RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language and Meaning in Sacred Texts: Transcendence, Immanence, and Divine Concealment in Jewish Thought

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Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between language, meaning, and divine revelation in Jewish textual traditions through comparative analysis of diverse interpretative frameworks: the intellectual approach of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the hermeneutics of religious passion and restraint developed by the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin), the contemporary philosophical perspectives of Elliot Wolfson, and the cross-cultural insights of Slavoj Žižek, Moshe Idel, Allan Nadler, and Simone Weil. By exploring the tensions between transcendence and immanence, nomian structure and religious enthusiasm, and the limits of religious language, this study illuminates how interpretive traditions navigate the paradoxical nature of divine revelation through textual engagement. Special attention is given to how theological meaning emerges not merely in the text itself but in the dialectic between immanence and transcendence, textual law and mystical yearning.

1. Introduction

Sacred texts occupy a unique linguistic space where ordinary hermeneutical approaches often prove insufficient. The attempt to access divine meaning through human language presents a fundamental paradox: how can the infinite be contained within finite expression? This question has generated rich interpretive traditions within Judaism that explore the complex relationship between religious language, spiritual experience, and normative practice (1).

This article examines diverse yet interrelated approaches to this paradox within religious thought. First, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's intellectual framework positions Torah study as the highest form of divine connection (2). Second, the Netziv's exegetical approach addresses the tension between religious passion and halakhic boundaries (3). Third, Elliot Wolfson's contemporary philosophical framework of "apophatic acosmism" provides a radical reinterpretation of transcendence and immanence that illuminates hidden dimensions

of traditional Jewish thought (4). Finally, we explore how philosophers from different traditions—Slavoj Žižek, Moshe Idel, Allan Nadler, and Simone Weil—offer complementary and contrasting perspectives that enrich our understanding of sacred language (5,6,7,8).

By placing these approaches in conversation, we gain insight into how interpretive traditions have navigated the paradoxical nature of divine language—simultaneously revealing and concealing, prescriptive and elusive, immanent and transcendent. As Louis Jacobs suggests, meaning unfolds dynamically across generations through communal study and tradition, embodying a theology of "continuous revelation" rather than fixed textual authority (51).

1.2 Intellectual Engagement as Divine Connection

The Lithuanian tradition, exemplified by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, offers an intellectual approach to divine connection through textual engagement. Unlike the Hasidic emphasis on emotional devekut (cleaving), Rabbi Chaim posited that Torah study itself constitutes the highest form of divine connection (2,5). As the primary student of the Vilna Gaon and founder of the influential Volozhin Yeshiva in 1803, Rabbi Chaim articulated a sophisticated philosophy in his masterpiece, Nefesh HaChaim, that positioned analytical study at the center of religious life (6).

For Rabbi Chaim, sacred language functions not merely as a vehicle for information but as the actual site of divine-human encounter. When engaged through rigorous analysis, the text becomes a medium through which the human mind connects with divine wisdom. This approach suggests that meaning emerges through the interpretive process itself, with the act of understanding becoming a form of metaphysical connection (7).

The philosophical implications of this approach are profound. It suggests that language about God must properly refer to an objective ontological reality beyond subjectivity. While emotional connection has value, the primary path to authentic divine knowledge is through disciplined intellectual engagement with authoritative texts rather than through subjective spiritual experience alone (2,8).

1.3 Religious Passion and the Boundaries of Interpretation

The Netziv's exegetical framework provides crucial insights into the tension between religious enthusiasm and normative boundaries. His interpretation of several biblical episodes, particularly the deaths of Nadav and Avihu and the Korach rebellion, reveals a sophisticated theology of religious language and experience (3,9).

In his commentary on Lev 10:1, the Netziv offers a striking interpretation of the "strange fire" brought by Nadav and Avihu. Rather than viewing their act as simple rebellion, he characterizes it as stemming from "the fire of the love of Hashem burning deeply and profoundly within them." Their error was not lack of devotion but excessive spiritual enthusiasm that bypassed established channels of divine service (3,10,52).

This interpretation reveals a critical philosophical stance regarding religious language and experience. The Netziv suggests that religious language should properly refer to an objective ontological reality outside itself (divine law as established by God), while subjective religious experience, though valuable, cannot become self-referential and override the established framework. Authentic spiritual language must acknowledge its own limitations and submit to the divinely ordained epistemological structure (3).

The Netziv diagnoses Nadav and Avihu's fundamental error as being "smitten with the yetzer hara to express themselves according to their own dictates, not God's." In their quest for divine closeness, "they ignored the form dictated by the Torah" (3,10). This suggests a sophisticated understanding of how sacred language can be misappropriated when divorced from interpretive tradition.

Through this lens, their transgression can be understood as exemplifying what Michael Sells calls "the language of unsaying" gone wrong—where the attempt to transcend ordinary religious discourse bypasses rather than properly negates established channels (53). Their story thus serves as a warning against enthusiasm without obedience yet also reveals the perpetual tension in religious life between keva (fixed law) and kavvanah (inner intent) (52).

1.4 Boundaries as Divine Expression

The Netziv's perspective on boundaries emerges clearly in his commentary on Deuteronomy 4:2-3, where he explains that the prohibition against adding to the commandments addresses individuals who might be tempted to add mitzvot as a means of achieving closeness to God. This prohibition is immediately followed by a reference to the worship of Baal Peor, which the Netziv interprets as an example of religious enthusiasm gone awry—well-intentioned individuals

attempting to degrade an idol but inadvertently engaging in its mode of worship (11,12).

This exegetical pattern reveals the Netziv's fundamental concern: religious passion, when unmoored from established interpretive frameworks, can lead to its opposite. The boundaries of interpretation are not arbitrary limitations but essential components of authentic divine service. By submitting to the established structure of religious language and practice, one paradoxically achieves greater divine connection than through unmediated spiritual innovation (3,13).

1.5 "Apophatic Acosmism"

Elliot Wolfson's work on transcendence and immanence provides a philosophical lens that illuminates hidden dimensions of the Netziv's approach. Wolfson's concept of "apophatic acosmism" combines two key philosophical elements: apophasis (defining the divine by what it is not) and acosmism (denying the independent reality of the cosmos as distinct from ultimate reality) (4,14).

Wolfson argues for "a more far-reaching apophasis that surpasses the theolatrous impulse lying coiled at the crux of theism," proposing an "apophasis of apophasis" that accepts "an absolute nothingness" signifying not the unknowable One but "the manifold that is the pleromatic abyss at being's core" (15). This radical approach challenges traditional theological frameworks by suggesting that the divine is neither simply transcendent nor immanent—rather, the very distinction between these categories is artificial.

For Wolfson, "the invisible is not to be construed as a potentially visible phenomenon that is presently not manifest but rather as the nonphenomenal dimension that makes all phenomena visible by always eluding visibility" (15,16). This suggests that the divine is not simply "beyond being" but constitutes the very ground of being itself—a ground that simultaneously manifests and withdraws.

Crucially, Wolfson introduces the concept of "hypernomianism," which reveals a deeper mystical dialectic than the Netziv's apparent opposition between law and spiritual ecstasy (54). In hypernomianism, the law is affirmed precisely by transcending it through its own inner logic—not bypassing structure but finding the infinite within finite forms. This perspective aligns with the kabbalistic paradox of tzimtzum, where God's self-withdrawal enables both concealment and presence (52,54).

1.6 Absorptive vs. Integrative Mysticism

Moshe Idel, a prominent scholar of Jewish mysticism, offers a framework that illuminates both the Netziv's concern with religious boundaries and Wolfson's apophatic approach. Idel distinguishes between two mystical models: the "absorptive," which seeks union with God through transcending linguistic and conceptual frameworks, and the "integrative," which seeks to incorporate the divine presence within established structures (32,33).

Idel's extensive research on Kabbalah demonstrates how these seemingly opposed tendencies coexist within Jewish mystical tradition. His concept of "intense experience" as a transformative encounter with sacred texts provides a bridge between the Netziv's emphasis on normative structures and Wolfson's radical apophasis (34). For Idel, the mystical experience does not negate textual authority but intensifies it, creating a hermeneutical circle where text and experience mutually reinforce each other.

Moreover, Idel's work reveals that kabbalistic hermeneutics is not merely exegetical but ontological—the act of interpretation participates in the unfolding of divine reality itself (32,52). This perspective suggests that religious epistemology in Judaism encompasses both propositional and experiential dimensions, integrating textual fidelity with mystical creativity.

This perspective sheds new light on the Netziv's interpretation of Nadav and Avihu. Their error can be understood as privileging absorptive mysticism over integrative mysticism—seeking unmediated divine encounter rather than working within established interpretive frameworks. Yet Idel's work suggests that these approaches need not be mutually exclusive but can exist in creative tension (32,35).

1.7 The Challenge of Rationalism

Allan Nadler's investigations into the Mitnagdic (Lithuanian) opposition to Hasidism provide crucial historical context for understanding the Netziv's concerns about religious enthusiasm. Nadler documents how the Mitnagdic rejection of popular mysticism was not simply a reaction against emotional excess but reflected profound theological commitments to rational textual engagement (36).

Nadler's analysis of the Vilna Gaon's disciples—including Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin—reveals that their opposition to Hasidic enthusiasm was rooted in concerns about the potential for antinomianism and the distortion of traditional Jewish concepts of divine transcendence (37). This historical perspective helps explain the Netziv's careful navigation between acknowledging the value of religious passion and

insisting on its channeling through established interpretive frameworks.

Particularly relevant is Nadler's examination of how the Mitnagdic tradition understood the relationship between language and divine reality. For the Mitnagdim, precise linguistic analysis of sacred texts was not merely an intellectual exercise but a means of accessing objective divine truth. This approach contrasts with the Hasidic tendency to privilege subjective spiritual experience, a tension that continues to inform contemporary debates about religious language (36,38).

In his critiques of mystical excess, Nadler reminds us of the rabbinic suspicion toward forms of piety that bypass halakhic boundaries (36,52). Yet he also acknowledges the spiritual allure of such transgressive gestures, revealing the perpetual tension between legal structure and mystical yearning that animates Jewish religious life.

1.8 The Void at the Heart of the Symbolic Order

Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic approach to religious language offers a provocative secular parallel to Wolfson's apophatic acosmism. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek explores how religious discourse operates around a constitutive void—a fundamental absence that paradoxically structures presence (39,40).

Žižek's concept of the "parallax view" suggests that apparent oppositions—such as the tension between religious passion and legal boundaries in the Netziv's thought—are not merely contradictions but reflect the inherent gap within reality itself (41). This perspective illuminates how the Netziv's concern with maintaining boundaries might stem not from simple conservatism but from an intuition about the necessary void around which religious discourse circulates.

Furthermore, Žižek's analysis of how prohibition structures desire offers insights into the Netziv's approach to religious passion. Just as the prohibition in psychoanalytic theory creates rather than simply limits the desire it forbids, the Netziv's insistence on channeling religious enthusiasm through established frameworks might be understood as creating the conditions for authentic religious experience rather than merely constraining it (42,43).

In his reading of Christianity, Žižek provocatively suggests that the death of God on the cross marks the radical absence that grounds all presence—echoing apophatic motifs in both Jewish and Christian mysticism (52,55). This theological void is not nihilistic but generative, suggesting that true religious language must navigate the constitutive absence at its center rather than attempting to fill it with false presence.

1.9 Attention and the Void

Simone Weil's unique approach to religious language provides a cross-cultural perspective that resonates with both the Netziv's emphasis on disciplined engagement and Wolfson's apophatic theology. Weil's concept of "attention" as a form of empty receptivity parallels the Lithuanian emphasis on rigorous study while simultaneously pointing toward the mystical dimensions of such study (44,45).

For Weil, authentic religious language operates not by filling space but by creating the void necessary for divine presence. As she writes, "Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it" (46). This paradoxical understanding of religious language as creating absence rather than presence offers a framework for understanding the Netziv's approach to religious boundaries not as mere limitations but as creative spaces that enable authentic divine encounter.

Weil's emphasis on contradiction as essential to religious truth further illuminates the seemingly contradictory elements in both the Netziv's and Wolfson's approaches. For Weil, contradictions in religious discourse are not problems to be resolved but windows into transcendent truth: "Contradiction is the lever of transcendence" (45,47). This perspective suggests that the apparent tensions in Jewish approaches to religious language—between passion and restraint, transcendence and immanence—might themselves constitute a form of revelation.

Weil's concept of "decreation," where one must empty the self to make space for the divine and where language must unmake itself to reach God, resonates with Wolfson's apophatic approach (52,56). Both suggest that authentic religious language must engage in a process of self-negation to avoid turning the divine into an idol. This resonance between a Christian mystic and a Jewish philosopher highlights the cross-cultural potential of apophatic approaches to sacred language.

2. Points of Convergence and Divergence

When we bring these diverse perspectives into conversation, several key themes emerge

2.1 The Paradox of Boundaries

The Netziv's emphasis on religious boundaries finds

unexpected parallels in Wolfson's apophatic approach, Idel's integrative mysticism, Nadler's analysis of Mitnagdic rationalism, Žižek's theory of prohibition and desire, and Weil's concept of the void. Each thinker, in different ways, suggests that limitations are not merely constraints but constitutive elements of authentic religious experience (3,15,32,36,41,45).

This convergence suggests a deeper insight: the boundary between the sayable and unsayable is not merely a limitation of religious language but its generative condition. The Netziv's insistence that religious passion must be channeled through established frameworks parallels Weil's understanding that "the void is necessary for grace" and Žižek's insight that prohibition structures rather than simply limits desire (3,45,42).

As Michael Sells's theory of "the language of unsaying" articulates, mystical traditions use paradox and negation to signal the inadequacy of ordinary language in conveying divine truth (53). When mystics alternate between calling God "light" and "darkness," it is not contradiction but strategy: a way to point to the ineffable. This resonates with kabbalistic semiotics, where symbols do not merely refer—they participate in the realities they signify (52).

2.2 The Dialectic of Presence and Absence

All these thinkers navigate the complex relationship between divine presence and absence. The Netziv's concern with proper channels of divine service, Wolfson's apophatic acosmism, Idel's integrative mysticism, Nadler's analysis of Mitnagdic theology, Žižek's theory of the constitutive void, and Weil's attention to emptiness all suggest that divine revelation involves not simply presence but a complex interplay of presence and absence (3,15,32,36,41,45).

This dialectic manifests differently across traditions: for the Netziv, divine presence is mediated through established interpretive frameworks; for Wolfson, the divine simultaneously reveals and conceals itself; for Idel, mystical experience intensifies rather than transcends textual engagement; for Nadler's Mitnagdim, divine transcendence is preserved through rational analysis; for Žižek, the void structures symbolic order; and for Weil, emptiness creates the conditions for grace (3,4,32,36,41,46).

The episode of Nadav and Avihu becomes a paradigmatic case that illustrates this dialectic: their "strange fire" represents both excessive presence (religious enthusiasm unbound by structure) and a failure to recognize absence (the necessary limitations

of human approaches to the divine). Their tragedy lies in seeking direct encounter without the mediating structures that make such encounter possible (52).

2.3 The Problem of Religious Language

Each thinker confronts the limitations of religious language while affirming its necessity. The Netziv acknowledges the value of religious passion but insists it must be expressed through established linguistic frameworks; Wolfson proposes language that continuously undermines itself; Idel examines how mystical experience transforms linguistic understanding; Nadler documents the Mitnagdic emphasis on precise linguistic analysis; Žižek explores how language circulates around a constitutive void; and Weil suggests that language can create the emptiness necessary for divine encounter (3,4,32,36,41,45).

This convergence suggests that the limitations of religious language are not merely obstacles to be overcome but essential aspects of its function. The gap between language and what it seeks to express is not a failure but a productive space where meaning emerges through the interplay of presence and absence, saying and unsaying.

As Louis Jacobs argues, rabbinic hermeneutics has long emphasized the plurality of meaning within scripture (51). The Sages' interpretive traditions— particularly midrash—suggest that divine wisdom cannot be exhausted by the plain sense of the text. This perspective aligns with contemporary insights into the necessary incompleteness of all symbolic systems, suggesting that religious language functions precisely through acknowledging its own limitations.

2.4 Theological and Philosophical Implications

This comparative analysis reveals several profound implications for understanding language and meaning in sacred texts:

2.5 Beyond Opposition: The Interpenetration of Contrary Principles

The dialogue between these diverse thinkers suggests that seemingly opposed principles—transcendence and immanence, passion and restraint, mysticism and rationalism—are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. The Netziv's concern with channeling religious passion through established frameworks, Wolfson's apophatic acosmism, Idel's integrative mysticism, Nadler's analysis of Mitnagdic rationalism, Žižek's parallax view, and Weil's emphasis on contradiction all point toward the interpenetration of apparently contrary principles (3,4,32,36,41,45).

This insight has profound implications for interpreting sacred texts. It suggests that authentic interpretation involves not choosing between opposed principles but navigating the paradoxical space where they interpenetrate. The boundary between literal and metaphorical, law and spirit, tradition and innovation is not fixed but fluid, generating meaning through its very instability.

As Wolfson's concept of "hypernomianism" suggests, the deepest affirmation of law may involve its transcendence through its own inner logic (54). Similarly, Idel's distinction between absorptive and integrative mysticism reveals how seemingly opposed approaches can coexist within a single tradition (32). This perspective challenges simplistic oppositions between Mitnagdic intellectualism and Hasidic enthusiasm, suggesting a more complex interplay of legal structure and mystical experience.

2.6 The Productive Function of Absence and Limitation

Each thinker, in different ways, suggests that absence and limitation are not merely negative constraints but positive, productive forces in religious discourse. The Netziv's emphasis on boundaries, Wolfson's apophatic approach, Idel's integrative mysticism, Nadler's account of Mitnagdic theology, Žižek's theory of the constitutive void, and Weil's attention to emptiness all point toward the generative function of absence (3,4,32,36,41,45).

This convergence suggests a radical reconceptualization of sacred language: it functions not simply by representing divine reality but by creating the space where divine presence can manifest through its very absence. The limitations of religious language—its inability to fully capture divine reality—become not obstacles to meaning but its essential conditions.

This insight aligns with the kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum, where divine withdrawal creates the space for finite existence (52). Similarly, it resonates with Wolfson's analysis of "the trace of transcendence and the transcendence of the trace" in kabbalistic thought, where divine absence becomes a mode of presence (15). This paradoxical understanding suggests that religious language works not by filling the gap between human and divine but by preserving it as the space where meaning emerges.

2.7 Theology as Continuous Revelation

Finally, this analysis suggests a dynamic understanding of religious meaning as continuously unfolding rather than fixed in canonical texts. As Louis Jacobs argued, rabbinic Judaism embodies a theology of "continuous revelation," in which meaning unfolds dynamically across generations, mediated through communal study and tradition (51).

This perspective challenges static conceptions of sacred text while affirming the importance of interpretive tradition. It suggests that religious meaning is neither wholly subjective (reducible to individual experience) nor wholly objective (fixed in canonical texts) but emerges in the communal process of interpretation across generations.

The dialogue between these diverse thinkers—spanning traditional rabbinic thought, contemporary Jewish philosophy, comparative mysticism, psychoanalytic theory, and Christian mysticism—reveals how this dynamic conception of meaning operates across cultural and historical boundaries. Despite their different contexts and frameworks, all navigate the paradoxical relationship between presence and absence, boundaries and boundlessness, speech and silence that characterizes religious discourse (48).

3. Conclusion

The dialogue between these diverse perspectives reveals how theological meaning emerges not merely in sacred text itself but in the liminal space where language, symbol, and silence converge. In Jewish thought, this space is navigated through the dialectics of law and love, tradition and innovation, immanence and transcendence. The Netziv's exegetical framework, Wolfson's apophatic theology, Idel's mystical hermeneutics, Nadler's historical analysis, Žižek's psychoanalytic approach, and Weil's mystical philosophy all illuminate different aspects of this common insight: that divine truth exceeds the grasp of any single system but reveals itself in the very effort to articulate, negate, and transcend it (49,50,52).

What appears on the surface to be a straightforward moral lesson in the Netziv (follow God's commands, don't innovate based on personal religious experience) contains within it profound philosophical tensions that contemporary thinkers help illuminate. Similarly, the abstract philosophical frameworks of Wolfson, Idel, Nadler, Žižek, and Weil gain concrete expression through engagement with traditional exegetical concerns (3,4,32,36,41,45).

The study of sacred texts thus emerges not merely as an intellectual exercise or spiritual practice but as a complex hermeneutical engagement that continuously navigates the paradoxical relationship between finite language and infinite meaning. In this navigation,

seemingly opposed approaches—intellectual analysis and mystical insight, normative boundaries and spiritual passion, tradition and innovation—reveal themselves as complementary dimensions of a unified interpretive tradition that acknowledges both the presence and the absence, the revelation and the concealment, of the divine within sacred language (49,50).

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