

# GOD, MAN AND HISTORY

Contemporary Jewish Thought  
from Shalem Press:

*Essential Essays on Judaism*

Eliezer Berkovits

*The Dawn: Political Teachings  
of the Book of Esther*

Yoram Hazony

GOD, MAN  
AND HISTORY

ELIEZER BERKOVITS

*Edited by David Hazony*

SHALEM PRESS  
JERUSALEM

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First edition 1959. Second edition 1965.  
Third edition 1979. Fourth edition 2004.

Cover design: Erica Halivni  
Cover picture: "Lower Slopes of Mount Sinai" (1839)  
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Printed in Israel

Distribution:  
The Shalem Center, 22A Hatzfira Street  
Jerusalem 93102, Israel  
Tel.: (02) 566-2202  
North America: 1-887-298-7300  
E-mail: [shalemorder@shalem.org.il](mailto:shalemorder@shalem.org.il)  
[www.shalem.org.il](http://www.shalem.org.il)

ISBN 965-7052-15-7

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## Foreword

In the three decades prior to the rise of Nazism, Germany gave birth to a generation of Jewish thinkers without precedent in recent centuries. Luminaries whose work can be associated with the ferment in Berlin and Frankfurt during this period include Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Emil Fackenheim, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Yehiel Jacob Weinberg, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that one of the most creative figures within this elite group was Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992), whose 19 books and hundreds of essays and articles broke new ground in nearly every area of Jewish thought, including theology, philosophy of law, Bible studies, the meaning of Jewish history, nationalism and Zionism, and contemporary trends in Jewish and Western thought.

Despite the breadth and depth of his writings, Berkovits did not attain during his lifetime the level of recognition enjoyed by other major Jewish thinkers. This, for a number of reasons: In part because he did not have the same tools for the promulgation of his work, such as the support of a major university or publishing house; in part because he spent his most productive years in Chicago, far from the center of Jewish intellectual life in America; and in part because his writing did not conform to the styles and schools that were fashionable in philosophy in his

day. Yet he maintained a dedicated following of scholars, rabbis, and laymen of all denominations, and recent years have seen a significant revival of interest in his works. Among the signs of renewed interest have been the publication of a collection of his essays, *Essential Essays on Judaism* (2002), and the establishment of the Eliezer Berkovits Institute for Jewish Thought at the Shalem Center, based in Jerusalem. One of the Institute's central projects is the re-publication of all of Berkovits' major works, many of which have been out of print for a generation, as well as their translation from English into Hebrew.

This edition of *God, Man and History* marks the inaugural volume of this series. The decision to publish this work first reflects its significance within the corpus of Berkovits' writings, as it is properly viewed as the keystone. First published in 1959, it examines the underpinnings of Judaism as a whole, from theology to law to the meaning of Jewish nationhood. In contrast to other twentieth-century thinkers, who employed the classic Jewish sources to defend a modernist outlook, or who wrote meditations on the Jewish experience in the style of contemporary philosophical trends, Berkovits' work offers an argument for the independence and validity of a traditional Jewish worldview in a manner reminiscent of Judah Halevi, Maimonides, and Saadia Gaon. *God, Man and History* is attuned to developments in modern thought, offering not only an exploration of the foundations of Judaism, but also their presentation as a coherent approach that may be contrasted with the central streams of Western philosophy since Hume and Kant.

The rationalist expository method that Berkovits adopted has obvious limitations. Based in argument rather than in existentialist description, it yields a work that is more challenging to read, and more vulnerable to criticism, than much of recent Jewish thought. But this sort of clear, methodical approach was, in Berkovits' view, a pressing need for Judaism, which he

believed to have been in a state of intellectual crisis since the advent of modern philosophy—a crisis that had led the majority of Jews to despair of their religion in its traditional form, and to abandon it in favor of either a thoroughgoing secularism or a Judaism reconstituted under fundamentally new premises.

The central weakness of modern Western thought, Berkovits argued, is not its rejection of religion but its inability to provide a compelling basis for moral action. The modern era in philosophy is often said to have begun with Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," a descriptive statement from which all understanding is assumed to follow by means of the strict application of reason. But as modern philosophers quickly learned, this method, in both its deductive and empirical versions, runs aground precisely where it tries to move from the strictly descriptive to the prescriptive—that is, from "is" to "ought."

This difficulty was first articulated in full form in the thought of David Hume (who was the subject of Berkovits' doctoral dissertation), but was also confronted, in a different context, by Immanuel Kant, whose writings form the basis of much of modern ethics. Kant sought to build an approach to morality based purely on rational statements. He was forced to concede, however, that while such a method may describe ethical action in theory, it cannot explain why anyone should decide to act on the basis of this theory. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant acknowledged: "But how pure reason can be practical by itself without other incentives taken from whatever source... to explain this is quite beyond the power of human reason, and all the effort and work of seeking such an explanation is wasted."<sup>\*</sup>

To Berkovits, this difficulty has had far-reaching consequences for the modern age, the most important of which is the inability

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\* Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 60.

to maintain a consistent, effective dedication to moral behavior. According to Berkovits, it is perhaps the central incongruity of Western civilization that despite steady progress in science and technology—that is, in the rationalization of nature and its utilization for human ends—modern man is nonetheless unable to advance on the ethical plane. Indeed, he has undertaken the most ambitious acts of barbarism the world has known, of which twentieth-century Nazism and Communism are only the most extreme cases. “The evil done by the power that knowledge provides,” he writes, “has always eclipsed the good done by the same power. Notwithstanding enlightenment, man seems to remain an essentially unethical being.” (p. 100)

As opposed to modern philosophy, Judaism starts with a different first principle, which does not merely describe existence, but also asserts the presence of a moral will and a binding moral ideal. It therefore incorporates not only the descriptive but also the prescriptive realm. “The foundation of religion,” Berkovits writes, “is not the affirmation that God *is*, but that God is concerned with man and the world; that, having created this world, he has not abandoned it, leaving it to its own devices; that he cares about his creation.” (p. 15)

What we know about God, explains Berkovits, we know not from speculation but from experience, of which the prophetic encounter is the central, foundational example, and from our memory of that experience as passed on in tradition. It is the encounter alone that provides us with our “raw data,” and from there we know that revelation is not simply a matter of factual, but also of moral, truth. Judaism does not require the fabrication of “other incentives taken from whatever source” to induce moral behavior; rather, such behavior follows from the concern for the world which God has revealed, the major implication of which is that man, too, must be concerned with human history and progress. This is the central content of the

revelation on which religion is based; without it, morality is forever undermined.

This central thesis—that God cares about the world, and therefore man should as well—forms the basis of Berkovits' approach to Judaism, and is a consistent thread running through his writings. We may discern three important ways in which he develops and applies this idea: In *theology*, where God's concern for the world translates into a distinct view of the meaning of righteousness, holiness, and truth (ideas that Berkovits treats principally in *Man and God: Studies in Biblical Theology*, 1969, and in *Faith After the Holocaust*, 1973); in *ethics*, where his theory of morality is founded on the principle of human responsibility for what happens in the world, rather than on abstract rules of behavior (*Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halacha*, 1983);\* and in the Jewish conception of *politics*, in which the concern for human history requires the creation of an exemplary political collective, a nation constituted in order to set an example of righteousness (*Towards Historic Judaism*, 1943).

All three of these spheres—theological, ethical, and political—find their philosophical foundation, and their place as part of a coherent whole, in *God, Man and History*. The theological aspect is treated principally in the first half of this work. Berkovits begins by exploring the experience of God's concern for history, and treats it as the epistemological starting point for all discussion of Jewish philosophy, and as the basis for a Jewish critique of other systems of thought. He then shows how the content of the encounter between man and God, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, establishes a relationship founded on mutual

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\* For a wider elaboration of Berkovits' approach to morality and Jewish law, see my introduction to Berkovits' *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Shalem, 2002), pp. ix–xxxvi.

regard and a shared concern for history. Finally, he addresses the implications of his thesis for many of the classical problems of theology, including the question of divine attributes, the meaning of creation, and the problem of evil. In Berkovits' view, the central justification for the imperfection of the universe is not to allow the possibility of freedom of the will per se, so much as of human *responsibility*: The idea that man, as the pinnacle of God's creation, may himself imitate the Creator by assuming the burden of responsibility—by becoming, in essence, a creator himself.

This argument, in turn, sets the stage for his discussion of morality and law. In the second half of *God, Man and History*, Berkovits lays the foundations for a Jewish moral philosophy grounded in divine concern and human responsibility. In his view, the main streams of Western moral thought—from ancient Greece through Christian theology and continuing in secularized form in modern ethics—suffered because they viewed morality first and foremost as a matter of perfecting the individual's understanding and faith, out of a belief that if one's intentions could be perfected, one's actions would readily follow suit. This approach, he argues, necessarily failed to produce effective moral behavior, because it ignored the basic facts of man's material nature. "Judaism," Berkovits writes, "does not accept the facile optimism of the Socratic-humanistic tradition that all man needs for the good life is the intellectual study of the essence of goodness. According to Judaism, man judged by his own nature is not as hopeless a creature as Christian theology would have it; neither is he as easily led to goodness as humanism imagines." (p. 110) Man's actions, in other words, frequently do not follow from his own reasoned understanding; behavior is the product not only of reasonable or faith-based decision, but also of blind habit. If goodness is to become a central feature of human society, morality must be constituted so as to have an impact not only on man's mind, but on his

entire way of life. In Judaism this is achieved through *law*, which trains man's material nature to seek and follow a higher order of things.

It is important to note, however, that law in Berkovits' view is not only the facilitator of a moral orientation. It also stands as testimony to the high position man is understood to hold in the overall scheme of creation. "The essence of the law is the same as that of the encounter itself," he writes. "It is an expression of God's continued concern with man... The law represents the highest affirmation of man, as well as his crowning dignity. By giving man the law, his Maker declares: I do care how he lives and what he does with his life." (p. 89) Having grounded Jewish morality in God's concern for humanity, and in the response of the individual to this concern, Berkovits advances this same argument in the sphere of the human collective, in the process creating the basis for a Jewish politics. If history is the central concern of religion, he writes, then one must recognize that history is made not only, or even principally, by individuals. Rather, history is the province of communities, and especially of peoples and nations. "For the deed to be effective," he writes, "it must not remain the act of an individual, but must become that of a community. The deed makes history if it is the materialization of the desire and will of a community of people joined together in a common cause... One cannot be a Jew only 'at heart'; one must be a Jew together with other Jews in history-making action." (pp. 138-139)

But because morality is not simply a matter of teaching but also of affecting habits, humanity requires not only a call to universal morals, but also the creation of a moral exemplar on the level of the human collective. Judaism requires the establishment of a "holy nation," a unified people, dwelling in its land and enjoying the benefits of sovereign authority, which seeks to represent the moral vision of Judaism at the level of national expression.

This understanding underlies Berkovits' entire approach to the Jewish people and to Zionism. To his mind, the greatest threat to long-term Jewish survival is exile, which, by rendering the Jews dependent on others and depriving them of the pre-conditions needed to fulfill Judaism's own ideal, distorts the meaning of their religion. "A people in control of its own life, capable of implementing Judaism by applying it to the whole of life, is a people in its own land. Judaism, as the religion of the deed, requires a people in its land," he writes. "The people alone can realize Judaism; in the land of the people alone may it be fully realized." (pp. 139-140)

This must be regarded as a significant statement in the history of modern Jewish thought, for in it we find an argument for a Jewish state founded on Jewish moral thinking, rather than on a messianic reading of modern history. For Berkovits, the establishment and survival of this state was not a foregone conclusion, but rather a vital need without which the Jewish people could not fulfill its most important mission.

In writing *God, Man and History*, Berkovits thus embarked on an effort with few parallels in the modern history of Judaism. This is not merely a meditation on, or an exploration of, a specific facet of the Jewish religion. Rather, it is a comprehensive construction of Judaism. This construction begins with first principles and proceeds, on the basis of arguments grounded in the classical sources, to examine the foundations of Judaism, while at the same time placing itself in contradistinction to the central premises of modern thought. This is an ambitious project, conducted by a thinker possessing a thorough command of both the rabbinic and philosophical traditions. For this reason alone it is worthy of being placed among the most important works of Jewish philosophy in the twentieth century.

This edition of *God, Man and History* represents the first in a series of reissued works by Eliezer Berkovits, published by Shalem Press in conjunction with the Eliezer Berkovits Institute of Jewish Thought at the Shalem Center. Established in 2002, the Institute seeks to encourage scholarship in Berkovits' thought through the publication and translation of his writings, the establishment of an archive, and the initiation and support of research on Berkovits' life, works, and philosophy. The current edition has been corrected and typeset anew; and the notes have been expanded to include full bibliographical information for the benefit of readers interested in following his scholarly leads. The index from the 1979 edition has been edited and updated.

It has been a great honor to participate in the project of bringing Berkovits' writings to a new generation of readers. My appreciation is owed to a large number of people who have given support and constructive criticism, including Zachary Braiterman, who coordinated the first panel discussion on Berkovits' thought at the conference of the Association of Jewish Studies in 2002; as well as David Ellenson, Emil Fackenheim, Howard Gilbert, David Hartman, Norman Lamm, Daniel Landes, Stephen Landes, Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz, John Moscowitz, David Novak, Jay Ozerowski, Roy Pinchot, Aviezer Ravitzky, Marc Shapiro, Joseph Shier, and Tzvi Hersh Weinreb.

This book would not have been possible without the able efforts of the team at Shalem Press, most notably Yael Hazony and Marina Pilipodi. Marla Braverman and Yasmine Garval offered crucial assistance in bringing the project to fruition.

Finally, a special debt of gratitude is owed to the family of Eliezer Berkovits, and especially his sons, Avraham, Dov, and

Shimshon; as well as his granddaughter, Rahel Berkovits. The family has been generous in offering its time, support, advice, and materials, and has been an invaluable partner in this venture.

David Hazony  
Jerusalem  
Passover 5764/April 2004

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# God in History

Just as the individual does not live alone, neither does a people. For this reason, as long as the holy people remains the “one people” in history, its deeds will be, at best, only partially effective. Its success or failure will depend on the international constellation in which the people lives and strives for its goal. A people with a purpose of its own, even though the purpose be an essentially universal one, may find itself at odds with other peoples, which are guided by exclusively self-serving considerations. Indeed, the *raison d’etre* of a God-centered nation would of necessity clash with the life-motifs of a world of self-centered nations. The conflict, at times, is unavoidable, and can have tragic consequences for the “one people.” In the history of Israel, these consequences are responsible for the exile; they have created the wandering Jew.

In one sense, exile is a natural phenomenon. For millennia, the way of life of the “one people” has been at cross-purposes with that of the rest of the world. Israel could easily have come to terms with Assyria and Rome, with Mohammed and even Torquemada, if only it had been willing to surrender its own distinctive purpose in history. Because in moments of ultimate trial Israel was not prepared to betray its destiny as the people of God, waves of hatred and destruction have swept over it unceasingly. Exile is not an accident, but the natural lot of the

people of God. Jewish history is inseparable from world history: The intensity of the exile is the measure of the world's opposition to the aspirations of the God-centered people. It is the negative version of Jewish universalism. Israel is always as homeless in this world as God's purpose for man is in exile in history. The exile of Israel is one of the manifestations of *galut hashechina*, the exile of the divine Presence from the affairs of men. It is true that in a mood of rigorous self-criticism, Israel uttered the words: "Because of our sins we have been exiled from our land." This is indeed a valid statement when the Jewish people faces God. Facing the world, however, the truth has been formulated in the phrase, "for your sake are we killed all the day."<sup>1</sup> From the very outset of its history, Israel knew that exile would be inseparable from loyalty to its God-oriented course.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of Israel's exile, the intensity of Jewish homelessness, has always been the measuring rod for the moral and spiritual maturity of the world around the Jew. The wanderings of the Jewish people, through lands and times, are the most revealing records of the ethical and religious history of the non-Jewish world. As was the case with their first exile in Egypt, so, too, were most of the subsequent exiles of the children of Israel not God-ordained punishments but humanly imposed persecutions. The question has thus been raised by Jews and Gentiles alike: If the immeasurable burden of suffering that is the exile is indeed undeserved, why does God allow it to happen? Why does he not protect the innocent? Why does he not intervene in time and strike down the would-be persecutor before he is able to perpetrate his crimes?

Such questions assume that a certain form of intervention in the course of history would be proper for the Almighty. Now, if such divine intervention on behalf of the innocent were the observable rule in history, then the suffering of Israel through the ages would prove something. But the suffering of the materially weak and guiltless seems to be rather the norm in

history. So we may say that the exile conforms to the norm, and that the problem of exile is, therefore, but a specific aspect of the general problem of theodicy. However prominent and incomparable an example of undeserved suffering the exile of the Jews may be, it is not the only case of its kind. He who asks why God permits the people of God to be persecuted might as well ask why God allows any injustice to be inflicted on any of his creatures. Why does God tolerate any suffering of the innocent in his creation? Such questions are, of course, as old as recorded history.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of theodicy, of God's justice, exists in two forms. For the purposes of our discussion we shall call them the cosmic and the historical-ethical aspects. There is evil, or imperfection, which seems to be congenital to creation itself. This is the cosmic aspect of the problem of theodicy, which was discussed earlier in the context of creation.<sup>4</sup> Now, however, we are concerned with evil as it is introduced into history by conscious, created beings—as the work of men and nations. And the question is, why does God not prevent man from spreading misery and sorrow in creation?

In answer to the problem, it has rightly been pointed out that any specific intervention on the part of God would not only render the doing of evil impossible, but would eliminate the foundations of all ethical action as well.<sup>5</sup> In a world in which evil would be doomed to complete and manifest failure from the outset, goodness could not prosper either. One cannot frighten people into goodness. In order to be good, man must choose the good; but there is choice only where there is freedom. In order to be good, then, man must be free to be wicked; he must be permitted to choose between good and evil. Where there is no practical possibility of choosing evil successfully, there is no opportunity to espouse the good. The goodness of man consists in his free commitment to the good. When we discussed the cosmic aspect of the problem, we found

that an imperfect creation was freedom's only opportunity. But what is true of creation in this context is also valid for God's continued relation to the history of the human race. No doubt, God is sufficiently powerful to intervene every time a wrong is committed; it would indeed be a small matter for him to eliminate all evil and injustice from the earth. But his *evident* intervention would destroy not only evil, but also the essence of man's humanity—namely, his moral responsibility. Man is man only if he may choose between alternative courses of action, and if he can do so in moral freedom.

One may also put it this way: Why ask for continuous miracles to rectify what goes wrong in the world? Would it not be simpler to ask for the creation of a perfect man, who would be so endowed by nature as to be incapable of committing any evil? The answer, of course, is even simpler than the question is naive. A perfect man is, in this sense, a contradiction in terms; it is an impossibility. A man incapable of doing wrong would not be human. The imperfection of human nature is inseparable from its most significant asset: Its potential for goodness, its capacity for responsible decision and action. Having created man as a morally responsible being, God had to grant him the opportunity for ethical action. The action itself must remain man's own choice, or else its ethical quality is lost.<sup>6</sup> Man must be able to go wrong if he is to go right at all—such is the perpetual risk inherent in the human situation. The possibility of humanly inflicted suffering, undeservedly imposed on other human beings, is always present in history, as long as man, in God's unfathomable wisdom, is permitted to seek his own fulfillment.

We may now approach once again the problem of the measureless injustice that is implied in the long centuries of Israel's exile. Exile, as we saw, is the outcome of an unavoidable conflict between the historic function of the "one people" and the ambitions of the other nations. As such, exile is a symptom that

constructive, universal reconciliation is still lacking in the world. The subhuman excesses of hatred and cruelty to which Israel has been exposed, almost without respite, are themselves the measure of the impotence of the spirit and the blind fury of the self-centered passions of man's biophysical inheritance. They bear convincing witness to the tragic truth that "humanity" is still only a potentiality, and far from being a reality; that the deed of transformation, rendering the spiritual vital and the vital spiritually purposeful, the *mitzva*, has still not become effective in history. And yet, God does not manifestly intervene. History is man's responsibility. The task is man's, for only man can build mankind. Only man can overcome the dualism within himself; only if he does so himself is it overcome. Of course, God is omnipresent. If he wished to, he could miraculously destroy the tyrant or the guilty nation. But would such an act of God create reconciliation among human beings? Would it establish mankind? Certainly it would create fear, and no nation would dare lift up the sword against another—and thus all history would end in universal trembling. In every miracle, history is at a standstill. But the stuff of history is the deed of man. Responsibility and purpose in history have been entrusted into his hands.

I do not mean to suggest that what has been said here with regard to God's silence in history is the solution to the problem of theodicy. It is, however, an important step forward to understand that the problem is not merely the result of human ignorance, but is implanted in the scheme of things. If divine providence were indeed manifest in the world, if it convincingly lived up to human expectations, as it were, and if God acted always as man's sense of justice would have him do, the overwhelming evidence that "sin doesn't pay" would extinguish man's freedom to commit himself to one or another possible course of action. There would be only "goodness" left, imposed from without. Man would cease to be a morally

responsible creature. Therefore the problem of God's providence and justice must forever remain unsolved in history, so as to enable the possibility of history itself, and of life's increasing orientation to God, through human responsibility.

Once again we may point to the concept of the hiding God, which was discussed in the first part of this work.<sup>7</sup> We saw that the original religious experience of the encounter had to be momentary in order to be endured by man; and even while it lasted, the divine Presence could reveal itself only from behind some protective barrier, or else man could not have survived the terror of the Almighty. We also saw that the encounters had to be extremely rare in history in order to leave room for doubt and, thus, to safeguard man's spiritual freedom, which is the most noble quality of faith. God hides from man most of the time so that man may believe in him without compulsion. We further noted the religious need for the impossibility of proving God's existence intellectually. Any such inescapable proof would put the human intellect in chains, prejudicing its search for truth. Finally, we have found yet another meaning of the concept of theodicy: For the sake of man, God cannot *evidently* interfere in the course of history, for such intervention would completely crush man's moral independence and responsibility. As the prophet said of him: "He will be silent in his love."<sup>8</sup> The very silence of God in history is due to his concern for man.

Does this mean, then, that God has left his creation completely to its own devices, allowing things to take their course as they may? Such a thought would be incompatible with the responsibility of which the Creator cannot, in any imaginable way, divest himself. Things need not happen in accordance with human insight and expectation, yet there is an ultimate responsibility that is God's. By creating man as a being in need of spiritual, intellectual, and ethical freedom in order to fulfill

himself, God took a chance. In respecting man's God-given—though limited—independence, the Creator incurs a risk. Man is responsible to the extent to which he is free; God is responsible to the extent to which he has made man free and sustains man in freedom. For this reason alone it is inconceivable that God departed from his creation and is indifferent to what man does with his life and the world.

The encounter, as well as the revealed law of God, is of course in itself a direct indication of the Creator's interest. At the same time, the need for divine silence in history excludes only manifest intervention; it does not eliminate indirect intervention by the Almighty. Such indirect, and therefore not altogether convincing, intervention in the affairs of men, which the human being is free to recognize or to reject, may well be one of the ways in which God discharges his responsibility to his creation. It may be a counterbalance to the risk of freedom that is inherent in life and in history. For all we know, God may even intervene in the guise of natural events, which happen in accordance with natural laws. Many of these events are his invisible or unrecognized messengers.<sup>9</sup>

It is not inconceivable, however, that as a result of human action, performed in freedom, or of the interplay of natural forces—and at times a combination of the two—a situation may arise in which divine intervention may have to be direct and manifest to all. When, for instance, the intended outcome of history is in utter jeopardy—not to mention other imaginable possibilities—the evident act of God may be quite in keeping with what is dictated by God's own responsibility. In such cases we speak of miracles. The miracle may be one of God's ways to safeguard the intended ultimate outcome. As the human deed is a manifestation of human responsibility met in freedom, similarly—although on an incomparably higher level—the miracle is an expression of divine freedom in the service of divine responsibility. At times, when the deed fails, the miracle may be

the only corrective. This, of course, means that miracles are not the ideal way of influencing the destinies of men. Only the deed is according to plan; the miracle is a stopgap in history. Not only is history at a standstill in the miracle, but the miracle is a sign of a serious breakdown in history. The need for the miracle stems from the measure of freedom that is inherent in creation. When freedom, misused, threatens to overstep the limits of the calculated risk God took with his creation, the freedom of the Almighty may have to bring its trespassing to a halt. It is, of course, not for man to say when a situation has arisen that must be salvaged by a miracle. Let us suffice with the idea that there is, indeed, a place for the miracle within the natural scheme of things.

Another question, however, may also be expected at this stage: While the logical and ethical necessity for the miracle may be conceded, is not the materialization of a miracle a practical impossibility? If the question means to imply that miracles are impossible because they are contrary to the laws of nature, we must regard it as completely devoid of meaning. We need not enter here into a discussion of the numerous religious and philosophical rationalizations of the miracle which, rather than interpret the concept, simply explain it away. The deist David Hume was perfectly right when, in defining the miracle, he maintained that the determining factor was not that an event occurred contrary to the observable laws of nature, but that it happened as the result of a direct intervention by God.<sup>10</sup> Putting it this way implies that not all miracles need be observable as such. At the same time, Hume's definition does say that miracles are contrary to nature. After all, direct divine intervention is not natural. A miracle is in essence—although not always in appearance—unnatural. Nevertheless, it is a poor contribution to the discussion to maintain that on this account alone a miracle could not happen. What is contrary to nature is, of course, *naturally* impossible. No one who is prepared to give credence

to the possibility of miracles ever denied that fact. Indeed, the point of the affirmation of the miracle is that the naturally impossible may happen as the result of divine intervention. The real issue, therefore, is not whether what is contrary to natural law is within the realm of natural possibility, but whether a form of direct intervention on the part of God is conceivable or not.

Obviously, the possibility of such intervention cannot be denied on the basis of God's lack of power. Starting with the premise of an almighty Creator, it does not seem logical to deny God the might to act within his creation. As long as we consider nature a thing apart from God, as we indeed do when we see it as creation, not even a strictly deterministic interpretation of its laws will rule out the possibility of the miracle. That nothing within nature may disrupt the chain of cause and effect does not prove that the God of nature may not do it. We ought to understand the philosophical significance of a position that rejects any form of direct divine intervention. There is, indeed, no way of establishing the *practical* impossibility of the miracle. The miracle may only be rejected for logical reasons as being incompatible with the premises of certain forms of metaphysics.

Such logical rejection follows, for instance, from the position of pantheism. Assuming, for example, the Stoic contention that the laws of nature are identical with the laws of reason, or with those of a universal pneuma that is the soul of the universe, no intervention by God in the flow of events is conceivable. Such intervention would indicate that the laws of universal reason were somewhere faulty and in need of correction. Quite within the Stoic tradition, Spinoza wrote: "For whatsoever is contrary to nature is also contrary to reason, and whatsoever is contrary to reason is absurd, and, *ipso facto*, to be rejected."<sup>11</sup> For Spinoza, of course, the cosmos becomes absorbed in God. The identification is so complete that nature disappears as a separate entity. There is only the infinite substance, which is deity. Starting

with such concepts, Spinoza must conclude that “the power and efficiency of nature are in themselves the divine power and efficiency.” The laws of nature are themselves the will of God; they are his decrees, “following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature.”<sup>12</sup> Miracles, therefore, would be contrary not only to the laws of nature, but also to divine nature itself.

There is also, however, a form of theistic metaphysics from which the rejection of the miracle follows as a logical necessity. Assuming that creation was perfect, representing a divine order in completion, the need for a miracle would reveal a flaw in what was originally planned to be without blemish. The corrective measure of the miracle would indicate that a “slip-up” had occurred in the divine order. It would be no less absurd to entertain such a possibility on the basis of the premises outlined than it would be to accept Spinoza’s assumption that anything contrary to reason could never occur in nature.

The Spinozistic argument against the miracle need not detain us longer. Spinoza’s reasoning is cogent, but only as long as we grant his acosmic pantheism. As discussed earlier, the very essence of religion is the confrontation between man and God.<sup>13</sup> The religious experience of the encounter and the idea of creation are diametrically opposed to any form of pantheism. Thus, far from agreeing with Spinoza’s dictum that “the power and efficiency of nature are in themselves the divine power and efficiency,” we can conceive of creation only as an act of divine self-limitation. Nature, as creation, is apart from God; it is outside him, it is “the other” to him. The laws of nature may indeed be called the decrees of the Creator, but they are not, as pantheism understands them, identical with the divine will. The laws of nature are nature’s laws; they are not divine but natural, which is to say created. There is no logical contradiction between such a concept of natural laws and the possibility of divine intervention in them.

What is more, we have found that creation as such must be conceived as being, of necessity, imperfect.<sup>14</sup> Now, in a perfect universe—if such a universe were possible—a miracle could never happen: All intervention with perfection can only be destructive. Nor would there be any need for the miracle in such a universe. It was in the very imperfection of the creation that we discovered both the challenge for man and the source of his freedom to meet that challenge. Within perfection there is no choice, no alternative, no freedom. The imperfection of creation is man's opportunity. This same opportunity granted to man in the form of freedom and responsibility may in history necessitate the corrective act of the miracle. As the element of imperfection is the chance for human freedom, how much more may it serve as the thin end of the wedge for divine intervention.<sup>15</sup>

While the miracle may be the divine corrective, man's destiny on earth can be fulfilled only by man himself. The task and the responsibility are his. A man made good by a miracle is not a good man, but a good puppet. The essence of goodness, as we saw, is expressed in an attitude or action consciously undertaken by man without outside compulsion. If the creation of "mankind" consists, as we have argued, in the achievement of universal reconciliation, it can be accomplished only by man himself. Unless reconciliation is an actual experience brought about by human desire—unless it means fellowship fostered by man through his own exertions—it cannot exist. And even the day of which the prophet says, "And the Eternal shall be King over all the earth; On that day shall the Eternal be One, and his name one,"<sup>16</sup> cannot be the Eternal's doing alone, without reference to man's success or failure in history. If it were altogether the work of the Eternal, it would have been more logical to dispense with all history from the very beginning and start

with the day on which “the Eternal shall be King.” There is a share of human responsibility in making the Eternal King over all the earth by placing all life under his sovereignty. The striving for this goal is the meaning of history.

Man’s redemption is, therefore, within the scope of human responsibility. That is how God willed it. While “mankind,” established through the self-redemption of man, is always far removed in the future, in history one may discern its emerging outlines in the interdependence of all human destinies. No one lives in “splendid isolation”; all have their neighbors, and whatever one does, or leaves undone, affects others and, in some measure, all. These facts point to the common responsibility of the race of men. Because of the interdependence of all life, the righteous, too, suffer from the consequences of the deeds of the wicked; this reflects the reality of mankind in its negative state. That we are tied to each other from the beginning is the sign that we should join each other in the end. Universal redemption is the common responsibility of all.

This should not, of course, be taken to suggest that man is entirely on his own. He who knows of the encounter and the revelation of the law is sure of God’s concern and care, with which history, as man’s creation of mankind, is initiated. He also knows that even in those long stretches of human history during which God seems to be silent, he is in fact “silent in his love.”<sup>17</sup> In the boldness of faith, man may often recognize the hints of the workings of the hiding God—not to mention those rare moments when man is overwhelmed by more convincing signs of divine concern. The rabbis of the Talmud were right to view man as a “partner” of God in the works of creation.<sup>18</sup> Who would say where the work of God comes to an end and the human contribution begins? Man may be “as nothing” before God, yet God nonetheless desires man’s partnership.

The goal of human history may never be achieved, the unity of mankind may never become a complete reality, and the day

on which “the Eternal shall be King over all the earth” may yet require a culminating act of divine grace and love; but man’s own responsibility never ceases, for his opportunity to bring the goal closer to realization is never lost. As long as man lives, his failure cannot be final. For after every failure, not only can he be forgiven, but he may even start anew, if he “returns.” After every failure, *teshuva*, or return, allows man to continue as if the failure had been a success. The return to God is an act of complete transformation of character. In the act of *teshuva*, the past is not undone—which would be impossible—but redone. The impact of past failures becomes creative in its effect on future desire and action. The man who returns to God incorporates even his past sins into the structure of his reborn personality. Moreover, man is forever invited to return.<sup>19</sup> Universal reconciliation may never be achieved by man alone, yet it is always *achievable* by him. Because of *teshuva*, the hope for redemption is never forfeited.<sup>20</sup>

What, however, ensures that man will make use of the gift of *teshuva*; that, after his numerous and tragic failures, he will seek the way of return to God? What ensures that, in a fit of universal folly and criminality, he will not extinguish life itself from the face of the earth and thus commit his final blunder? In a sense, we have already answered this question. God, in endowing man with a measure of freedom—the source of all human folly, and all human achievement—accepted responsibility for the final outcome. God alone, who determined the beginning, will determine the end. Having granted man the freedom to fail, God will not let him fail irrevocably. The divine responsibility for creation is the guarantee that the purpose of man’s formation in freedom and responsibility will not ultimately be thwarted. That is the root of the messianic faith. God’s intention for man, as revealed in the encounter and by his law, will be fulfilled. It is the messianic promise, inseparable from history. But only the goal is preordained; the path to it,

however, must be blazed by man, and the time required to reach it will depend on him. What the Sages said of Israel applies to the entire race: They will not be redeemed unless they return.<sup>21</sup> Since in the final reckoning God will not be defeated, there is always time to return. And so we have ample failure in ample time, which means ample suffering. The hope of man is that, through suffering, he will return to be redeemed. But redeemed he will be, for God lives.

The messianic fulfillment of history is beyond any doubt. The most convincing indication of this is the survival of Israel. The survival of Judaism and of the Jewish people in all times, in conditions of utter political and material weakness, in spite of continuous persecution, and in defiance of an endless series of the most barbarous attempts at their extermination, defies all explanation. It is the mystery of the ages. The return of Israel to its ancient homeland in our days, as Israel maintained for numberless generations that it would do, is incomparable in human history. As a manifestation of the interdependence of all life, Israel's suffering is the measure of man's failure to become a partner with God in the task of human salvation. Israel is always as close to martyrdom as the human race is removed from humanity. On the other hand, Israel's survival is itself the proof that God's purpose in history will not be defeated, and that the day of mankind's reconciliation will yet dawn.

Whether the price that must be paid in terms of suffering and misery will be well worth the achievement is not within man's ability either to affirm or to deny. Judging from the standpoint of experience, the rabbis of the Talmud have said: "It would have been better for man not to be created"; yet they nevertheless accepted life as a task and a responsibility, for they continued: "However, now that he has been created, let him look to his deeds."<sup>22</sup> Only one who knows of the original intention that moved God in creating may judge the road as well as the destination. We may have some hint of God's own

purpose for man, as revealed to man by God; yet we can know nothing of God's purpose with his creation as a whole. Being placed in this world, man has been invited to accept, and to cooperate with, what God desires for him. Let this suffice.

Indeed, before the day of fulfillment and universal salvation arrives, many will have suffered because of the sins of others; many will have fallen by the wayside. What of them? What of the numberless millions who pay the price for the risk that God has taken with creation, but never live to see the day of justification? One can answer only by saying that our concept of divine justice demands that on the day of universal fulfillment, they, too, must be vindicated and justified individually, just as they suffered individually. Divine justice, which is one of the ways we have conceived of God's care for man, is the postulate of immortality. It requires that in the act of final redemption, all generations that were ever born be redeemed.<sup>23</sup> Even the dead must live to share in the realization of the promise that alone justifies the travail of all times.

God, as he has made himself known to man, is a caring God. God is our surety that nothing that has value, in accordance with his desire for man, ever perishes. He is the Preserver. Because he is, we know that no good deed and no kind word, no noble thought and no sincere striving for the good, are ever in vain. Because he is God, nothing worth preserving is ever so lost in history as not to be found again—be it even beyond history.<sup>24</sup>

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