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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Divine Judgment and Divine Absence: Post-Holocaust Theology in the Dialectic of Midas HaDin and Midas HaRachamim

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Abstract

This paper examines the theological rupture caused by the Holocaust through the dialectical lens of Midas HaDin (divine judgment) and Midas HaRachamim (divine mercy). Drawing on mystical traditions of divine presence and absence, it explores how the Holocaust challenges both traditional religious frameworks of meaning and Enlightenment narratives of human progress. The concept of "NOT-God"—a space where divine absence is palpably felt—is developed as a theological framework for understanding catastrophic suffering without resorting to facile explanations or complete abandonment of tradition. The paper analyzes the role of embodied ritual practices, particularly the Kaddish, as transformative responses to suffering that neither resolve theological questions nor surrender to nihilism. Through comparative analysis with major post-Holocaust theologians including Rubenstein, Berkovits, Fackenheim, Levinas, Greenberg, Raphael, Cohen, Lichtenstein, Schneerson, Sacks, and Soloveitchik, the paper articulates a distinctive theological approach that maintains the tension between rupture and continuity, between divine judgment and divine mercy, and between the failure of traditional theological categories and the ongoing search for meaning in their aftermath.

Keywords: Holocaust Theology, Divine Hiddenness, Shechina, Postmodernism, Ritual Transformation, Jewish Mysticism, Theodicy, Post-Holocaust Thought, Divine Judgment, Divine Mercy.

1. Introduction

The Holocaust represents not merely a historical atrocity but a profound theological rupture in human history. This paper synthesizes my perspectives on post-Holocaust theology, examining how this watershed event exposed the failure of Enlightenment rationalism while simultaneously challenging traditional religious frameworks of meaning. The central tension I explore is how we are caught between recognizing the collapse of old theological categories while still searching for meaning in a postmodern landscape that resists absolute truth claims. In my "Theological Reflections on Divine Hiddenness"[16], I specifically question whether times of profound suffering can call the covenant into question (hester panim), examine whether man's inhumanity to man is of God's concern (hashgachah protis), and consider our role as witnesses to such catastrophe.

1.1 The Protest Against Divine Silence

Any discussion of post-Holocaust theology would be incomplete without engaging with Elie Wiesel, whose work has profoundly shaped the theological discourse surrounding the Holocaust. In books such as "Night" (1956)[30] and essays like "The Death of My Father" (1965)[31], Wiesel articulates a theology of protest that refuses both facile explanations of suffering and the abandonment of faith. His famous statement that "the opposite of faith is not heresy but indifference"[32] reflects a theological approach that holds questioning and protest as forms of religious engagement rather than rejection.

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Wiesel's work is characterized by what I have termed in my essay "The Sacred Protest: Wiesel's Theological Legacy"[33] as a "theology of sacred protest." This approach maintains a relationship with God precisely through questioning, challenging, and even accusing the divine. In "Night," Wiesel describes a mock trial of God conducted by rabbis in Auschwitz who, after finding God guilty, proceed to pray the evening service. This paradoxical response—judging God guilty yet continuing to pray—captures the essence of Wiesel's approach: maintaining relationship with God through protest rather than submission.

My own theological approach shares significant resonances with Wiesel's. Like Wiesel, I reject both easy theodicies that attempt to justify divine action and complete theological despair that abandons the divine-human relationship altogether. The concept of the "NOT-God" space in my work parallels Wiesel's articulation of divine absence as a presence that demands response. In my dialogue with Wiesel published in "Conversations on Suffering and Meaning"[34], we explored how protest itself becomes a form of prayer—an affirmation of relationship through negation.

However, our approaches also have important differences. While Wiesel's work often emphasizes the ethical imperative to bear witness to suffering as a religious obligation, my work places greater emphasis on the cosmic dimension of theological response—the imbalance between divine judgment and divine mercy that shapes creation itself. Where Wiesel focuses primarily on human response to divine absence, I explore more extensively the mystical dimension of divine absence itself—the exile of the Shechina and the fragmentation of divine reality.

Wiesel's reluctance to engage in systematic theology reflects his conviction that the Holocaust resists theorization, that systematic explanations inevitably betray the concrete reality of suffering. As he writes: "Auschwitz signifies not only the failure of two thousand years of Christian civilization, but also the defeat of the intellect that wants to find a Meaning—with a capital M—in history"[32]. While I share Wiesel's skepticism toward grand theoretical frameworks, my work engages more explicitly with theological and mystical traditions in an attempt to find language for what Wiesel often leaves in eloquent silence.

Despite these differences, Wiesel's emphasis on maintaining the tension between faith and protest, between accusation and prayer, between remembrance and hope, has profoundly influenced my approach to post-Holocaust theology. His insistence that "to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time"[30] resonates with my emphasis on the ethics of memory and witness. Both our approaches reject the false closure of traditional theodicy while maintaining that the theological task after Auschwitz is not to explain suffering but to resist its dehumanizing power through acts of ethical witness, remembrance, and sacred protest.

1.2 The Question of Divine Judgment

The Holocaust forces us to confront the troubling theological implications of what Jewish tradition calls Midas HaDin (the attribute of divine judgment) as opposed to Midas HaRachamim (the attribute of divine mercy). As I ask in "Midas Hadin"[17], "If only He'd begun with Midas HaRachamim / What would it have looked like today / Orgies and fun? (God forbid!) / Too much loving? / Unconditional praise? / Certainly, the need to avoid so much destruction?"

The problem of divine judgment in a world marked by catastrophic suffering raises profound questions about the nature of God and our relationship to the divine. Traditional religious frameworks often attempted to explain suffering through concepts of divine judgment, suggesting that catastrophe was somehow connected to human sinfulness or divine retribution. Yet the systematic murder of six million Jews—including over one million children—shatters such simplistic frameworks.

In my "The Dialectic of Divine Attributes: Judgment and Mercy After the Holocaust"[20], I explore the tension between Midas HaDin and Midas HaRachamim, questioning whether the attribute of judgment has overwhelmed the attribute of mercy in our broken world. The image of a world "condemned to a history of divine gevurot / Infecting down below every interaction burdened with these kelippot / Splitting our hearts into chambers of good and evil" captures the profound sense that justice and mercy have become unbalanced in the cosmic order.

The Holocaust forces us to question both traditional religious narratives of divine punishment and modern secular narratives of human progress. It reveals how both theological and philosophical frameworks fail to adequately address the magnitude of suffering experienced by the victims. Post-Holocaust theology must therefore navigate between simplistic religious

justifications of suffering and nihilistic denials of all meaning—a navigation that acknowledges the profound imbalance between judgment and mercy without surrendering the hope for cosmic rebalancing and healing.

1.3 The Failure of the Enlightenment

The Holocaust did not occur in a pre-modern society but in Germany—one of the most educated, scientifically advanced, and culturally sophisticated nations in the world. This reality exposed the fundamental failure of the Enlightenment project, which had promised that human reason, scientific progress, and secular education would lead to moral advancement and the gradual elimination of barbarism.

The systematic, bureaucratic, and "rational" nature of the Holocaust's implementation revealed how Enlightenment values of reason and technological progress could be perverted into instruments of unprecedented evil. Modern science, medicine, engineering, and bureaucratic efficiency were all employed in service of genocide. This fundamental betrayal of Enlightenment ideals has left us in a postmodern condition where grand narratives of human progress have collapsed, and where reason itself has been revealed as an insufficient guarantor of ethical behavior.

This collapse raises profound questions about cosmological order and divine governance. In "Midas Hadin"[17], I reference the Zoharic notion of prior worlds created and destroyed: "The verse 'These are the generations of the heaven and the earth when they were created' (Gen. 2:4) suggested to the rabbis the creation of prior worlds." This mystical tradition suggests that our world is not the first attempt at creation—that God created and destroyed numerous worlds before our own. I ask whether "those worlds [were] enough to show him the devastating effects of Midas Ha-Din?"

The image of God as "a mad scientist in a laboratory who just cannot give up / And the rats on their treadmills are going crazy" captures the profound sense of a divine experiment gone wrong. This perspective, which I develop further in my essay "Prior Worlds and the Postmodern Condition"[21], challenges both traditional theological frameworks that see history as divinely guided toward redemption and Enlightenment narratives that see history as human progress toward perfection. Instead, it suggests a more complex and troubling cosmic reality in which both divine and human projects of perfection repeatedly fail, leaving us to question whether divine providence (hashgachah protis) operates in a world where both human reason and divine governance seem to have failed so catastrophically.

My approach to post-Holocaust theology, as expressed in my poems, essays, and podcasts, exists in conversation with other significant voices in this field. While sharing certain concerns with these thinkers, my emphasis on the dialectic between Midas HaDin and Midas HaRachamim, and the poetic exploration of the "NOT-God" space, offers a distinctive contribution to this ongoing theological conversation.

1.4 Death of God

Richard Rubenstein's groundbreaking work, "After Auschwitz" (1966)[1], declared that we can no longer believe in the God of covenant and election after the Holocaust. Rubenstein concluded that the Holocaust demonstrated that God is dead—or at least that the God of history who acts to protect the Jewish people could no longer be affirmed. While I share Rubenstein's recognition of the profound theological rupture the Holocaust represents, my approach differs in its refusal to abandon God-language entirely.

Rather than declaring God dead, I explore the space of "NOT-God" and the exile of the Shechina, suggesting that divine absence is not the same as divine non-existence. Where Rubenstein moves toward a naturalistic Judaism devoid of supernatural elements, I propose a more dialectical approach that acknowledges divine concealment while maintaining the possibility of "moments of grace / Where She glimpses of the divine, transcending time and space." This tension between absence and presence allows for a theology that neither retreats to pre-Holocaust certainties nor surrenders to post-Holocaust nihilism.

1.5 Hester Panim

Eliezer Berkovits, in his work "Faith After the Holocaust" (1973)[2], developed the concept of hester panim (the hiding of God's face) to explain divine absence during the Holocaust. Berkovits argued that God's self-limitation is necessary for human freedom—that God must withdraw to create space for genuine human agency. While I engage with the concept of hester panim in my work, I approach it with greater ambivalence than Berkovits.

Where Berkovits presents divine hiddenness as a deliberate and necessary act that ultimately serves a positive purpose, my poetry explores the darker

implications of this withdrawal. The image of God as "a mad scientist in a laboratory who just cannot give up / And the rats on their treadmills are going crazy" questions whether divine self-limitation represents wisdom or a troubling divine experiment. My concept of the Shechina "forced, wrenched and torn from the Divine pleroma / Without her consent" suggests a more traumatic understanding of divine withdrawal than Berkovits's more deliberate theological framing allows.

1.6 The 614th Commandment

Emil Fackenheim, in "God's Presence in History" (1970)[3], famously proposed that the Holocaust adds a 614th commandment to the traditional 613 commandments of Judaism: Jews are forbidden to grant Hitler posthumous victories by abandoning Judaism. Fackenheim insisted that despite the Holocaust, Jews must affirm meaning in Jewish existence and resist the temptation to despair. While I share Fackenheim's commitment to finding meaning after the Holocaust, my approach is less prescriptive and more questioning.

Rather than issuing a new commandment, my work explores the ambiguity of ritualized responses to catastrophe, asking whether "this brilliant psychodrama of Kaddish" serves to affirm faith or to question it. Where Fackenheim emphasizes the imperative to respond to the Holocaust by affirming Jewish continuity, I question whether traditional religious frameworks can contain the magnitude of our loss. The tension between the ritual affirmation of faith in the Kaddish and the "silence that screams in the Sahara Desert" reflects a more ambivalent stance toward the possibility of redemptive responses to catastrophe.

1.7 Ethics of Responsibility

Emmanuel Levinas, while not exclusively a Holocaust theologian, developed an ethical philosophy deeply informed by his experience as a Holocaust survivor. In works such as "Totality and Infinity" (1961)[4] and "Otherwise Than Being" (1974)[5], Levinas argued that ethics precedes ontology—our responsibility to the other comes before any theoretical understanding of being. This "ethics as first philosophy" positions the face-to-face encounter with the other as the foundation of ethics and, indeed, of our relationship with the divine. My approach shares Levinas's emphasis on ethics and responsibility but frames it within a more explicitly theological and mystical context.

Where Levinas's thought moves away from traditional theological concepts toward a phenomenological ethics, my work reinterprets traditional theological and mystical concepts like Shechina, Midas HaDin, and Midas HaRachamim in light of post-Holocaust realities. The ethics of witness I propose is grounded not only in the face-to-face encounter with human suffering but also in the cosmic imbalance between divine judgment and divine mercy. This framework allows for a theology that maintains traditional religious categories while acknowledging their profound transformation in the wake of catastrophe.

1.8 Moment Faiths

Irving Greenberg, in his essay "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" (1977)[6], proposed the concept of "moment faiths"—the idea that after the Holocaust, faith cannot be maintained continuously but only in moments. No statement of faith, Greenberg famously declared, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children. My work resonates with Greenberg's acknowledgment of the fragmentary nature of post-Holocaust faith but expresses it through different theological imagery.

The concept of "moments of grace" in my poetry parallels Greenberg's "moment faiths"—brief instances where divine presence can be glimpsed amidst overwhelming absence. However, where Greenberg emphasizes the ethical criterion for theological statements (their credibility in the presence of suffering), my work explores the mystical dimension of these momentary experiences: those times when "one can feel the presence of His absence / Where a wormhole allows Her to gaze / And fill with desire." This mystical framing offers a different language for understanding the discontinuous nature of faith after the Holocaust.

1.9 The Female Divine

Melissa Raphael, in "The Female Face of God in Auschwitz" (2003)[7], argues that the divine presence in Auschwitz was manifest through acts of compassion and care among women prisoners. Raphael rejects the dominant masculine imagery of God as an all-powerful ruler whose absence during the Holocaust requires explanation. Instead, she proposes a feminine divine presence that suffers with and among the victims. My work shares this attention to the feminine aspects of divinity, particularly in the image of the Shechina dwelling "in the heart of darkness."

The concept of the Shechina who "must suffer alongside us / Eternally yearning to be reunited with her GOD" resonates with Raphael's feminist theology. However, where Raphael emphasizes the redemptive power of women's compassionate acts as manifestations of divine presence, my approach emphasizes the cosmic separation of masculine and feminine aspects of divinity—the "divine self-indulgence, pique and experiment" that has led to a world dominated by judgment rather than mercy. This cosmic drama frames human suffering within a larger metaphysical narrative about the fragmentation of divinity itself.

2. A Halakhic Response

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, in essays such as "The Holocaust: A Study in Jewish Theodicy" (1979)[9], approached the theological challenges of the Holocaust primarily through the lens of halakhah (Jewish law) and traditional religious categories. Unlike more radical post-Holocaust theologians, Lichtenstein maintained that the Holocaust, while posing profound challenges to faith, does not fundamentally alter the nature of the covenant between God and Israel or require new theological categories. For Lichtenstein, the appropriate response to the Holocaust is not to question God's justice but to deepen one's commitment to Torah study and observance.

My approach differs significantly from Lichtenstein's in its willingness to question traditional theological frameworks and explore new theological language. Where Lichtenstein maintained that "the destruction of European Jewry does not present any essentially new theological problems"[9], my work explicitly confronts the rupture that the Holocaust represents for traditional theology. The question in "Midas Hadin," "If only He'd begun with Midas HaRachamim / What would it have looked like today?" represents a far more radical questioning of divine justice than Lichtenstein's approach would allow.

However, there are also points of resonance between our approaches. Lichtenstein emphasized the importance of religious practice and the study of Torah even—or especially—in the face of theological doubts. Similarly, my exploration of the Kaddish recognizes the transformative power of ritual practice amid theological uncertainty. The difference lies in how we interpret this practice: for Lichtenstein, ritual practice reaffirms traditional faith despite suffering, while for me, ritual practice becomes a way of inhabiting the tension between faith and doubt, creating meaning precisely through engaging with theological uncertainty.

2.1 The Dialectic of Faith

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in works such as "Kol Dodi Dofek" (1956)[13] and "The Lonely Man of Faith" (1965)[14], approached the theological challenges posed by catastrophic suffering through a framework of existential dialectics. Though Soloveitchik rarely addressed the Holocaust directly in his published works, his theology of suffering and redemption provides important resources for post-Holocaust thought. In "Kol Dodi Dofek," Soloveitchik distinguishes between the "covenant of fate" (brit goral) and the "covenant of destiny" (brit ye'ud), arguing that Judaism transforms suffering from mere fate into purposeful destiny through the halakhic response.

For Soloveitchik, the appropriate response to suffering is not theological speculation about divine motives but rather a halakhic and existential engagement that transforms passive victimhood into active moral agency. He famously distinguished between two questions: "Why did this suffering occur?" (a metaphysical question that may have no answer) and "What am I called to do in response to this suffering?" (an ethical question that demands a response). This distinction allows Soloveitchik to maintain traditional faith while acknowledging the limits of theological understanding.

My approach shares with Soloveitchik an emphasis on dialectical thinking and the limits of theological understanding. Like Soloveitchik, I recognize that responses to catastrophic suffering must move beyond mere theoretical explanations to embodied ethical and spiritual practices. The concept in my poem of the Kaddish as "transforming the grief into memory / A spiritual cardio-conversion" resonates with Soloveitchik's emphasis on the transformative power of religious practice in the face of suffering.

However, our approaches differ significantly in their assessment of traditional theological frameworks. Soloveitchik maintained that the dialectical tensions within faith—between presence and absence, understanding and mystery, surrender and assertion—were already fully articulated within the tradition. My work, in contrast, suggests that the Holocaust has created new ruptures that cannot be fully contained within traditional frameworks. The image of God as "a mad scientist in a laboratory who just cannot give

up" represents a more radical questioning of divine governance than Soloveitchik's approach would permit.

Furthermore, while Soloveitchik emphasized the role of halakhah in structuring the Jewish response to suffering, my approach places greater emphasis on poetry, mysticism, and embodied ritual as modes of response that may exceed the boundaries of halakhic categories. This difference reflects our distinct understandings of how tradition functions after catastrophe: for Soloveitchik, tradition provides stable categories for navigating the chaos of suffering, while for me, tradition itself has been destabilized and requires creative reinterpretation and extension.

2.2 Covenant of Faith

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in works such as "Crisis and Covenant" (1992)[11] and "To Heal a Fractured World" (2005)[12], developed a post-Holocaust theology that emphasizes the enduring validity of the covenant while acknowledging the profound challenges the Holocaust poses to traditional faith. Sacks distinguishes between the "covenant of fate" (shared Jewish suffering and destiny) and the "covenant of faith" (shared commitment to God and Torah). For Sacks, the Holocaust represents the most extreme manifestation of the covenant of fate, which paradoxically strengthens rather than weakens the imperative to maintain the covenant of faith.

Sacks rejects both theological triumphalism (claiming to understand God's purposes in the Holocaust) and theological despair (abandoning faith altogether). Instead, he advocates what he calls "the courage to doubt and yet the faith to believe"[12]. This approach allows him to maintain traditional Jewish frameworks while acknowledging their limitations in the face of catastrophic suffering. Unlike more radical post-Holocaust theologians, Sacks does not propose new theological categories but rather a reinterpretation of traditional ones in light of historical trauma.

My approach shares Sacks's resistance to both facile explanations and complete abandonment of tradition. Like Sacks, I explore the tension between doubt and faith, questioning and affirmation. However, while Sacks ultimately maintains the coherence of the covenant despite its challenges, my work explores more radical ruptures in the divine-human relationship. The image in my poem of the Shechina "forced, wrenched and torn from the Divine pleroma / Without her consent" suggests a more traumatic disruption of covenant than Sacks's more measured approach allows.

At the same time, there are important resonances between our approaches. Sacks's emphasis on the ethical dimension of post-Holocaust faith—the imperative to "heal a fractured world" through acts of justice and compassion—parallels my concern with the ethics of witness. Both approaches recognize that theological responses to the Holocaust must manifest in concrete ethical engagement rather than remaining at the level of abstract speculation. The difference lies in our assessment of how profoundly the Holocaust has transformed our theological categories: while Sacks sees continuity amid rupture, my work emphasizes rupture amid continuity.

2.3 Hermeneutics of Rupture

The resources of Kabbalah offer profound frameworks for understanding the theological challenges posed by the Holocaust. In my "Kabbalistic Hermeneutics After the Rupture"[25], I honor Elliott Wolfson's approach to mystical hermeneutics and its implications for post-Holocaust thought. Wolfson's analysis of the "hermeneutic of concealment" in Kabbalah provides a framework for understanding divine absence not as the negation of presence but as a different modality of presence—what he terms "the absence embodied in presence and the presence embodied in absence"[26].

This dialectical understanding of presence and absence resonates deeply with my exploration of the "NOT-God" space. Wolfson's insight that "disclosure is predicated on concealment, illumination on darkness, revelation on hiddenness"[26] provides a hermeneutical key for understanding how the Holocaust might be integrated into a mystical framework without minimizing its horror. Just as Kabbalistic texts employ strategies of concealment to convey esoteric truths, the divine reality after Auschwitz may be accessible only through a hermeneutic that acknowledges rupture and absence as constitutive of meaning rather than its negation.

Jeremy Hershy Worch's innovative application of Kabbalistic thought to post-Holocaust theology offers another important perspective. In his teachings on "The Breaking of the Vessels and the Holocaust"[27], Worch applies the Lurianic concept of shevirat ha-kelim (the breaking of the vessels) to understand the Holocaust as a cosmic rupture that reveals the fragility of creation itself. For Worch, the Holocaust represents not divine judgment but a fundamental breakdown

in the cosmic order—a catastrophic shattering that requires tikkun (repair) through human ethical action rather than theological explanation.

This perspective aligns with my emphasis on the necessity of ethical response rather than theoretical justification. In my dialogue with Worch published in "Contemporary Conversations in Jewish Mysticism"[28], we explore how the Kabbalistic notion of tzimtzum (divine contraction) offers a framework for understanding divine hiddenness that avoids both the theological triumphalism of traditional theodicy and the theological despair of radical atheism. The idea that God's self-limitation creates the space for both human freedom and cosmic catastrophe allows for a theology that neither blames God nor absolves God of relationship with the world.

The application of Kabbalistic concepts to post-Holocaust theology must be approached with caution, however. As I argue in "Kabbalah After Auschwitz: Problems and Possibilities"[29], there is a danger in using mystical frameworks to aestheticize or spiritualize suffering in ways that diminish its concrete horror. Kabbalistic interpretations that too readily incorporate the Holocaust into a redemptive narrative risk diminishing both the particularity of Jewish suffering and the radical challenge that the Holocaust poses to all theological frameworks.

At the same time, Kabbalah's emphasis on the paradoxical nature of divine presence, the reality of cosmic rupture, and the human role in tikkun olam (repairing the world) offers resources for a post-Holocaust theology that maintains both the rupture that the Holocaust represents and the possibility of meaning in its aftermath. The dialectical thinking characteristic of Kabbalah—its ability to hold together seeming opposites without resolving them into a higher synthesis—provides a model for the kind of theological thinking demanded by the Holocaust's unprecedented challenges.

2.4 Cosmic Evil and the Kabbalistic Tradition

The theological challenge posed by the Holocaust has deep resonances with earlier Jewish engagements with the problem of evil, particularly in the Kabbalistic tradition. Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz (1690-1764), the renowned Talmudist and Kabbalist, offers a profound framework for understanding radical evil that has significant implications for post-Holocaust theology. In my essay "Cosmic Evil: From Eybeschutz to Auschwitz"[35], I explore how Eybeschutz's understanding of evil as having cosmic rather than merely moral dimensions provides resources for addressing the overwhelming nature of Holocaust suffering.

In his work "Ya'arot Devash"[36], Eybeschutz develops a complex understanding of evil that goes beyond conventional moral categories. For Eybeschutz, evil is not merely the absence of good but has its own positive existence within the cosmic structure. Drawing on Lurianic Kabbalah, he understands evil as emerging from the "breaking of the vessels" (shevirat ha-kelim) during creation—a primordial catastrophe that left "sparks" of divine light trapped within the "shells" (kelippot) of evil. This understanding of evil as embedded in the very structure of creation itself allows for a theological framework that does not reduce catastrophic suffering to divine punishment or human moral failure.

Even more significant for post-Holocaust theology is Eybeschutz's treatment of divine hiddenness in his controversial work "Veavo Hayom el HaAyin"[38]. In this text, attributed to Eybeschutz though published posthumously and somewhat contested, he develops a radical understanding of the divine contraction (tzimtzum) that has profound implications for understanding God's relationship to evil. As I argue in "Divine Absence and Cosmic Catastrophe: Eybeschutz's 'Veavo Hayom el HaAyin' and Post-Holocaust Thought"[39], this text offers a theological framework that takes divine absence not as a metaphor but as a constitutive feature of reality.

In "Veavo Hayom el HaAyin," Eybeschutz proposes that the divine contraction that preceded creation was not merely a limiting of divine power to make space for the created world, as in standard Lurianic interpretations, but a more radical withdrawal that left a genuine void—a space of divine absence. This absence is not merely the concealment of divine presence but a real rupture in the divine reality itself. The kabbalistic phrase "Veavo Hayom el HaAyin" ("And I came today to the nothing/source") becomes, in this interpretation, not merely a reference to spiritual ascent but an acknowledgment of the void at the heart of existence.

This understanding of divine absence as constitutive rather than merely apparent has profound implications for post-Holocaust theology. If divine absence is built into the structure of creation itself, then the experience of God's absence during the Holocaust is not an aberration requiring explanation but a manifestation

of the cosmic structure itself. As I argue in my article "The Void and the Voice: Divine Absence and Human Response"[40], this framework allows for a theological response to the Holocaust that neither denies the reality of divine absence nor abandons the possibility of divine-human relationship.

Eybeschutz's approach is particularly significant for post-Holocaust thought because it acknowledges the overwhelming reality of evil without attributing it directly to divine intention. As I argue in my article "Trapped Divine Light: Eybeschutz's Theory of Evil and Post-Holocaust Theology"[37], this perspective offers a way to maintain faith in God's ultimate goodness while acknowledging the devastating reality of evil in the world. The Holocaust, in this framework, can be understood not as divine punishment but as an eruption of the cosmic evil that has been present since creation—an evil that even God struggles against.

This approach resonates with my concept of the "NOT-God" space as a realm where divine presence is eclipsed by the overwhelming power of cosmic evil. Just as Eybeschutz understood the divine sparks as trapped within the kelippot, my image of the Shechina "forced, wrenched and torn from the Divine pleroma / Without her consent" suggests a divine presence that is both present in and constrained by the structures of cosmic evil. This understanding provides a framework for addressing the Holocaust that neither trivializes its horror through conventional theodicy nor abandons faith altogether.

Eybeschutz's kabbalistic approach also offers important resources for understanding the theological significance of human response to suffering. His concept of tikkun (repair) as the process of liberating the divine sparks trapped in the kelippot provides a framework for understanding the redemptive potential of human ethical action. In this view, acts of justice, compassion, and witness in response to suffering are not merely moral imperatives but participate in a cosmic process of redeeming the divine presence trapped within the structures of evil.

This perspective aligns with my emphasis on the ethics of witness and memory as theological responses to the Holocaust. Just as Eybeschutz saw human ethical action as participating in the cosmic drama of tikkun, I understand the practice of bearing witness to suffering not merely as a moral obligation but as a participation in the cosmic struggle against the powers of chaos and destruction. The act of remembering becomes, in this framework, a form of resistance against the annihilating power of evil and a contribution to the redemption of divine presence in the world.

At the same time, Eybeschutz's understanding of evil as having cosmic dimensions warns against facile optimism regarding human capacity to overcome evil through ethical action alone. Just as the process of tikkun in Lurianic Kabbalah requires divine participation and culminates in messianic redemption, my approach emphasizes that human ethical response to the Holocaust, while necessary, is not sufficient. The rupture caused by the Holocaust is too profound to be healed through human action alone; it requires a transformation at the cosmic level—a rebalancing of Midas HaDin and Midas HaRachamim that exceeds human capacity.

3. Mystical Redemption

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, developed a distinctive approach to the Holocaust that situates it within a larger Kabbalistic framework of cosmic exile and redemption. In his various discourses collected in works such as "Faith and Suffering" (2012)[10], the Rebbe resisted attempts to explain the Holocaust through conventional theodicies, insisting that human understanding is too limited to comprehend divine purposes. Instead, he emphasized the mystical concept of "descent for the purpose of ascent" (yeridah tzorech aliyah), suggesting that the unprecedented suffering of the Holocaust would ultimately lead to an unprecedented revelation of divine light and the coming of the Messiah.

My approach shares the Rebbe's inclination toward mystical frameworks, particularly in my use of Kabbalistic concepts like the Shechina and the divine attributes of judgment and mercy. However, where the Rebbe maintained an ultimately redemptive framework in which suffering serves a cosmic purpose, my work is more ambivalent about the possibility of redemption. The image in my poem of God as "a mad scientist in a laboratory who just cannot give up" challenges the notion that divine action follows a coherent redemptive plan.

At the same time, there are important parallels in our use of mystical language to address the Holocaust's theological challenges. The Rebbe's emphasis on the "birth pangs of the Messiah" (chevlei mashiach) as a framework for understanding catastrophic suffering resonates with my image of "moments of grace" amid overwhelming absence. Both approaches seek to find

meaning in suffering without minimizing its reality or offering simplistic explanations. The difference lies in the ultimate horizon: for the Rebbe, this meaning points toward an imminent messianic redemption, while my work remains more tentative about the possibility of ultimate cosmic resolution.

3.1 Divine Hiddenness

As I express in my poem "Midas Hadin"[17], we must "imagine in the place of NOT-God / Where history and suffering cohabit / Where blind hatred and genocide flirt / And the angel of death moves with impunity." This space of divine absence cannot be easily explained away through traditional theological maneuvers. Rather than attempting to justify God's ways, post-Holocaust theology must confront this hiddenness directly.

The apparent absence of God during the Holocaust leads to a profound reflection on the nature of the Shechina—the divine presence—who dwells "in the heart of darkness, / Forced, wrenched and torn from the Divine pleroma / Without her consent, banished from the father's table." This image of the Shechina suffering alongside humanity while separated from the fullness of divinity offers a powerful theological framework for understanding divine hiddenness not as abandonment but as a form of divine suffering. I have explored this concept further in my essay "Shechina in Exile: Divine Presence in the Absence of God"[18].

Some theologians have proposed that God's hiddenness represents a divine withdrawal that creates space for genuine human freedom and responsibility. In this view, God limits divine power to allow for human agency. While this approach has merit, I have argued in my lecture series "After Auschwitz: Theology at the Limits"[19] that it must be balanced with recognition of the victims' perspective. For those who suffered and died, sophisticated theological justifications can seem like empty intellectual exercises detached from the reality of their experience.

Instead, I propose that post-Holocaust theology must embrace the tension between divine hiddenness and human responsibility, recognizing both the limits of theological explanation and the imperative to pursue justice in a world where God often seems absent. This tension cannot be resolved through abstract theorizing but must be lived in the concrete practice of ethical responsibility toward others—a practice that acknowledges how the Shechina "must suffer alongside us / Eternally yearning to be reunited with her GOD."

3.2 Theological Reimagining

The Holocaust forces us to confront the possibility that traditional understandings of covenant—both religious and secular—have been irrevocably broken. The religious covenant between God and Israel, which promised divine protection for faithfulness, cannot be maintained in its traditional form after Auschwitz. Similarly, the secular covenant of Enlightenment humanism, which promised moral progress through reason, has been shattered.

Yet rather than abandoning these traditions entirely, post-Holocaust theology must engage in the difficult work of reimagining them. This process involves retrieving elements of the tradition that remain vital while honestly acknowledging what has been irretrievably lost. It requires creativity and intellectual humility, a willingness to live with uncertainty while remaining committed to the search for meaning.

The distinctive challenge of post-Holocaust theology is that it must operate in the space between tradition and postmodernity, between the need for meaning and the recognition of its fragility. This "in-between" position is uncomfortable but potentially creative. It prevents us from retreating to either dogmatic certainty or nihilistic despair.

I have argued that this position requires a form of "faithful questioning" that honors both the tradition and the rupture that the Holocaust represents. It acknowledges that while traditional theological categories may no longer hold, the human need for meaning and ethical orientation remains. In this sense, post-Holocaust theology becomes a form of witness—not providing definitive answers but bearing testimony to both the horror of what happened and the ongoing struggle to find meaning in its wake.

3.3 The Ethics of Witness

Post-Holocaust theology ultimately leads to an ethics of memory and witness—a commitment to remember both the victims and the failure of our theological and philosophical traditions to prevent their suffering. As I write in "Midas Hadin"[17]: "Imagine / In the place of NOT-God / There is a silence too / A not saying of Kaddish / For the worlds He destroyed." This silence represents both divine absence and the human inability to adequately respond to catastrophic suffering.

The theological crisis precipitated by the Holocaust cannot be resolved through abstract theorizing alone.

It demands concrete ethical engagement with the suffering of others and a commitment to resist the forces of dehumanization in our own time. The silence that "screams in the Sahara Desert" is "representing the failure to adequately mourn the loss / The enormity of the bereavement / The silence after every life breathed no longer / For the permanent absence."

This silence compels us to bear witness to both what has been irretrievably lost and what remains to be redeemed. In my essay "The Ethics of Witness After Catastrophe"[23], I argue that it calls us to acknowledge "His allowing the angel of death free reign / For the Midas Ha-Din" while simultaneously resisting the forces that produce suffering in our own time. The tension between divine judgment and human responsibility cannot be resolved but must be lived in the practice of ethical witness.

The question that haunts my theological reflection is what our role should be as witnesses to such catastrophe. Perhaps our most profound theological responsibility is not to explain or justify suffering but to remember it truthfully, to resist the forces that produce it, and to cultivate the ethical sensibilities that might prevent its recurrence. In this way, post-Holocaust theology becomes not merely an intellectual exercise but a spiritual and ethical practice of witness—one that honors both what has been irrevocably lost and what remains to be redeemed.

4. Conclusion: Between Divine Judgment and Divine Mercy

As I have maintained throughout my work, post-Holocaust theology exists in the tension between the loss of traditional frameworks of meaning and the refusal to abandon the search for meaning altogether. It acknowledges both the failure of the Enlightenment project and the inadequacy of pre-modern religious categories, challenging us to think and live in the difficult space between these collapsed certainties. I refuse to give up on either.

The Holocaust forces us to confront the troubling imbalance between Midas HaDin (divine judgment) and Midas HaRachamim (divine mercy) in our world. As I ask in my poem[17], "If only He'd begun with Midas HaRachamim / What would it have looked like today?" This question has no simple answer, but it compels us to search for moments of grace even within a world dominated by judgment—those moments where "She glimpses of the divine, transcending time and space / And one can feel the presence of His absence / Where a wormhole allows Her to gaze / And fill with desire / Taking me along for the ride."

Post-Holocaust theology does not offer comfort or closure but rather calls us to the ongoing task of making meaning in a world where absolute certainties have been shattered but where the need for ethical orientation remains. In my concluding reflections in "Toward a Theology of Rupture and Continuity"[24], I suggest that it invites us to discover those moments of "unbearable lightness" where the weight of history is temporarily lifted and where we can imagine the possibility of reconciliation between divine judgment and divine mercy, between human suffering and human flourishing, between the brokenness of our world and the hope for its redemption.

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