



The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice

Author(s): Hans Jonas

Source: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 1-13

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1203313>

Accessed: 26/11/2013 11:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Religion*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice*

Hans Jonas / New School for Social Research, New York

When, with the honor of this award, I also accepted the burden of delivering the oration that goes with it, and when I read in the biography of Rabbi Leopold Lucas, in whose memory the prize is named, that he died in Theresienstadt, but that his wife Dorothea, mother of the donor, was then shipped on to Auschwitz, there to suffer the fate that my mother suffered there, too, there was no resisting the force with which the theme of this lecture urged itself on my choice. I chose it with fear and trembling. But I believed I owed it to those shadows that something like an answer to their long-gone cry to a silent God be not denied to them.

What I have to offer is a piece of frankly speculative theology. Whether this behoves a philosopher is a question I leave open. Immanuel Kant has banished everything of the kind from the territory of theoretical reason and hence from the business of philosophy; and the logical positivism of our century, the entire dominant analytical creed, even denies to the linguistic expressions such reasonings employ for their purported subject matters this very object-significance itself, that is, any conceptual meaning at all, declaring already—prior to questions of truth and verification—the mere speech about them to be nonsensical. At this, to be sure, old Kant himself would have been utterly astounded. For he, to the contrary, held these alleged non-objects to be the highest objects of all, about which reason can never cease to be concerned, although it cannot hope ever to obtain a knowledge of them and in their pursuit is necessarily doomed to failure by the

* This is my translation of a lecture I delivered in German on the occasion of receiving the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize for 1984 at Tübingen University. It was published in Fritz Stern and Hans Jonas, *Reflexionen finsterner Zeit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1984). The lecture expanded and recast an earlier paper with the same title (“The Concept of God after Auschwitz,” in *Out of the Whirlwind*, ed. A. H. Friedlander [New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1968], pp. 465–76), which in turn incorporated portions of my 1961 Ingersoll Lecture, “Immortality and the Modern Temper” (see n. 1). The partly verbatim use of this previously published material is by permission.

© 1987 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0022-4189/87/6701-0001\$01.00

The Journal of Religion

impassable limits of human cognition. But this cognitive veto, given the yet justified concern, leaves another way open besides that of complete abstention: bowing to the decree that “knowledge” eludes us here, nay, even waiving this very goal from the outset, one may yet meditate on things of this nature in terms of sense and meaning. For the contention—this fashionable contention—that not even sense and meaning pertain to them is easily disposed of as a circular, tautological inference from first having defined “sense” as that which in the end is verifiable by sense data or from generally equating “meaningful” with “knowable.” To this axiomatic fiat by definition only he is bound who has first consented to it. He who has not is free, therefore, to work at the *concept* of God, even knowing that there is no *proof* of God, as a task of understanding, not of knowledge; and such working is philosophical when it keeps to the rigor of concept and its connection with the universe of concepts.

But of course, this epistemological laissez-passer is much too general and impersonal for the matter at hand. As Kant granted to the practical reason what he denied to the theoretical, so may *we* allow the force of a unique and shattering experience a voice in the question of what “is the matter” with God. And there, right away, arises the question, What did Auschwitz add to that which one could always have known about the extent of the terrible and horrendous things that humans can do to humans and from times immemorial have done? And what has it added in particular to what is familiar to us Jews from a millennial history of suffering and forms so essential a part of our collective memory? The *question of Job* has always been the main question of theodicy—of general theodicy because of the existence of evil as such in the world, and of particular theodicy in its sharpening by the riddle of election, of the purported covenant between Israel and its God. As to this sharpening, under which our present question also falls, one could at first invoke—as the prophets did—the covenant itself for an explanation of what befell the human party to it: the “people of the covenant” had been unfaithful to it. In the long ages of faithfulness thereafter, guilt and retribution no longer furnished the explanation but the idea of “witness” did instead—this creation of the Maccabean age, which bequeathed to posterity the concept of the martyr. It is of its very meaning that precisely the innocent and the just suffer the worst. In deference to the idea of witness, whole communities in the Middle Ages met their death by sword and fire with the *Sh'ma Jisrael*, the avowal of God's Oneness, on their lips. The Hebrew name for this is *Kiddush-hashem*, “sanctification of the Name,” and the slaughtered were called “saints.” Through their sacrifice shone the light of promise, of the final redemption by the Messiah to come.

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

Nothing of this is still of use in dealing with the event for which “Auschwitz” has become the symbol. Not fidelity or infidelity, belief or unbelief, not guilt and punishment, not trial, witness and messianic hope, nay, not even strength or weakness, heroism or cowardice, defiance or submission had a place there. Of all this, Auschwitz, which also devoured the infants and babes, knew nothing; to none of it (with rarest exceptions) did the factory-like working of its machine give room. Not for the *sake* of faith did the victims die (as did, after all, “Jehovah’s Witnesses”), nor *because* of their faith or any self-affirmed bend of their being as persons were they murdered. Dehumanization by utter degradation and deprivation preceded their dying, no glimmer of dignity was left to the freights bound for the final solution, hardly a trace of it was found in the surviving skeleton specters of the liberated camps. And yet, paradox of paradoxes: it *was* the ancient people of the “covenant,” no longer believed in by those involved, killers and victims alike, but nevertheless just this and no other people, which under the fiction of race had been chosen for this wholesale annihilation—the most monstrous inversion of election into curse, which defied all possible endowment with meaning. There does, then, in spite of all, exist a connection—of a wholly perverse kind—with the god seekers and prophets of yore, whose descendants were thus collected out of the dispersion and gathered into the unity of joint death. And God let it happen. What God could let it happen?

Here we must note that on this question the Jew is in greater theological difficulty than the Christian. To the Christian (of the stern variety) the world is anyway largely of the devil and always an object of suspicion—the human world in particular because of original sin. But to the Jew, who sees in “this” world the locus of divine creation, justice, and redemption, God is eminently the Lord of *History*, and in this respect “Auschwitz” calls, even for the believer, the whole traditional concept of God into question. It has, indeed, as I have just tried to show, added to the Jewish historical experience something unprecedented and of a nature no longer assimilable by the old theological categories. Accordingly, one who will not thereupon just give up the concept of God altogether—and even the philosopher has a right to such an unwillingness—must rethink it so that it still remains thinkable; and that means seeking a new answer to the old question of (and about) Job. The Lord of History, we suspect, will have to go by the board in this quest. To repeat then, What God could let it happen?

For a possible, if groping, answer, I fall back on a speculative attempt with which I once ventured to meet the different question of immortality but in which also the specter of Auschwitz already played its part. On that occasion, I resorted to a *myth* of my own invention—

The Journal of Religion

that vehicle of imaginative but credible conjecture that Plato allowed for the sphere beyond the knowable. Allow me to repeat it here:

In the beginning, for unknowable reasons, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted or unimpaired part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny in creation. On this unconditional immanence the modern temper insists. It is its courage or despair, in any case its bitter honesty, to take our being-in-the-world seriously: to view the world as left to itself, its laws as brooking no interference, and the rigor of our belonging to it as not softened by extramundane providence. The same our myth postulates for God's being in the world. Not, however, in the sense of pantheistic immanence: if world and God are simply the same, the world at each moment and in each state represents his fullness, and God can neither lose nor gain. Rather, in order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his being, divesting himself of his deity — to receive it back from the Odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it. In such self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of *possibilities* which cosmic being offers in its own terms: to these, God committed his cause in effacing himself for the world.

And for aeons his cause is safe in the slow hands of cosmic chance and probability — while all the time we may surmise a patient memory of the gyrations of matter to accumulate into an ever more expectant accompaniment of eternity to the labors of time — a hesitant emergence of transcendence from the opaqueness of immanence.

And then the first stirring of life — a new language of the world: and with it a tremendous quickening of concern in the eternal realm and a sudden leap in its growth toward recovery of its plenitude. It is the world-accident for which becoming deity had waited and with which its prodigal stake begins to show signs of being redeemed. From the infinite swell of feeling, sensing, striving, and acting, which ever more varied and intense rises above the mute eddyings of matter, eternity gains strength, filling with content after content of self-affirmation, and the awakening God can first pronounce creation to be good.

But note that with life together came death, and that mortality is the price which the new possibility of being called "life" had to pay for itself. If permanence were the point, life should not have started out in the first place, for in no possible form can it match the durability of inorganic bodies. It is essentially precarious and corruptible being, an adventure in mortality, obtaining from long-lasting matter on its terms — the short terms of metabolizing organism — the borrowed, finite careers of individual selves. Yet it is precisely through the briefly snatched self-feeling, doing, and suffering of *finite* individuals, with the pitch of awareness heightened by the very press of finitude, that the divine landscape bursts into color and the deity comes to experience itself. . .

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

Note also this that with life's innocence before the advent of knowledge God's cause cannot go wrong. Whatever variety evolution brings forth adds to the possibilities of feeling and acting, and thus enriches the self-experiencing of the ground of being. Every new dimension of world-response opened up in its course means another modality for God's trying out his hidden essence and discovering himself through the surprises of the world-adventure. And all its harvest of anxious toil, whether bright or dark, swells the transcendent treasure of temporally lived eternity. If this is true for the broadening spectrum of diversity as such, it is even truer for the heightening pitch and passion of life that go with the twin rise of perception and motility in animals. The ever more sharpened keenness of appetite and fear, pleasure and pain, triumph and anguish, love and even cruelty—their very edge is the deity's gain. Their countless, yet never blunted incidence—hence the necessity of death and new birth—supplies the tempered essence from which the Godhead reconstitutes itself. All this, evolution provides in the mere lavishness of its play and the sternness of its spur. Its creatures, by merely fulfilling themselves in pursuit of their lives, vindicate the divine venture. Even their suffering deepens the fullness of the symphony. Thus, this side of good and evil, God cannot lose in the great evolutionary game.

Nor yet can he fully win in the shelter of its innocence, and a new expectancy grows in him in answer to the direction which the unconscious drift of immanence gradually takes.

And then he trembles as the thrust of evolution, carried by its own momentum, passes the threshold where innocence ceases and an entirely new criterion of success and failure takes hold of the divine stake. The advent of man means the advent of knowledge and freedom, and with this supremely double-edged gift the innocence of the mere subject of self-fulfilling life has given way to the charge of responsibility under the disjunction of good and evil. To the promise and risk of this agency the divine cause, revealed at last, henceforth finds itself committed; and its issue trembles in the balance. The image of God, haltingly begun by the universe, for so long worked upon—and left undecided—in the wide and then narrowing spirals of prehuman life, passes with this last twist, and with a dramatic quickening of the movement, into man's precarious trust, to be completed, saved, or spoiled by what he will do to himself and the world. And in this awesome impact of his deeds on God's destiny, on the very complexion of eternal being, lies the immortality of man.

With the appearance of man, transcendence awakened to itself and henceforth accompanies his doings with the bated breath of suspense, hoping and beckoning, rejoicing and grieving, approving and frowning—and, I daresay, making itself felt to him even while not intervening in the dynamics of his worldly scene: for can it not be that by the reflection of its own state as it wavers with the record of man, the transcendent casts light and shadow over the human landscape?¹

¹ Hans Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper," the 1961 Ingersoll Lecture at Harvard University, first printed in *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 1-20; now in H. Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 262-81.

The Journal of Religion

Such is the tentative myth I once proposed for consideration in a different context. It has theological implications that only later unfolded to me. Of these I shall develop here some of the more obvious ones—hoping that this translation from image into concept will somehow connect what so far must seem a strange and rather willful private fantasy with the more responsible tradition of Jewish religious thought. In this manner I try to redeem the poetic liberties of my earlier, roving attempt.

First, and most obviously, I have been speaking of a *suffering God*—which immediately seems to clash with the biblical conception of divine majesty. There is, of course, a Christian connotation of the term “suffering God” with which my myth must not be comfounded; it does not speak, as does the former, of a special act by which the deity at one time, and for the special purpose of saving man, sends part of itself into a particular situation of suffering (the incarnation and crucifixion). If anything in what I said makes sense, then the sense is that the relation of God to the world *from the moment of creation*, and certainly from the creation of man on, involves suffering on the part of God. It involves, to be sure, suffering on the part of the creature too, but this truism has always been recognized in every theology. Not so the idea of God’s suffering with creation, and of this I said that, *prima facie*, it clashes with the biblical conception of divine majesty. But does it really clash as extremely as it seems at first glance? Do not we also in the Bible encounter God as slighted and rejected by man and grieving over him? Do not we encounter him as rueing that he created man, and suffering from the disappointment he experiences with him—and with his chosen people in particular? We remember the prophet Hosea, and God’s love lamenting over Israel, his unfaithful wife.

Then, second, the myth suggests the picture of a *becoming God*. It is a God emerging in time instead of possessing a completed being that remains identical with itself throughout eternity. Such an idea of divine becoming is surely at variance with the Greek, Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of philosophical theology that, since its incorporation into the Jewish and Christian theological tradition, has somehow usurped for itself an authority to which it is not at all entitled by authentic Jewish (and also Christian) standards. Transtemporality, impassibility, and immutability have been taken to be necessary attributes of God. And the ontological distinction that classical thought made between “being” and “becoming,” with the latter characteristic of the lower, sensible world, excluded every shadow of becoming from the pure, absolute being of the Godhead. But this Hellenic concept has never accorded well with the spirit and language of the Bible, and the concept of divine becoming can actually be better reconciled with it.

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

For what does the becoming God mean? Even if we do not go so far as our myth suggests, that much at least we must concede of “becoming” in God as lies in the mere fact that he is affected by what happens in the world, and “affected” means altered, made different. Even apart from the fact that creation as such—the act itself and the lasting result thereof—was after all a decisive change in God’s own state, insofar as he is now no longer alone, his continual *relation* to the creation, once this exists and moves in the flux of becoming, means that he experiences something with the world, that his own being is affected by what goes on in it. This holds already for the mere relation of accompanying knowledge, let alone that of caring interest. Thus if God is in any relation to the world—which is the cardinal assumption of religion—then by that token alone the Eternal has “temporalized” himself and progressively becomes different through the actualizations of the world process.

One incidental consequence of the idea of the becoming God is that it destroys the idea of an eternal recurrence of the same. This was Nietzsche’s alternative to Christian metaphysics, which in this case is the same as Jewish metaphysics. It is indeed the extreme symbol of the turn to unconditional temporality and of the complete negation of any transcendence that could keep a memory of what happens in time, to assume that, by the mere exhaustion of the possible combinations and recombinations of material elements, it must come to pass that an “initial” configuration recurs and the whole cycle starts over again, and if once, then innumerable times—Nietzsche’s “ring of rings, the ring of eternal recurrence.” However, if we assume that eternity is not unaffected by what happens in time, there can never be a recurrence of the same because God will not be the same after he has gone through the experience of a world process. Any new world coming after the end of one will carry, as it were, in its own heritage the memory of what has gone before; or, in other words, there will not be an indifferent and dead eternity but an eternity that grows with the accumulating harvest of time.

Bound up with the concepts of a suffering and a becoming God is that of a *caring God*—a God not remote and detached and self-contained but involved with what he cares for. Whatever the “primordial” condition of the Godhead, he ceased to be self-contained once he let himself in for the existence of a world by creating such a world or letting it come to be. God’s caring about his creatures is, of course, among the most familiar tenets of Jewish faith. But my myth stresses the less familiar aspect that this caring God is not a sorcerer who in the act of caring also provides the fulfillment of his concern: he has left something for other agents to do and thereby has made his care dependent on

The Journal of Religion

them. He is therefore also an endangered God, a God who runs a risk. Clearly that must be so, or else the world would be in a condition of permanent perfection. The fact that it is not bespeaks one of two things: that either the One God does not exist (though more than one may), or that the One has given to an agency other than himself, though created by him, a power and a right to act on its own and therefore with a scope for at least codetermining that which is a concern of his. This is why I said that the caring God is not a sorcerer. Somehow he has, by an act of either inscrutable wisdom or love or whatever else the divine motive may have been, forgone the guaranteeing of his self-satisfaction by his own power, after he has first, by the act of creation itself, forgone being "all in all."

And therewith we come to what is perhaps the most critical point in our speculative, theological venture: this is not an omnipotent God. We argue indeed that, for the sake of our image of God and our whole relation to the divine, for the sake of any viable theology, we cannot uphold the time-honored (medieval) doctrine of absolute, unlimited divine power. Let me argue this first, on a purely logical plane, by pointing out the paradox in the idea of absolute power. The logical situation indeed is by no means that divine omnipotence is the rationally plausible and somehow self-recommending doctrine, while that of its limitation is wayward and in need of defense. Quite the opposite. From the very concept of power, it follows that omnipotence is a self-contradictory, self-destructive, indeed, senseless concept. The situation is similar to that of freedom in the human realm: far from beginning where necessity ends, freedom consists of and lives in pitting itself against necessity. Separated from it, freedom loses its object and becomes as void as force without resistance. Absolute freedom would be empty freedom that cancels itself out. So, too, does empty power, and absolute, exclusive power would be just that. Absolute, total power means power not limited by anything, not even by the mere existence of something other than the possessor of that power; for the very existence of such another would already constitute a limitation, and the one would have to annihilate it so as to save its absoluteness. Absolute power then, in its solitude, has no object on which to act. But as objectless power it is a powerless power, canceling itself out: "all" equals "zero" here. In order for it to act, there must be something else, and as soon as there is, the one is not all powerful anymore, even though in any comparison its power may be superior by any degree you please to imagine. The existence of another object limits the power of the most powerful agent at the same time that it allows it to be an agent. In brief, power as such is a *relational* concept and requires relation.

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

Again, power meeting no *resistance* in its relatum is equal to no power at all: power is exercised only in relation to something that itself has power. Power, unless otiose, consists in the capacity to overcome something; and something's existence as such is enough to provide this condition. For existence means resistance and thus opposing force. Just as, in physics, force without resistance—that is, counterforce—remains empty, so in metaphysics does power without counterpower, unequal as the latter may be. That, therefore, on which power acts must have a power of its own, even if that power derives from the first and was initially granted to it, as one with its existence, by a self-renunciation of limitless power—that is, in the act of creation.

In short, it cannot be that all power is on the side of one agent only. Power must be divided so that there be any power at all.

But besides this logical and ontological objection, there is a more theological, genuinely religious objection to the idea of absolute and unlimited divine omnipotence. We can have divine omnipotence together with divine goodness only at the price of complete divine inscrutability. Seeing the existence of evil in the world, we must sacrifice intelligibility in God to the combination of the other two attributes. Only a completely unintelligible God can be said to be absolutely good and absolutely powerful, yet tolerate the world as it is. Put more generally, the three attributes at stake—absolute goodness, absolute power, and intelligibility—stand in such a logical relation to one another that the conjunction of any two of them excludes the third. The question then is, Which are truly integral to our concept of God, and which, being of lesser force, must give way to their superior claim? Now, surely, goodness is inalienable from the concept of God and not open to qualification. Intelligibility, conditional on both God's nature and man's capacity, is on the latter count indeed subject to qualification but on no account to complete elimination. The *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God (not to speak of an absurd God) is a profoundly un-Jewish conception. Our teaching, the Torah, rests on the premise and insists that we can understand God, not completely, to be sure, but something of him—of his will, intentions, and even nature—because he has told us. There has been revelation, we have his commandments and his law, and he has directly communicated with some—his prophets—as his mouth for all men in the language of men and their times: refracted thus in this limiting medium but not veiled in dark mystery. A completely hidden God is not an acceptable concept by Jewish norms.

But he would have to be precisely that if together with being good he were conceived as all powerful. After Auschwitz, we can assert with greater force than ever before that an omnipotent deity would have to

The Journal of Religion

be either not good or (in his world rule, in which alone we can “observe” him) totally unintelligible. But if God is to be intelligible in some manner and to some extent (and to this we must hold), then his goodness must be compatible with the existence of evil, and this it is only if he is not *all* powerful. Only then can we uphold that he is intelligible and good, and there is yet evil in the world. And since we have found the concept of omnipotence to be dubious anyway, it is this that has to give way.

So far, our argument about omnipotence has done no more than lay it down as a principle for any acceptable theology continuous with the Jewish heritage that God’s power be seen as limited by something whose being in its own right and whose power to act on its own authority he himself acknowledges.² Admittedly, we have the choice to interpret this as a voluntary concession on God’s part, which he is free to revoke at will—that is, as the restraint of a power that he still and always possesses in full but, for the sake of creation’s own autonomous right, chooses not fully to employ. To devout believers, this is probably the most palatable choice. But it will not suffice. For in view of the enormity of what, among the bearers of his image in creation, some of them time and again, and wholly unilaterally, inflict on innocent others, one would expect the good God at times to break his own, however stringent, rule of restraint and intervene with a saving miracle.³ But no saving miracle occurred. Through the years that “Auschwitz” raged God remained silent. The miracles that did occur came forth from man alone: the deeds of those solitary, mostly unknown “just of the nations” who did not shrink from utter sacrifice in order to help, to save, to mitigate—even, when nothing else was left, unto sharing Israel’s lot. Of them I shall speak again. But God was silent. And there I say, or my myth says, Not because he chose not to, but because he *could* not intervene did he fail to intervene. For reasons decisively prompted by contemporary experience, I entertain the idea of a God who for a time—the time of the ongoing world process—has divested himself of any power to interfere with the physical course of things; and

² The same principle has been argued, with a slightly different reasoning, by Rabbi Jack Bemporad, “Toward a New Jewish Theology,” *American Judaism* (Winter 1964–65), pp. 9 ff.

³ An occasional miracle, i.e., extramundane intervention in the closed causality of the physical realm, is not incompatible with the general validity of the laws of nature (rare exceptions do not void empirical rules) and might even, by all appearances, perfectly conform to them—on this question, see H. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 66–67, and, more extensively, my Rudolf Bultmann Memorial address of 1976 at Marburg University, “Is Faith Still Possible? Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work” (*Harvard Theological Review* 75, no. 1 [January 1982]: 1–25, esp. 9–15); see also pp. 17–18 of this address for a statement of the religious objection against thinking of God as “Lord of History.”

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

who responds to the impact on his being by worldly events, not “with a mighty hand and outstretched arm,” as we Jews on every Passover recite in remembering the exodus from Egypt, but with the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal.

In this, assuredly, my speculation strays far from oldest Judaic teaching. Several of Maimonides’ Thirteen Articles of Faith, which we solemnly chant in our services, fall away with the “mighty hand”: the assertions about God ruling the universe, his rewarding the good and punishing the wicked, even about the coming of the promised Messiah. Not, however, those about his call to the souls,⁴ his inspiration of the prophets and the Torah, thus also not the idea of election: for only to the physical realm does the impotence of God refer. Most of all, the *Oneness* of God stands unabated and with it the “Hear, O Israel!” No Manichaean dualism is enlisted to explain evil; from the hearts of men alone does it arise and gain power in the world. The mere permitting, indeed, of human freedom involved a renouncing of sole divine power henceforth. And our discussion of power as such has already led us to deny divine omnipotence, anyway.

The elimination of divine omnipotence leaves the theoretical choice between the alternatives of either some preexistent—theological or ontological—*dualism*, or of God’s *self*-limitation through the creation from nothing. The dualistic alternative in turn might take the Manichaean form of an active force of evil forever opposing the divine purpose in the universal scheme of things: a two-god theology; or the Platonic form of a passive medium imposing, no less universally, imperfection on the embodiment of the ideal in the world: a form-matter dualism. The first is plainly unacceptable to Judaism. The second answers at best the problem of imperfection and natural necessity but not that of positive evil, which implies a freedom empowered by its own authority independent of that of God; and it is the fact and success of deliberate evil rather than the inflictions of blind, natural causality—the use of the latter in the hands of responsible agents (Auschwitz rather than the earthquake of Lisbon)—with which Jewish theology has to contend at this hour. Only with creation from nothing do we have the oneness of the divine principle combined with that self-limitation that then permits (gives “room” to) the existence and autonomy of a world. Creation was that act of absolute sovereignty with which it consented, for the sake of self-determined finitude, to be absolute no more—an act, therefore, of divine self-restriction.

⁴ For more about this inalienable postulate of revealed religion—the possibility of revelation itself, i.e., of God’s speaking to human *minds* even if debarred from intervening in physical *things*—see Jonas, “Is Faith Still Possible?” pp. 18–20.

The Journal of Religion

And here let us remember that Jewish tradition itself is really not quite so monolithic in the matter of divine sovereignty as official doctrine makes it appear. The mighty undercurrent of the Kabbalah, which Gershom Scholem in our days has brought to light anew, knows about a divine fate bound up with the coming-to-be of a world. There we meet highly original, very unorthodox speculations in whose company mine would not appear so wayward after all. Thus, for example, my myth at bottom only pushes further the idea of the *tzimtzum*, that cosmogonic centerconcept of the Lurianic Kabbalah.⁵ *Tzimtzum* means contraction, withdrawal, self-limitation. To make room for the world, the *En-Sof* (Infinite; literally, No-End) of the beginning had to contract himself so that, vacated by him, empty space could expand outside of him: the “Nothing” in which and from which God could then create the world. Without this retreat into himself, there could be no “other” outside God, and only his continued holding-himself-in preserves the finite things from losing their separate being again into the divine “all in all.”

My myth goes farther still. The contraction is total as far as power is concerned; as a whole has the Infinite ceded his power to the finite and thereby wholly delivered his cause into its hands. Does that still leave anything for a relation to God?

Let me answer this question with a last quotation from the earlier writing. By forgoing its own inviolateness, the eternal ground allowed the world to be. To this self-denial all creation owes its existence and with it has received all there is to receive from beyond. Having given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man’s now to give to him. And he may give by seeing to it in the ways of his life that it does not happen or happen too often, and not on his account, that it “repented the Lord”⁶ to have made the world. This may well be the secret of the “thirty-six righteous ones” whom, according to Jewish lore, the world shall never lack⁷ and of whose number in our time were possibly some of those “just of the nations” I have mentioned before: their guessed-at secret being that, with the superior valency of good over evil, which (we hope) obtains in the noncausal logic of things there, their hidden holiness can outweigh countless guilt, redress the balance of a generation, and secure the peace of the invisible realm.⁸

⁵ Originated by Isaac Luria (born 1534–died 1572).

⁶ Genesis 6:6–7.

⁷ Sanhedrin 97 b; Sukkah 45 b.

⁸ The idea that it is we who can help God rather than God helping us I have since found movingly expressed by one of the Auschwitz victims themselves, a young Dutch Jewess, who validated it by acting on it unto death. It is found in *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–43* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). When the deportations in Holland began, in 1942,

The Concept of God after Auschwitz

All this, let it be said at the end, is but stammering. Even the words of the great seers and adorers — the prophets and the psalmists — which stand beyond comparison, were stammers before the eternal mystery. Every mortal answer to Job's question, too, cannot be more than that. Mine is the opposite to the one given by the Book of Job: this, for an answer, invoked the plenitude of God's power; mine, his chosen voidance of it. And yet, strange to say, both are in praise. For the divine renunciation was made so that we, the mortals, could be. This, too, so it seems to me, is an answer to Job: that in him God himself suffers. Which is true, if any, we can know of none of the answers ever tried. Of my poor word thereto I can only hope that it be not wholly excluded from what Goethe, in "Testament of Old-Persian Faith," thus put into Zarathustra's mouth:

All that ever stammers praising the Most High
Is in circles there assembled far and nigh.⁹

she came forward and volunteered for the Westerbork concentration camp, there to help in the hospital and to share in the fate of her people. In September 1943 she was shipped, in one of the usual mass transports, to Auschwitz and "died" there on November 30, 1943. Her diaries have survived but were only recently published. I quote from Neal Ascherson ("In Hell," *New York Review of Books* 31, no. 13 [July 19, 1984]: 8–12, esp. 9): "She does not exactly 'find God,' but rather constructs one for herself. The theme of the diaries becomes increasingly religious, and many of the entries are prayers. Her God is someone to whom she makes promises, but of whom she expects and asks nothing. 'I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. . . . Alas, there does not seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place in us to the last.'" Reading this was to me a shattering confirmation, by a true witness, of my so much later and sheltered musings — and a consoling correction of my sweeping statement that we had no martyrs there.

⁹ "Und was nur am Lob des Höchsten stammelt, / Ist in Kreis' um Kreise dort versammelt" (Goethe, "Vermächtnis altpersischen Glaubens").