Revelation in concealment: toward an embodied Post-holocaust spirituality

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1. Introduction: The Locked Gates of Understanding

Standing before the locked gates of a synagogue, watching young dancers rehearse on the bima where generations once prayed, I encountered a revelation that would reshape my understanding of post- Holocaust theology. These dancers, unknowing of the sacred space beneath their feet, embodied a truth that decades of theological discourse had obscured: that sometimes the most profound spiritual encounter occurs when we abandon our need to understand and allow the body to become the vessel of divine presence.

This moment crystallized a theological journey that began with the great post-Holocaust thinkers—Jonas, Levinas, Celan, Levi, Rubenstein, and Fackenheim (1-6)—but ultimately led beyond their frameworks toward what I call an “anti-theology”: a systematic abandonment of systematic thinking about God that paradoxically opens us to divine encounter. This anti- theology does not reject the insights of these masters but recognizes that their intellectual responses to Auschwitz, however brilliant, remain trapped within the very categories that the Holocaust rendered problematic (10,13).

Crucially, this theological innovation does not emerge ex nihilo but recovers suppressed currents within Jewish mystical tradition itself. The radical kabbalistic precedents—from Sabbatean antinomianism to Eybeschutz’s revolutionary “movement toward ayin”—provide historical legitimation for contemporary innovation while highlighting what is unprecedented about post-Holocaust spiritual challenges (23-33). This dual grounding strategy demonstrates that authentic theological innovation emerges not from abandoning tradition but from engaging tradition’s most radical possibilities in response to unprecedented historical trauma.

The central thesis of this work is that post-Holocaust theology must evolve from intellectual wrestling with divine presence and absence toward an embodied dialectical spirituality that finds God not in resolution but in the sustained tension of yearning itself. The divine reveals itself most fully in concealment, teaching us through absence rather than presence, through the broken heart rather than the reasoning mind.

2. The Inheritance of Theological Crisis

2.1 Rubenstein’s Radical Negation

Richard Rubenstein’s declaration in After Auschwitz that “we live in the time of the death of God” represents perhaps the most radical theological response to the Holocaust (1). His assertion that the covenant between God and Israel ended in the gas chambers of Auschwitz was not merely a crisis of faith but a fundamental critique of any theology that attempts to maintain traditional notions of divine providence in the face of ultimate evil.

Rubenstein’s contribution lies not in his conclusion but in his willingness to face the theological implications of Auschwitz without intellectual compromise (1). He recognized that any attempt to

maintain belief in a covenantal God who watches over history would inevitably lead to either blaming the victims or excusing the perpetrators. His “death of God” theology was thus not atheism but a form of theological honesty that cleared the ground for new forms of religious experience.

However, Rubenstein’s framework, while necessary, remains incomplete. His focus on the death of the covenantal God assumes that this particular conception of divine presence was the only viable option. What he identified as the death of God might better be understood as the death of a certain kind of theological thinking—one that demands coherent explanations for divine action in history.

2.2 Fackenheim’s Commanding Voice

Emil Fackenheim’s response to Rubenstein took the form of what he called the 614th commandment: Jews are commanded not to give Hitler a posthumous victory by abandoning Judaism (2). This imperative, Fackenheim argued, comes from the “commanding voice of Auschwitz” itself, revealing that even in the depths of evil, divine presence persists in calling Jews to continue their historical journey.

Fackenheim’s insight was to recognize that theological response to the Holocaust need not take the form of explanation but of commandment (2). The divine voice that emerged from Auschwitz was not one that explained suffering but one that demanded continued Jewish existence as a form of resistance to evil. This shift from theodicy to imperative represents a crucial development in post-Holocaust theology.

Yet Fackenheim’s framework, while moving beyond Rubenstein’s negation, still operates within a paradigm that locates divine presence in historical command. It assumes that we can identify divine voice with sufficient clarity to distinguish it from human projection. The question remains: how do we know when we are hearing the commanding voice of God rather than the echo of our own moral convictions?

2.3 The Limitations of Intellectual Response

Both Rubenstein and Fackenheim, despite their radically different conclusions, share an assumption that theological response to the Holocaust must take place primarily in the realm of ideas. Whether affirming God’s death or God’s commanding presence, they remain within what I call the “theological trap”—the assumption that authentic religious response requires intellectual coherence.

This trap becomes apparent when we consider that both responses, however sophisticated, ultimately fail to address the fundamental challenge that Auschwitz poses to religious consciousness: the shattering of our categories for understanding divine-human relationship. The Holocaust does not simply pose difficult questions for traditional theology; it renders questionable the very enterprise of theological questioning as traditionally conceived.

What is needed is not better theological answers but a different kind of theological questioning—one that emerges from the body, the heart, and the lived experience of loss rather than from the intellect’s demand for coherence. This is the path toward what I call “anti-theology.”

3. The Concept of Divine Vulnerability

Hans Jonas’s contribution to post-Holocaust theology centers on his radical reconceptualization of divine power. In his essay “The Concept of God after Auschwitz,” Jonas proposes that God’s creation of the world required a form of divine self-limitation that made evil possible (3). This self-

limitation was not accidental but necessary: for genuine freedom and genuine goodness to exist, God had to withdraw divine power and become vulnerable to the suffering of creation.

Jonas's theology represents a profound shift from traditional concepts of divine omnipotence toward what we might call a "theology of divine vulnerability" (3). God suffers with creation, experiencing the full horror of evil not as an external observer but as one intimately connected to the fate of the world. This suffering God does not intervene to prevent evil precisely because such intervention would negate the conditions that make genuine moral choice possible.

This framework offers a powerful alternative to theologies that either blame victims for their suffering or require us to see evil as somehow serving divine purposes. Jonas's God is neither absent nor omnipotent but present in vulnerability, sharing in the very suffering that traditional theology struggles to explain.

Jonas's insight points toward a fundamental dialectical principle that becomes central to my own theological framework: authentic divine presence manifests not in power but in powerlessness, not in intervention but in shared vulnerability. This dialectical understanding suggests that we encounter God most fully not when we experience divine protection but when we share in divine suffering.

This principle extends beyond theoretical theology into lived spiritual experience. In moments of profound loss—standing at a parent's deathbed, confronting the reality of evil, facing our own mortality—we do not encounter God as powerful protector but as fellow sufferer. The divine presence that emerges in such moments is not one that offers explanations or solutions but one that shares in the fullness of human vulnerability.

Jonas's theological revolution thus opens the possibility for a spirituality based not on seeking divine intervention but on participating in divine vulnerability. This participation requires abandoning our desire for theological comfort in favor of what I call "dialectical presence"—the capacity to remain present to both divine and human suffering without demanding resolution.

3.1 Beyond Theistic Categories

While Jonas's theology of divine vulnerability represents a significant advance beyond traditional theism, it still operates within categories that may themselves be post-Holocaust anachronisms. The very language of divine "self-limitation" and "vulnerability" assumes a coherent divine subject capable of making choices about power and powerlessness.

What if the Holocaust challenges not merely our understanding of divine power but our very capacity to speak coherently about divine subjectivity? What if the most authentic post-Holocaust theology must abandon not only traditional theism but the entire framework of theological discourse that assumes we can make meaningful statements about divine nature and divine action?

This question points toward the possibility of an anti-theology that maintains spiritual depth while acknowledging the fundamental inadequacy of theological language itself. Such an approach would not seek to develop better concepts of God but would find ways of relating to ultimate reality that transcend conceptual thinking altogether.

4. The Primacy of Ethics

Emmanuel Levinas's contribution to post-Holocaust thought extends far beyond theology into fundamental questions about the nature of ethical responsibility. His assertion that "ethics precedes ontology"—that our responsibility to the Other comes before any questions about the

nature of being—offers a profound alternative to theological approaches that begin with concepts of God (4).

For Levinas, the face of the Other presents us with an infinite responsibility that cannot be contained within any system of thought or practice (4). This responsibility is not chosen but imposed; it precedes any decision on our part and calls into question all our self-interested calculations. The ethical demand of the face is absolute, infinite, and asymmetrical—we owe the Other everything while they owe us nothing.

This ethical framework offers a powerful resource for post-Holocaust thought because it locates ultimate meaning not in cosmic order or divine plan but in the concrete encounter with human vulnerability. The Holocaust becomes not a theological problem to be solved but an ethical demand to be faced: how do we respond to suffering that exceeds all our capacities for response?

Levinas's concept of the "trace of the infinite" provides a crucial bridge between his ethics and questions of divine presence (4). The infinite does not appear directly but leaves traces in our ethical encounters with others. These traces point beyond themselves toward what Levinas calls "the absolutely Other"—not as object of knowledge but as that which calls all knowledge into question.

This understanding of divine presence as trace rather than manifestation offers a powerful alternative to both traditional theism and atheistic rejection of the divine (4). God does not appear but leaves traces that we can follow only by attending to our infinite responsibility for others. These traces cannot be captured in theological concepts but can only be lived in ethical practice.

The implications for post-Holocaust theology are profound. Rather than asking where God was during the Holocaust, we might ask: where do we encounter the traces of infinite responsibility in our response to the Holocaust? How does attending to these traces transform our understanding of what it means to live as human beings in a post-Holocaust world?

Levinas's designation of ethics as "first philosophy" suggests that all meaningful thinking must begin with acknowledgment of our responsibility for others. This responsibility is not derived from theological or philosophical principles but is the foundation upon which any authentic thinking must build.

Applied to post-Holocaust theology, this insight suggests that we should not begin with questions about God's nature or God's action in history but with questions about our responsibility for Holocaust memory, for preventing future genocide, for responding to contemporary suffering. Theological reflection becomes meaningful only as it emerges from and returns to this ethical foundation.

This approach points toward what I call "ethics-based anti-theology"—a spiritual practice that finds ultimate meaning not in theological understanding but in ethical response to the traces of infinite responsibility that appear in our encounters with others. Such practice maintains spiritual depth while avoiding the theological trap of trying to make sense of senseless suffering.

5. The Limits of Ethical Idealism

While Levinas's ethical philosophy offers profound resources for post-Holocaust thought, it also faces significant limitations when confronted with the reality of radical evil. His assumption that ethical responsibility is infinite and asymmetrical works well in contexts of ordinary human interaction but becomes problematic when applied to situations involving genocidal perpetrators.

Can we meaningfully speak of infinite responsibility toward those who systematically murder innocents? Does the face of the Nazi perpetrator present the same ethical demand as the face of the victim? Levinas himself struggled with these questions, sometimes suggesting that there are faces that have lost their humanity and no longer present authentic ethical demands.

This struggle points toward the need for an ethics that can maintain its commitment to human dignity while acknowledging that some human choices place individuals beyond the reach of ordinary ethical response. Such an ethics must be grounded not in abstract principles but in concrete wisdom about how to respond to the full spectrum of human behavior, from saintliness to radical evil.

6. Language After Auschwitz

Paul Celan's poetry represents perhaps the most profound artistic response to the Holocaust, confronting directly Adorno's challenge about whether poetry is possible after Auschwitz (5). Celan's answer was not to abandon poetry but to transform it radically, creating a new poetic language that could bear witness to experiences that exceed ordinary language's capacity for expression.

Celan's poetry operates through what he called "counter-word"—language that works against itself, that says by not saying, that reveals by concealing (5). His famous "Death Fugue" demonstrates this technique, using the beautiful structure of fugue to convey the horror of systematic murder, creating aesthetic beauty that simultaneously condemns the aesthetic beautification of evil.

This poetic strategy offers crucial insights for post- Holocaust theology. Like Celan's poetry, authentic theological response to the Holocaust must work against itself, using religious language while simultaneously questioning that language's adequacy. Theological discourse must become "counter- theology"—speaking of God while acknowledging the impossibility of such speech.

Celan's later poetry moved increasingly toward silence, with poems becoming sparser, more fractured, more willing to allow empty space to carry meaning (5). This evolution reflects his growing conviction that authentic response to the Holocaust required not more words but fewer words, not greater eloquence but deeper silence.

The theological implications are profound. If Celan is correct that authentic witness requires movement toward silence, then post-Holocaust theology must question not only its content but its very existence as discourse (8,10). Perhaps the most authentic theological response to Auschwitz is the gradual abandonment of theological speech in favor of what I call "theological silence"—a silence that bears witness more powerfully than any theological argument.

This silence is not emptiness but fullness—pregnant with the memory of those who can no longer speak, heavy with the weight of questions that cannot be answered, resonant with the echoes of prayers that received no response. Such silence becomes a form of anti-theology that maintains spiritual depth while refusing theological consolation.

7. Poetry as Counter-Memory

Celan understood his poetry as a form of counter- memory that resisted both forgetting and the false consolations of conventional remembrance. His poems do not offer healing or closure but maintain the wound of memory open, preventing it from being transformed into comfortable historical narrative.

This understanding of poetry as counter-memory provides a model for post-Holocaust theology that refuses the consolations of traditional religious discourse. Such theology must maintain what I call “dialectical memory”—holding simultaneously to the memory of divine presence in Jewish tradition and the memory of divine absence during the Holocaust, refusing to resolve the tension between them.

Dialectical memory operates through what Celan called “breathturn”—moments when ordinary breathing stops and new forms of breath become possible. In theological terms, these are moments when ordinary theological discourse fails and new forms of spiritual expression emerge. Such moments cannot be planned or controlled but can only be received as gifts of grace in the midst of theological crisis.

Celan’s poetry is famously difficult to translate, not merely because of linguistic complexity but because the poems work through the specific materiality of German language—the language of both Goethe and Goebbels, of culture and catastrophe. This untranslatability is not a limitation but a theological principle: authentic witness to the Holocaust cannot be universalized without betraying its specificity.

This insight challenges any post-Holocaust theology that seeks universal principles or general lessons from the Holocaust. The specificity of Jewish suffering under Nazism cannot be dissolved into abstract discussions of evil or general principles of human rights. Authentic theological response must remain rooted in the particular while acknowledging that this particularity resists theological generalization.

The untranslatability of Holocaust experience thus becomes a theological principle: authentic encounter with ultimate reality always exceeds our capacity for theological translation. This excess points toward an anti-theology that maintains openness to divine encounter while acknowledging the fundamental inadequacy of all theological language for capturing such encounter.

8. Rational Witnessing

Primo Levi’s approach to Holocaust testimony stands in apparent tension with Celan’s poetic fragmentation (6). Where Celan worked through indirection and linguistic experimentation, Levi insisted on clarity, rationality, and precise description. His commitment to rational discourse reflected not naive faith in reason but ethical conviction that clear testimony was owed to both the dead and the living.

Levi’s If This Is a Man demonstrates how rational discourse can serve testimonial purposes that transcend mere factual reporting (6). His clear, analytical style creates what he called “zone grise”—gray zone— between victim and perpetrator that complicates simplistic moral categories while maintaining absolute condemnation of the system that created such zones.

This testimonial rationality offers important resources for post-Holocaust theology. Against romantic or mystical responses to the Holocaust that risk aestheticizing suffering, Levi’s approach insists on facing the full human reality of the camps: the hunger, the cold, the systematic degradation of human dignity. Any authentic theology must begin with such unflinching acknowledgment of historical reality.

8.1 The Limits of Human Understanding

Paradoxically, Levi’s commitment to rational analysis led him to profound recognition of reason’s limits. His description of the Muselmann—the camp prisoners who had lost all will to live—points toward experiences that exceed rational comprehension while demanding rational response. The

Muselmann represents the limit case where human categories break down while human responsibility remains.

This dialectical relationship between rational analysis and the recognition of reason's limits provides a model for post-Holocaust theology that I call "rational anti-theology." Such theology employs rigorous intellectual analysis while acknowledging that the most important questions lie beyond intellectual resolution. It maintains commitment to clear thinking while recognizing that clear thinking alone cannot resolve the fundamental challenges posed by radical evil.

Levi's approach thus avoids both the intellectual arrogance that claims to understand the Holocaust and the anti-intellectual romanticism that abandons critical thinking in favor of pure emotion or mysticism. His rational witnessing becomes a form of spiritual practice that honors both human intelligence and its limitations.

8.2 The Burden of Survival

Levi's later writings increasingly focused on what he called "survivor's guilt"—the complex emotional and moral burden carried by those who lived through experiences that killed others (6). This guilt is not merely psychological but ontological: survival itself becomes a theological problem that challenges any simple affirmation of life's meaning.

The survivor's perspective offers crucial insights for post-Holocaust theology because it refuses both despair and easy consolation (11,13). Survivors like Levi lived in the tension between gratitude for life and guilt about survival, between the obligation to testify and the inadequacy of all testimony. This tension points toward a theological stance that I call "grateful guilt"—a form of spiritual experience that can neither fully affirm nor fully deny life's meaning.

Grateful guilt operates through what Levi called "shame"—not personal shame for specific actions but existential shame for being human in a world where such things are possible. This shame becomes a theological resource that prevents both cynical despair and naive optimism, maintaining openness to grace while acknowledging the depth of human capacity for evil.

8.3 Chemistry as Theology

Levi's professional training as a chemist profoundly shaped his approach to Holocaust testimony. His insistence on precise observation, careful analysis, and respect for empirical reality reflects not scientific reductionism but what might be called "chemical theology"—a way of approaching ultimate questions through attention to material reality.

This chemical theology recognizes that authentic encounter with ultimate reality must include rather than transcend physical existence. The body's hunger, the mind's capacity for both cruelty and kindness, the material conditions that shape spiritual possibility— all these belong to any complete theological account of human existence.

Levi's approach thus points toward an embodied anti- theology that finds spiritual meaning not in escape from material reality but in deeper engagement with it. Such theology recognizes that the divine, if it is to be encountered at all in a post-Holocaust world, must be encountered in and through rather than despite the full reality of material existence.

9. The Halakhic Response

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's response to the modern theological crisis—of which the Holocaust forms the most extreme manifestation—took the form of what he called "dialectical theology" (16).

His famous essay “The Lonely Man of Faith” presents human existence as fundamentally torn between two modes of being: Adam I, who seeks to master and control the world, and Adam II, who yearns for meaning and relationship with the divine.

Soloveitchik’s contribution to post-Holocaust thought lies not in direct engagement with the Holocaust but in his recognition that authentic Jewish existence must embrace rather than resolve the fundamental tensions of human spiritual life (16). His halakhic approach suggests that Jewish response to theological crisis should take the form not of new theological answers but of intensified commitment to Jewish practice, regardless of whether such practice provides intellectual satisfaction.

This halakhic response offers important resources for post-Holocaust Judaism because it locates meaning in observance rather than belief, in practice rather than theology. For Soloveitchik, the question is not whether we can understand God’s ways but whether we can remain committed to the covenant despite our inability to understand (17). This commitment becomes itself a form of faith that transcends intellectual resolution.

Yet Soloveitchik’s framework, while moving beyond simple rationalism, still operates within what might be called “institutional theology”—the assumption that authentic Jewish response to crisis must take place within established halakhic categories. His dialectical approach recognizes tension but channels it through traditional forms that may themselves require fundamental reconsideration in light of the Holocaust’s challenge to all inherited frameworks.

10. The Rebbe’s Messianic Hope

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, developed perhaps the most optimistic post-Holocaust Jewish theology, one that insisted on finding divine presence and purpose even in the darkest moments of Jewish history (18). His approach combined mystical Kabbalistic insights with practical activism, arguing that Jewish response to the Holocaust should take the form of renewed commitment to bringing divine light into the world.

Eli Rubin’s groundbreaking analysis in “Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity” reveals that the Rebbe’s theological optimism was grounded in a revolutionary reinterpretation of the kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum (divine contraction) that distinguished him sharply from his predecessors (34,35). Where traditional kabbalah and those students of the Vilna Gaon understood tzimtzum as God’s literal withdrawal from cosmic space to make room for creation, the Rebbe articulated what Rubin calls a “non-literal” interpretation: God never actually departs but remains fundamentally present even in apparent absence.

This theological innovation had profound implications for post-Holocaust Jewish thought. In one of his earliest publications after assuming leadership, the Rebbe declared that “just like in Chabad, we understand tzimtzum in a non-literal way—that is to say that God never actually departs, but rather God is fundamentally present—so the term histalkus [departure/death] as applied to the tzaddik also needs to be interpreted in a non-literal way” (35). This principle extended beyond the death of righteous individuals to encompass all apparent divine absence, including the Holocaust itself.

11. Cosmic Optimism

The Rebbe’s theology operates through what might be called “transformative mysticism”—the belief that human actions, particularly mitzvot performed with proper intention, have the power to transform cosmic reality and hasten the coming of the Messiah (18,34). This approach locates ultimate meaning not in understanding suffering but in working to eliminate it through spiritual

practice that affects the fundamental structure of reality itself.

Rubin's analysis demonstrates that this optimistic theology represented a deliberate departure from the more dialectical approaches of the Rebbe's predecessors, who maintained greater tension between divine presence and absence (34,35). The Rebbe's insistence on divine omnipresence, even in apparent concealment, created theological framework that could maintain messianic hope despite historical catastrophe. His famous characterization of America as a "medina shel hesed" (nation of kindness) reflected this optimistic assessment of possibilities for Jewish spiritual work in the contemporary world.

The Rebbe's emphasis on outreach (kiruv) and his insistence that every Jew has infinite value represents a profound response to the Holocaust's attempt to destroy Jewish existence. His movement's remarkable success in creating vibrant Jewish communities worldwide demonstrates the practical power of theological optimism that refuses to be defeated by historical trauma (19,35). This approach transforms post-Holocaust Jewish existence from reactive survival into proactive spiritual transformation of the world.

However, the Rebbe's approach, while psychologically and sociologically powerful, faces significant theological challenges when measured against the insights of post-Holocaust anti-theology. His mystical certainty about cosmic transformation and divine omnipresence, while inspiring, requires forms of cognitive and spiritual commitment that may prove unsustainable for those who cannot share his mystical confidence about ultimate reality.

The Rebbe's non-literal interpretation of tzimtzum, while solving certain theological problems, creates others. If divine presence is truly constant and tzimtzum represents not actual divine withdrawal but merely concealment, then the Holocaust becomes not genuine divine absence but divine presence operating through incomprehensible concealment. This interpretation risks the kind of theodicy that post- Holocaust theology must avoid—finding ultimate meaning and purpose in radical evil itself.

Moreover, the Rebbe's confident predictions about messianic transformation and his movement's expectations of imminent redemption create theological vulnerabilities when such transformation fails to materialize. The continuing reality of suffering, the persistence of evil, and the non-arrival of the messianic age he confidently anticipated challenge the sustainability of purely optimistic theological frameworks (35).

The Rebbe's approach shares certain important insights with the anti-theological framework developed in this study, particularly his recognition that authentic spiritual life must transcend conventional theological categories. His emphasis on transformative practice over systematic theology, his focus on embodied mitzvot rather than abstract belief, and his commitment to finding divine presence in apparently secular contexts all anticipate elements of post-theological spirituality.

However, fundamental differences distinguish the Rebbe's optimistic mysticism from post-Holocaust anti-theology. Where the Rebbe maintains confident knowledge about divine presence and cosmic purpose, anti-theology embraces sustained uncertainty about ultimate reality. Where his approach seeks to transform apparent divine absence into concealed divine presence, anti-theology finds authentic spiritual engagement precisely in sustained attention to irreparable absence itself.

The question that emerges from engagement with the Rebbe's approach is whether his practical wisdom about Jewish spiritual life can be separated from the metaphysical optimism that grounds it. Can his insights about transformative practice, community formation, and spiritual activism be sustained within frameworks that abandon his confident claims about divine presence and cosmic

purpose? This question points toward the possibility of what might be called “post-Chabad spirituality”—practice that honors the Rebbe’s innovations while transcending his theological limitations.

12. The Hidden God

Eliezer Berkovits’s Faith After the Holocaust provides perhaps the most systematic theological response to the Holocaust from within Orthodox Judaism (20). His central argument revolves around the concept of hester panim (divine hiddenness), which he interprets not as divine absence but as divine self-restraint necessary for human freedom and moral development.

Berkovits argues that God’s apparent absence during the Holocaust reflects not divine indifference but divine commitment to human freedom (20). For genuine moral choice to be possible, God must remain hidden, allowing humans to choose between good and evil without divine intervention that would make such choice meaningless. The Holocaust thus represents not the failure of divine providence but its most extreme manifestation—God’s willingness to remain hidden even in the face of ultimate evil.

This theodicy offers important psychological resources for maintaining faith after Auschwitz because it transforms divine silence from evidence of divine absence into evidence of divine respect for human freedom. Berkovits’s approach allows believers to maintain both their faith in God and their condemnation of evil without requiring them to find redemptive meaning in suffering itself (9,20).

Yet Berkovits’s theodicy, however sophisticated, still operates within the framework of traditional theology that assumes divine action in history can be understood through human categories. His explanation of divine hiddenness, while intellectually satisfying to some, may ultimately provide the kind of theological comfort that the Holocaust’s radical challenge to meaning- making renders problematic.

13. Incarnational Judaism

Michael Wyschogrod developed what might be called an “incarnational” Jewish theology that emphasizes God’s particular attachment to the Jewish people as a physical, biological reality rather than merely spiritual or ethical community (21). His approach suggests that divine presence manifests itself through Jewish flesh and blood, making the Holocaust not merely an attack on Jewish beliefs but an assault on divine embodiment itself.

Wyschogrod’s theology offers a powerful alternative to spiritualizing interpretations of Judaism that locate Jewish significance in ethical or theological principles rather than in the concrete reality of Jewish existence (21). His emphasis on divine attachment to Jewish physicality provides theological grounding for Jewish survival that transcends questions of Jewish theological or ethical superiority.

This incarnational approach suggests that Jewish response to the Holocaust should emphasize not theological explanation but biological and cultural survival—the continuation of Jewish life as itself a form of divine presence in the world (22). Wyschogrod’s theology thus provides resources for Jewish commitment that do not depend on intellectual resolution of theological problems.

However, Wyschogrod’s emphasis on Jewish particularity, while providing powerful motivation for Jewish survival, risks the kind of ethnic theology that may prove problematic in pluralistic contexts. His incarnational approach, while avoiding some of the problems of abstract theology, may create others related to questions of Jewish superiority and the theological status of non-Jewish suffering.

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14. The Persistence of Theological Categories

These four thinkers represent sophisticated attempts to maintain Jewish theological discourse in the face of the Holocaust's challenge to such discourse. Each offers important resources: Soloveitchik's dialectical thinking, the Rebbe's mystical optimism, Berkovits's hidden God theodicy, and Wyschogrod's incarnational particularity.

Yet all four approaches, despite their sophistication, remain within what I call the "rescue paradigm"—the assumption that authentic Jewish response to the Holocaust must take the form of rescuing traditional theological categories through more sophisticated interpretation (10,13). Whether through halakhic commitment, mystical transformation, theodic explanation, or incarnational theology, these thinkers seek to preserve the possibility of meaningful theological discourse about divine action in history.

The question that emerges from sustained engagement with these approaches is whether such rescue operations, however brilliant, ultimately miss the Holocaust's deepest challenge to religious consciousness. What if the Holocaust requires not better theology but the gradual abandonment of theology as traditionally conceived? What if authentic post-Holocaust Jewish existence requires moving beyond the very categories that these thinkers seek to preserve?

This question points toward the need for what I call "post-rescue Judaism"—forms of Jewish practice that can maintain profound spiritual depth while acknowledging that the traditional categories through which such depth has been understood may themselves be casualties of historical trauma that cannot be restored through intellectual innovation alone.

15. Radical Kabbalah and the Tradition of Divine Failure

The anonymous kabbalistic text "Va-avo ha-Yom el ha-'Ayin" (I Came This Day to Nothingness), discovered in 1725 and attributed to Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz, represents perhaps the most radical theological innovation in Jewish mystical literature— one that anticipates contemporary post-Holocaust anti-theology in remarkable ways (23). The work's very title announces its revolutionary character: rather than conventional messianic hope, it envisions eschatological movement toward ayin (nothingness) as authentic spiritual fulfillment.

Eybeschutz's most shocking innovation involves a complete inversion of traditional kabbalistic theology regarding Christianity. Where conventional Kabbalah identifies "Edom" (Christianity) with the demonic realm of pure judgment, Eybeschutz boldly identifies Edom with the Holy Ancient One—the highest divine potentiality, characterized by pure mercy and grace (33). This identification transforms Christianity from cosmic evil into the supreme manifestation of divine presence, albeit one that proves ultimately destructive in its very perfection.

The theological implications are staggering. Eybeschutz suggests that pure divine grace, unrestrained by judgment, caused the primordial catastrophe known as the "Shattering of the Vessels" (33). The Ancient One's "uncontained ejaculate"— divine effluence without the restraining influence of the feminine principle—devastated the cosmic structures of existence. Christianity, as embodiment of pure mercy, represents this dangerous divine perfection that destroys precisely through its inability to establish proper boundaries.

16. Sacred Apostasy

Eybeschutz develops a revolutionary understanding of messianic function through radical feminization of the Davidic messiah. In his reading, King David— represents not masculine warrior but feminine receiver, serving as the Ancient One's missing Shechinah (divine feminine presence)

(33). The messiah's role involves offering himself for divine penetration, containing the Ancient One's potentially destructive effluence within his feminized body.

This theological framework transforms the messiah's "alien worship" into a salvific act that enables the Ancient One to engage with creation without destroying it (33). Through his willingness to serve as divine container, the messiah makes possible the Ancient One's direct intervention in human affairs while preventing the catastrophic "flooding" that pure divine grace would otherwise produce.

The explicitness of Eybeschutz's imagery—describing divine coupling—serves not merely as scandalous metaphor but as precise theological description of cosmic processes (33). The work envisions future liberation from conventional boundaries, anticipating a time when "the Shechinah will engage with the lower realms".

Eybeschutz's theological innovation extends beyond divine theory into practical implications for human community. His work entirely abandons the "racism and xenophobia that disfigure the orthodox Kabbalah," instead embracing universal human brotherhood based on the principle that "God repudiates no one" (33). The Ancient One's pure mercy extends equally to Jews and Gentiles, creating theological foundation for transcending traditional religious boundaries.

The work anticipates what Halperin calls a "charter for the world religion of the future"—one that transcends distinctions between Jew and Gentile while encompassing what we would now recognize as gender equality and marriage equality (33). This universal religion operates not through conventional theological categories but through systematic transgression of established religious boundaries.

Most remarkably, Eybeschutz envisions a future reversal of gender hierarchy in which "the Higher Shechinah will be above the God of Israel," comparing this to "a noble woman [who] is her husband's crown" (33). This anticipated transformation extends beyond symbolic representation to practical implications for human relationships, suggesting that authentic spiritual maturity requires abandoning patriarchal assumptions about divine and human authority.

16.1 The Theology of Sacred Failure

Perhaps Eybeschutz's most profound innovation involves his recognition that spiritual authenticity may require embracing apparent failure rather than seeking conventional success. His analysis of the "Shattering of the Vessels" suggests that cosmic catastrophe resulted not from divine absence but from divine presence in its most perfect form (33). Pure grace, untempered by judgment, proves destructive precisely because of its perfection.

This insight anticipates contemporary theological recognition that traditional categories for understanding divine action may themselves be problematic. Eybeschutz's theology operates through what might be called "systematic paradox"—finding authentic divine presence in apparent divine failure, locating ultimate meaning in the abandonment of conventional meaning-making categories.

The work's title phrase, "veavo hayom el HaAyin" (and the day will come to nothingness), captures this eschatological embrace of apparent meaninglessness as pathway to authentic spiritual fulfillment. Rather than anticipating conventional redemption, Eybeschutz envisions movement toward ayin as itself the goal of spiritual practice—a recognition that parallels contemporary anti-theological approaches that find meaning in the systematic abandonment of theological certainty.

This examination of Eybeschutz's radical theology demonstrates that my own "anti-theology of

embodied absence" may stand within an authentic Jewish mystical tradition rather than representing complete rupture with Jewish sources. The historical precedents are striking: Eybeschutz's movement "toward ayin" anticipates my emphasis on finding divine presence in apparent absence; his recognition that pure divine grace proves destructive parallels my insight that traditional theological comfort may be spiritually inadequate; his systematic transgression of conventional religious boundaries prefigures my abandonment of established theological categories (33).

Yet crucial differences highlight what is distinctively post-Holocaust about my approach. Where Eybeschutz maintained cosmic frameworks that could ultimately contain transgression and failure within larger metaphysical structures, my anti- theology emerges from complete breakdown of such containing frameworks. The Holocaust represents not merely another instance of historical catastrophe that can be integrated into existing theological systems, but fundamental challenge to the very possibility of systematic theology itself.

Eybeschutz's theology, however radical, still operated within traditional kabbalistic cosmology that located ultimate meaning in divine processes, even when those processes involved apparent failure or transgression. His "Sacred failure" remained contained within cosmic purpose - the Ancient One's destructive grace served necessary function in cosmic evolution, and messianic apostasy enabled ultimate redemption. My anti-theology, by contrast, abandons teleological assumptions entirely, finding spiritual authenticity in sustained presence to irreparable brokenness without expectation of cosmic repair.

This historical grounding serves crucial apologetic function: it demonstrates that Jewish tradition itself contains resources for theological approaches that transcend conventional categories, legitimizing contemporary innovation while highlighting its unprecedented character. The radical kabbalists show that Judaism has always included voices willing to embrace divine absence, sacred transgression, and the inadequacy of conventional religious discourse. Yet none faced the complete shattering of theological categories that the Holocaust represents.

The tradition of sacred failure thus provides not template to be followed but inspiration for continued innovation that addresses challenges previous generations could not have anticipated. Where Eybeschutz could still envision cosmic redemption through messianic transgression, post-Holocaust spirituality must learn to find meaning in the sustained tension between yearning and absence, without guarantee of ultimate resolution. This represents not abandonment of Jewish tradition but its deepest evolution in response to unprecedented historical trauma.

17. Sabbatean Theology

The Sabbatean movement, centered around the seventeenth-century messianic pretender Shabbetai Zevi, developed perhaps the most radical theology in Jewish history—one that found sacred meaning in the apparent failure of messianic hope (25). When Shabbetai Zevi converted to Islam under Ottoman pressure, his followers developed complex theological explanations that transformed apparent apostasy into deeper spiritual truth.

Sabbatean theology operates through what Scholem calls "redemption through sin"—the paradoxical idea that spiritual repair (tikkun) can only be achieved through deliberate transgression of conventional religious boundaries (25). This theology suggests that divine presence appears most authentically when traditional religious categories are systematically violated rather than preserved.

The Sabbatean concept of the "holy serpent" represents perhaps the most radical expression of this thinking— the idea that evil itself serves sacred purposes and that authentic spiritual practice

requires engaging directly with forces that conventional religion seeks to avoid (26). This engagement with darkness as pathway to light provides important precedent for theologies that refuse to locate meaning in conventional religious consolation.

Sabbatean mysticism thus develops what might be called an “anti-halakhic spirituality” that finds sacred meaning precisely in the spaces where traditional Jewish law and theology break down. This historical precedent suggests that traditions of theological transgression operate deep within Jewish mystical culture, providing resources for contemporary responses to situations where conventional religious discourse proves inadequate.

Gershom Scholem’s scholarly analysis of post- Sabbatean mysticism reveals what he calls “nihilistic Kabbalah”—forms of Jewish mystical practice that embrace the breakdown of traditional religious categories as itself a spiritual path (25,27). Scholem’s work demonstrates that Jewish mystical tradition contains sophisticated resources for finding meaning in apparent meaninglessness.

Scholem’s analysis of figures like Jacob Frank and the radical Sabbatean underground shows how Jewish mysticism could develop forms of practice that systematically transgress conventional religious boundaries while maintaining profound spiritual commitment (25). These movements represent not simply antinomian rebellion but sophisticated theological responses to the failure of conventional messianic hope.

The concept of “nihilistic Kabbalah” suggests that Jewish tradition itself recognizes the necessity for periodic destruction of established religious forms as pathway to authentic spiritual renewal (27). This recognition provides crucial historical grounding for contemporary theologies that find authentic divine encounter in the breakdown rather than preservation of traditional theological categories.

Scholem’s scholarship thus reveals that what appears as radical innovation in post-Holocaust theology may actually represent recovery of suppressed but authentic dimensions of Jewish mystical tradition. The nihilistic impulse within Kabbalah provides historical precedent for embracing theological failure as itself a form of spiritual practice.

18. Transgressive Mysticism

Elliot Wolfson’s contemporary scholarship on Jewish mysticism reveals the extent to which transgression, paradox, and the violation of conventional categories operate at the heart of kabbalistic thinking (28,29). Wolfson’s analysis demonstrates that Jewish mysticism has always contained resources for embracing what conventional religious discourse finds unacceptable.

Wolfson’s work on gender transgression in Kabbalah shows how mystical practice often requires systematic violation of conventional categories, including those related to sexual identity and social role (28). This transgressive dimension suggests that authentic mystical practice requires moving beyond rather than within established religious boundaries.

The concept of “mystical transgression” that emerges from Wolfson’s scholarship provides contemporary academic framework for understanding how spiritual practice can operate through rather than despite the violation of conventional religious norms (29). This framework offers important resources for post- Holocaust theologies that find conventional religious discourse inadequate to contemporary spiritual challenges.

Wolfson’s analysis of kabbalistic approaches to divine concealment shows how Jewish mysticism has long recognized that authentic encounter with ultimate reality requires abandoning

conventional expectations about how such encounter should manifest itself (30). This recognition provides historical grounding for contemporary approaches that embrace divine absence as itself a form of divine presence.

19. The Tradition of Sacred Failure

The historical survey of radical Kabbalah reveals what might be called a “tradition of sacred failure” within Jewish mystical culture—a recurring pattern of finding authentic spiritual meaning in precisely those moments when conventional religious discourse breaks down (25,27,31). This tradition suggests that apparent theological crisis may actually represent opportunity for recovering suppressed dimensions of Jewish spiritual practice.

The figures examined—Eybeschutz, the Sabbateans, and their scholarly interpreters—all demonstrate how Jewish mystical tradition contains resources for embracing paradox, transgression, and apparent failure as pathways to authentic spiritual experience. This historical precedent provides crucial context for understanding contemporary post-Holocaust theologies that operate through similar dynamics.

The phrase “veavo hayom el HaAyin” captures the eschatological dimension of this tradition—the recognition that authentic spiritual fulfillment may require movement toward rather than away from experiences of nothingness, absence, and apparent meaninglessness (24). This movement toward ayin provides historical precedent for contemporary theological approaches that find meaning in the systematic abandonment of meaning-making itself.

The tradition of sacred failure thus reveals that Jewish mystical culture has always contained resources for responding to situations where conventional religious discourse proves inadequate. This historical depth suggests that contemporary innovations in post- Holocaust theology may represent not radical departure from Jewish tradition but recovery of authentic but suppressed dimensions of that tradition.

20. Beyond historical Precedent

While this historical survey reveals important precedents for contemporary theological innovation, it also reveals the limitations of any approach that seeks to ground contemporary spiritual practice entirely in historical authority. The radical kabbalists examined operated within cosmological and social contexts that differ fundamentally from our post-Holocaust situation.

The value of historical precedent lies not in providing ready-made solutions to contemporary problems but in demonstrating that Jewish tradition itself contains resources for theological innovation that transcends conventional religious boundaries (32). This demonstration legitimizes contemporary experiments in post-Holocaust theology while acknowledging that such experiments must address challenges that previous generations could not have anticipated.

The tradition of sacred failure thus provides not a template to be followed but inspiration for continued innovation in Jewish spiritual practice. The historical precedents examined suggest that authentic Jewish theology has always required willingness to transgress established boundaries when such boundaries prove inadequate to contemporary spiritual challenges.

21. The Failure of Intellectual Ttheology

The great post-Holocaust thinkers examined above— despite their profound insights—ultimately remain trapped within what I call the “theological paradigm”: the assumption that authentic religious response requires coherent intellectual framework for understanding divine-human

relationship. Whether affirming God's death (Rubenstein), God's commanding presence (Fackenheim), God's vulnerability (Jonas), divine traces in ethics (Levinas), or bearing poetic witness to divine absence (Celan), these thinkers all assume that meaningful response to the Holocaust must take place primarily in the realm of ideas and language.

But what if the Holocaust's deepest challenge to religious consciousness is precisely its demand that we abandon this paradigm? What if authentic spiritual response requires not better theological thinking but the systematic abandonment of theological thinking as traditionally conceived?

This possibility emerges from my own experience of loss and the theological insights that such experience generates. Standing at my mother's deathbed, confronting the reality of a Prussian Holocaust survivor's fragility, watching young dancers unknowingly perform on sacred ground—these experiences suggest that authentic encounter with ultimate reality occurs not through intellectual wrestling with divine concepts but through embodied presence to the dialectical tensions that constitute human existence.

22. The Theology of Imperfection

In my poem "The Theology of Imperfection," I explore how physical imperfection—an infected toenail (!)—becomes a gateway to theological insight (7). The contrast between my father's meticulous grooming and my own "pesty ectoderm" reveals what I call the "left side of the divine"—not the perfected, idealized divine presence of traditional theology but the divine that appears precisely in imperfection, weakness, and embodied vulnerability.

This theology of imperfection suggests that authentic divine encounter occurs not despite our physical and moral limitations but through them. The infected toenail becomes a theological text more revealing than volumes of systematic theology because it points toward a divine presence that embraces rather than transcends the full reality of embodied existence.

Such insight cannot be reached through intellectual analysis but only through what I call "embodied hermeneutics"—reading the meaning of ultimate reality through attention to the body's wisdom. This reading reveals that the divine appears most clearly not in perfection but in imperfection, not in strength but in weakness, not in presence but in absence.

23. Revelation in Concealment

The concept of "revelation in concealment" emerges from sustained reflection on the paradox that divine presence often appears most powerfully in moments of apparent divine absence. This paradox cannot be resolved intellectually but can only be lived through what I call "dialectical faith"—the capacity to remain open to divine encounter while acknowledging that such encounter challenges all our categories for understanding it.

My mother's death provided the most profound lesson in revelation through concealment (7). In her "excruciating absence" and my "painful longing," she taught me "a theology she never articulated"—one that required casting aside "any intellectual grasp" and "any attempt to make sense of the non-sense." This theology could only be learned through "immersive" experience of loss that transcended all attempts at rational explanation.

The theological insight that emerged from this experience was not a new concept of divine presence but a new way of relating to divine absence. Rather than experiencing absence as lack or failure, I learned to encounter absence as itself a form of presence— not the presence of a divine being but the presence of divine mystery that exceeds all our capacities for comprehension.

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24. Rebbe Nachman's Anti-theology

This understanding connects directly with Rebbe Nachman's paradoxical theology, which teaches that authentic faith emerges precisely from the experience of divine distance rather than divine closeness (7). According to Nachman's parable of the mountain and the spring, the heart of the mountain (representing the divine) and the spring (representing the human soul) can only maintain their relationship through sustained yearning across infinite distance.

Nachman's insight, as interpreted through the lens of post-Holocaust experience, suggests that authentic post-Holocaust spirituality must abandon the search for divine presence in favor of sustained attention to divine absence (7,9). This attention is not passive resignation but active spiritual practice that finds in yearning itself the most authentic form of divine encounter.

This practice constitutes what I call "anti-theology" because it systematically abandons all attempts to make positive statements about divine nature or divine action while maintaining profound openness to divine encounter. Anti-theology is not atheism but the recognition that authentic relationship with ultimate reality requires transcending all our categories for understanding such relationship.

25. The Kafkaesque Paradox

The theological path revealed through personal loss connects directly with Kafka's understanding of spiritual existence as fundamentally paradoxical. Like Kafka's characters, who constantly seek access to transcendent meaning while finding all gates locked, post-Holocaust spiritual seekers must learn to find meaning not in achieving understanding but in sustaining the search itself.

This Kafkaesque dimension of post-Holocaust spirituality suggests that the locked gates of the synagogue—which prevented my entry for conventional worship but opened the possibility for witnessing the dancers—represents the fundamental structure of divine encounter in our time. The divine appears not through direct access to sacred space but through the dialectical tension between exclusion and inclusion, between seeking and not finding, between yearning and disappointment.

Such paradoxical encounter requires what I call "Kafkaesque faith"—the capacity to continue seeking divine presence while accepting that all seeking is ultimately frustrated. This faith operates not through intellectual conviction but through embodied persistence in the face of apparent meaninglessness.

26. The Body as Sacred Text

The theological crisis posed by the Holocaust extends beyond questions of divine action into fundamental questions about religious epistemology: how do we know ultimate reality, and what are the sources of authentic religious insight? Traditional theology has typically privileged intellectual analysis of sacred texts, rational argument, and systematic conceptual development. But the Holocaust challenges not only the content of traditional theology but its methods.

My experience watching young Cuban dancers rehearse in the unrepaired former synagogue, revealed an alternative epistemological approach that I call "embodied hermeneutics" (7). These dancers, "clueless in fact as where they are dancing" but completely committed to their craft, embody a form of spiritual practice that transcends intellectual understanding while achieving profound connection to sacred reality.

The dancers' unconscious sacrilege—performing secular choreography on the bima—paradoxically

reveals authentic sacred practice (7). Their commitment to “letting the body soar in space” and finding “new sanctuary” in “the body as temple” points toward forms of spiritual engagement that operate through physical presence rather than intellectual comprehension.

The dancers’ training through “constant rehearsal” until their “limbs” develop “muscle memory” provides a powerful metaphor for post-Holocaust spiritual practice. Just as the dancers must “inhibit the mind so that the body can perform,” authentic spiritual practice must often transcend intellectual analysis in favor of embodied engagement with sacred reality.

This insight connects with my experience of performing Bach fugues, where successful performance required “letting go of the thought of the notes” and allowing “the fingers” to “play and play until the fingers got it right.” The transition from mental control to embodied flow represents a fundamental shift from intellectual to somatic spirituality.

Applied to post-Holocaust theology, this suggests that authentic encounter with divine reality requires abandoning our attempts to think our way through theological problems in favor of embodied practices that engage ultimate reality directly. Such practices might include contemplative prayer, ritual movement, artistic creation, or ethical action—all forms of spiritual engagement that operate through the body’s wisdom rather than the mind’s analysis.

26.1 Dance as Theology

The dancers’ unconscious performance of sacred practice while believing themselves to be in merely “rental space” reveals that authentic theology often operates beneath the level of conscious intention. Their “rapturous dance” and commitment to “leave the head behind” and “leave the heaviness” embodies what I call “unconscious orthodoxy”—perfect spiritual practice that emerges from embodied commitment rather than theological understanding.

This unconscious orthodoxy suggests that post- Holocaust theology must learn to recognize and cultivate forms of spiritual practice that transcend the categories through which such practice has traditionally been understood. The dancers’ ability to transform secular space into sacred space through the quality of their presence points toward the possibility of a theology that operates through embodied engagement rather than intellectual analysis.

Their practice reveals that authentic spiritual life often requires what they call “letting the body soar in space” while finding “new sanctuary” in “the body as temple.” This embodied sanctuary represents an alternative to traditional sacred space that has been compromised by historical trauma while maintaining full access to transcendent reality.

The revelation provided by watching the dancers transforms my understanding of traditional Jewish liturgical practice. When I return to conventional worship, I will “bring back these movements” and “try to let go and let the swaying” of Hasidic dance “move me out of the headspace and into the rhythm and movement.”

This transformation of traditional liturgy through embodied consciousness represents what I call “liturgical anti-theology”—the practice of engaging traditional religious forms while systematically abandoning the intellectual frameworks through which such forms have typically been understood.

The goal is not to reject tradition but to recover its embodied wisdom while transcending its intellectual limitations. The specific practice of “tansel”—the post- Kabbalat Shabbat dance around the bima—becomes a form of anti-theological worship that finds sacred meaning not in the conceptual content of prayer but in the embodied experience of communal movement. Such practice maintains full connection to Jewish tradition while transcending the theological categories that the Holocaust has rendered problematic.

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27. The Rabbi as Choreographer

The image of “the new rabbi as choreographer” represents a fundamental reimagining of religious leadership for the post-Holocaust era. Rather than serving as interpreter of sacred text or teacher of theological doctrine, the spiritual leader becomes one who guides embodied engagement with sacred reality through attention to movement, rhythm, and spatial relationship.

This model of religious leadership emerges from recognition that traditional forms of religious authority—based on mastery of textual interpretation and theological knowledge—may themselves be implicated in the intellectual frameworks that proved inadequate to prevent or respond to radical evil. The choreographer-rabbi operates through different forms of wisdom that emerge from embodied engagement with sacred practice.

Such leadership requires what I call “anti-authoritarian authority”—the capacity to guide spiritual practice while systematically abandoning claims to theological expertise. The choreographer-rabbi knows not what movements mean but how to create conditions in which meaningful movement can emerge from the community’s embodied engagement with sacred reality.

28. The Dialectical Divine in Practice

The theological framework that emerges from sustained reflection on post-Holocaust experience and embodied spiritual practice points toward what I call the “dialectical divine”—an understanding of ultimate reality that transcends traditional categories of presence and absence while remaining fully engaged with the spiritual challenges of our time.

The dialectical divine cannot be understood as either present or absent but as the dynamic tension between presence and absence that constitutes the fundamental structure of spiritual existence. This tension cannot be resolved through intellectual analysis but can only be lived through sustained attention to the dialectical movements through which ultimate reality manifests itself.

My experience of my mother’s absence teaching me theological insights that her presence never could reveals the practical dimensions of dialectical divine encounter. The “infinite distance” between us became the medium through which authentic spiritual instruction occurred—not despite the absence but through it.

The traditional concept of hester panim (divine hiddenness) takes on new meaning within the framework of dialectical theology. Rather than representing divine punishment or abandonment, divine hiddenness becomes the necessary condition for authentic spiritual maturation. Just as children must learn to navigate the world without constant parental intervention, spiritual seekers must learn to find divine presence precisely in experiences of divine absence.

This understanding transforms hester panim from theological problem into spiritual practice. The experience of divine hiddenness becomes an opportunity for developing what I call “dialectical faith”—the capacity to remain open to divine encounter while accepting that such encounter will challenge all our expectations about how divine presence should manifest itself.

The Holocaust represents the ultimate experience of hester panim, and post-Holocaust spirituality must learn to find divine presence not despite this hiddenness but through sustained attention to what divine absence teaches about the nature of authentic spiritual life.

The theological method that emerges from dialectical divine encounter operates not through systematic analysis but through sustained yearning. This yearning is not passive emotion but active spiritual practice that maintains openness to divine encounter while accepting that such

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encounter will always exceed our capacity for comprehension.

Yearning as theological method requires what I call “disciplined longing”—the capacity to sustain spiritual desire without demanding immediate satisfaction. This discipline operates through forms of practice that cultivate our capacity for remaining present to spiritual tension without resolving it prematurely through intellectual or emotional consolation.

Such practice might include contemplative attention to experiences of loss, artistic engagement with themes of absence and presence, ethical commitment to causes that seem hopeless, or liturgical participation that emphasizes embodied engagement over intellectual understanding.

29. The Broken Heart as Sacred Text

The insight that emerged from my mother’s death— that “any solace must come from the infinite distance of her not being here”—points toward a fundamental theological principle: the broken heart becomes the most reliable text for learning authentic spiritual wisdom. This principle suggests that post-Holocaust theology must privilege experiential sources of religious insight over traditional textual or doctrinal sources.

The broken heart as sacred text cannot be read through intellectual analysis but only through what I call “cardiac hermeneutics”—sustained attention to the emotional and spiritual movements that emerge from experiences of irreparable loss. Such hermeneutics reveals that authentic encounter with ultimate reality requires abandoning our desire for emotional and intellectual comfort in favor of sustained presence to the full range of spiritual experience.

This approach does not reject traditional sacred texts but reads them through the lens of broken-hearted experience, finding in classical sources resources for navigating spiritual territories that cannot be mapped through intellectual analysis alone.

The anti-theology that emerges from these insights is not merely intellectual position but comprehensive spiritual practice that includes contemplation, ethical action, artistic creation, and liturgical engagement. This practice operates through systematic attention to experiences that exceed our capacity for theological explanation while maintaining full commitment to spiritual development.

Anti-theological practice cultivates what I call “comfortable discomfort”—the capacity to remain spiritually engaged while accepting that such engagement will never provide the intellectual or emotional satisfaction that we naturally seek. This comfort with discomfort becomes the foundation for authentic spiritual maturity in a post-Holocaust world.

Such practice requires regular attention to experiences of divine absence, sustained engagement with questions that have no answers, and cultivation of forms of spiritual community that can support spiritual seeking without providing premature closure to spiritual questions.

The anti-theological approach developed here shares important resonances with the radical kabbalistic traditions examined earlier, while also transcending their limitations (23-33). Like the crypto-Sabbatean mysticism associated with figures such as Eybeschutz, my approach embraces concealment, paradox, and the productive tension between orthodoxy and transgression.

The movement “toward ayin” (nothingness) that characterizes Eybeschutz’s theology finds contemporary expression in my theology of embodied absence, which locates authentic divine encounter in experiences that exceed conventional theological categories (33). However, where Eybeschutz’s radical Kabbalah maintained cosmological frameworks that could ultimately contain

transgression within larger divine purpose, my approach abandons such frameworks entirely in favor of purely experiential engagement with mystery.

Eybeschutz's recognition that pure divine grace caused the "Shattering of the Vessels" anticipates my insight that traditional theological comfort may prove spiritually destructive (33). Yet where his theology located this recognition within cosmic evolution toward ultimate redemption, my anti- theology suspends such teleological assumptions, finding spiritual authenticity in sustained presence to irreparable brokenness without expectation of repair.

The Sabbatean concept of "redemption through sin" anticipates my recognition that authentic post- Holocaust spirituality may require systematic transgression of conventional theological boundaries (25,33). However, where Sabbatean theology maintained belief in ultimate cosmic tikkun (repair), my anti-theology embraces what I call "dialectical brokenness"—the capacity to remain spiritually engaged with fracture itself as the medium for divine encounter.

Eybeschutz's embodied sexual mysticism, with its explicit descriptions of divine coupling and its anticipation of liberated sexuality, provides important precedent for my emphasis on embodied spiritual practice (33). Yet where his approach operated through symbolic interpretation of cosmic sexual processes, my anti-theology grounds itself in immediate bodily experience—the infected toenail, the dancers' unconscious movement, the physical reality of grief— as itself the primary text for theological insight.

The kabbalistic tradition of sacred failure thus provides historical legitimation for contemporary theological innovation while highlighting the distinctively post- Holocaust character of my approach. Where traditional radical Kabbalah could envision cosmic redemption through messianic transgression, post-Holocaust anti-theology must learn to find spiritual meaning in sustained engagement with irredeemable loss. This represents not abandonment of Jewish mystical tradition but its necessary evolution in response to unprecedented historical trauma that exceeds all traditional categories for understanding suffering and meaning (31,32,33).

30. Torah as Question Rather than Answer

Traditional Jewish learning operates through the assumption that Torah contains divinely revealed answers to fundamental questions about how to live. Post-Holocaust Jewish practice must maintain deep engagement with Torah while recognizing that the most important questions raised by the Holocaust cannot be answered through traditional textual interpretation.

This recognition transforms Torah study from the search for divine answers into sustained engagement with divine questions. The questions that emerge from Torah study—questions about justice, suffering, divine presence, and human responsibility—become more spiritually significant than any answers we might discover.

Such study operates through what I call "interrogative devotion"—the practice of engaging sacred text as a collection of questions rather than answers, allowing these questions to reshape our understanding of what it means to live as Jews in a post-Holocaust world.

30.1 Ritual as embodied Memory

Post-Holocaust Jewish ritual practice must maintain connection to traditional forms while acknowledging that the meanings traditionally associated with these forms have been fundamentally challenged by historical experience. This challenge does not require abandoning ritual but practicing ritual as embodied memory that connects us to Jewish experience across history while remaining honest about the discontinuities that historical trauma has created.

Ritual practice thus becomes a form of what I call “embodied archaeology”—digging through layers of historical experience to recover forms of Jewish spiritual practice that can function authentically in our historical moment. Such practice honors traditional forms while allowing new meanings to emerge from embodied engagement with these forms.

The goal is not to recover pre-Holocaust innocence but to develop forms of Jewish practice that can sustain authentic spiritual life while remaining fully present to the realities of post-Holocaust existence.

30.2 Prayer as Sustained Question

Jewish prayer practice in a post-Holocaust context cannot assume that traditional prayer language adequately expresses our spiritual condition. At the same time, abandoning prayer altogether would represent a form of spiritual impoverishment that diminishes our capacity for authentic religious experience.

Post-Holocaust prayer thus becomes the practice of using traditional prayer language while remaining fully present to the tensions between what we say and what we experience. This tension becomes itself a form of prayer—not the prayer of confident faith but the prayer of sustained spiritual questioning.

Such prayer operates through what I call “dialectical davening”—the practice of allowing traditional prayer forms to carry both their traditional meanings and the weight of historical experience that challenges these meanings. The goal is not to resolve this tension but to allow it to become a medium for authentic encounter with divine mystery.

30.3 Community as Shared Questioning

Jewish community in a post-Holocaust context cannot be built around shared theological convictions that history has rendered problematic. Instead, post- Holocaust Jewish community must be built around shared commitment to sustained engagement with the questions that emerge from Jewish historical experience.

Such community operates through what I call “interrogative solidarity”—the capacity to remain united not by common answers but by common commitment to facing the most difficult questions that Jewish existence raises. This solidarity requires forms of communal practice that can support spiritual questioning without demanding premature closure.

The synagogue dancers who unknowingly performed on sacred ground represent a model for such community—a group united not by theological understanding but by shared commitment to embodied practice that transcends intellectual categories while maintaining profound spiritual engagement.

31. Beyond the Theological Paradigm

The trajectory of thought traced through this essay points toward the necessity of moving beyond what I have called the “theological paradigm”—the assumption that authentic religious response requires coherent intellectual framework for understanding divine-human relationship. This movement does not represent abandonment of spiritual seriousness but recognition that such seriousness may require transcending the categories through which it has traditionally been expressed.

The future of post-Holocaust theology lies not in developing better theological answers to the

questions raised by the Holocaust but in cultivating forms of spiritual practice that can engage ultimate reality without requiring theological explanation of that reality. This shift from explanation to engagement represents a fundamental transformation in how we understand the relationship between intellectual and spiritual life.

Such transformation requires what I call “post- theological spirituality”—forms of religious practice that maintain full engagement with ultimate reality while acknowledging the inadequacy of all theological language for capturing such engagement. This spirituality operates through embodied practice rather than intellectual analysis, through sustained questioning rather than systematic answers.

Anti-theology, as developed throughout this essay, represents not rejection of theological thinking but recognition of theological thinking’s proper limitations. Anti-theology maintains that the most important spiritual insights emerge not from systematic thought but from experiences that exceed systematic thought’s capacity for comprehension.

This insight suggests that the future of post-Holocaust spirituality lies in forms of practice that cultivate our capacity for remaining present to experiences that challenge all our categories for understanding them. Such practice requires what I call “epistemological humility”—recognition that authentic encounter with ultimate reality will always exceed our intellectual capacity for capturing such encounter.

The wisdom of anti-theology lies in its recognition that spiritual maturity requires learning to live comfortably with intellectual and emotional uncertainty while maintaining full commitment to spiritual practice. This comfort with uncertainty becomes the foundation for authentic spiritual life in a world where traditional forms of religious certainty have been fundamentally challenged.

32. Embodied Transcendence

The alternative to intellectual theology developed in this essay operates through what I call “embodied transcendence”—forms of spiritual practice that find ultimate meaning not through escape from material existence but through deeper engagement with the full reality of embodied life. This approach recognizes that authentic encounter with transcendent reality must include rather than bypass our physical, emotional, and social existence.

Embodied transcendence operates through attention to what I call “incarnational wisdom”—the recognition that ultimate reality manifests itself most clearly through rather than despite the particular conditions of material existence. The infected toenail becomes as theologically significant as the burning bush because both point toward divine presence that embraces rather than transcends the full reality of embodied existence.

This understanding suggests that the future of post- Holocaust spirituality lies not in developing more sophisticated theological concepts but in cultivating forms of practice that can recognize divine presence in the most ordinary and even degraded aspects of human experience.

The future of post-Holocaust Jewish life requires forms of community that can support dialectical spiritual practice—practice that maintains tension between traditional forms and contemporary experience rather than resolving this tension through either traditionalist retreat or progressive abandonment of tradition.

Such community operates through what I call “dialectical solidarity”—the capacity to remain united through shared commitment to spiritual practice while accepting that this practice will lead different individuals to different conclusions about fundamental questions. This solidarity requires forms of

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communal worship, study, and social action that can accommodate intellectual and spiritual diversity while maintaining communal coherence.

The model for such community emerges from my experience watching the dancers in the synagogue—a group united not by shared theological understanding but by shared commitment to embodied practice that transcends intellectual categories while achieving profound spiritual engagement.

33. Practical Implications

The anti-theological approach developed in this essay has specific implications for Jewish practice in the contemporary world:

Liturgical Practice: Post-Holocaust Jewish liturgy must maintain traditional forms while allowing new meanings to emerge from embodied engagement with these forms. The goal is not to change the words of traditional prayers but to change our relationship to these words, allowing them to carry both their traditional meanings and the weight of historical experience that challenges these meanings.

Educational Practice: Jewish education must move beyond the transmission of theological doctrines toward cultivation of capacities for spiritual questioning. Students must learn not what to think about God but how to remain present to experiences that challenge all thinking about God.

Communal Leadership: Jewish religious leadership must evolve from theological expertise toward what I call “spiritual choreography”—the capacity to guide communal practice that engages ultimate reality without requiring theological explanation of such engagement.

Ethical Practice: Jewish ethics must operate through sustained attention to concrete human need rather than application of abstract moral principles. The goal is not to derive ethical conclusions from theological premises but to allow ethical engagement to become itself a form of spiritual practice.

Interfaith Engagement: Jewish participation in interfaith dialogue must be based not on shared theological convictions but on shared commitment to forms of spiritual practice that transcend intellectual categories while maintaining profound engagement with ultimate reality.

Medical Practice: Post-Holocaust anti-theology transforms medical practice by recognizing the therapeutic encounter as itself a form of spiritual practice that operates through embodied presence rather than intellectual understanding. Medical practitioners must learn to remain present to suffering that exceeds explanation while maintaining commitment to healing that does not depend on understanding ultimate causes.

The physician-patient relationship becomes a space of “dialectical presence” where healer and patient encounter mystery together, abandoning the illusion of medical omniscience in favor of shared vulnerability. This approach recognizes that authentic healing often requires accepting the limits of medical intervention while maintaining full engagement with suffering—a medical practice that can hold both scientific rigor and spiritual humility without requiring their intellectual reconciliation.

34. Conclusion: The Eternal Dance

As I prepare to return to conventional Jewish worship— to “tansel” around the bima in the post-Kabbalat Shabbat dance—I carry with me the movements learned from watching the unconscious

dancers. These movements represent not the abandonment of traditional Jewish practice but its embodied renewal through engagement with forms of spiritual practice that transcend the intellectual categories through which such practice has traditionally been understood.

The future of post-Holocaust theology lies not in better answers to the questions raised by the Holocaust but in forms of spiritual practice that can remain present to these questions without demanding premature closure. Such practice operates through what I call “eternal dance”—sustained embodied engagement with ultimate reality that finds in movement itself the most authentic form of divine encounter.

This eternal dance cannot be captured in systematic theology but can only be lived through sustained commitment to spiritual practice that honors both tradition and innovation, both presence and absence, both certainty and uncertainty. The dance continues not because we understand its meaning but because the dance itself is the meaning—the embodied expression of human openness to divine mystery that exceeds all our capacities for comprehension.

The dialectical divine reveals itself most fully not in theological explanation but in the quality of presence that emerges when we abandon our need to understand and allow ourselves to be moved by realities that transcend our intellectual control. This movement becomes itself a form of prayer—not the prayer of confident faith but the prayer of sustained openness to mystery.

As the dancers taught me, the most authentic spiritual practice often requires leaving “the head behind” and allowing “the body to soar in space.” This soaring does not represent escape from historical reality but deeper engagement with the full dimensions of human existence, including its capacity for both transcendence and tragedy, both beauty and horror, both presence and absence.

The anti-theology developed throughout this essay thus concludes not with theological assertions but with an invitation to embodied practice that can sustain authentic spiritual life in a post-Holocaust world. This practice requires courage to remain present to experiences that challenge all our categories for understanding them, wisdom to find meaning in questions rather than answers, and faith to continue dancing even when the music of traditional theology has fallen silent.

35. Historical Legitimation and Contemporary Innovation

The examination of radical kabbalistic tradition— from Sabbatean antinomianism through Eybeschutz’s revolutionary “Va-avo ha-Yom el ha-’Ayin”— demonstrates that this anti-theological approach stands within authentic Jewish mystical tradition rather than representing complete rupture with Jewish sources (23-33). The historical precedents provide crucial legitimation: Eybeschutz’s movement “toward ayin,” his recognition of pure grace as destructive, his systematic transgression of religious boundaries, and his embodied sexual mysticism all anticipate contemporary post-Holocaust spiritual innovations.

Yet the Holocaust represents qualitatively different challenge than any faced by previous Jewish mystics. Where Eybeschutz could still envision cosmic redemption through messianic transgression, and where Sabbatean theology maintained belief in ultimate tikkun (repair), post-Holocaust spirituality confronts complete shattering of theological categories without possibility of restoration through traditional means. This necessitates evolution beyond even the most radical historical precedents toward forms of spiritual practice that can engage ultimate reality without requiring theological explanation of such engagement.

The historical grounding thus serves dual purpose: it legitimizes radical theological innovation by showing that Jewish tradition itself contains resources for transcending conventional religious categories, while simultaneously highlighting what is unprecedented about post-Holocaust spiritual

challenges. This approach avoids both traditionalist retreat into pre- Holocaust categories and progressive abandonment of Jewish sources, instead showing how authentic Jewish innovation emerges from sustained engagement with tradition's most radical possibilities in response to unprecedented historical trauma.

The eternal dance continues in the space between memory and hope, between tradition and innovation, between human finitude and divine mystery. It is in this space—the space of sustained spiritual questioning rather than systematic theological answers—that authentic post-Holocaust Jewish life becomes possible, grounded in the deepest currents of Jewish mystical tradition while addressing spiritual challenges that no previous generation could have imagined.

In the end, the most profound theological insight may be the recognition that theology itself must give way to forms of spiritual practice that can engage ultimate reality without requiring intellectual mastery of such engagement. The dancers in the synagogue, unknowing of the sacred ground beneath their feet, embody this insight more perfectly than volumes of theological discourse.

Their unconscious orthodoxy becomes a model for conscious practice that can maintain profound spiritual engagement while transcending the intellectual frameworks that have proven inadequate to the spiritual challenges of our time. The future lies not in better theology but in the eternal dance that finds in embodied movement itself the most authentic expression of human openness to divine mystery.

Appendix. Distinguishing Anti-theology from Contemporary Mystical Ccholarship

This study's relationship to contemporary scholarship on Jewish mysticism, particularly the work of Elliot Wolfson, requires clarification. While significant resonances exist between this anti-theological approach and Wolfson's deconstructive readings of kabbalistic literature, several fundamental differences distinguish this work from purely academic analysis of transgressive mysticism (28-30).

1. Academic vs. Experiential Epistemology

Wolfson's scholarly methodology operates primarily through sophisticated textual interpretation, employing postmodern hermeneutics to reveal transgressive and deconstructive elements within historical kabbalistic sources (28,29). His profound insights emerge from scholarly analysis of how mystical texts systematically subvert their own theological claims, demonstrating that Kabbalah contains inherent resources for undermining conventional religious categories.

This anti-theological approach, by contrast, emerges from lived spiritual crisis rather than textual analysis. The primary sources for theological insight are embodied experiences—my mother's death, observing dancers unknowingly performing on sacred ground, inheriting physical imperfection from my Holocaust survivor father (7). This creates fundamentally different epistemological foundation that privileges experiential over textual authority, establishing what might be called "somatic hermeneutics" rather than literary interpretation.

2. Historical Specificity vs. Transhistorical Deconstruction

Wolfson's scholarship identifies transgressive and deconstructive elements as inherent features of Jewish mysticism across historical periods, showing how Kabbalah always already contained resources for undermining conventional categories of religious thought and practice (30). His approach suggests that mystical transgression operates as transhistorical constant within Jewish religious culture.

This study, while acknowledging crucial historical precedents within radical Kabbalah, argues that the Holocaust creates qualitatively different spiritual challenges that exceed even the most radical historical precedents (33). Where figures like Eybeschutz could still envision cosmic redemption through messianic transgression, post-Holocaust spirituality confronts irreparable breakdown of theological categories without possibility of restoration through traditional mystical means. This represents not merely another instance of mystical transgression but unprecedented spiritual territory.

Wolfson's academic work remains primarily concerned with understanding mystical consciousness and illuminating textual meaning. His scholarship reveals how mystical experience functions epistemologically and hermeneutically but does not necessarily prescribe specific forms of spiritual practice for contemporary practitioners.

This anti-theological approach explicitly orients itself toward practical spiritual life in post-Holocaust context—addressing concrete questions of how to pray, form community, engage ritual practice, and embody Jewish existence after traditional theological categories have proven inadequate (7). The work functions as theological therapeutics rather than academic analysis, responding to specific pastoral and spiritual needs created by historical trauma.

3. Systematic Practice vs. Pure Deconstruction

Wolfson's methodology operates primarily through deconstruction, demonstrating how mystical texts systematically undermine their own theological and philosophical claims without necessarily constructing alternative systematic frameworks. His approach reveals the inherent instability of mystical discourse while maintaining scholarly distance from prescriptive spiritual guidance.

This study, despite calling itself "anti-theology," develops coherent practical frameworks for sustaining post-Holocaust Jewish existence. It articulates specific approaches to liturgical practice, community formation, spiritual pedagogy, and embodied Jewish life that can function systematically despite abandoning systematic theology (7). The result is paradoxically systematic anti-systematic practice.

Wolfson's scholarship concentrates primarily on individual mystical consciousness and its relationship to textual interpretation, analyzing how mystical experience challenges conventional categories of religious understanding at the personal level.

This anti-theological approach maintains explicit communal orientation, focusing on forms of Jewish community that can support transgressive spiritual practice while maintaining Jewish cultural continuity. The unconscious dancers become paradigmatic for communities that embody authentic spiritual practice while transcending conventional theological categories—a model for collective rather than individual mystical life (7).

4. Therapeutic vs. Analytical Intent

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction involves therapeutic intent. Wolfson's scholarship, however profound its spiritual implications, operates within academic frameworks that prioritize understanding over healing. His work illuminates mystical transgression without necessarily addressing how such transgression might serve contemporary spiritual needs.

This study emerges from and returns to therapeutic questions: How do we heal from the specific spiritual trauma of the Holocaust while remaining authentically Jewish? How do we create forms of Jewish practice that can sustain spiritual life without requiring intellectual resolution of theological problems that may be intellectually irresolvable? The work functions as spiritual medicine rather than academic analysis.

5. Complementary Rather than Competitive Approaches

These distinctions should not be understood as criticism of Wolfson's scholarly achievements, which provide crucial intellectual foundation for understanding transgressive elements within Jewish mystical tradition. Rather, they highlight how different methodological approaches serve different spiritual and intellectual needs.

Wolfson's scholarship demonstrates that Jewish mysticism contains sophisticated resources for challenging conventional religious categories. This anti-theological study attempts to show how such resources might be employed for spiritual healing and community formation in our specific historical moment. The relationship is diagnostic to prescription, analysis to therapeutics, understanding to practice.

Both approaches contribute to broader recognition that Jewish mystical tradition contains profound resources for responding to contemporary spiritual challenges while maintaining authentic connection to Jewish sources. The academic and the therapeutic, the analytical and the practical, serve complementary functions in the larger project of sustaining authentic Jewish spiritual life in a post-Holocaust world.

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