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Benjamin Lazier: God Interrupted

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Introduction

“NOTHING WILL HAPPEN to you if you don’t eat pork,” opined Shimon Peres, at the time the prime minister of Israel, in 1985. Peres meant to justify his concessions to the ultra-orthodox, whose support he required to advance negotiations with Israel’s adversaries. Israelis could do without swine, he reasoned, “but things will be very bad if we don’t renew the peace process.”¹ Peres was right about peace, but he was wrong about pig. He was wrong, that is, to think that Israel’s geopolitics had nothing to do with how Israelis defined themselves as Jews. To concede to the ultra-orthodox on the right to pork may have seemed a worthwhile forfeiture. Its greasy delights pale in comparison, certainly, with the return on a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East. But Peres conceded more than he had realized. To the ultra-orthodox he had given in, but he had also given something up. He had given up on the heretical ideal.

This ideal was born of Europe between the world wars. To its interwar advocates, however, it had seventeenth-century roots, and in one episode above all. In 1665, a twenty-three-year-old named Abraham Nathan ben Elisha Hayyim Ashkenazi—Nathan of Gaza for short—identified as the messiah a sometime Jerusalemite called Sabbatai Sevi, and roused Jews on three continents who proved eager to heed his call. Sevi was an improbable candidate for the job. He was blessed with noble looks and a mellifluous voice, but he was a second-rate intellect, haunted by demons (which he called “the sons of whoredom”), and given to “strange acts” in fits of manic activity. Some of these acts were decidedly odd—he married himself to a Torah scroll, refused to consummate his marriages to women, and once swaddled a large fish in infant’s clothes. But some of these acts were antinomian—open transgressions of Jewish law.

The untruth of his messianic pretensions did not, of course, distinguish him. With one possible exception, the erstwhile messiahs of Western history have to this day been proved false. But Sabbatai Sevi was no mere false messiah. He was an apostate messiah, and his apostasy was understood as part and parcel of his mission. To his detractors, he converted to Islam on pain of death at the hands of the Ottoman sultan. His was an act of craven capitulation, with the salutary effect of exposing him for what he was: a charlatan and a fraud. But to the more radical of his supporters, he had entered the realm of evil to defeat it from within. He

had announced by example a full-fledged doctrine of the holiness of sin, and many felt enjoined to do the same. His apologists developed a theology out of the sources of Jewish tradition that turned that tradition on its head. Not the pious observance of law, but its oddly and equally pious transgression would usher in the messianic age.

The upheaval that ensued engulfed the Jewish world. Further installments of the controversies—some fantastic, others frankly bizarre—lasted well over a century. They also left lasting wounds. The upshot, or one of them: successive generations of Jews, whether proponents of rabbinic creed or the Enlightenment project, for various reasons did their utmost to efface the phenomenon from Jewish historical memory. This, at least, is how a man named Gershom Scholem was to speak of their fate.

In 1973, Scholem published his masterpiece, his biography of Sabbatai Sevi. Here is what the literary critic Cynthia Ozick had to say about it:

There are certain magisterial works of the human mind that alter ordinary comprehension so unpredictably and on so prodigious a scale that culture itself is set awry, and nothing can ever be seen again except in the strange light of that new knowledge. Obviously it is not possible to “review” such a work, any more than one can review a mountain range: an accretion of fundamental insight takes on the power of a natural force. Gershom Scholem’s corpus has such a force and its massive keystone, *Sabbatai Sevi*, presses down on the grasping consciousness with the strength not simply of its invulnerable, almost tidal, scholarship, but of its singular instruction in the nature of man.²

Ozick’s is heady stuff, but her sentiment is not without warrant. In the years since Mt. Scholem erupted—smoking, raining ash, belching fire, and for those who knew him, making a lot of noise—it has lost none of its grandeur and little of its capacity to induce awe and wonder among those who behold it. But it no longer strikes the witness dumb, at least not permanently. Its fires have cooled. Its peak has weathered. The scholarship remains tidal, as Ozick put it, but navigable. And its singular instruction, if still in the nature of man, appears now to speak just as much, if not more, to the nature of Scholem and his peers.

The English revision of the book came toward the end of a life that began in Berlin and would end in Jerusalem. The span of time (1897-1982) saw Scholem catapulted from modest beginnings—fourth son to a typical family of assimilated German Jews—to a position inside and outside the academy bordering on apostlehood. His fame came on the strength of researches in the history of kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism. These did not break new ground so much as create it. As the theologian Martin Buber once put it, Scholem did not merely found a school, but established a discipline. The tenor of his writings on kabbalah owed much

to his work on Sabbatai Sevi, the final fruit of which Ozick rightly celebrated. But Scholem's massive keystone had its more humble origins in an essay of 1936, called "Mitzva ha-ba'a ba-avera." The phrase is a rabbinic category and refers to a divine command fulfilled through transgression. More colloquially, it is translated "Redemption through Sin."³

Scholem's essay charts the adventures of the apostate messiah and the series of movements he spawned. Its great achievement was to rescue the Sabbatian controversies and kabbalah itself from the dustbin of Jewish history, and to grant them pride of place in a story about the rise of the modern Jewish world. As Scholem saw it, contemporary Jewish indifference to the law followed upon the Sabbatian program of its deliberate and studied violation. His argument had its problems. Still, it made claims about the relation of heresy to modern Jewish identity that merit notice and regard. It also incorporated a full-fledged theory of secularization that reversed the reigning approach, for which secularization—whatever it meant—proceeded against and beyond religion rather than through it.⁴ Scholem argued for secularization from within rather than without. Judaism, it turns out, secularized itself. His essay proved to be the single most important piece of Jewish historical scholarship written in the twentieth century. It proved also to be one of the most important in twentieth-century religious thought, period. Some of what follows explains why.

But this book has more fundamental aims. Simply stated, it is an intellectual history of Europe between the world wars, the Weimar period above all, and some of its important afterlives, approached by means of revisions in theological thinking that were also much more. The study asks that we take theology seriously as a cultural and intellectual practice. It asks that we appreciate theology as a vehicle for commentary on the political, aesthetic, and philosophical present common to us all, and not merely as the parochial pursuit of like-minded, if fractious believers. Throughout, the work foregrounds the relation between the ways in which Europeans in this period spoke of the divine with the ways in which they spoke also of themselves and of the natural and human-built worlds in which they lived. It stresses the capacity of theological language to assert itself in apparently unrelated domains—in talk of art, for example, or politics, or natural science, or philosophy. In short, the study describes a theological dimension to interwar life—it is easy to detect it in many of the major cultural undertakings of the early twentieth century—and for a variety of reasons, the study privileges the problem of heresy to address it.

In part, these reasons are formal. The "logic" of heresy makes the category a useful one for anyone concerned with the displacement and diffusion of God-talk. On its face, the mark distinguishes and excludes. It

names a person or a position as other. It is no accident, for example, that in rabbinic Hebrew the term *acher*, other, is a euphemism for the heretic. But to apply the mark of heresy is also to assert a claim to ownership. It is an exclusion that also includes, since heretical deviation is intelligible only in terms of the norms it reworks or disputes. Applied to persons, the label comments on the inside and outside of human communities. Applied to ideas, it begs the question of the limits and the beyonds of our thoughts about God.

But the reasons for attending to heresy are not only formal. They are also—first—historical. The interwar era witnessed a resurgence of interest in the heretic as both object and inspiration. As Scholem unearthed the Sabbatians of old as a resource for Jewish identity in the present, his friend, the philosopher Hans Jonas, was goaded by the spirit of the times to retrieve a much older group of heretics. Jonas discovered in the gnostic spirit of late antiquity an early avatar of the alienation and estrangement from the world that dominated leading currents of interwar thought. The diagnosis, and Jonas's efforts to overcome that spirit, would produce a philosophical biology and environmental ethics of real consequence: in Germany, Jonas became a "guru" to the Green movement as it developed over the 1980s; in the United States and Europe, he helped set the direction of bioethical inquiry and practice. Meanwhile, the philosopher Leo Strauss, another close friend of Scholem, devoted the bulk of his intellectual effort in the 1920s to the arch Jewish heretic Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza. Strauss undertook to decipher the mysteries at the heart of Spinoza's critique of religion and the stakes of his heresy for the modern era. The consequences: Strauss would set out to recover a natural standard by which to judge the rightfulness of human action—a kind of worldly surrogate for a lost God. Whether he found it is up for debate, but the importance of his quest is not. It has inspired several generations of students and disciples, and by some accounts has made him the intellectual touchstone for a neoconservative revolt in American politics and culture.

Strauss was only one of hundreds of interwar observers for whom Spinoza's example had something timely to convey. Ernst Bloch, a Marxist philosopher of great renown and another of Scholem's familiars, would sum up this sentiment nicely: "The best thing about religion," he wrote in 1968, "is that it gives birth to heretics."⁵ For the generation that came of age between the world wars, heresy had again become a problem. For many it also became a model. But why then? A model for what? And above all, why should we care? What were the implications for Judaism, for theology, for modern Western thought? These are the basic questions this study undertakes to pose and, I hope, to answer.

RELIGION AFTER LIBERALISM

Begin with the death of an ideal. For many Europeans, the First World War drove a stake through the heart of liberal civilization. At first glance, the claim appears odd. After all, the war's end marked the end also for four of Europe's imperial powers, and saw the spread of republican governments across the continent. Before the war there were three; after, eighteen. Parliaments ruled where once potentates reigned. With some notable exceptions the liberal agenda of constitutional rule was the order, literally, of the day. But the recasting of bourgeois Europe proved short-lived. By the end of the decade the center was besieged and in some places had collapsed altogether. Support for the German experiment in democracy in particular had never been more than tepid, indicated by the name for those who had made it possible in the first place. The regime of the *Vernunftrepublikaner*, republicans of reason or pragmatism, gave way to radicals of right and left unafraid to back conviction with force.⁶

A typical liberal wish list looked like this: a constitution, rule of law, individual liberties, a market society, property rights, and an expanded, if not universal suffrage. But liberalism was no exclusively political or economic program, and its demise was in part prepared by the demise of its cultural and intellectual forms. The liberal project—at least in the nineteenth century—had derived much of its impetus from a confidence in the capacity for human progress, and could not help but falter as the trust proved folly. The war in particular dealt a deathblow to a faith in the progressive moral perfection of man, and in its wake came a post-liberal ethos more at home in crisis than calm. This was the case in politics, in cultural circles, in philosophy, and not least in theology.⁷ The crisis in relations among men, it turns out, had much to do with innovations in the ways Europeans thought about God.

Post-liberal theology was not born of the postwar period. Its roots tunnel deep into the nineteenth century, and as a discernible movement or mood, albeit a minority one, it commenced before the advent of war. But its rise accelerated in the spirit of existential dislocation that prevailed in its wake. In Protestant circles, it went by the name of “crisis theology” and referred to the circle of thinkers grouped around Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Eduard Thurneysen. The name of their journal, *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times), summed up their message well. They thought themselves to live in the theological breach: unmoored, cast adrift, dislocated. They undid a liberal Protestant tradition that had reigned in the latter half of the nineteenth century by hacking away at its roots. These roots extended deep into the eighteenth century, when biblical scholars first transformed the Bible from a record of God's word into a cultural treasure.⁸ In philosophical terms, however, they meant to

unearth and overturn the thought of the theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher.

Over a century before, Schleiermacher had made man's subjective experience of the divine the foundation of his theology, and as a corollary had stressed the presence of the godly in the worldly. In the more optimistic of its incarnations, the Protestant-liberal synthesis discovered in human history the progressive unfolding of religious truth. Barth and his followers would have none of this. It was hard, after all, to find God in an experience of the world defined by man-made mass death, and the attempts of some liberal theologians to justify the war as a part—even the apotheosis—of their endeavor only aggravated their opponents all the more. Post-liberal Protestants rid God of his worldly corruptions, so much so that they threatened to exile him from his creation altogether. To contemporaries, this recalled the gnostic idea of an absent God or *deus absconditus*. In order to save God, they banished him from a world soaked in sin.

Judaism and Jewish thought underwent a similar transformation, if with different and more far-reaching consequences.⁹ In the nineteenth century, especially, German Jews had thrown in their lot with liberalism. Their legal equality hinged on the success of liberal politics. They voted for liberal parties and supported constitutional government. They favored free trade. They argued for individual liberty and for more ecumenical versions of religious belief and ritual. Above all, they pursued a metamorphosis: from a religious community into “German citizens of the Mosaic persuasion.”¹⁰

The legacy of the war and its aftermath was twofold. On the one hand, the war's end and the advent of the Weimar Republic marked the apparent completion of the emancipatory project begun 150 years before. For the first time, Jews became full participants in German civic life. Yet the war had eroded the enlightened, liberal foundation that made this emancipation possible in the first place. All this left Jews in a precarious position. The world they had long sought to enter, a world whose threshold they had crossed and whose ideals they had done much to uphold—for many interwar observers this world had vanished. The irony was this: Jews became full participants at a moment when the ground for their participation no longer seemed so stable. Whether a salvage operation might have saved this foundation is difficult to know, but to know its fate is not. Fifteen years later, it collapsed.

This political predicament of German Jewry had a theological corollary. The era witnessed a renewal of Jewish life, a renaissance of a peculiar sort. If diverse, the new cultural and religious forms Judaism took on in this period were united in their thrust: they were all post-liberal and, with a few exceptions, post-assimilatory as well. This holds true for German-Jewish Zionism, for Jewish anarchists like Gershom Scholem,

for newfangled forms of Jewish mysticism, and for neo-orthodoxy as well. All styled themselves a return of sorts, and all repudiated the model for modern Jewish identity that had until then reigned in Germany—the nineteenth-century Jewish-liberal synthesis.

The synthesis shared much with its Protestant cousin, so much so that its champions (such as the philosopher Hermann Cohen) could speak of a spiritual affinity joining Protestant to Jew. The undoing of this synthesis also shared much with its Protestant analogue. Its repudiation typically took the form of an Oedipal revolt, a reaction of the sons against the fathers. Franz Kafka's reproach against his father's "bourgeois Judaism" was only the most famous example of a transconfessional symptom. By the end of this period, in 1933, Kafka's generation had done much to sever the Jewish-liberal synthesis. As Franz Rosenzweig, the most important Jewish theologian of the time, put it: "The Liberal German-Jewish standpoint on which almost all of German Judaism had enough room for nearly a century has become so tiny that apparently only one person—I myself—can live there."¹¹ Not even Rosenzweig would remain there for long.

Even the proponents of liberal Judaism undertook to redefine their liberalism in line with the spirit of the age. Liberal Jews had once celebrated the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn as their model and hero. In the late eighteenth century, Mendelssohn had reconciled orthodoxy with Enlightenment. He had made Judaism safe for Europe and Europe safe for the Jews. But those whose lives he had enabled now disparaged him as unoriginal and of little consequence. In the course of a generation, he and his successors were transformed: from the founders of modern Judaism to "Protestants in Jewish garb." Before, liberal Jews had disavowed Hasidim (eastern European Jewish mystics) as retrograde enthusiasts. They banished these "daughters of darkness" from sight. But in the interwar era, they stressed the affinities of Hasidism for liberal Judaism, and in a complicated operation—better described as casuistry—declared it born in the spirit of liberalism. Earlier, German Jews had welcomed the replacement of Hebrew *by* German as the language of prayer. But they now came to realize that it was precisely the opacity of the Hebrew, the fact that it was not understood as it was enunciated, that lent the act of prayer a nonrational and deep-seated emotional appeal.¹²

There is an irony here. The innovations introduced to liberal Jewish culture and theology represented a partial reversal of Enlightenment traditions that emphasized the common elements of all monotheistic religions and culminated in a single, nonsectarian faith. The partial retrieval of nonrational elements in the Jewish tradition was therefore enacted in the name of Jewish difference and distinction. Yet this very move—to recover the irrational—was just as definitive an inclination in European culture of the 1920s as its converse had been in the age of Enlightenment.

Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt: names like these make the point abundantly clear. In other words, even as they once again discovered their distinction, Jews did so in an idiom they shared with their non-Jewish neighbors, an idiom that therefore marked them at once as distinct and as same. In every act to assert their difference, they had in part already erased it.

Ultimately, these innovations were holding patterns, last-ditch or stopgap measures by the generation of the fathers to stave off a reversal of the theological-political order. Neither could a mere appreciation for the irrational elements of the Jewish tradition on the part of change-minded liberals compete with the wholesale revival of a heretical ideal among the sons. In some instances, this revival was lived out without much sense for its fact. In others, it was paradoxically and knowingly calculated to revitalize Jewish life in the modern age.

The arrival of this ideal marked the definitive end to a chapter in German-Jewish history that began with Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn had ushered Judaism into the modern age, or so the story proceeds, by defining it as a religion of revealed law alongside the universal religious truths available to all. The rise of heretical forms of Jewish return signaled the demise of Mendelssohn's gambit, as it undid both aspects of his legacy. This was first an antinomian Judaism that rejected revelation and law. It was happy to acknowledge itself as deviant. But it contested the other half of Mendelssohn's bequest no less. It reversed the universalism introduced by Mendelssohn himself, and developed in unexpected ways in the nineteenth century by Mendelssohn's liberal heirs. Jews in the interwar period invoked heresy not to assert their sameness but to reassert their difference. To describe the advent of this ideal is one of the aims of this study.

This is a Jewish story. It is also a European one. To this end, I redescribe the Weimar milieu in general from the view afforded by the concern of its inhabitants with the divine. The problem of heresy turns out to have been of special concern across confessions, and so I lay bare the grammar of the two leading languages of heresy in the period, which I call, as a kind of shorthand, the gnostic and the pantheist. Though associated with epochs long past, each enjoyed a heady revival in the interwar years. The first expressed hope for salvation from a sinful world by the grace of an absent God, and was linked in the interwar period with the Protestant representatives of crisis theology. But those who spoke the pantheist language of heresy contested the gnostic spirit. They insisted that God (understood as the impersonal, creative force in nature) was anything but absent. Indeed, God was everywhere: pan-theism. They divinized the world, and they were abetted in this endeavor by the spectacular revival of Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century philosopher and most consequential of

Jewish heretics after Jesus. These languages were theological innovations, but also much more. They resonated beyond their theological chamber of origin. They echoed among jurists, philosophers, artists, and astrophysicists. To consider what this group thought about God opens up a new perspective on their generation as a whole.

The final aim of the study is to trace exfoliations of the encounter with these languages of heresy down to the present day. I want to show how interwar theological debates lie at the root of important and apparently unrelated chapters in the history of ideas. The work of Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Gershom Scholem, for example, lives on in the environmental movement and bioethics, in a political philosophy sometimes marshaled on behalf of neoconservative politics, and in a radical rethinking of what it means to be a Jew, but all had common origins in arguments about heresy between the world wars. Undoubtedly there are other, similar stories to be told. But these examples ought to suffice to demonstrate the abiding salience of the divine to cultural and political life between the wars and beyond. If nothing else, the stories presented here should alert us to the ways in which talk about God could be adapted for talk about nature, or politics, or art, to the ways in which discourses of the divine not only persist as an alternative to this worldly world of ours, but also flourish in the midst of our most secular of pursuits. Thinking about heresy between the world wars enables us to think with greater care about what has happened to religion in the modern age.

THREE THINKERS

Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, Gershom Scholem: they were German Jews, titans of scholarship, émigrés, and friends. Each deserves attention. The study begins with Jonas, who first made his name as a masterful interpreter of religion. His dissertation, written under the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann, followed on the heels of a concise but neglected study on Paul and Augustine, and eventually became the first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity, 1934). The book endures to this day as a monument in the field of religious thought. Jonas arrived in Palestine in 1935, joined the British Army's Jewish Brigade in the Second World War, and fought in the Israeli war for independence in 1948. Some years later he arrived at the New School for Social Research in New York. There he produced a series of important studies in philosophical biology, on the history of the technological ethos, and in biological and environmental ethics. On the strength of the last, especially, Jonas earned wild applause. His foremost book on the theme,

Prinzip Verantwortung (The Imperative of Responsibility, 1979), sold over two hundred thousand copies in German alone. This was a stunning achievement for a work of philosophy, all the more so given the manifest oddity of some of its claims.¹³ Jonas also wrote a series of essays in post-Holocaust theology that have made him a minor star in the Jewish theological firmament.

But the diversity of his corpus has worked to the detriment of its grasp. To some, he is a maverick scholar of religion. To others, he is an environmentalist. To some, he is a Jewish theologian. To others, he is a phenomenologist, or one of Martin Heidegger's conflicted Jewish "children."¹⁴ All are right. But to the extent that they are right, these accounts are also local in outlook. They tend to pass over what I take as the most salient aspect of his work. Beneath the apparent diversity there lies also a deep historical and philosophical unity. This story I tell in part 1, and I describe it as an "overcoming" of gnosticism.

I borrow the phrase from Hans Blumenberg, the eminent German philosopher and historian of ideas. Blumenberg described the birth of the medieval and modern epochs as first and second overcomings of gnosticism. What Blumenberg meant by this is complicated. But to simplify: he thought that early medievals and early moderns invested a modicum of dignity in the world and in human endeavor that the gnostics—who thought the world sinful and irredeemably so—were at pains to deny. The twentieth century witnessed a third return of gnosticism in the form of crisis theology, and also its third overcoming, in the person of Jonas above all (he was not alone, only the most accomplished). His philosophical biology and environmental ethics ought to be understood not as some post-Hiroshima anxiety about technological excess. Rather, they were born of a hostile Jewish response to Barth's theology and the gnostic return in general. To overcome gnosticism meant to overcome the forces, both religious *and* technological, that alienated man from the natural world. Jonas helps us see how the ways in which we relate to our planet have much to do with the ways in which we relate to the divine, even (or especially) when the divine is nowhere to be found.

But what if the divine were not nowhere but everywhere? In our world? In our blood? In our love? Many interwar observers—some silly, most serious—thought just that. I address them in part 2 ("The Pantheism Controversy") by canvassing the reception of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, the arch Jewish heretic who thought he could prove that God—what he called God—was everywhere. Spinoza enjoyed his second great renaissance in this period, comparable only to his first in the wake of the so-called pantheism controversy in late eighteenth-century Germany. It was no accident that Spinoza arrived when he did. The gnostics had rid the world of God in order to save him; Spinoza had divinized the world,

but in order to destroy him—to destroy, that is, belief in a providential deity personally invested in our doings. Those dismayed by the revival of gnostic heresies turned to Spinoza for help in banishing them, once and for all, from the face of the earth.

Their number was great and their kind, diverse. Occultists approved of Spinoza's karmic consequences. Catholics revived him as an antidote to the Protestant theologians of crisis. Jews, meanwhile, revoked his excommunication and recovered him for the Jewish people not despite his heresy but because of it. This last story is important in its own right, as a chapter in the advent of Judaism's heretical ideal, and I treat it at some length. But it also helps to set the stage for the bulk of the discussion: a reinterpretation of the philosophical career of Leo Strauss (1897-1973).

Our understanding of Strauss has suffered the same difficulties as our understanding of Jonas, only more so. There is first the formidable bulk and diversity of his work: a dissertation on Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, the *bête noire* of the German Enlightenment, a first book and a series of essays on Spinoza, writings on Moses Mendelssohn, a book on Maimonides, several treatments of Hobbes, and of course his masterpiece, *Natural Right and History* (1953). This takes us only through the first half of a career celebrated just as much for what came next, a series of studies in political philosophy from the Greeks to Machiavelli to Nietzsche.

There is also the problem of his legacy. Strauss has inspired veneration among several generations of students and interested observers who agree on the greatness of the man, but not on his message. To some he is the champion of the ancients against the moderns. To others he is a Nietzschean in disguise. To some he is illiberal kin to Carl Schmitt, for a time the "crown jurist" of the Third Reich. To others, he is a defender of American liberal democracy. To some he is the founding father of a neo-conservative revolt in American politics and culture, and as such to be venerated. To others he is that same father, and so to be vilified. For my part, I feel the need neither to apologize (Strauss can defend himself) nor to condemn. I want to question instead.¹⁵

All this is compounded by another division: Strauss the philosopher versus Strauss the Jew. At their most egregious, his philosophical champions have dismissed his work on Jewish topics as a smoke screen designed to blind the uninitiated to the philosopher's dangerous truths. His Jewish champions have, for the most part, left the interpretation of his apparently philosophical works to others. Both impulses are understandable, as they proceed out of fidelity to Strauss himself, or to one of the hallmarks of Straussian thought: that philosophy and religion are at odds, and defy genuine reconciliation.¹⁶

But devotion can also be blind, and to understand Strauss we would in fact do well to betray him—sort of. Strauss developed an antihistoricist

approach to reading; he insisted on the timelessness of questions posed by Paul or by Plato, thought it possible, crucial, to read them as contemporaries. He identified historicism as the root of much that was wrong in his world, of Nazism and nihilism not least, because he thought it to leave us without an enduring, timeless standard by which to decide whether what we do is right. Rather than approach Strauss philosophically, however, I suggest we do so historically. I trace how Strauss, following both Spinoza and Hobbes, came to identify the relation between theology and politics as *the* problem of the modern age. His approach was both idiosyncratic and complicated. But for now, in a sentence: man had seized the prerogative to master the world as he saw fit by doing away with two traditional sources of authority—divine revelation and nature—that once had specified the right way for man to live. Strauss hoped to revive a version of the latter to temper the political and technological excesses of his age.

But *how* did Strauss arrive at this point? By what provocation? And to what ends? Posing the question this way promises a new perspective on the problem of Strauss and his legacy. It also resolves many of the antinomies that attend his reception. For one, it enables us to see how Strauss's formulation of the theological-political predicament evolved in the context of a contest: between competing idioms on the relation of God, man, and world—the gnostic and pantheist languages of heresy—and between their principal exponents on the interwar scene. It also enables us to understand the great shift in Strauss's thought: from the question of God to the question of nature. It enables us to understand Strauss's quest for natural right as akin to a search for a lost or absent God, and his option for philosophy as a form of heresy. It enables us to understand the most "secular" formulation of his message as more involved with the divine than his philosophical champions will admit, but not in the way those who have attended to his writings on religion have claimed. It may even enable us to make sense of a peculiar rapprochement: the one that has led neoconservatives, many of them ethnic but secular Jews, to make common cause with millenarian Christians on a range of issues, from scientific experimentation to foreign policy in the Middle East. Whatever the explanatory return, the story begins with Strauss's early interest in Jacobi, Spinoza, and Mendelssohn. These were the personalities at issue in the pantheism controversy of old, and so I cast Strauss as the pugilist most intent on fighting a "second round" of the pantheism controversy, a rematch which transpired in the arena of interwar Europe.

Some in this fight were impressed by God's absence—the world was too debased to accommodate him. Others were more impressed by his presence—the world was too wondrous to exclude him. But could God be

both present and absent at once? Some argued no, absolutely no. They were a minority, but they are useful as ideal-types. They exemplify the revivals of gnosticism and pantheism in their purest form. The closer we look, however, the more obvious it becomes that they were just that: ideals, not realities (even absolutists like Barth were not exempt, and in some of his moods he was forthright enough to admit it). These heretical options, after all, were not philosophical systems. I call them “languages” instead, the spoken expressions of more fundamental, felt sensibilities. Each had a “logic” or physiognomy, a typical set of concepts or traits at work in both their popular and philosophical expressions. But if the gnostic and pantheist options in their pure form were logically powerful (and this is debatable), they were historically fallible, never quite lived out. And so most interwar observers, whether they knew it or not, balanced divine absence with divine presence. Like the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, they allowed that God was far, yet near. Impressed by the depredations of man, they nonetheless sought—and claimed—the consolations of the divine.

But there was at least one man for whom none of these sensibilities quite sufficed. There was at least one man so convinced of God’s absence, yet so desperate for his presence, and so suspicious of indulging just that want—a man of a mind so schizoid, perhaps—that he could imagine only one way out. God, this man reasoned, must be nowhere and everywhere, nothing and everything—and all at once! That man was Gershom Scholem.

Scholem’s idea was strange, but not unprecedented. Some kabbalists, for example, thought that God manifested himself in the world as nothingness, albeit of a special kind. They imagined creation as shot through by the nothingness of an otherwise absent God. Scholem was not a kabbalist. Their era was not his own. Still, he did discover through them ways to think about problems that flummoxed him in his time—in fact, the same problems and anxieties afflicting all those in the interwar period who made recourse to the gnostic and pantheist languages of heresy. Scholem felt them at fever pitch, and in his person is exemplified a generation. He described every major episode in the history of kabbalah either as a form of Jewish gnosticism or as a Jewish flirtation with pantheism. And so the great expanse of his scholarship, his history of Jewish mysticism, his life’s work—all this ought to be understood as an attempt to speak Jewish revisions of both these languages, but together, at the same time. Scholem’s options for Jewish gnosticism and Jewish pantheism were the most obvious and willful of his choices for the Jewish past. As it turns out, they underwrote also the most obvious and willful of his choices for the Jewish present: Zionism. In part 3 (“Redemption through Sin”), I try to show how.

Just how he did it is fascinating. Scholem's story is an odyssey though time, space, and ideas. With him we travel from Berlin to Jerusalem, from nihilism to nothingness, from gnosticism to pantheism and back. Along the way we encounter angels and golems, sinners and apostates. We also meet puppies and kittens. It is a story of homecoming and exile, megalomania and despair, clairvoyance and feigned insanity. It is a story of forbidden love, divine love, self-love, unrequited love, and love triangles. Scholem was an outrageous and imaginative man—for a short time he thought he was the messiah—and we might as well face up to the fact. We serve him ill to ignore it.

Scholem had a story to tell about himself, and it is related to the stories he had to tell about the Jews. Scholem was frank about the fact, but frankly a tease about how. This raises a problem that has long vexed those who have listened to what he has to say. It is difficult to distinguish between his life and work, to know where Scholem ends and scholarship begins. Was Scholem secretly a kabbalist? A Sabbatian? A gnostic? There is no end to the speculation. Scholem's genre of choice—history—makes the task still more intractable. Historical inquiry enabled him to hold in suspension a variety of inclinations within and about himself, without forcing him to choose between them or resolve their inner tensions. It did so by offering up a host of figures from the past through which to explore his commitments in the present. Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote that every philosophy resolves itself into autobiography in the end. Nietzsche was for some time an inspiration to Scholem, and if his maxim has any truth to it, then surely it is here. One question is how.

Nietzsche's dictum also raises two related questions. Does what Scholem did count as philosophy at all? Does it matter? In this respect, the problems Scholem poses differ considerably from those posed by Jonas and Strauss. They are nearly the inverse. With his friends, the challenge is to specify the theology at the heart of the philosophy for which each is better known. The challenge is to specify the Jewish, as it were, in the Greek. It is to recount the story of the philosophers they had become and the Jews they wished to remain. With Scholem, the Judaism is obvious (even if his commitments remain elusive), but the philosophy, if any, is hidden from view. Scholem opted for history and philology as best suited to his aims. The result: it is difficult to appreciate his writings as interventions in the history of Western thought, rather than as historical arguments about a particular religious tradition. But they are as much the former as the latter.

They are also—they are precisely—an instance of what Nietzsche wanted from philosophy. Nietzsche once declared that he had no desire to replace the great error of Judeo-Christian morality with its ugly truth—that it was merely a weapon used by hypocrites and weaklings in their

war against the strong. Truth did not interest him all that much. He wanted to destroy an error he thought inimical to life as it ought to be lived with a splendid and affirmative error instead. He wanted to overcome one myth with another.

Something of the same ought to be said of Scholem. Something, but not everything—Scholem, after all, was a historian, and he did not hesitate to appeal to the historical record to trounce his foes. Still, his relation to the norms of the profession was ambivalent at best. He practiced philology, but he also joked that God resided in the textual details. There was a myth in there waiting to be discovered, or made. In other words, Scholem's work is both history and myth, both social science and a passionate, creative, glorious *error*. It is an error in the finest Nietzschean tradition, an interpretation that has eclipsed all others in its beauty and its will. It is why I also think that those who reject Scholem by casting doubt on his historical project miss the point in part. It is why I hold to a thesis once advanced by a reader of Hannah Arendt: that even if every historical claim in her monumental book on the origins of totalitarianism were proved false, the whole of her work would endure as an indispensable truth—an indispensable error—for our time.¹⁷

THE TWIN EXCLUSION

What Scholem's truth was and what it is good for will come later. But the aim of his truth, or his error, was simply this: Jews ought to affirm the world, not the beyond, in whatever form such an elsewhere or otherwhen might assume. Jonas and Strauss had much the same to say, not just about Jews but about human beings, and for them all, it was the encounter with the gnostic and pantheist languages of heresy that led them to say what they did.

Their affirmation probably sounds banal. After all, where else is meaningful life to be lived? Their conclusion may also sound vague. After all, there are many ways to be in the world. Jonas asked after the biological dimensions of worldliness—the living world. Strauss asked after its political dimensions—the world as the cities and states we inhabit. Scholem was interested in both. But above all, he wanted to secure the world as a historical arena for human action unaided and unmolested by God. To say they affirmed the “world” is to say several things at once, or perhaps nothing at all.

But perhaps not. The conclusion is neither as banal nor as vague as it might at first appear. It is not banal because it runs against one of the common estimations of their generation of German-Jewish thinkers—that this was a group obsessed with the prospect of messianic redemption. It is certainly true that Scholem and his peers repudiated the milquetoast

God offered up by liberal theology. It is true that they devoted great energy to deciphering the mysteries of the messianic impulse. But it is also true that many of them came to repudiate that impulse, Scholem among them. Equally if not more impressive were their efforts to root man in the world, in this world, whatever its deficiencies or its wonders. In other words, the story of their generation does not end in the interwar period; the international exfoliations of interwar thought—among them diverse withdrawals from messianism—are just as much a part of its history. Neither is the conclusion vague, or at least it does not need to be. That is because all three made recourse to the same, specific vocabulary to voice variations on a common theme. All three revived an ancient Greek distinction: they set law and convention (*nomos*) against teleological notions of nature (*physis*), and for the most part they adjudicated this contest in favor of the latter.

This requires some explanation. *Physis* is a slippery term with multiple dimensions. In Aristotelian biology (or more precisely, physics), it entailed the idea that organisms possess within themselves the source of their own movement. Organisms are not mechanistic assemblages of matter, but have lives and trajectories of their own, and are in this sense autonomous. Twentieth-century intellectuals dismayed by the mindless pursuit of technological advance sometimes revived and revised this notion of nature as an antidote. They used it to question the modern equation of human freedom with the fabrication of our world and ourselves. *Physis* also has political dimensions. Embedded in both *physis* and *nomos*, after all, are claims about how to live. Those who prefer *physis* hold up nature as a standard by which to measure the rightfulness of human law or convention, and by extension our cities and states. Those who prefer *nomos* hold that nature, human or otherwise, has little to say about the matter, and if it did would lack the voice to say it.

But what does any of this have to do with God? As it turns out, a great deal. The appeal to a natural standard prior to human design only makes sense as a corrective to the perceived excesses of human creativity, or to the waywardness of human will. Atom bombs, transgenic rabbits that glow in the dark, and not least our political experiments with totalitarianism and the industrial slaughter of human beings—different animals to be sure, but all in their way have generated a felt need for limits, moral limits to the license men have arrogated to themselves to do with the world and one another whatever they see fit. There are any number of stories about how this situation arose. The ones advanced by mid-century intellectuals were complicated and diverse, but many shared a sense that the evaporation of limits had something to do with the evaporation of God's authority over man. They worried that modern man had set himself up as God. Even worse, the apparent rebellion against God dovetailed

with a rebellion against teleological nature. This, many emphasized, was precisely the aim of leading early-modern thinkers. Francis Bacon, for example, inaugurated modern learning by submitting the Aristotelian cosmology to ridicule, and recommended that man re-create Eden on earth by “wresting from nature her secrets.” Nature was not to be an object of idle contemplation; it was a resource to be exploited and mastered. Hobbes thought appeals to nature as spurious as appeals to God as a foundation for the state. The state was not natural, but artifactual, and the human act of making that brought it into being was akin to God’s creative act at the beginning of time, his *fiat lux*. Let there be light.

The light may have driven God and teleological nature into the shadows, but it has not managed to eradicate them. Moderns remain haunted by their twin exclusion. Sometimes it produces vigorous counterreactions. Modern religious fundamentalisms, for example, are an obvious instance of a response to the exclusion of God. But the haunting applies just as much to the most committed of atheists. They protest too much, and in their dispute with religion inadvertently sustain it. Karl Marx once wrote of atheism as the active negation of God. Active negation, however, makes sense only as a reaction to a position it disputes, and so atheism accords to God both longevity and the legitimacy of an opponent. Marx called for a “negation of the negation” instead: a negation of atheism that would supersede antagonism to God and culminate in simple indifference. But Marx’s hope for man’s relation to the divine has not come to pass. Perhaps that is because appeals to God are a permanent, transhistorical option—even the default option—for how humans conduct their lives.¹⁸ Perhaps it is because God is one of the names we have for a “something more” without which we cannot live. Perhaps the need for something more is a part of the human condition. All this is open to question. But whatever the case, the anti-godly is not yet the ungodly. We fear this shadow still.

We are haunted also by the exclusion of teleological nature. Sometimes this produces redoubled labors to banish it—by erecting an artificial planet fit to displace the earth. Sometimes it elicits an intuitive (as opposed to reasoned) disgust for technological novelty or planetary vandalism. It is easy to understand how teleological nature still exerts its pull. We open our eyes and appear confronted with its overwhelming fact. The world *lives*. It moves. It grows. It undulates, sways, and swells. From metabolism to the very quaking of the earth, the world appears to the precritical mind as invested with unconscious will. It is self-organizing and self-regulating, its own cause and effect. It appears also replete with design, which has naturally generated a search for its designer. In other words, teleology can spawn theology. The converse can hold as well, its exclusion linked intimately to the exclusion of God.¹⁹

These are some of the basic intellectual problems that confront the modern age. In the interwar period, however, they were pursued through the gnostic and pantheist languages of heresy. For all their apparent opposition, both languages perpetuated the twin exclusion that inaugurated the modern era. For all their apparent animosity, they in fact shared much. To the neo-gnostic mind, God was absent and “totally other.” To the pantheist, he was everywhere, but no longer a personal God invested in our doings. He (or it) was a natural force instead. Those invested with the gnostic spirit were also immune to the charms of teleological nature. Or as one sympathizer put it, the neo-gnostics had assembled a worship “that practices, or executes, the end of the world.”²⁰ As for pantheism, it does not reject teleology as a matter of course, but it can, and in Baruch Spinoza (if he was indeed a pantheist), it did. As a consequence, these languages of heresy were perfect vehicles for thinkers anxious about the modern age to revisit the twin exclusion that enabled it in the first place. They discovered that the crisis of religion in the modern world was also a crisis of nature, the crisis of nature a crisis of art or artifice, and the crisis of them all a crisis of what it meant to be a modern man.

It was also a crisis of what it meant to be a Jew, and Hans Jonas helps to show us how.