, and G-d falls silent. When they do face each other, however, the Voice of the Holy One emerges from between the two angels (see Exodus 25:22).

Hence the commentary of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero cited in Chapter 8:

As long as a man has not married, the Shechinah is not with him. For man stands between two female aspects—his wife below in the physical world, who receives “sustenance, clothing, and conjugal rights” from him; and the Shekhinah above him, who blesses him with all these so that he will give again and again to the wife he has chosen in the covenant of marriage.

*(Cordovero 1993: 128)*

Further, when the Shekhinah is not with the man, he is not quite complete, not quite in the image and likeness of the Holy One; as it is written in the Talmud, “a man is not a man until he is married” (*Yevamot* 62b). Therefore, Rabbi
Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza reminds us, we pronounce the phrase “who formed man in His image” at a person’s wedding, and not at birth or at a circumcision (Mordechai Yosef of Isbitza 2001: 19). At the circumcision we wish that the child may one day stand under the wedding canopy, where he may be instilled with the Divine image as he joins with his wife (see Shabbat 137b). To be sure, the Hebrew word for “wedding canopy,” חופה (chupah), can also be a “sanctuary” or the “seat of Divine Majesty,” as when it is used to refer to the upper chamber in the Holy of Holies (see 2 Chronicles 3:9).

Because marriage opens up holiness, it opens up a dimension of height, an insight conveyed by the Hebrew verb נסה (nasa). In this לשת (paal) or root form it means to “raise up” or to “elevate”; in its מרשע (hifil) form, חסן (hisi), however, the verb means to “enter into marriage.” Similarly, the adjective חסן (nisa) means “high,” “lofty,” “exalted,” while its cognate כז (nasui) means “married.” Marriage—when it is כז—elevates and exalts the human being by drawing him or her into a more profound intimacy with the Holy One. It is both the reality and the metaphor for the task of all of humanity, namely to elevate the material world to the level of holiness. In fact, the last of the ten sefirot, which is Malkhut, represents the physical world; also known as Nukva, or the Female, Malkhut is the realm of the Shekhinah. The purpose of Creation—the meaning of human life—is to turn the Female to face and join with the Male or the Zeir Anpin, through whom the holiness of the upper worlds flows into this realm. Our aim, in other words, is to effect the marriage of heaven and earth, whereby the Divine Presence will be released throughout all the worlds (see, for example, Chayyim Vital’s Ets Chayyim 5:6 and 6:3). That task begins with כז.

And so we may understand more deeply the song we sing each Friday to usher in the Sabbath:_lekhah dodi likrat kalah penei shabat nekablah_ (lekhah dodi likrat kalah penei shabat nekablah), “Come, my Beloved, to meet the Bride; let us welcome the Sabbath,” or more literally, “let us receive the Face of the Sabbath.” This line can be taken in various ways to bring out various levels of the interrelations we have spoken of, if we ask: who is addressing whom? The answer is that each is addressing the other at every level of relation: G-d is addressing humanity and humanity G-d; every husband is addressing his wife and every wife her husband; heaven is addressing earth and earth heaven; Zeir Anpin is addressing Nukva and Nukva Zeir Anpin. The summons of Lekhah Dodi is a summons to merge into the marital relation, so that holiness—the holiness of the Sabbath—may enter this realm. It teaches us that we should “fear HaShem as a man who loves his wife and who is beloved by her, and who fears to do anything against her lest he lose her love” (Orchot Tsadikim Gate 5). For only then, only in the relation of כז, is holiness even an issue.

And why is the Sabbath called כז (kalah), or “Bride?” According to Rabbi Yose, it is because “the Community of Israel is also called ‘Sabbath,’ for she is G-d’s spouse” (Zohar II, 63b). Here we come to a crucial realization: in His isolation G-d, the Ein Sof, is neither holy nor unholy. Only when G-d is released from His own solitude—only within the contexts of marriage, of the marriage
performed at Mount Sinai, where we receive the commandment to remember and observe the Sabbath—does holiness become a category, a concept, and a reality. Only in the unfolding of His Creation—only as the upper, ethereal, spiritual worlds condense into this very concrete, physical, material world—is the Ein Sof revealed as the Holy One. Only there—or rather, only here—is the Holy One the Holy One. That is why it may be said: “Only when you are My witnesses, am I G-d, but when you are not My witnesses, I—if one dare speak thus—am not G-d.” Only when I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine, am I the Holy One: only when you are my bride. Where, then, is the holy manifest concretely, so that it is not left to the nebulous realm of speculation? In the הָלָה, in the bride.

The bride as the vehicle of holiness

In the Shaarei Teshuva (Gates of Return) Rabbenu Yonah of Gerona reminds us that “it is permissible to praise the bride in the presence of the groom and to say that she is beautiful and graceful, even though she is not” (3:181). Hillel, contrary to Shammai, in fact, says that we must treat every bride as beautiful and graceful (see Ketuvot 16b–17a). It is not that if the bride is not beautiful, we should remain silent; no, we should always praise the beauty of the bride. To do otherwise, of course, would simply be rude and might even spoil the joy of a great blessing and celebration. On a deeper level, however, we praise the bride because the bride represents the flow of the holy into the midst of creation. We praise the bride because it is incumbent upon us to praise the Holy One. Thus, Rabbi Benjamin Blech notes, “the Greeks proclaimed ‘the holiness of beauty’; we insisted that far more significant is ‘the beauty of holiness’” (Blech 1993: 141). That is why we say the bride, the הָלָה, is beautiful and graceful.

One notices further that the Hebrew word for “bride,” הָלָה, is made of ל (kol) or “all” plus a ה (hey), the letter signifying G-d: the bride signifies the presence of the One who is more than all in the midst of all, the merging of beyond and within. Rabbi Blech adds, “The bride is called הָלָה (kallah). הָלָה (kol) all, ה, five, i.e. the Five Books of Moses and adherence to Torah are subsumed under her” (Blech 1993: 183). If the ה signifies HaShem, it also signifies Torah, the Five Books of Moses: Torah is the presence of the holy within the all, the Holy One at the core of Creation. And so it is written in the Eliyahu Rabbah: “A man wed to Torah, never to abandon it, is like a man wed to a good wife, never to abandon her” (Tanna debe Eliyyahu 1981: 246). Thus the Talmud compares a good wife to Torah itself (Yevamot 63b) and affirms that, like the Torah, the bride makes a man complete (Kiddushin 30b). Likewise, during the celebration of Simchat Torah the last person called to the Torah is the הָלָה (chatan Torah), literally the “bridegroom of the Torah.” And the first called to read the first part of the first portion of the Torah, the beginning of Genesis or Bereshit, is the הָלָה (chatan Bereshit), the “bridegroom of Bereshit.”

What does all this mean? It means we stand in relation to Torah as a bridegroom stands in relation to his bride, there seeking our wholeness and humanity,
there embracing the Holy One who alone makes us human and whole. If, as it is written in the Talmud, there is no joy greater than the joy that bursts forth under a wedding canopy (Sukkah 25b), it is because the joy under the wedding canopy is itself a Simchat Torah, a “Rejoicing in the Torah.” The sages teach that the commandment to study Torah is equal to all the other commandments combined, that the study of Torah is even greater than building the Temple (Megillah 16b). But the sages also insist that even the study of Torah may be neglected for the sake of bringing a bride to the wedding canopy (Megillah 3b, 29a). If the study of Torah is greater than building the Temple and if it may be neglected for the sake of bringing a bride to the wedding canopy, then it would seem that the bride is even greater than the Temple. Perhaps she is. Or, if not greater, the Talmud suggests that she is at least comparable. For it is written that when a man has seen the death of his wife, it is as though he had witnessed the destruction of the Temple (Sanhedrin 22a). It is as though holiness had left the world. And so the “widower,” the רֶמֶש (alman) is “struck dumb,” וַלִּאֹלָם (neelam).

The study of Torah, however, draws holiness back into the world by reaffirming the marriage ceremony at Mount Sinai, which in turn is reenacted under the Sukkah, the canopy that is also a sanctuary of holiness. Just as the Shekhinah is present where two are gathered to study Torah (Avot 3:3), so is she present where a man is gathered with his bride, as it is written in the Zohar: “The Shekhinah abides only with a man who has a wife, for all women are in the shelter of the Shekhinah” (Zohar I, 228b). Hence we have the Hebrew phrase נשאสารוה (ishto meshamarto), which means “His wife’s presence guards him” or “watches over him.” Since all women are in the shelter of the Shekhinah, a man must seek that shelter through his bride. How does her presence watch over him and keep him? By protecting him from the evil that threatens his soul. Any man who is married knows that he is a better man for being married. Not only because his wife opens up for him the opportunity to be devoted to something sacred beyond his miserable self, but also because she opens up for him a metaphysical relation to what is forever hidden, a relation that transcends his ontological drive for domination.

In the Jewish tradition the bride is the highest instance of the feminine, and the relationship with the feminine, Lévinas explains, is a relationship “with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything else is there—not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity” (Lévinas 1987b: 88). Everything Lévinas here says about the feminine can be said about the holy. The relationship with the holy is a relationship with “the very dimension of alterity,” with what is otherwise than everything that belongs to the grid of being. The holy is what cannot and should not be there, and yet it is there, hidden behind the glance, abiding beneath the caress, reposing in the silence.

Recall here Lévinas’s comments on the nature of the caress: the caress, he says, “consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it were not yet. It searches” (Lévinas 1969: 257–258). Significantly, the Hebrew verb
meaning to “search for” is קְפֶּס (chipes); in its לְפַע (pual) or passive intensive form, קִפּוֹס (chupas), it means to “be disguised.” What is sought after in the caress is the holiness that is disguised not only by the feminine but as the feminine. As the feminine, holiness can only be sought after because it is always disguised. To lay hands on it or to “touch” it is to “strike” it, both of which are meanings of the verb נָגַד (naga). And yet it remains beyond violation, forever eluding the touch, forever concealed.2

When G-d created Eve, the one whose hair He plaited for her wedding day, He made her from Adam’s side. Why? Because, says the Midrash, this is “the most modest part of man, for even when he stands naked, that part is covered” (Bereshit Rabbah 18:2). Now the word for “modest,” תַּנְיָה (tsanua), is from the verb נָסַא (tsinaa), which means to “hide” or “conceal.” Modesty, then, is not a matter of being coy; it is a matter of being holy. The man’s bride signifies the hidden part, the holy part, the eternally inviolable part of the human being. Hence she wears the bridal veil, which may be compared to the veil that hides the Holy of Holies. To be sure, in the Midrash it is written: “The Tent of Meeting symbolized a wedding” (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:8); it was designed, says Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 26:9, to have “the appearance of a modest bride who has her face covered by a veil.” Just as the Tent of Meeting drew holiness into the midst of the Israelites, so does the bride bring holiness to a man’s life.

Thus without the feminine, as Lévinas states it, man knows “nothing which permits living a life, not even the death that one dies for another” (Lévinas 1990a: 34). Without the bride we are like Adam, who, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, “felt an intense loneliness and could not find solace in the silent companionship of G-d” (Soloveitchik 1965: 50). What he finds in the “modesty” or תָּנְיָה (tsniut) of his bride and not in the hiddenness of G-d is the flesh-and-blood revelation of holiness as the hidden. This concrete manifestation of holiness in the bride is what leads the sages to compare her to the Torah, which is another concrete manifestation of the Holy One. It is what leads Rabbi Yehuda Loeve, the Maharal of Prague, to declare,

Woman is the consummation of man’s existence, for through her, man becomes complete. When a man has his own woman [a bride], his existence is essential, not casual. When he has an illicit relationship with a woman, however—when the lust strikes him—his very existence is casual. Thus “He who has illicit relations with a woman lacks a heart” [Proverbs 6:32]. The Torah, too, completes man; it is often compared to a woman [see, for example, Kiddushin 30b] because, like woman, it makes man complete.

(Loeve 1994: 106)

The betrayal of one’s bride, then, results in a tearing of one’s soul and amounts to a betrayal of the Holy One. It is the most fundamental instance of the unholy. In order to better understand the holy, then, let us consider its opposite: the unholy.
The unholy

In the betrayal of the holiness and marriage—that sanctifies life, we descend to the “other side,” which is anti-life, to what is known as the Sitra Achara (Sitra Achara) (see Scholem 1991: 73–87). The Sitra Achara is the opposite of holiness. It is not so much evil or profanity as it is “sameness,” the lack of a sense of difference that shows itself as an indifference toward anything outside the self. And it is a distinguishing characteristic of postmodernism, a stance under which everything is tolerated and anything goes, the tyranny of a liberty that waxes infinite, a totalitarianism of the leveling totality that insists, “It’s all the same.”

Here we catch a glimpse of the opposition between the Ets HaChayim, or the “Tree of Life,” and the Ets HaDaat Tov Vara, the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The former is associated with Torah, holiness, and life, whereas the latter is tied to unholliness and death, to the Sitra Achara. Why do we die on the day that we consume the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (see Genesis 2:17)? A look at the word for “knowledge,” daat, will give us a clue. For daat also means “joining together” or “merging into one,” as when Adam “knew” his wife Eve (Genesis 4:1). We notice, then, that it is not the Tree of the Knowledge of the Difference between Good and Evil. No, we die on the day we consume its fruits, because on that day we collapse good and evil into a sameness, in a vain attempt to become “like god.” As the Ari’s disciple Rabbi Chayyim Vital has said, “This is the sin that came about through the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: it caused a mixing and confusion [of good and evil] throughout all the worlds” (Shaarei Kedushah Part 1, Gate 1). Thus, according to the Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, this “mixing of evil with good” was just the meaning of the serpent’s temptation that “you will be as G-d” (Genesis 3:5) (Alter 1998: 10).

If holiness entails separation and distinction, unholliness lies in the collapse of distinction into sameness, in the appropriation of the other by the same. It lies in subsuming everything, including the Holy One, under the auspices of the “I think, therefore I am” of the thinking ego, in a flight from responsibility, in a seizure of power. Franz Rosenzweig gives us a hint of what this means:

If “in the deepest depth” the other were the same as myself, “deep down,” as Schopenhauer would have it, I would not love him, but only myself; if G-d were “in me,” or “only my higher self,” . . . this G-d would have hardly anything to tell me since I know already what my higher self has to tell me.

(Rosenzweig 1999a: 85)

Thus having only myself, I have nothing; in my effort to escape the horror of my isolation in my vacuous self, I can do nothing but lay claim to the other in a way that isolates me even further. We have seen that the caress is characteristic of seeking after the holy within the human; “the caress searches,” as Lévinas has
said, yet what is sought is never touched (Lévinas 1987b: 89). It is invisible because it is inviolable. The *Sitra Achara*, on the other hand, shows itself in the grabbing and groping that seeks precisely what can be touched. It is the essence of violence and violation. It comes. It sees. It conquers.

Because holiness is definitively tied to a devotion to the Holy One and a fidelity to the bride, the prohibition against adultery parallels the prohibition against idolatry. Indeed, the Midrash states that to commit adultery is to violate all ten of the Ten Commandments (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 9:12; *Tanchuma Kedoshim* 3). Making oneself and one’s own pleasure into an absolute, it is a denial of the One who is Absolute. Acting in the name of the self—“But I’m really in love”—it is a desecration of the Name and the holiness of the Sabbath that is the Name. Acting contrary to the teaching and example of one’s mother and father, it is a dishonoring of one’s parents. Acting in a manner that has a casual regard for the life that might be born of such a union, it amounts to taking that life. It involves lying and deceit; it involves stealing another’s bride; it involves coveting the affections of another’s bride. Adultery consists of the self-serving feeling and fondling that is the opposite of the loving caress—even if both parties are “in love.” For neither loves the other enough to protect the other from a violation of the holy.

The connection between adultery and idolatry can be found in the Hebrew verb that means to “commit adultery” or to “have illicit intercourse”; it is בז (“naaf”), which also means to “worship idols.” The *Sitra Achara*, the other side, is the other side of fidelity, the other side of truth. Therefore the word בז (kazaw), which means “lie” or “deceit,” also means “idolatry.” Both idolatry and adultery are impossible without deceit. And the most common of the false gods worshiped in the act of idolatry and adultery—the embodiment of the unholy—is the ego.

In its philosophical form, idolatry is characterized by grounding the “autonomy” of my being in my thinking, and not in the commandment of the Holy One, who both creates me and summons me to fidelity. And if anything defines speculative, ontological philosophy, particularly in its modern and postmodern manifestations, it is the grounding of being in thinking. Emil Fackenheim rightly identifies the premise of just such a way of thinking with regard to G-d. It is, writes Fackenheim, that “all meaning that the individual can find in his life is inherent in his own nature” and that G-d is “an idea only, His existence being acknowledged with embarrassment if acknowledged at all” (Fackenheim 1968: 28). Therefore speculative, ontological philosophy is from the *Sitra Achara*. It is not for nothing that, as the Talmud points out, the one known as the Acher, the apostate Elisha ben Avuya, would secretly study Greek philosophy (*Chagigah* 14b, 15b). Even before he officially renounced Torah, he was slipping into the Other Side.

Taking the ego seriously, we take holiness casually. And we end up taking human life casually. We end up taking life. Who is the Unholy One opposed to the Holy One? For Jewish thought it is not Satan, who, according to traditional teaching, is G-d’s servant. In his *Perush Sefer Yetzirah*, for example, Abraham Abulafia explains that Satan is not a “fallen angel” but an aspect of the material
world that is necessary to creation (see Idel 1988b: 34–36). No, the “satanic” is the I, the ego, the self of self-assertion and self-esteem, who begins by deducing everything from itself and ends by erecting Auschwitz. That is the deception that lies behind postmodernism and all the shibboleths that begin with self:- self-esteem, self-actualization, self-image, self-made, self-determination, self-realization, self-this, self-that. Contrary to the Mishnah, which teaches us to mistrust authority (Avot 2:3), the postmodern I insists upon maintaining authority, autonomy, and totality through a will to power. Postmodern thought assumes the deceptive stance of mistrusting authority, but only from an interest in its own power and domination; Jewish thought would have us mistrust authority from a disinterest in power and an interest in truth, in a relinquishing of power for the sake of the other human being and for the sake of the One who is to be found “not in power”—בַּל בּוֹקָא (lo vekhoach), as it is written (Zechariah 4:6)—but in truth and in spirit.

As it has emerged from three thousand years of the speculative, ontological tradition—staking its “authenticity” on a resolve for power—the I is necessarily totalitarian and anti-Torah. Such thinking characterizes the thinking from the Sitra Achara. It is exemplified in the ontological thinking of Martin Heidegger, the first postmodernist and thoroughgoing Nazi, who complained of the “Jewification” of the German mind (quoted in Rockmore and Margolis 1992: 12). What was the complaint? That Jewish thought thinks in terms of the holy—of what is more than being and time and nothingness—and not in terms of what “is there,” not in terms of Dasein. Heidegger’s thinking, as we saw in Chapter 7, is perfectly consistent with Auschwitz, the very category that defines Nazism. Why did Heidegger never express any regrets for having been a Nazi? Why was he a Nazi to the end? Because repentance would have meant the obliteration of everything, of the very Heideggerian philosophy, that defined who he was. He could not make a movement of return because he had thought himself out of the soul he might have returned to.

Conceptually connected to the uniquely Nazi Auschwitz was the uniquely Nazi Lebensborn program, a program of breeding between SS men and nubile Aryan women—a program of sheer adultery, from the viewpoint of Jewish thought. A program diametrically opposed to every Judaic notion of marriage, of כָּל הָעָלָה, it was a program opposed to the holy. Just as the holy stands over against the I, so does marriage stand over against adultery. And not only private lives but also all of creation are at stake in this opposition. As simplistic as it may sound, what befalls human life begins where human life begins: in marriage. Says Glazerson,

Peace between a husband and wife is not just a personal matter; it has an effect on the Jewish people as a whole. The Sages say in Avot d’Rabbi Natan: “When a person establishes peace in his home, Scripture accounts it to him as if he had established peace among the Jewish people.”

(Glazerson 1997: 138–139)
And what affects the Jewish people as a whole affects humanity as a whole. There is a connection between the totalitarian terror that has swept the planet and the collapse of marriage. Both entail a deadly undoing of the holy.

Lévinas has said that “holiness is necessary for the well-being of the healthy” (Lévinas 1999: 62). Abraham Joshua Heschel makes the same point but perhaps in stronger terms: “The future of all men depends upon their realizing that the sense of holiness is as vital as health” (Heschel 1983: 101). And so it is true. The sickness, the unholliness, that has reached epidemic proportions is the speculative tradition that, in the words of Rosenzweig, has “concluded that the ‘ego’ is the essence of the world. All the wisdom of philosophy can be summed up in this sentence” (Rosenzweig 1999b: 66). Why? Because this sentence sums up all of its sickness. If the holy is to once again find its way into the human realm, there must be an end to the speculative, ontological tradition of Western thought. For only the Jewish thought that, along with the Jews, has been targeted for annihilation can return holiness and therefore health to humanity.

In his Warsaw Ghetto diary Chaim Kaplan had the insight to assert that after the Shoah “either humanity would be Judaic, or it would be idolatrous-German” (Kaplan 1999: 130). To be “Judaic” is to seek salvation in deeds commanded from beyond the world, and not in the autonomy of the “self.” Jewish thought arises not in the wonder of speculative philosophy but in the realization of a responsibility. It rests not upon the ruminations of reason but on a commandment to be holy as G-d is holy. Kaplan’s either/or, then, comes to this: either humanity will continue down the totalitarian and murderous path of postmodern ontological thought, or humanity will seek a return, a teshuvah, to the Judaic thought that has long been targeted for annihilation and that alone can undo the continuing, massive annihilation of human beings. If we know deep within our souls that this horror is indeed a horror, it is not because we have deduced such wisdom from reason, which has proven to be bankrupt. No, it is because our very souls are made of the Torah that forms the core of our being. Jewish thought proceeds from that core.
Soon after his entry into Auschwitz-Birkenau Primo Levi came to the realization of exactly what defined this realm that in turn defined the Nazis. “Then for the first time,” he writes, “we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man” (Levi 1996: 26). This demolition of a man is the outcome not only of twenty centuries of anti-Semitic Christian doctrine but of an even longer tradition of ontological speculative thought. There is no word for this offense because the demolition of a man entails the demolition of the word. In the twentieth century this evil finds its most heinous expression in the Nazis’ calculated creation of the Muselmann, as discussed in Chapter 9—the ones Levi describes as “the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them” (Levi 1996: 90).

Inasmuch as the human being is created by a Divine utterance and in the Divine image, the demolition of a man entails the demolition both of the Divine word and of the Divine image in which the human being is created, as understood by Jewish thought. And both the Divine word and the Divine image—or the Divine spark, as Levi calls it—are made of the holy tongue. Thus sounding the depths of the holy tongue means sounding the depths of the Divine spark within the human being as a speaking being, as a medaber. As we have seen, the Western speculative tradition has in many ways undertaken an assault on the Divine being, on the human being, and on the holy tongue. If the sanctity of the human being is to be regained, then one avenue for that return is the holy tongue.

It turns out, therefore, that what is at stake in sounding the depths of the holy tongue is not an exercise in philosophical inquiry but our very understanding of the value of a human being and therefore the very lives of human beings. Only within the framework of Jewish thought informed by the holy tongue can we come to a view of the human being that affirms the sanctity of the other human being, as well as an infinite responsibility to and for that being. The “dejudaizing” of thought, from Marcion and Martin Luther to Hegel and Heidegger, threatens the future not only of the Jews but also of humanity. Indeed, having been chosen to be a light unto humanity, the Jews are chosen to attest to this
teaching concerning the holiness of the human being. And we can attest to the 
teaching only if we can determine what makes Jewish thought Jewish. If we 
should fail in this task, then our existence both as Jews and as human beings is in 
jeopardy.

This is certainly not to say that humankind should convert to Judaism. 
Nothing could be less Jewish. Rather, it is to suggest a manner of thinking that is 
consistent with Judaism. Says Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz,

    In Judaism holiness is first and foremost the sanctity of life. Where life 
    abounds, holiness is at hand. “Life” is a synonym for all that is most 
exalted in Creation. One of the names of G-d is “the G-d of life.” The 
    Torah is described as “the Torah of life.” The Torah itself speaks of 
    “life and goodness” as of one and the same thing. 
    (Steinsaltz 1988b: 192–193)

Whereas ontological thought is enamored of “being,” Jewish thought is 
concerned with living. Hence ontological thought is much more concerned with 
how one thinks than with how one lives. And there lies the radical difference 
between the two. No matter how intense the inner resolve or will, no matter 
what the content of belief, no matter how sincere the feeling, when a way of life 
is tied to being, it is ultimately tied to the neutral. At best this concern leads to 
little more than taking up space; at worst it leads to the appropriation of space, 
either by force or by forced conversion. The Nazi notion of Lebensraum is a good 
example. The Nazi interest in “living space” is an interest in denying the non-
Nazi a place to live as a non-Nazi.

To live rather than to be, on the other hand, entails a testimony and an 
accountability that refuses to usurp the place of the other human being. 
Therefore the cry of Am Yisrael Chai—The People of Israel Live—means much 
more than that the Jews are still alive or that the Jews have survived. It means 
that the Jews continue to engage in the task that G-d requires of them, a task 
that includes opening up a space for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. It 
means that the Jews continue to attest to the truth of Torah. It means that the 
Jews continue to live in the Covenant. As we have seen, Covenant is linked to 
Creation, ברית (brit) with ברא (bara), so that nothing merely “is.” Rather, every-
thing is created, and everyone is commanded.

With this point in mind, the contrast between being and living takes us back to 
a crucial peculiarity in the Hebrew language, namely that in Hebrew there is a 
passive voice for the verb היה (hayah), which means to “be,” as if it were not a verb 
of being but a verb indicating the performance of an action on the part of One 
who “is” before anything “is.” The passive or נפל (nifal) form of the verb is 
נהיה (nihyah), which translates as to “become,” to “be made to happen,” or “to be made 
to be.” One of the most common blessings, for instance, is to bless HaShem, 
שהכל נהי בדבורה (shehakol nihyah bidvaro), which translates as “by whose word all 
things come into being.” Now if we were to say (shehakol naasah
“by whose word all things are made,” we could make perfect sense of the
difference between the active voice הָנָּשׁ (asah), to “make,” and the passive voice
הָנָּשָׂה (naasah), to “be made.” But how do we grammatically give הָנָּשָׂה a literal trans-
lution? Is it something like “to be been?” But what could that mean?

The point is that for Jewish thought, as it unfolds through the holy tongue,
“being” pertains not to what is merely “there” or to what is thought or even
believed. Rather, this passive voice of the verb “to be” underscores a Divine
word or action that underlies all there is from beyond all there is. Being speaks
and is spoken, by a Voice. Being commands through its very being, by a Voice.
Being is Torah, by a Voice. For ontological thought, being is mute, silent, and
indifferent, despite all the idle chat about language being the voice of being. As
we have seen, ontologically speaking, the “voice” of being is the voice of no one;
hence it is no voice. From such a standpoint, being in the world entails, at best,
working the world, where work is understood in social, economic, and political
terms, and has nothing to do with sanctifying or elevating either creation or
humanity. Marxism is one logical outcome of the ontological tradition. And, as
history has demonstrated, Stalinism is one logical outcome of Marxism.

In contrast to these -isms, Jewish thought is informed by the fact that the
Hebrew word for “work,” אָבְדָּה (avodah), also means “worship” or “divine
service”; similarly, the verb אָבִּד (avad), means to “work,” as well as to “serve” or
“worship.” The speculative tradition views such “work” either as obsolete or as
insignificant; the Christian tradition may laud the endeavor, but the endeavor is
always insufficient, if not in vain. Here too we see the difference between being
and living, between a manner of thinking that regards human beings as a species
or as sinful and one that sees human beings as the children of G-d, sacred and
inviolable. It is the difference between the thinking of the Western speculative
tradition and the Jewish tradition. It is the difference between seeing redemp-
tion—however that may be understood—in terms of thought or belief, or seeing
it in terms of how we treat our fellow human beings.

Just as nothing “is” but rather is “made to be,” the Jewish thinker neither
“thinks” nor “believes” in the usual sense of the words. Rather, in his thinking
the Jewish thinker is himself thought by another “Thinker.” For a Jewish thinker,
to “think,” חָשַׁב (chashav), is to engage in a חֶשְׁבּוֹן (cheshbon) or a “reckoning.”
Abraham Joshua Heschel correctly notes that

... to think of things means to have a concept within the mind, while
to think of Him is like walking under a canopy of thought. He remains
beyond our reach as long as we do not know that our reach is within
Him; that He is the Knower and we are the known; that to be means to
be thought by Him.

(Heschel 1951: 127–128)

The only thing I would add is this: to think is precisely to think of Him in the
light of His thinking us. And He thinks us by means of the holy tongue.
Therefore to think Jewishly, sounding the depths of the holy tongue, is to think in terms of this being thought. To think Jewishly, sounding the depths of the holy tongue, is to think under the canopy of a Divine commandment. For if the holy tongue harbors a revelation, it also conveys a commandment.

Because we are commanded, we are blessed—with meaning. Because we are commanded, we must “rise early,” הִישְׁחִיר (hischîr), so that we may “seek early” and “search diligently,” which are translations of the root רַשָּׁ ה (shachar). Hence the noun רַשָּׁ ה (shachar) signifies the “dawn.” But it also means “meaning,” “sense,” and “significance.” Equally worth noting in this connection is the use of the verb in the expression לְשַׁחֵר אָנָּ ה (shicher et panim), which means to “welcome” someone, literally to “seek out the face” of another. There we encounter the height that opens up when sounding the depths of the holy tongue. There we encounter the holiness within the human being. For as the face speaks we encounter the holiness within the human tongue, at once declaring: “Thou shalt not murder” and “I am Hashem.”
# Appendix

## ROOTS OF HEBREW WORDS EXAMINED

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APPENDIX: ROOTS OF HEBREW WORDS EXAMINED
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NOTES

1 OPENING REMARKS ON THE HOLY TONGUE

1 Nachmanides (1194–1270) discusses this teaching in his Commentary on the Torah (see Nachmanides 1971, Vol. 2: 543). For similar teachings of the Baal Shem Tov on Betsalel see Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe in Toledot Yaakov Yosef, Pekudei 4; see also Keter Shem Tov 319.

2 Recall that, according to the Talmud, when Pharaoh tested Joseph on the seventy languages of the world, Hebrew was not among those languages, so that Joseph knew one language more than the Pharaoh: he knew the holy tongue (see Sotah 36b).

It is also interesting to note that Rav Yehudah taught in Rav’s name that a Sanhedrin, or council of judges, must not be established in a city unless there are two people who can speak the seventy languages and one who can understand them (see Sanhedrin 17b).

3 Sefirot is a term from Jewish mysticism referring to the avenues through which G-d manifests Himself in the world. They are Keter (Crown), Chokhmah (Wisdom), Binah (Understanding), Chesed (Loving Kindness), Din (Judgment), Tiferet (Beauty), Netsach (Victory), Hod (Glory), Yesod (Foundation), and Malkhut (Kingdom); among the upper three, Lurianic Kabbalists do not include Keter (which they deem to be too remote to count) but add Daat (Knowledge) to Chokhmah and Binah. Also, instead of Din they use the term Gevurah (Power). In his Shaar HaShamayim (The Gates of Heaven, c. 1620) Abraham Herrera describes the sefirot as

emanations from the primal simple unity; making known his good which is without end; mirrors of His truth, which share in His nature and essence, which is above all . . . ; structures of His wisdom and representations of His will and desire; receptacles of His strength and instruments of His activity; treasuries of His bliss and distributors of His grace and goodness; judges of His kingdom, bringing His judgment to light; and simultaneously the designations, attributes, and names of He who is the highest of all and who encompasses all.

(quoted in Scholem 1991: 40; see also Schochet 1979: 59–104); see also Kaplan 1990: 40–48)

4 While it is true that the second-century Gnostic Marcus undertakes what could be called a mystical interpretation of the Greek alphabet and Greek words in the Greek Scriptures, there is no tradition with regard to Greek letters and words that is comparable to the ancient, elaborate, and ongoing tradition of learning with regard to Hebrew letters and words.

When Leah, for instance, names her children, she is given a moment of prophetic insight to determine what G-d has named them. In the case of Levi, the angel Gabriel takes the child to G-d not only to be named but also to be consecrated for the priesthood. See Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 29:34.

2 FIRST THINGS

1 This teaching is based on the passage from the Book of Psalms: “How many are the things you have made, Hashem; You have made them all with Wisdom [כְּלָם בְּחָכְמַת אֲסֵתָה](Psalms 104:24).

2 Tradition teaches that the Ten Commandments are written on two tablets to define two realms of relation: the first five pertain to the relation between G-d and humanity, and the second five address the relation between one human being and another (see, for example, Abraham ibn Ezra 1995: 64–65).

3 For this reason the Maharal of Prague declared,

> Woman is the consummation of man’s existence, for through her, man becomes complete. When a man has his own woman [a bride], his existence is essential, not casual. When he has an illicit relationship with a woman, however—when the lust strikes him—his very existence is casual. Thus “He who has illicit relations with a woman lacks a heart.” The Torah, too, completes man; it is often compared to a woman [see, for example, *Kiddushin* 30b] because, like woman, it makes man complete.

(Loeve 1994: 106)

4 The Musar Movement was an ethics-based, action-based movement that arose in a number of Jewish communities, inspired by the teachings and the example of Rabbi Joseph Sundel ben Benjamin Benish Salanter (1786–1866).

3 GIVING VOICE TO G-D

1 The “Name of Seventy-Two” comes from the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton ייִהְיָה when it is written with the name of each of the four letters spelled out. According to Abraham Abulafia, the seventy-two-letter Name consists of the seventy-two letters that comprise Exodus 14:19–21 (see Idel 1989: 46); another tradition bases the seventy-two-letter Name on Deuteronomy 4:34 (see, for example, *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 5:11, *Bereshit Rabbah* 44:9, *Vayikra Rabbah* 23:2, and *Devarim Rabbah* 1:11). According to a teaching from Rabbi Avin, it was with the seventy-two-letter Name in Deuteronomy 4:34 that G-d redeemed the Israelites and brought them out of Egypt (*Pesikta Rabbati* 15:17). The twelfth-century sage Bachya ibn Paquda (c. 1090–1156) explains that the seventy-two-letter Name is made of the six letters on each stone of the High Priest’s breastplate representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The six letters of each stone represent the six days of creation; and, just as the world is founded upon the twelve tribes, so is it founded upon the seventy-two-letter Name (see Weissman, Vol. 2, 1980: 285). Matityahu Glazerson also discusses the name of seventy-two letters and the seventy-two names (Glazerson 1997: 25–26).

2 Teachings concerning the forty-two-letter and the twelve-letter names of G-d can be found in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 71a). The forty-two-letter name of G-d is comprised

NOTES
of the letters between the first and third beit in the Torah (see, for instance, Shushan Sodot 1995: 111). According to the Zohar, “when the Shekhinah went down to Egypt, a celestial ‘living being’ (Chayah, from Ezekiel 1:5) called ‘Israel,’ in form like the patriarch Jacob, went down with Her, accompanied by forty-two heavenly attendants, each of whom bore a letter belonging to the Holy Name” (Zohar II, 4b). Also, it is written in the Kitsh Shulchan Arukh that the forty-two journeys described in Numbers 33:6–49 correspond to the forty-two-letter name of G-d (78:4). Finally, it is said that the Baal Shem Tov once appeared to his son Rabbi Tsvi and told him, “In the next world a tsaddik is transformed into a Divine Name. You should meditate on the Name [alluded to in the prayer] Ana Bekhoach, for I am that Name” (see Heschel 1985: 15). The Ana Bekhoach prayer is an acrostic that is composed from the letters of the forty-two-letter Name. While these forty-two letters are not the same as the letters between the first and third beit in the Torah, they are the same as the letters that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov identifies as the forty-two letter name of G-d (see Nathan of Nemirov 1973: 284). With regard to the twelve-letter name, it is written in the Zohar that Moses taught the name to the spies who would go into the Holy Land ahead of the Israelites, so that it might protect them (Zohar III, 160b) (see also Alter 1998: 108–110).

3 See Eliahu Klein’s notes on Vital 2000a: 279–280. The four names of seventy-two, sixty-three, forty-five, and fifty-two letters correspond to the letters of the Divine Name, yud-heh-vav-heh. Each of the four names is based on the numerical value of the Divine Name when the names of the four letters are spelled out and then added up, depending on the variations one uses in the spelling of the letters. Each name also corresponds to one of four worlds described in Kabbalah (see Scholem 1974: 132).

4 Corresponding to the seventy names of G-d are seventy names of the Jewish people, as listed by the Baal Haturim in his commentary on Numbers 11:16; also the Midrash teaches that the Holy City of Jerusalem has seventy names (see Weissman 1980, Vol. 4: 139). In fact, the Yalkut Shimoni refers to the seventy names of G-d, the seventy names of Israel, the seventy names of Torah, and the seventy names of Jerusalem (see Yalkut Shimoni Naso).

5 To understand the One who is heard as the subject who hears is very similar to a teaching from the great sage Levi ben Gershom or Gersonides (1288–1344): “The act of knowledge, the object of knowledge, and the knower are all identical” (Gersonides 1984: 180).

6 The legend is based on a talmudic interpretation of Isaiah 30:18, where it is written, כי-א-לוֹ-קֵי-ש-מ-ת-פ-ה-ל-ו-ש-מ-ת ה-ש-מֵ-ר-י-ק-י-ל-ו-ש-מ-ת ה-ש-מ-ר-י-ק-י-ל-ו-ש-מ-ת (ki-elokei mishpat HaShem ashrei kol-chokhei lo), that is, “For the Lord is a G-d of justice; blessed are those who await him.” The word him is a translation of the Hebrew word lamed (lo), whose letters lamed and vav have a numerical value of thirty-six; hence the thirty-six righteous people who sustain the world (see Sukkah 45b; Sanhedrin 97b).

7 It is said that one night the Greek philosopher Thales was walking along gazing upward and contemplating the mysteries of the heavens, when he suddenly fell into a pit. After gathering his strength to climb out of the pit, he resolved never again to take a single step without first being sure of the firm ground beneath his feet. Thus, adopting the methods of reason and logic alone, Thales sought the firm ground, and Western philosophy was born. But he lost his vision of the heavens.

8 Maimonides very likely bases his view on Onkelos’ translation of the verse on man’s becoming a נפש חayah (nafsh chayah), or a “living soul” (Genesis 2:7), as man’s becoming a רוח מומלך (ruach memalla) or a “talking spirit.”

9 From my teacher, Rabbi Levi Klein, I have received a Chasidic teaching that interprets the naming of Benjamin to indicate that Joseph’s righteousness lay in his capacity for transforming the ריד (acher) or “other” into a ב (ben), that is, a “son” or a
“child,” based on Genesis 30:24, יִשְׂרָאֵל לִי חַי ה' בֶּן אֶחָר (yosef li HaShem ben acher), which means “The L-rd has added to me a רְאוֹם בַּן,” that is, “another son.”

4 THE GOOD

1 The אטב transformation is a means of interpretation, whereby the first letter of the alphabet is interchanged with the last letter, the second letter of the alphabet with the penultimate letter, and so on.

2 Says Nachman of Breslov, “All a person’s deeds are inscribed in his soul. That is why after death a person is asked if he remembers his name” (Nachman of Breslov 1984: 102; see also Nathan of Nemirov 1973: 148). The tradition that the Angel of Death is covered with eyes is from the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 20b).

3 I heard this teaching from the Baal Shem Tov through my teacher, Rabbi Levi Klein.

4 It is likely that Rabbi Shapira received this teaching from the commentary of the Or HaChayim on Leviticus 18:4, where, based on the same method of At-bash, (see Note 1 above), he writes, “Performance of each המָזֵקֶס also results in G-d’s name, or rather part of it, coming to rest on the sinew which that המָזֵקֶס represents.”

5 FOR THE SAKE OF ANOTHER

1 According to the Talmud, words create angels (Avot 4:11; Chagigah 41a). Deeds are like prayers because both create angels; the angels on Jacob’s ladder are the ones we have created. As the Baal Shem Tov stated it, “of every good deed we do, a good angel is born. Of every bad deed, a bad angel is born” (quoted in Levin 1975: 47). Says the Chofetz Chaim, “We know that from the mitzvah a man does a sacred, lofty angel is created. These angels constantly offer praise on his behalf” (Chofetz Chaim 1992: 182; see also Shemot Rabbah 32:6 and Tanchuma Mishpatim 19). And, as the Ramak, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, teaches, “when a person transgresses, a destructive creature is created” (Cordovero 1993: 6).

2 Informed by the Torah, Jewish thought divides the world into four components: mineral, vegetable, animal, and medaber (see, for example, Chayyim Vital’s Shaarei Kedushah Part I, Gate 2), which tells us that, from the standpoint of Jewish thought, a human being is not an animal. “That thing which is called man,” teaches Maimonides, “consists of life and speech” (Moreh Nevuchim 1:51). Maimonides, of course, bases his insight on the Targum, where Onkelos renders the phrase “living being” in “man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7) as “speaking spirit.”

3 Chokhmah corresponds to the brain, Binah to the heart, Daat to the lower brain, Chessed to the right hand, Gevurah to the left hand, Tiferet to the torso, Nethach to the right leg, Hod to the left leg, Yesod to the sex organ. All of these flow into Malkhut or “sovereignty,” which corresponds to speech (see Steinsaltz 1988a: xviii).

4 While Rabbi Simlai teaches that the 365 commandments correspond to the 365 days of the year (see Makkot 23b), we also have the tradition that of the 613 commandments, 248 correspond to the 248 bones of the body, and 365 to the 365 sinews of the body (see, for example, Makkot 24a; Zohar II, 165b; Tikkunei Zohar 70:131a; Chayyim Vital’s Shaarei Kedushah Part 1, Gate 1; the commentary on Deuteronomy 20:11 in the Or HaChayim; Keter Shem Tov 53; or Yaakov Yosef of Pohnoe in Toledot Yaakov Yosef, Shemini 2). The 248 positive commandments, says the Zohar, correspond to the 248 “upper organs,” whereas the 365 negative commandments correspond to the 365 “lower organs” (see Zohar II, 165b).

5 The five worlds include Adam Kadmon and the worlds of Atsilut (Emanation), Beriah (Creation), Yetzirah (Formation), and Asiyah (Action). The five Partsufim within each of
these worlds are *Arich Anpin* (Long Face), *Abba* (Father), *Ima* (Mother), *Zeir Anpin* (Small Face), and *Nukva* (Female) (see Schochet 1979: 139–142).

6 THE SOUL

1 In the *Timaeus* Plato discusses three levels of the soul: appetite, emotion, and reason. These levels, however, are altogether unlike the five levels of the soul addressed here. Unlike the *çp,n*, Plato’s appetite, for instance, has nothing to do with the eternal soul, and, while the soul may imitate the divine, it is not linked to the divine.

2 Note that, with regard to the ten sefirot, *çp,n* corresponds to the six intermediary sefirot, from *Chesed* to *Yesod*; thus it joins the three higher sefirot (*Keter*, *Chokhmah*, and *Binah*) to the lowest sefirot, *Malkhut*, which corresponds to *çp,n*. Associated with the six intermediary sefirot, moreover, *çp,n* is associated with the six days of creation: as the spirit or *çp,n* moves over the face of the deep, creation comes into being.

3 It should be noted that the word *çp,n* is sometimes used to refer not just to one of the five levels of soul but to the very essence of the soul; at times this term is used in such a way as to include all levels of the soul.

4 Aryeh Kaplan, in fact, points out that the five levels of the soul parallel the four letters of the Divine Name. The *nefesh* corresponds to the final *hey*, and the *ruach* parallels the *vav*, which denotes connection and transition. The *neshamah* is associated with the first *hey*, which is the “hand that gives” from above to below. *Chayah* corresponds to the *yud*, and *yechidah* is associated with the “hook” or the infinitesimal point of contact with the Holy One Himself, from which the *yud* emerges (see Kaplan 1990: 18–20).

5 In the light of this view of the *çp,n*, it is interesting to see what the Zohar says about the levels of the soul after death. According to the Zohar, the *çp,n* remains in this realm until the body has returned to dust; during that time it mingles with the living to watch over them. The *çp,n* enters the earthly Garden of Eden and assumes a form resembling the body it once had. The *çp,n* ascends immediately to the upper realms from which she emanated (see *Zohar* II, 141b).

7 EXILE

1 The word *hl…ben* is from the verb *lb'n*: (naval), which means to “wither,” to “perish,” or to “be destroyed”; the noun *lb…n*: (naval) refers to one who is base and vile; it can also refer to one who is godless, an “unbeliever.”

2 This, of course, would not include those who commit suicide in a state of genuine despair or madness or who do so in order to avoid severe torture (see *Kitsur Shulchan Arukh* 201:3).

8 DWELLING

1 According to the Talmud, in addition to *Teshuwah* and the Temple, the things that were brought into being prior to the Creation are the Torah, Gehinnom, the Garden of Eden, the Throne of Glory, and the Name of the Messiah (*Pesachim* 54a; *Nedarim* 39b).

2 The word *hb…WçT* is often mistranslated as “repentance,” a term that does not convey the turning about or the return that *hb…WçT* denotes. The word for “repentance” is *hf;r;j* (charatah); it also translated as “regret” or “feeling sorry.”


4 In addition to the “Hear, O Israel!” prayer, the *mezuzah* also contains the passage “If you listen diligently to My commandments . . .” (Deuteronomy 11:31–21).
5 A בָּהַיִם, literally a “house of the father,” is one’s family; a בית-הברא is a “house of prayer.”

6 Here one may realize some of the more devastating ramifications of the fact that the Nazis, in a very calculated manner, set about creating realms void of children in the process of rendering Jews homeless. See my discussions of the Nazi assault on the child in Sun Turned to Darkness and Along the Edge of Annihilation.

7 There is, of course a fifth world, Adam Kadmon, but it is so remote, so removed from anything that can be said or thought, that, for the purposes of understanding creation, we often do not deal with it at all.

8 I have this from a commentary by Rabbi Shaul Leiter on Parshata Vayera dated October 2002.

9 THE HOUSE OF THE BOOK

1 To Young’s credit, what he says is at least intelligible. There are others, such as Dominick LaCapra, who, in order to hide the fact that they have nothing to say, resort to a calculated obfuscation. Commenting on the distinction between absence and loss in “texts,” for instance, LaCapra explains, “Absence applies transhistorically to absolute foundations; loss applies to historical phenomena. The conflation of absence and loss induces either a metametaphysical etherealization, even obfuscation, of historical problems or a historicist, reductive localization of transhistorical, recurrently displaced problems—or perhaps a confusingly hybridized, extremely labile discourse that seems to derive critical analyses of historical phenomena directly from the deconstruction of metaphysics and metametaphysical, at times freely associative (or disseminatory), glosses of specific historical dynamics” (LaCapra 2001: 195).

2 Cf. the teaching from Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda: “The study of Torah is as tillage is to the soil—ploughing and clearing it. The aid that comes from G-d is like the rain that waters the field. And the fruit that is produced and brought forth is what remains in the heart” (Chovot HaLevavot 3:3). In a similar vein, Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid writes, “The Written Torah may be compared [to raw material] like wool or linen, whereas the Oral Torah corresponds to the process of weaving the wool or linen into cloth. The word masechta [מָסְכֶת], meaning Talmudic tractate, is indicative of this. The term masechta is etymologically related to the biblical word masechet [מַסְכֶּת], ‘web’” (Sefer Chasidim 17).

3 On the other hand, we should perhaps point out a teaching that comes from a different perspective: “Warm yourself by the fires of the sages, but be careful of their coals, so you do not get burned. For their bite is the bite of a fox, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss is like the hiss of a snake. And everything they say is like fiery coals” (Avot 2:10). While a teacher may claim to learn from his student, Rabbi Eliezer’s comment on his teachers is characteristic of a good student. As he lay on his deathbed, in fact, he declared, “Woe to you, two arms of mine, that have been like two Scrolls of Torah that now are wound. Much Torah have I studied, and much have I taught. Much have I learned, yet I have but skimmed from the knowledge of my teachers as a dog lapping from the sea” (Sanhedrin 68a; also Avot d’Rabbi Natan 27a; cf. Steinsaltz 1997: 62).

10 THE WORD

1 Recall in this connection the teaching from the Zohar: “The word et [וּ] consists of the letters alef [א] and tav [ת], which include between them all the letters, as being the first and last of the alphabet. Afterwards hey [ה] was added, so that all the letters should be attached to hey, and this gave the name atah [וֹ] (Thou)” (Zohar I, 15b).
Once philosophy killed off the Greek gods and their thunderbolts, the divine was situated by degrees solely within the self. As Goethe once stated, “What man reveres as god is drawn from his innermost being” (Goethe 1966: 188). Once god is within the self, the self becomes as god, a shift that culminates in the creation of Hitler. Therefore Yitzhak Katznelson, the great Jewish poet murdered by the Nazis, rightly records the following observation in an entry from his Vittel Diary dated 12 August 1943: “These are the generations of Goethe: Goethe begot that ugly reptile, utterly loathsome, foul-blooded filthy vermin—Hitler” (Katznelson 1972: 112).

In a commentary on this verse the Zohar explains that the tearing of word from meaning, or the apparently imposed silence that has descended upon the world, is the result of the tearing of the vav from the hey of the Tetragrammaton; for the hey represents the sefirah of Malkhut, which is also called Speech. The separation dries up the very source of speech, so that the Voice of Zeir Anpin is not present. This separation of the Voice from Speech, of word from meaning, is what characterizes the exile of the Shekhinah (see Zohar I, 116b).

THE HOLY

1 See, for example, Bamidbar Rabbah 19:1, Tanhuma Chukat 3, and Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 4:1. With regard to the letters that spell פגח (alef–chet–dalet), the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, points out that these letters “have the numerical values 1, 8, 4. Eight symbolizes, as it were, the seven heavens and the earth, and 4, the four directions. All these are emanations from 1 (alef), the Source and Master (aluf) of the world” (see Schneerson 1986b: 82).

2 This is not to say that a woman cannot be violated; on the contrary, it is to assert the particularly horrific nature of the violation of a woman. From the perspective of Jewish religious law and Jewish thought, only a woman can be raped.
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