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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Returning without Erasure: Teshuva, Apophasis, and the Sanctification of the Secular Past

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Dedicated to Professor Elliot R. Wolfson, whose teaching of Jewish mysticism and apophatic theology has profoundly shaped my understanding of the limits of religious knowing and the possibility of faith beyond conceptual possession.

Abstract

Religious return is frequently represented as a movement from spiritual alienation toward religious authenticity, in which the returning individual is expected to repudiate the secular intellectual and cultural formation that preceded observance. This essay challenges the theological necessity of such discontinuity and proposes an understanding of teshuva as the transformation, and not the erasure, of the past. It reads four bodies of work together: Elliot R. Wolfson's apophatic critique of theological representation, including his reading of Rav Kook's "atheistic faith"; Rav Abraham Isaac Kook's Orot HaTeshuva, which names as counterfeit any repentance that fails to gather the scattered self; the Lubavitcher Rebbe's theology of transforming darkness into light, read alongside Wolfson's own study of that theology; and Rav Shagar's account of a repentance that begins with the person exactly as he is and a faith that lives in several worlds without harmonizing them. From these the essay develops the concept of anamnetic teshuva: religious return through transformed remembrance. Three supports are offered that the tradition itself supplies. Maimonides' Hilkhot Teshuva holds together the penitent's "I am another" with the requirement that his sin remain always before him, and assigns the memory of the past to the penitent while forbidding it to the community. The clinical anamnesis supplies a working model of a history that is reread by what is later found and is never discarded. And sociological studies of baalei teshuva show that observance and cultural assimilation come apart in practice. The proposed theology preserves the necessity of halakhic and ethical transformation while rejecting the assumption that religious authenticity requires autobiographical repudiation. It concludes that the deepest religious return may consist not in exchanging secular certainty for religious certainty, but in fidelity to a covenant whose divine ground remains beyond conceptual possession.

Keywords: Teshuva, Apophatic Theology, Elliot R. Wolfson, Rav Kook, Rav Shagar, Lubavitcher Rebbe, Baalei Teshuva, Kiruv, Anamnesis, Religious Identity, Negative Theology, Hermeneutic Medicine.

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1. Introduction: The Past That Refuses to Disappear

What does it mean to return to a place one has never inhabited? The question is not rhetorical. It names one of the central paradoxes of contemporary Jewish religious life, in which individuals raised outside the structures of Orthodox observance are called *baalei teshuva*, masters of return, although they never consciously departed from the world to which they now seek admission. The journey is described as a restoration, yet it is lived as a discovery. They return to an inheritance of which they may have known little, and they enter a community whose intellectual assumptions, ritual disciplines, and social conventions may differ profoundly from those that formed them.

The difficulty is not merely semantic. It concerns the theological status of the past. Does the embrace of Torah require the repudiation of the intellectual and cultural world through which a person came to religious consciousness? Must secular learning, philosophical skepticism, artistic sensibility, and professional identity be treated as unfortunate preliminaries to an authentic religious life? Or can they become part of the structure through which the meaning of return is understood?

I have asked a version of this question before, from the opposite shore. In an earlier essay on the modern Jewish self I examined the ambivalence of those who wished to enter European culture without ceasing to be Jews, and I described the task as one of entering without disappearing [1]. The baal teshuva faces the mirror image of that task. He wishes to enter Torah without ceasing to be the person who sought it. The assimilating Jew of Vienna was told that the price of admission was the erasure of the kapote and the Yiddish of the home; the returning Jew of our own day is too often told that the price of admission is the erasure of the university, the laboratory, the concert hall, and the library. The two demands share a logic. Each treats a human history as a garment that can be removed at the door.

I propose that a theology of teshuva adequate to modern Jewish existence must distinguish between repentance as moral transformation and repentance as autobiographical erasure. The former is indispensable to religious life. The latter is neither necessary nor always desirable. The attempt to obliterate the significance of the secular past may in fact deprive religious thought of insights into divine transcendence that became available precisely through encounters beyond the boundaries of inherited religious certainty.

This claim arises from an intellectual debt that I wish to acknowledge at the outset. Elliot R. Wolfson's scholarship and teaching introduced me to an understanding of apophatic theology that goes well beyond the familiar assertion that God cannot be adequately described. His studies of kabbalistic temporality taught me to distrust the picture of time on which the ordinary description of return depends, in which the past lies behind us as a closed deposit and the only question is whether to keep it or throw it away [2]. His interrogation of representation, language, and mystical experience challenges the assumption that the inadequacy of theological knowledge can be overcome by acquiring a more comprehensive religious vocabulary [3]. The impossibility of conceptual possession does not disappear when secular categories are replaced by theological ones. It may become more urgent.

The implications are especially important for a person who has lived in more than one intellectual world. Someone who has met scientific uncertainty, philosophical contradiction, or the failure of an inherited system of meaning may discover, on entering observant Judaism, that these experiences have prepared him for a more radical understanding of the limits of theological discourse. His secular past need not be the negative background against which religious truth emerges. It may be a source of epistemological humility.

I do not argue that secular education is intrinsically superior to traditional religious learning. Such an assertion would only reproduce the exclusivism I wish to question. A person raised within Orthodox life may be profoundly familiar with doubt, suffering, and divine concealment, and secular formation may produce dogmatism as readily as humility. My claim is narrower and, I think, more consequential: the experience of moving between intellectual and religious worlds may cultivate forms of reflection that become theologically productive, provided they are neither romanticized nor suppressed.

I shall call this possibility *anamnetic teshuva*: a theology of return through transformed remembrance. By this I mean a mode of repentance in which the past is neither preserved unchanged nor rejected wholesale, but is reread through the ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical commitments of the present. The word is chosen deliberately. *Anamnesis* is the liturgical term for remembrance that makes present, and it is also the ordinary clinical term for the taking of a patient's history. I shall argue in Section VII that the second sense illuminates the first.

Four thinkers provide the principal coordinates of the inquiry. Rav Kook offers a vision of teshuva as the restoration and elevation of life and not its negation. The Lubavitcher Rebbe develops a theology in which estrangement may become the source of an intensified relationship with God. Rav Shagar explores how religious fidelity can be sustained where the assumptions of metaphysical certainty have been destabilized. Wolfson presses that destabilization further, declining to secure transcendence even through the negation of its representations.

Their positions should not be collapsed into a harmonious doctrine. They differ on revelation, religious language, metaphysical truth, and the possibility of reconciliation. I bring them into conversation not to erase their differences but to ask whether those differences, left standing, illuminate a more adequate theology of return.

2. Teshuva and the Transformation of Religious Time

The classical Jewish understanding of teshuva already contains a remarkable challenge to the assumption that moral transformation requires the cancellation of the past. In Yoma 86b, Resh Lakish distinguishes repentance motivated by fear, through which deliberate transgressions are reckoned as inadvertent ones, from repentance motivated by love, through which deliberate transgressions are reckoned as merits [4]. The statement is conceptually difficult. A wrongful act cannot become morally innocent through a later change in the actor. The damage inflicted on another person remains real, and repentance cannot abolish the historical occurrence of suffering.

The significance of the rabbinic formulation must therefore be sought elsewhere. It suggests that the moral meaning of an event is not exhausted by its original position within a life. Later transformation may alter the significance of earlier actions within the whole of a person's spiritual biography. The past has not been changed as a matter of historical fact. What has changed is the relationship between past and present. What once expressed estrangement may become the occasion for a humility, a longing, or a moral attentiveness that could not have developed in the same way without it.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik gave this intuition its most rigorous modern statement. In *Halakhic Man* he concedes that if the past is simply dead and the future simply unborn, then repentance is an empty notion, and its philosophical mockers are right. Repentance is intelligible only if the past remains alive within the present and is open to determination by what a person goes on to become; the penitent does not mourn a past that is irretrievably lost but takes hold of a past that still exists and gives it a new image [5]. Rav Kook says something similar in a more metaphysical register when he writes that teshuva preceded the world and lies concealed in the soul even at the hour of sin [6]. On both accounts teshuva is an act performed upon time. It presupposes that the past is still there to be acted upon.

This is the first point at which the model of erasure fails on the tradition's own terms. If the past were deleted there would be nothing for love to convert into merit. The alchemy described by Resh Lakish needs its base metal.

Maimonides is usually read as the witness for the other side, and the reading has a real textual basis. Among the ways of repentance he lists in *Hilkhot Teshuva* is that the penitent changes his name, as though to say: I am another, and I am not the person who did those deeds [7]. Here, it seems, is the charter for autobiographical repudiation. Yet the same chapter contains a ruling that points in the opposite direction. Sins confessed on one Day of Atonement are to be confessed again on the next, even though the person has remained steadfast in his repentance, because, in the words of the psalm, my sin is before me always [7]. The Maimonidean penitent is therefore asked to do two things at once. With respect to the deed he says, I am another. With respect to memory he says, it is always before me. The one who has become another is precisely the one who remembers. The new name is not a device for forgetting; it is the name under which the old history is henceforth carried.

A second Maimonidean ruling settles who owns that memory. Baalei teshuva, he writes, stand in a place where the wholly righteous cannot stand, a rabbinic teaching from Berakhot 34b that he codifies as law [7,8]; the one who was yesterday distant is today beloved and near. And it is a grave sin to say to a baal teshuva, remember your former deeds, or to recall them in his presence in order to shame him [7], a prohibition the Talmud classifies as verbal oppression [9]. Read together, the two rulings distribute memory asymmetrically. The penitent must keep his past before him. The community is forbidden to hold it over him. Remembrance belongs to the one who returns and to no one else. I shall come back to this asymmetry in Section VI, because much of what goes wrong in the reception of baalei teshuva can be described as its inversion: the community remembers on the returnee's behalf and instructs him to forget.

There is a liturgical confirmation of the same structure. Among the six remembrances that tradition asks a Jew to rehearse daily, more than one is a remembrance of failure: how the people provoked God in the wilderness, what befell Miriam on the way out of Egypt. I have written elsewhere about these remembrances as a framework for the care of patients with memory loss [10]. Here I note only that a tradition which commands the daily recollection of its own worst hours has not understood holiness as amnesia.

The contemporary baal teshuva meets a further complication that the classical juridical model does not fully capture. Much of his earlier life may not have consisted of conscious transgression at all. He may have been raised without extensive knowledge of halakhah, or educated within traditions in which Jewish observance was not regarded as binding. His secular past may contain real moral accomplishment, sustained intellectual labor, and deep experiences of responsibility toward others. To identify this entire history with the category of sin is to confuse several distinct questions: whether particular practices are halakhically permissible, whether particular beliefs are theologically adequate, and whether the life in which those practices and beliefs occurred was devoid of spiritual significance.

A theology of return must refuse this confusion. The past may contain acts that require repentance, convictions that require revision, and achievements that deserve preservation. A person does not dishonor Torah by distinguishing among them. The capacity for such discrimination may be necessary if repentance is to remain truthful.

Anamnetic teshuva begins from the proposition that religious return is not an escape from historical continuity. The person who returns carries his history into the new religious existence, where it becomes the subject of renewed judgment and interpretation. The result is not a completed reconciliation. The past may remain troubling, ambiguous, and resistant to explanation. Its continued presence need not be taken as evidence that the return has failed.

3. Wolfson and the Critique of Religious Possession

The philosophical foundation of this argument derives from the apophatic problem as Elliot R. Wolfson has developed it across three decades of work.

In *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Wolfson shows how Jewish mystical discourse is mediated through imaginative, visionary, and symbolic forms [11]. Mystical knowledge is not an unmediated apprehension of an object that simply stands before the knowing subject. It arises through interpretive structures whose historical, linguistic, and imaginative character cannot be separated from the experience they articulate. The significance of this insight extends beyond the historical interpretation of kabbalistic sources. It raises the question whether religious language can ever provide transparent access to the reality it seeks to disclose.

In *Language, Eros, Being*, he develops this concern through an intricate analysis of linguistic embodiment, erotic symbolism, and mystical hermeneutics [12]. Language does not merely describe religious experience after the event. It participates in the constitution of the world within which such experience becomes intelligible. What appears is never simply independent of the conditions of its appearance.

It is in *Giving Beyond the Gift* that Wolfson confronts the apophatic problem most directly [3]. In the opening chapter, "Via Negativa and the Imaginal Configuring of God" (pp. 14–33), he asks whether the negation of anthropomorphic representations can avoid reproducing the theological possessiveness it seeks to overcome. In the concluding chapter, "Undoing (K)not of Apophaticism: A Heideggerian Afterthought" (pp. 227–260), the problem becomes more radical still: negative theology may itself be a form of representation through which the unknowable is made conceptually available. The subtitle of the book names the condition from which he seeks release as *theomania*.

This is a significant step beyond a simplified account of Maimonidean negative theology. In the *Guide*, Maimonides argues that only negative attributes may be predicated of God and that every positive attribution compromises divine unity [13]. For Wolfson it is not enough to insist that God cannot be described through positive attributes if the assertion of divine unknowability then becomes one more secure possession of the theological mind. The problem is not simply that human descriptions are inadequate. It is that the desire for theological adequacy may survive even in the language of inadequacy.

The implications for teshuva are substantial. A common narrative of religious return assumes that the individual moves from an inadequate secular account of reality to a more adequate religious one. The failure of one system is overcome through adoption of another, and the anxieties of secular intellectual

life are answered by the apparent completeness of tradition. Wolfson makes such a narrative difficult to sustain. The acquisition of religious language does not free a person from the limits of representation. The theological thinker remains situated within historically mediated structures of meaning, and no claim of fidelity to revelation automatically authorizes the identification of those structures with divine reality.

There is one essay of Wolfson's that bears on the present question with particular force, because in it he brings this critique to an Orthodox master who was himself preoccupied with the religious meaning of secularity. In "Secrecy, Apophasis, and Atheistic Faith in the Teachings of Rav Kook," Wolfson argues that Rav Kook's rhetoric of the secret and his apophatic theology cannot be separated, and that for Rav Kook the logic of monotheism, pressed to its aniconic conclusion, undoes the images of theism itself [14]. He cites Rav Kook's aphorism that every definition of divinity brings about heresy. On this reading atheism is not the opposite of faith. It is the purgation that faith requires, the stripping away of the idol that a definition of God has become. From the relative standpoint of the human being, faith and heresy differ; from the standpoint of the infinite they pass into one another.

I dwell on this essay because it changes the shape of my argument. It would be one thing to claim, as an outsider's plea, that the skepticism a baal teshuva acquired in his secular years has some religious use. It is another to find, in Wolfson's reading of the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, that the denial of inadequate images of God is itself a moment within faith. If that is so, then the years a person spent unable to believe in the God he had been offered were not simply years spent outside religion. They may have been years spent performing, without knowing its name, the negative labor that mature faith cannot do without. The laboratory and the seminar room become, on this account, something like schools of aniconism.

Two cautions are necessary. The first is Wolfson's own: he does not let Rav Kook off lightly, and the same essay presses hard on the ethnocentrism that compromises Rav Kook's universal vision [14]. An honest appropriation cannot take the consoling half of the reading and leave the critical half. The second caution is mine. Wolfson's philosophical interrogation is more radical than a conventional covenantal theology can comfortably accommodate, and nothing in what follows should be attributed to him as a conclusion. I am a clinician who has learned from his work, and I am applying what I learned to a question he did not set. The attempt to live his critique inside halakhic commitment is my problem and not a gap in his thought. It must remain a problem here and not an assumed achievement.

With those cautions in place, the lesson I draw is this. Fidelity must be distinguished from possession. The secular past may have taught a person that explanatory systems are incomplete; religious return need not invalidate that discovery and may deepen it. What the baal teshuva brings into religious life is not necessarily an alternative doctrine. It is an acquired suspicion of conceptual mastery, and that suspicion may be among the most valuable resources of a mature faith.

4. Teshuva as the Renewal of Life

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook offers a vision of return that differs considerably in temper from Wolfson's interrogation, and it is best approached through its own words. *Orot HaTeshuva*, first published in 1925 from his notebooks and arranged with his son Rav Zvi Yehuda [15], presents repentance as a pervasive movement of renewal whose significance extends far beyond particular human transgressions [6,16]. Six passages carry the weight of what I want to say.

The first two establish the scale. Teshuva, he writes, arises from the yearning of all existence to be better, purer, and more vigorous than it is (6:1), and it preceded the world, so that it lies hidden in the soul even at the hour of sin (6:2) [6]. Repentance on this account is not in the first instance a response to wrongdoing. It is a current that runs through being, and human repentance is the place where that current becomes conscious of itself.

The third establishes its character. Teshuva is the healthiest feeling of the soul (5:1) [6]. A physician reads this sentence with a certain recognition. Rav Kook does not describe repentance as the amputation of a diseased part. He describes it as what a sound organism does. The health of a body is not the absence of a history of illness; adaptive immunity is the body's memory of what it has encountered. A soul that had deleted its past would not be healthier. It would be naive, in the immunological sense, and defenseless.

The fourth passage is the one on which my argument most depends. The primary teshuva, the one that lights up the darkness at once, is that a person return to himself, to the root of his soul; then he will at once return to God, the soul of all souls. When a person

forgets the essence of his own soul, everything becomes confused and uncertain. And Rav Kook adds a warning that is rarely quoted in the literature of outreach: a repentance in which a person claims to return to God while declining to gather his own scattered self is a deception (15:10) [6]. On the model of erasure the returning Jew is asked to become someone else as the condition of coming near. Rav Kook says the reverse. The road to God passes through the self one actually is, and a return that bypasses that self has not arrived anywhere. The word he reaches for is not immature or incomplete. It is fraudulent.

The fifth and sixth passages concern what becomes of the energies of the former life. The very force that expressed itself in sin, he writes, becomes through teshuva a living power that accomplishes great and exalted things (12:2), and from true teshuva one must return to the world and to life (14:30) [6]. The first of these is his gloss on Resh Lakish: what love converts into merit is not the deed, which stands condemned, but the vitality that was spent in it. The second closes the door on a repentance that is only withdrawal. A return that ends in flight from the world has stopped halfway.

Read together these passages give a theological vocabulary for transformed continuity, and they apply with full force to the relation between religious and secular culture. Rav Kook's thought does not require the assumption that intellectual or cultural developments outside explicitly religious institutions are without spiritual meaning. In the essay that Bokser translates as "The Pangs of Cleansing," he grants even to atheism a temporary legitimacy, as the force that clears away the debased images which have attached themselves to faith so that a purer knowledge of God can emerge [16]. This is the text behind Wolfson's reading discussed above [14], and it is not a marginal one. Rav Kook's commitment to Torah remains normative throughout. But the possibility of elevating what appears estranged from holiness is integral to his imagination, and he extends it to the estrangement of unbelief itself.

The application to the baal teshuva is direct. The physician need not relinquish scientific knowledge in order to acknowledge the limits of scientific explanation. The literary scholar need not abandon aesthetic sensitivity in order to recognize the authority of Torah. The philosopher need not cease to philosophize in order to accept the obligations of religious practice. What must change is not the existence of these faculties but the orientation in which they are exercised. In Rav Kook's terms they are the scattered self that true repentance is obliged to gather.

There is, however, a difficulty, and I have felt it for many years. Rav Kook's comprehensive account of cosmic renewal can encourage a reading in which every estrangement is finally assigned its place within a unified redemptive process. Such a theology has enormous spiritual power. It also risks excessive confidence about the meaning of suffering and historical rupture. He died in 1935, and the system was built before the event that most severely tests it.

It is here that Wolfson's critique is needed, and here too that Rav Kook's own apophatic strain, as Wolfson has brought it out, can be turned upon his harmonizing vision. An apophatic theology of return cannot presume that the meaning of every experience has become transparent merely because it has been incorporated into a religious narrative. The patient whose suffering remains unresolved, the person whose intellectual crisis has not reached closure, and the one whose earlier life contains irreparable loss must not be told that the significance of these things is now disclosed. Rav Kook teaches the possibility of transformation. Wolfson teaches restraint before the claim of completed comprehension. The tension between them keeps a theology of return from becoming either a doctrine of erasure or a doctrine of compulsory reconciliation.

5. The Transformation of Darkness

The theology of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, presents perhaps the most direct challenge to the claim that Orthodox outreach must require repudiation of the secular past. This is worth stating plainly, since Chabad is the movement most identified with kiruv, and its own doctrine of return is more radical than simple repudiation.

The doctrine has its root in the seventh chapter of the *Tanya*. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi explains there how deliberate sins can become merits: the penitent who returns out of great love thirsts for God like one in a parched land, and the intensity of that thirst is owed to the very distance in which his soul had been living. Because the distance produced the love, the distance is reckoned to his credit [17]. The classical Chabad vocabulary distinguishes two modes of divine service, the subjugation of what opposes holiness and its transformation, and it is the second, the turning of darkness into light, that characterizes the baal teshuva.

The Rebbe's teaching returns to this theme repeatedly. In *Likkutei Sichot*, volume 1, pp. 202–203, he describes

teshuva as the transformation of concealment into revelation [18]. The crucial movement is not merely the removal of darkness. It is the possibility that darkness itself becomes the occasion of an intensified disclosure of light. This must be understood within its Hasidic metaphysical frame. The transformation is not simply psychological. It concerns the relation between the soul, divine concealment, and a dimension of divine reality that exceeds the ordinary structures of religious service. I have examined elsewhere how Chabad thought sustains theological continuity even where divine withdrawal is understood to precede human sin [19]; the same structural confidence, that rupture can be held inside relation, is at work here.

The baal teshuva's earlier estrangement is not thereby declared desirable. Transgression remains transgression. Yet repentance can alter the spiritual consequence of estrangement so radically that the distance becomes implicated in the return. The Rebbe's teaching therefore has a temporal dimension that is closely related to the anamnetic argument. Teshuva does not only change what a person will do. It reconfigures the religious significance of what has already occurred.

An essential distinction must nevertheless be maintained. The transformation of darkness into light does not entail the indiscriminate preservation of secular practices or beliefs. In Chabad thought certain forms of worldly experience may be elevated through the service of God, while prohibited actions require rejection and repentance. The theology of transformation operates inside a normative framework that distinguishes what can be refined from what must be relinquished.

My proposal extends this distinction to the sphere of secular intellectual formation. The earlier education of a baal teshuva need not be treated as equivalent to transgression. Scientific training, philosophical inquiry, literature, and artistic experience may belong to the category of resources capable of religious redirection and not to the category of practices requiring repentance. If Chabad doctrine holds that even the energy of actual sin can be turned to merit, then a fortiori the neutral and often noble energies of a secular education can be. The distinction matters because it prevents the theology of return from becoming an indiscriminate celebration of the past. Not everything can be preserved unchanged, but neither is everything that preceded observance morally or spiritually disqualified.

An earlier version of this argument set the Rebbe and Wolfson against one another as an affirmative metaphysics on one side and an apophatic critique on the other. That contrast is too simple, and the reason is Wolfson's own scholarship. *Open Secret*, his study of the seventh Rebbe, is the most searching academic reading of that corpus we have, and it finds the apophatic movement inside the Rebbe's teaching and not outside it [20]. In the chapters on apophatic embodiment and on what he calls hypernomian transvaluation, Wolfson reads Habad thought as governed by a logic in which the divine essence lies beyond the opposition of concealment and disclosure, so that the deepest disclosure is the disclosure of concealment as concealment. The term *hypernomian*, which he had developed earlier in *Venturing Beyond*, names a surpassing of the law that proceeds through the law's fulfillment and not through its abrogation [21].

If Wolfson is right about the Rebbe, then the transformation of darkness into light should not be heard as the replacement of one positive content by another, the bad past by the good present. Light and darkness are both, in the end, garments. What the penitent reaches through his distance is not a brighter object but that which exceeds the difference between the bright and the dark. This reading does something important for the baal teshuva. It relieves him of the fantasy that his return has moved him from the side of darkness to the side of light, as though he now stood among the possessors. The Habad doctrine, on Wolfson's account, is less triumphant and more exacting than that.

A difference between the two remains, and I do not wish to dissolve it. The Rebbe's idiom is affirmative: it speaks of revelation, of redemption, of the practical work that brings them about. Wolfson's philosophical writing declines to rest in any such affirmation. But the difference is one of idiom and of where each is willing to stop, not a difference between a thinker who knows concealment and one who does not.

Taken together they permit a threefold distinction that a mature theology of teshuva requires: between rejecting a practice, transforming an inheritance, and acknowledging an experience whose significance remains unresolved. The Rebbe's language of transformation supplies an affirmative spiritual grammar for the first two. Wolfson's reading keeps that grammar from hardening into a claim of exhaustive comprehension, and so makes room for the third. The past, on this view, becomes neither an idol nor an embarrassment.

6. Rav Shagar: Faith After the Collapse of Certainty

Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, known as Rav Shagar, brings a different dimension to this discussion. His engagement with postmodern philosophy, existentialism, and Hasidic thought raises the possibility that religious faith may survive not by defeating contemporary skepticism but by acknowledging the conditions of thought that make skepticism unavoidable.

The English collection *Faith Shattered and Restored* opens with an essay entitled "Uncertainty as the Trial of the Akeda" (pp. 1–20), and near its beginning Rav Shagar asks, "Can man ever attain absolute certainty as to the will of God?" [22]. The question is put at the summit of religious obedience, the binding of Isaac, and not at its margins. The ordeal, as he reads it, lies in having to act without the assurance that one has heard correctly. The essays that follow, "My Faith: Faith in a Postmodern World" (pp. 21–40) and "Living with Nothingness" (pp. 85–104), do not concede the superiority of relativism, and they do not try to restore premodern certainty by rhetorical insistence. They examine the form faith may take when it no longer depends on an incontestable philosophical foundation.

Miriam Feldmann Kaye's *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* provides an important scholarly analysis of this development [23]. Through her study of Rav Shagar and Tamar Ross she shows how postmodern philosophical challenges may become resources for theological renewal and not only threats to belief.

What has been less noticed in English-language discussion is that Rav Shagar wrote directly and at length about teshuva, and that what he wrote bears precisely on the question of erasure. His High Holy Day discourse "The Matter Depends Upon Me Alone," now available in *Living Time* (pp. 3–12), is built on the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdayya in Avodah Zarah 17a [24,25]. The man who had visited every prostitute in the world asks the mountains, the heavens, the sun and the moon to plead for him. Each declines. He concludes that the matter depends on him alone, places his head between his knees, and weeps until his soul departs. Rav Shagar reads the search for outside advocates as the last form of avoidance, and the collapse of that search as the beginning of repentance. The decisive sentence, for my purposes, concerns who it is that repents. The "I" on whom the matter depends is not an abstraction or an ideal self waiting to be uncovered. It is the person "exactly as you are" [24].

This is the subject of anamnetic teshuva stated in four words. The one who returns is not a purified remainder from which the biography has been subtracted. He is the whole man, with the whole record, and there is no other candidate for the role. Two further details of the Talmudic story support the reading. The heavenly voice that announces his acceptance calls him Rabbi Elazar ben Durdayya: the title is added to the name, and the name is not replaced. And Rabbi Judah the Prince, weeping, observes that penitents are not only accepted but are called Rabbi [25]. The tradition honors him under the name by which he sinned.

Rav Shagar also declines to make repentance a simple achievement of will. The unified and wholehearted state of mind from which Rabbi Elazar finally speaks is, he says, a function of divine grace [24]. Levi Morrow, his translator, has shown that this double emphasis runs through Rav Shagar's Hebrew monograph on repentance, *Shuvi Nafshi*, whose subtitle poses the alternative of grace or freedom. That book sets the Maimonidean and Soloveitchikian account of teshuva as self-creation through free choice against the lineage of Bahya, Izbica, and Rav Zadok of Lublin, in which repentance is the acceptance of oneself as one has been made, and it refuses to decide between them [26]. Morrow calls the result a paradox of change and self-acceptance.

I would put it this way. The erasure model resolves Rav Shagar's paradox in one direction only: all change, no acceptance. A sentimental religiosity resolves it in the other: all acceptance, no change. Anamnetic teshuva is an attempt to honor the paradox as he left it. One changes, and one accepts that it is oneself who is changing.

A last text completes the picture. Another discourse in *Living Time* bears the title "On Translation and Living in Multiple Worlds" (pp. 105–130) [24]. The title names a possibility that Rav Kook's vocabulary of unity does not quite allow. For Rav Kook the scattered self is to be gathered into a harmony. Rav Shagar, formed in the religious Zionist world that Rav Kook shaped, is more willing to let the worlds stand next to one another, translated into each other imperfectly, without a synthesis that would absorb them. I have written elsewhere of what I owe to Rav Shagar's way of reading the Zohar after betrayal and catastrophe [27]; what I take from him here is the permission to be gathered without being harmonized. The baal teshuva who is also a neurologist, or a novelist, or a physicist

does not have to produce a unified theory of himself before he may daven.

The relevance to teshuva is therefore direct. If religious authenticity is defined by the elimination of ambiguity, the baal teshuva must learn to suppress the very questions that may have brought him to religious life. If faith can be sustained without final conceptual closure, his earlier intellectual formation may remain an active participant in religious understanding. Rav Shagar provides a language for this from within an observant framework.

His position is not identical with Wolfson's apophasis, and the difference matters. Wolfson's critique bears on the representability of transcendence as such. Rav Shagar's concern is more explicitly existential and religious: how a person may go on praying, studying, observing, and belonging when the intellectual structures that supported inherited certainty have been shaken. Wolfson examines the desire to possess divine truth conceptually. Rav Shagar explores what it is to inhabit the covenant without that possession. I would argue that the baal teshuva's earlier encounter with secular thought can be a preparation for exactly this form of religious existence. He need not arrive at Torah as one who has found the definitive refutation of every alternative. He may arrive because the practices, texts, and ethical obligations of Jewish life have become compelling while philosophical questions remain. Such a return is not intellectually deficient because it declines to claim certainty. It may be more faithful to the actual conditions of human knowing.

Rav Shagar also leaves a problem that must not be evaded. If religious commitment becomes primarily an expression of existential authenticity or cultural belonging, what prevents the relativization of its normative claims? Can halakhic obligation remain binding if its justification is inseparable from historically contingent language and communal identity? My answer, developed in Section IX, is that epistemological humility does not entail practical indifference. One may acknowledge the limits of theological explanation while accepting the demands of a religious form of life. That distinction cannot be established merely by appeal to uncertainty; it requires a substantive account of covenantal responsibility. But Rav Shagar's work makes clear that the alternative to dogmatic certainty need not be religious abandonment. For the baal teshuva this is liberating. He need not cease to be intellectually unsettled in order to become religiously serious.

7. The Social Construction of Religious Return

The theological argument also requires engagement with the social experience of baalei teshuva. Religious return takes place not only through ideas and private spiritual decisions but within communities that hold expectations about identity, conduct, belonging, and legitimacy.

Roberta G. Sands's study of the social integration of baalei teshuva examines the experience of individuals who entered Orthodox Judaism after being raised outside its institutions [28]. Her research describes the complexity of their social location, including the distinctive identity of those who return and their sometimes ambivalent relationship with those raised within Orthodox communities. Yitzhak Dahan's study, significantly entitled "We Don't See Our Past as a Mistake," offers a complementary perspective [29]. His analysis of a baal teshuva community shows that the initial aspiration to merge with an established Haredi environment may develop into a more differentiated form of communal identity.

These studies do not establish the theological validity of any particular understanding of repentance. They do challenge the assumption that religious transformation inevitably culminates in complete cultural assimilation, and they show that the people concerned have already begun to say so in their own words. The title Dahan records is a theological statement made by a community before any theologian had supplied it with warrants. Part of what I am attempting here is to supply them.

The distinction between observance and assimilation is the essential one. A baal teshuva may embrace halakhic practice without concluding that his earlier secular education was devoid of value. He may adopt the disciplines of communal religious life while retaining distinctive intellectual interests. He may accept the authority of rabbinic tradition while refusing to falsify the experiences that contributed to his religious development. Such a person need not be considered a failed or incomplete baal teshuva.

The possibility of a differentiated religious identity raises a question about the aims of kiruv. Is its purpose the creation of individuals who reproduce the cultural identity of an existing religious community, or the cultivation of Jews capable of entering covenantal life with the full complexity of their biographies? A community concerned principally with cultural reproduction may regard the preservation of earlier

intellectual identity as an obstacle to integration. A community concerned with the flourishing of Torah may recognize that those who arrive from other intellectual worlds bring perspectives unavailable within a more homogeneous environment.

The Maimonidean asymmetry described in Section I gives this question a halakhic edge. The penitent is to keep his past before him; others are forbidden to say to him, remember your former deeds [7,9]. The pathology of assimilationist kiruv can be described as the exact inversion of that rule. The community keeps the returnee's past in view, as a deficit to be managed, a reason for caution in matchmaking, a ground for permanent probation, and at the same time instructs him to forget it. He is asked to disown what his neighbors will not let him live down. The prohibition of verbal oppression was formulated for precisely this figure, and it is a sober thought that a practice undertaken in the name of bringing Jews near may regularly transgress the one law the tradition enacted for their protection.

The relation between religious teachers and returning students is marked by asymmetry of another kind. The teacher possesses familiarity with texts, customs, and practices that the student lacks, and the student may experience dependence at the very moment when his identity is under reconstruction. Such dependence may be necessary and beneficial. It becomes theologically problematic when the teacher's authority extends beyond instruction into the demand that the student's previous biography be interpreted exclusively through the teacher's categories. In clinical work with patients who carry religious injury I have found that this is very often where the injury was done: not in the teaching of Torah, but in the confiscation of a life story by someone who held religious power over its owner [30].

A mature religious pedagogy should distinguish the authority to teach Torah from the presumption of ownership over the student's history. The student may need a rebbe in order to learn the tradition. He does not need permission to acknowledge the truth of his own experience.

8. Medicine, Suffering, and the Education of Unknowing

My own understanding of this problem has been shaped by medicine no less than by philosophy and theology, and after nearly five decades of neurological practice I cannot separate the two educations.

The physician inhabits a world of extraordinary explanatory sophistication. Scientific knowledge permits increasingly precise descriptions of disease, and technology has transformed diagnosis and treatment. Yet the clinical encounter repeatedly discloses the limits of explanation. To identify the pathology of a disease is not to understand the meaning of suffering. To describe the neurological basis of a disability is not to comprehend the experience of a person whose former capacities have gone. To explain the mechanism of death is not to answer the questions raised by mortality. These distinctions do not invalidate scientific knowledge. They show that explanation and understanding are not the same thing. I have argued elsewhere that the patient is better approached as a sacred text to be read than as an object to be measured, and that the reading is never finished [31].

Medicine has taught me that the accumulation of knowledge does not produce mastery over the human condition. The physician may know more than the patient about the biological process unfolding in the body and considerably less about the meaning of that process within the patient's life. Such an encounter is an education in humility, and I have tried to describe uncertainty and doubt as the proper foundations of that humility in medicine and in religion alike [32].

It is tempting to translate this humility directly into theological language, and the analogy must be handled carefully. Scientific uncertainty is frequently contingent: what cannot be explained today may become intelligible tomorrow. Apophatic theology raises a different kind of question, concerning the adequacy of finite concepts before transcendence. The two are not identical. What the clinic teaches is narrower and still valuable. The physician learns to distinguish the availability of information from the possession of meaning.

This distinction matters most when religion attempts to explain suffering through an overconfident theology of providence. The suffering patient does not necessarily require a theological account of why the illness occurred. Such accounts may compound suffering by implying that its ultimate significance is already known to someone else. An apophatic religious response may begin instead with the refusal to convert another person's pain into evidence for a comprehensive theory [33]. That restraint acknowledges that the limits of human knowledge are not removed by religious conviction.

There is a second and more specific thing that medicine contributes, and it concerns the word I have chosen

for this theology. *Anamnesis* is what clinicians in much of the world call the taking of a history. It is the first act of every clinical encounter and, in neurology especially, the most important one; the examination and the imaging confirm or correct what the history has already suggested. Three features of the clinical anamnesis seem to me to bear directly on teshuva.

The first is that the history is never discarded when the diagnosis is made. A physician who, having reached a diagnosis, tore up the history would be regarded as incompetent, because the diagnosis is an interpretation of the history and is unintelligible without it. The new understanding does not replace the old story. It is the old story, understood.

The second is that the history changes its meaning without changing its facts. A headache that the patient mentioned in passing, a fall two years ago that no one thought important, a period of low mood, are reread in the light of what is later found, and events that seemed unconnected become the early chapters of a single account. Nothing in the past has been altered. Everything in the past has been reinterpreted. This is as close as ordinary experience comes to what Resh Lakish describes, and it is what Rabbi Soloveitchik means by a past that receives its image from the future.

The third is that the history is retaken at every encounter. No anamnesis is final. The patient tells it differently as he comes to understand it differently, and the good clinician expects this and does not treat the earlier version as a lie. A person's account of the life that preceded his return will likewise change over the decades of his observance, and it should be allowed to. The demand for a single, fixed, edifying testimony, the conversion narrative delivered on request, asks of the baal teshuva something we would never ask of a patient.

The physician who enters the beit midrash therefore brings more than scientific expertise. He brings an acquired awareness of the insufficiency of expertise before the fullness of human experience, and he brings a practiced discipline of listening to a past in order to understand a present. In this respect the secular professional life is not an obstacle to theological understanding but a preparation for it. The same may be said of literature, music, and philosophy. Each can disclose dimensions of existence that resist reduction to propositions, and each can cultivate the capacity to remain with ambiguity without dissolving it at once. Such experiences need not replace Torah. They may deepen the seriousness with which Torah is met.

9. Anamnetic Teshuva and the Unfinished Self

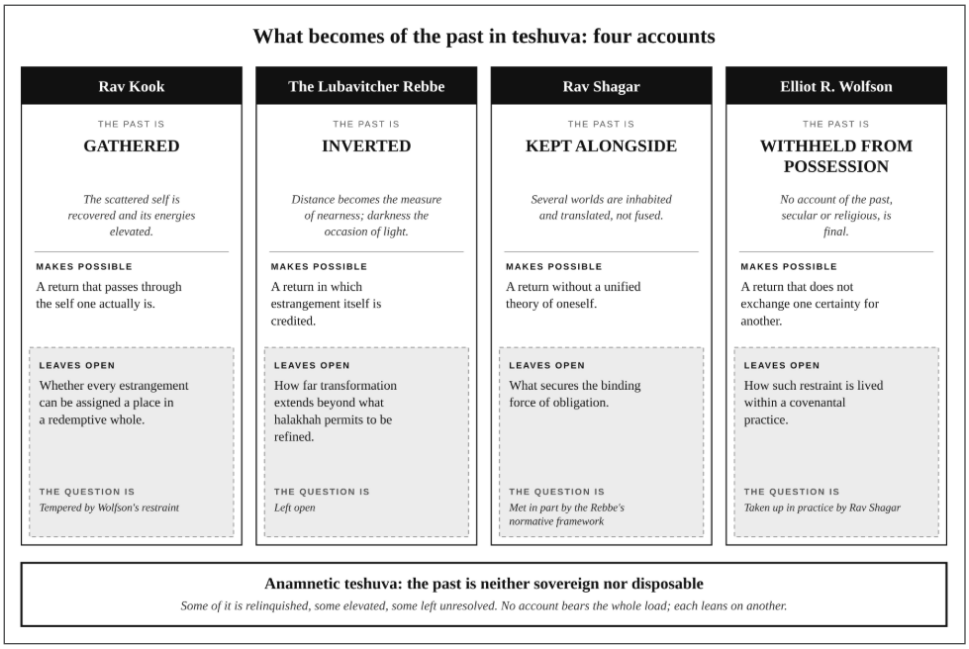
The preceding discussion permits a more precise formulation. Religious return is not a simple transition between two completed identities. It is an ongoing reinterpretation of the self through the encounter between an inherited history and a newly assumed obligation. The term *anamnetic* emphasizes the theological role of remembrance. The past remains present, not as an unchanged authority over the person, but as a field of experience whose significance is continually reconsidered.

This account rejects two inadequate models. The first is repudiative teshuva, in which the past is understood primarily as error and return requires its symbolic destruction. The second is merely additive teshuva, in which observance becomes one more component of an existing identity without demanding serious moral or intellectual transformation. Anamnetic teshuva differs from both. It recognizes that some earlier practices must be abandoned, some beliefs reconsidered, and some habits transformed. It also insists that the work of return involves preserving the truth of experience and not producing an ideologically convenient autobiography.

The four thinkers contribute differently to this formulation, and it is clearer to set their contributions side by side than to blend them. Table 1 summarizes what each says becomes of the past, what each makes possible for the returning Jew, and what each leaves open.

The table should be read down its last column as well as across its rows. Each account leaves a question, and in three of the four cases the question is answered, as far as it can be, by one of the others. Rav Kook's confidence is tempered by Wolfson's restraint. Rav Shagar's question about obligation is met, in part, by the normative framework within which the Rebbe's transformation operates. Wolfson's question, how apophatic restraint is to be lived, is the one that Rav Shagar spent his life attempting to answer in practice. The positions do not collapse into one another. They lean on one another, as the stones of an arch do, and what holds them up is that none is asked to bear the whole load.

Table 1. *What becomes of the past in teshuva: four accounts*



The distinction between transformation and transparency is especially significant in relation to suffering. The returning individual may be tempted to reinterpret every earlier failure as a necessary stage in a divinely directed journey. Such narratives can console. They also risk converting contingency into providential certainty, and an apophatic theology must resist that temptation. The meaning of the past may be transformed without becoming transparent. A person can recognize that suffering has changed his life without claiming to know why it occurred. He can acknowledge that intellectual estrangement contributed to his religious seeking without treating estrangement as desirable. He can find value in earlier experiences without asserting that they were all necessary parts of a predetermined plan.

The incompleteness of such interpretation is not a failure of teshuva. It is an expression of its theological integrity, and it is what the clinical model would lead us to expect: no history is ever taken for the last time.

Anamnetic teshuva therefore names a form of return in which a person neither remains what he was nor denies that he was ever that person. He becomes responsible for his past without claiming complete knowledge of its meaning.

10. The Covenant Beyond Certainty

A final objection remains. If the deepest religious return involves relinquishing the demand for conceptual certainty, does the theology proposed here undermine the binding character of Jewish observance?

The concern is legitimate, and it is not mine alone. David Shatz has put the question in so many words, asking whether halakhah can survive negative theology, in the same volume in which Wolfson's essay on Rav Kook appears [34]. Apophatic thought can become a sophisticated means of evading concrete obligation if the transcendence of the divine is invoked to relativize every religious claim. A theology that celebrates ambiguity without distinguishing it from moral indifference cannot sustain the demands of repentance. I do not propose such a theology.

Three considerations seem to me to answer the objection, or at least to show that it does not follow of necessity.

The first is historical. The thinkers on whom I have drawn were not led by their apophatic or dialectical insight to loosen their observance. Rav Kook, who wrote that every definition of God engenders heresy, was a halakhic decisor of the first rank. The Rebbe, in whose teaching Wolfson finds an apophatic logic at work, demanded of his followers a scrupulousness that few communities match. Rav Shagar headed a yeshiva. Whatever the logical relation between unknowing and obligation may be, the lived relation in these lives was not one of erosion.

The second is conceptual, and I take it from Wolfson's own vocabulary. The alternative to nomian piety is not only the antinomian. There is also what he calls the hypernomian: a reaching beyond the law that is achieved through the law's most exacting fulfillment and not by setting it aside [21]. I do not claim that the ordinary baal teshuva is a hypernomian mystic, and I do not claim Wolfson's authority for applying the term to him. I borrow only the structural point that

the recognition of a beyond need not weaken the path that leads toward it. A person may keep the Sabbath with greater care, not less, for knowing that the One who commanded it is not contained in his idea of a commander.

The third is clinical. The physician accepts binding professional obligations under permanent uncertainty about outcome, and often about diagnosis. No one supposes that the duty to the patient lapses because prognosis is uncertain; if anything, uncertainty sharpens the duty. Ethical responsibility has never required complete epistemological possession. I have argued in another setting, the theology of recovery, that personal address and impersonal ground must be held as an irreducible antinomy and that the attempt to resolve it in either direction damages the person who is trying to live by it [35]. The same is true here. Obligation and unknowing are not to be reconciled. They are to be held.

The distinction I wish to preserve, then, is between acknowledging an obligation and claiming to comprehend its ultimate divine ground. A person may recognize halakhic commitment as binding while acknowledging that the theological meaning of revelation exceeds the conceptual structures through which it is interpreted. The willingness to act without claiming exhaustive understanding may be an especially demanding form of religious seriousness. The religious person does not obey because every ambiguity has disappeared. He obeys within a tradition whose claims have become binding on him, while recognizing that the relation between human interpretation and divine reality is more complex than any doctrinal formula can exhaust. This is not a denial of truth. It is a refusal to confuse truth with possession.

The distinction also modifies the relation between rebbe and talmid. Religious authority remains necessary for the transmission of Torah, but its legitimacy does not depend on the teacher's immunity from intellectual limitation. The rebbe possesses knowledge and experience that the student seeks to acquire; he does not possess the divine reality toward which their shared learning is directed. The student, for his part, must distinguish intellectual independence from the refusal of discipline. His secular education does not exempt him from serious engagement with religious texts and obligations. It may allow him to bring questions and insights that enlarge the possibilities of that engagement.

The purpose of religious education should therefore be neither the production of a permanently dependent student nor the preservation of an unchanged secular self. It should be the cultivation of a person capable of standing responsibly within Torah while remaining honest about the limits of his understanding. Such a person remains a talmid even as he acquires mastery, and he remains a baal teshuva even after entering observant life. Return, understood in its deepest sense, does not end when communal integration has been achieved. It remains a demand upon every religious person, including those who never left.

11. Conclusion: Returning With What We Have Been

The central claim here has been that teshuva does not require the erasure of the secular past. The abandonment of wrongdoing, the revision of mistaken convictions, and the acceptance of religious obligation are not the same as the repudiation of an entire intellectual and existential history.

The distinction has consequences for contemporary Jewish religious life. A model of kiruv that measures success primarily by cultural assimilation may overlook the theological significance of the experience through which a person arrived at observance. It may confuse the adoption of Torah with the abandonment of capacities that could enrich the beit midrash. And it may, as I have suggested, invert the Maimonidean rule, remembering on the returnee's behalf what it forbids him to remember for himself.

A theology of return grounded in transformed remembrance proposes another possibility. The baal teshuva brings his history into religious life, where it becomes subject to moral judgment, halakhic commitment, and theological reinterpretation. Some elements of that history must be relinquished. Others may be elevated. Still others remain unresolved. The past is neither sovereign nor disposable.

From Rav Kook we learn that the primary return is the return to oneself, and that a repentance which leaves the self ungathered has deceived itself. From the Lubavitcher Rebbe we learn that distance can be credited to the one who crosses it. From Rav Shagar we learn that the one on whom the matter depends is the person exactly as he is, and that such a person may live faithfully in more than one world. And from Elliot R. Wolfson we learn to distinguish divine transcendence from the conceptual structures through which we try to possess it, and to find that distinction already at work in Rav Kook and in the Rebbe.

It is to Wolfson that I owe the deepest intellectual

debt in this argument. His teaching opened for me the possibility of understanding the limits of theological knowledge not as an embarrassment to religious life but as a condition of its integrity. The use I have made of that teaching is my own, and its shortcomings are mine. I have tried to work as a grateful reader and not as a rival one.

What I have sought is a form of Jewish religious return that neither abandons the demands of covenant nor confuses those demands with the possession of metaphysical certainty. Such a theology cannot promise the disappearance of ambiguity. It cannot explain every suffering, reconcile every intellectual conflict, or assign a definitive providential meaning to every event in a person's past. Its achievement, if it has one, lies elsewhere. It permits the one who returns to remain truthful about the life from which he has come. It allows secular intellectual formation to become a resource for religious humility and not an embarrassment to be concealed. It resists the transformation of religious belonging into a demand for autobiographical repudiation. And it recognizes that the journey toward God is not completed by the acquisition of a religious identity.

Perhaps the deepest meaning of teshuva is therefore neither the restoration of a lost certainty nor the substitution of one comprehensive worldview for another. It is the discovery that the self can be transformed without being erased, that fidelity can endure without conceptual possession, and that the past can acquire spiritual significance without surrendering its unresolved complexity.

We do not return to God by ceasing to be the persons our histories have made us. We return by bringing those histories before a transcendence that neither our secular knowledge nor our theological language can finally contain. The physician knows this from the other side of the desk. Every patient who has ever recovered has done so as the same person who fell ill, carrying the same history, now read differently. No one is healed into someone else.

The return is real, and the transformation is necessary. But the self remains unfinished, and it may be in that unfinished condition that the possibility of faith continues to unfold.

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