“DEATH” IN THE LITERARY IMAGINATION: RABBI MILTON STEINBERG’S *AS A DRIVEN LEAF*

By Norman K. Swazo, Ph.D.

“Why do you hide your face, and treat me like an enemy? Will you harass a driven leaf?”
--Job (13:24)

SEEKING THE MEANING OF “DEATH”

“What is man, that you should be mindful of him, mortal man, that you should think of him?” the psalmist (Ps. 8:5) asked the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had reason to think the infinite God mindful of the human who, in the finitude of his physical life, is but a mere mortal, always anticipating a day in which his potentiality of being on Earth comes to its ordained end. But, the psalmist also interrogated this

God whose face remains hidden (*hester panim*): "Why do you hide your face, and treat me like an enemy? Will you harass a driven leaf?" (Job 13:24)

These questions came to the fore for Torah-observant Jews after the Nazi genocide, requiring them to engage fundamental questions about the possibility of faith and a post-Holocaust theology. To our consternation and disquiet, the questions that Job raised yet resonate in present time, as humanity at large suffers widespread, horrendous, and overwhelming death in a pandemic caused by a novel virus for which there was neither advance warning nor immediately efficacious remedy to hold death at bay. The question returns: How is one to explain seemingly senseless death, whether from the "political" evil men do, as with Nazi genocide, or from the apparently "natural" evil a pandemic epitomizes as it wreaks the havoc of a plague across the globe?

One can, of course, consult rabbinical tradition, systematic theology, and the philosophy of religion in search of a plausible (if not ultimate) explanation, theodicy, and consolation, as many have done and yet do. But, in what follows, instead of those esteemed texts, it is the literary imagination of American Rabbi Milton Steinberg (1903-1950) that I choose to engage here. Steinberg's *As a Driven Leaf* (originally published in 1939)[1] is apropos because therein both political and natural evils combine to configure the narrative; for, the Roman military's destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the arrival of the plague in Palestine, and the torture and execution of venerable rabbis, all assaulted the lived experience of the novel's principal character,

[1] Milton Steinberg, As A Driven Leaf (New York: Behrman House, 1987)

Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah. That constellation of events precipitated an insuperable conflict of faith and reason as Elisha sought certitude for faith that must be had if senseless death is to be explained and justified; for, failing that, one renounces one's faith and impugns the justice of the hidden God.

It is with reference to the hiddenness of this God that the twentieth century's singular experience with Nazi genocide during World War II cast a dark shadow of desperation over the *meaning* of all human existence. For, as Talmud scholar David Kraemer (b. 1955) put it, "Religions make sense of life by making sense of death."[2] That shadow was darkest especially for European Jews who were Torah-observant and lived according to the oral law (*halacha*). In virtue of this trusting observance of the laws, commandments, and ordinances they believed in the blessings of God in this life and in the afterlife. Absent that, what is the point of life and death for the innumerable generations of Adam and Eve?

In contrast to genocide (conceived as a singular phenomenon of mass murder that appropriated the apparatus of modern industrial-scale technology in the Nazi "death camps"), death has had its conceptualizations within frameworks both theological and philosophical. More or less uniformly, these conceptualizations have sought to diminish psychological perceptions of death as negative and hostile, with its associated "fear and trembling" [to use the words of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)]. In this way, it was hoped, there may be some comfort for the faithful about

[2] David Kraemer, The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism (New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 3.

what may transpire when the soul (*neshama*) is called before the court of heaven (*beit din shel ma'alah*) in the time of its judgment. Therein is a hope for some kind of afterlife beyond death, a possibility to become actuality only by the decree from heaven, assuming a Jew's observance of the divine law.

But, with the singular event of Nazi genocide, given its unrelenting assault on European Jews and the Torah-observant Judaism they represented, death became a matter of *dread* rather than mere fear. Dread has no identifiable object per se in the way fear does. It calls into question the meaningfulness of both life and death: What is the point of life in view of senseless death, when no theodicy provides a persuasive account to assuage the human sense of justice due in the presence of both political and natural evils? Such a question is uttered in a moment that mingles dismay, disappointment, and bewilderment especially at the evil that men do, hence resentment against a seemingly impotent or indifferent God. For many, Nazi genocide uprooted and undermined belief in the sanctity of human life as well as belief in a transcendent, and benevolent God as revealed in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. For traditional Jews, whose self-understanding identified them as the elect of God, whose "history" as recorded in these scriptures long declared its witness of God's salvific power, their sanctification, and divine punishment, it was no longer clear that they are God's chosen, despite the authoritative word of the received scriptures and the rabbinic tradition.

Rabbis, theologians, and philosophers of religion, grappling with this seemingly meaningless event in the post-WW2 world, interrogated the possibility and necessity

of a post-Holocaust theology. This question arose with insistent, even desperate, focus. Writing in the nineteenth century, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had already called for a "transvaluation" of all human values, challenging belief in both divine *telos* and *eschaton*. His deep interrogation of the Western philosophical tradition engendered the subsequent "death of God" theology and the apologist philosophy of religion that became vogue in the early twentieth century.

Then, existentialism [such as expressed in the writings of Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)] turned away from faith altogether, declaring the absurdity of the human condition. They spoke of the necessary task of appropriating human freedom, of release from belief in divine agency and providence, thus to oppose misplaced doctrines of fate, determinism, and nihilism, each with its own manner of surrender to the absurd. In all of this, the problem of human death has been central, requiring interpretation or explanation—*if it is to be had*—other than as given in the dominant theologies of Judaism and Christianity and as further augmented in associated post-Holocaust philosophies of religion. For some among contemporary Jews, one cannot simply defer to the promise of divine justice in "the world to come."[3]

Prominent in Conservative Judaism with influences from Reconstructionist Judaism, Steinberg published his *As a Driven Leaf* narrating the lived experience of Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah, a reputed "Talmudic sage" of the Sanhedrin in the 2nd

[3] Dan Cohn-Sherbok, e.g., (in his "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," Religious Studies, Vol. 26, No. 2, June 1990, pp. 277-293, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20019409, accessed 26 September 2021) opined, "If the Jewish faith is to survive, Holocaust theology will need to incorporate a belief in the Afterlife in which the righteous of Israel who died in the death camps will receive their due reward."

century CE[4] who became scandalized as a pariah (heretic or apostate). In his youth Elisha was influenced by his father's zeal for Greek literature rather than Torah and rabbinic *halacha*.[5] And, despite his subsequent dedicated and accomplished study to become a Sage, Elisha grappled with what seemed to him the absurdity of Jewish belief. The absurdity arose from his lived experience with death, from his quest for an epistemic certitude such as he found in the method of Euclid's geometry.[6] For him the experiences of Jewish life amply contradicted the promise of divine blessings in Torah and rabbinic tradition. What, then, is a Torah-observant Jew to do in the face of such paradox?

To engage Steinberg's narrative here is to deliver a "productive" reading[7] of the text, insofar as the novel suggests he was struggling (for himself, for his congregation)

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[4] Richard Claman, "A Philosophical Note on As A Driven Leaf," Zeramim: An Online Journal of Applied Jewish Thought, Vol. III, Issue 2, Winter 2018-2019/5779, 55-73. Claman cites Catherine. Hezser, The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), pp. 186-187, for the claim of scholarly "consensus" that there is no evidence for the existence of a Sanhedrin in the period 70-220 CE, in which case Steinberg's narrative in the novel associating various rabbis with the Sanhedrin is a speculative construction within the frame of his didactic narrative.

[5] This historical stage of rabbinic oral tradition ('mishnah' meaning "repeated tradition") would have been multifarious and unsettled in script, with the tradition of the Mishnah and the Braitha (c. 50-200 CE) having been in process in relation to the opinions of rabbis (c. last century BCE through 3rd century CE). On the latter see Martin S. Jaffee, "Oral Tradition in the Writings of Rabbinic Oral Torah: On Theorizing Rabbinic Orality," Oral Tradition, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1999, 3-32, https://journal.oraltradition.org/wp-content/uploads/files/articles/14i/4_jaffee.pdf, accessed 16 July 2021. Also see David Weis Halivni, Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[6] Though Steinberg associates Elisha with Euclidean geometry, there is something of Kierkegaard's quest; for, Elisha searches for what Kierkegaard desired—as he put it—to live "a completely human life and not merely one of knowledge," basing his thought "upon something that is bound up with the deepest roots of [his] existence, through which [he would be], so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which [he could] cling fast even though the whole world may collapse." See here Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. The Essential Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), "Early Journal Entries," p. 9.

[7] The concept comes from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). See here Gadamer's Truth and Method, 2nd Ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) and Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. D. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

with questions concerning the relation of faith and reason, for which problem he engaged theology, rabbinic tradition, and philosophy. *As a Driven Leaf* discloses elements of Steinberg's philosophical bent of mind and his effort to respond to rabbinic tradition in view of his philosophical training. It is a work that, in present reading, works to *rehabilitate* or otherwise *initiate* a "redemptive" view of the "pariah" Elisha ben Abuyah. Read in a "post-Holocaust" comportment (and this is the "productive" element of the interpretation delivered here), *As a Driven Leaf* speaks—ahead of its time[8]—simultaneously to the twain problems of death and loss of belief. It speaks such that, were one to jump ahead to the post-Holocaust time of Jewish disquiet, instability, and loss of foundation in a prior faith, all who have been placed in that position by the facts of Nazi genocide could, like Elisha, be rehabilitated, redeemed, welcomed to remain as "Jews" despite their having turned away (about which more below).

As with the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and the Roman oppression of the Jews of Palestine in Elisha's time, the Nazi genocide elicited an interrogation of Jewish suffering and the problem of theodicy. Israeli Supreme Court president Aaron Barak (b. 1936), e.g., took a position representative of

[8] Consider Lou H. Silberman (1915-2006) writing in his review of Steinberg's The Anatomy of Faith (Judaism, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 1961, 86), who cites Arthur A. Cohen's "Introduction" to say that, "Cohen suggests the transitional nature of Steinberg's position. He writes of certain individuals who 'summarize in themselves so much that was best in their environment that they anticipate and instruct the future without consciously shaping it….'" (emphasis added).

one line of thought[9] in remarking: "I do not believe that God exists. In my view the Holocaust is irreconcilable with the existence of God."[10] Eminent Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein (1924-2021)—denominated by some as "the theologian of the Holocaust"[11]—wrote *After Auschwitz*, asserting: "The real objections against a personal or theistic God come from the irreconcilability of the claim of God's perfection with the hideous human evil tolerated by such a God"[12]—as with the evil of Nazi genocide. Rubenstein asserted his moral judgment much as did the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880): "A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent." Infinite cruelty and hopeless indifference in a supposedly benevolent God do not square with a human concept of justice.

In contrast, Jewish philosopher and Reform Rabbi Emil Fackenheim (1916-2003) chose otherwise, proposing that all surviving Jews adhere to the "614th *mitzvah*",

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[9] Referencing Reeve Robert Brenner's empirical study of Holocaust survivors, John K. Roth (b. 1940) comments in his "The Silence of God," Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Vol. 1, No. 4, 01 October 1984, pp. 407-420, https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol1/iss4/5, accessed 10 October 2021, p. 412: "Far from irresistibly driving survivors away from belief in God, the Holocaust draws out many different views, thus suggesting that post-Holocaust religious options are not simply reducible to affirmation of one God or of none at all. It remains possible, of course, to label all affirmations of God incredible, and the Holocaust led significant numbers to do so. Along with the sheer diversity of affirmative views held by others, they underscore that no single idea about God will ever be acceptable to all." Roth refers to Brenner's The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors (New York: The Free Press, 1980). My thanks to Richard Claman for pointing me to Brenner's and Roth's publications.

[10] Reuven Hammer, "To believe or not to believe," The Jerusalem Post, 22 May 2008, https://www.jpost/com/jewish-world/judaism/to-believe-or-not-to-believe, accessed 29 May 2021.

[11] Jocelyn Hellig, "Richard L. Rubenstein: Theologian of the Holocaust," Journal for the Study of Religion, Vol. 1, No. 2, September 1988, pp. 53-65.

[12] Richard L. Rubenstein, After Auschwitz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 86.

which he added to the 613 *mitzvot* pronounced by Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138-1204). "Jews are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories," Fackenheim stipulated;[13] for, Jews have a *moral* imperative to survive *as Jews*. In the face of the unprecedented evil of the Holocaust and the demonic in human beings, "To despair of the God of Israel is to continue Hitler's work for him." Survival is above all essential for Jews; but also for humanity, lest all forget the demonic in human nature. Fackenheim elaborated his commandment: Jews are "commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish"; "to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish"; "forbidden to despair of Man, lest they co-operate in delivering the world to the forces of Auschwitz"; forbidden "to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish." In all of this, the death of a people, the purported death of God, and the prospective death of a religion are conjoined, thus to interrogate the foundation of Jewish belief.

Like Fackenheim, Steinberg understood the rational and emotive dimensions of judgments against and in favor of a post-Holocaust Jewish faith,[14] even though it is difficult to identify a "theology" in his works that speaks directly to the Jewish experience of Nazi genocide. Steinberg understood the significance of possessing a sound systematic theology in the post-World War period, but supplemented by a pragmatic pastoral theology. His writings such as are published in his *Basic Judaism* (1947) and *A Believing Jew* (1951) manifest his inclination for a "normative" Judaism that

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[13] Emil Fackenheim, "Faith in God and Man After Auschwitz: Theological Implications," Yad Vashem—April 2002, http://www.holocaust-trc.org/faith-in-god-and-man-after-auschwitz-theological-implications/, accessed 30 May 2021.

[14] Milton Steinberg, Anatomy of Faith (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960)

combines faith and reason, each within its epistemic limits. Yet, it is Steinberg's literary imagination that incorporates the fundaments of Jewish belief so as to speak to the uncanny relation of life and death, faith and reason.

In Steinberg's portrayal, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah knew of death from early in his childhood. His mother died in childbirth, his loving and devoted father dying a decade later, before Elisha became of age for a decisive dedication to rabbinic life. Indeed, perhaps it is in the character of Elisha that Steinberg discloses something of his own quest for self-understanding in the struggle of a life lived between faith and reason, between theology and philosophy, and in his effort to communicate that understanding for the edification of a post-Holocaust Jewry.[15]

Steinberg was clear about his own break with the received tradition even as he worked for the preservation of some basics, e.g., "[believing] in the immortality of the soul" but not "in the future raising to life of the bodies of the dead."[16] Observing the rituals of Judaism's weekly Sabbaths and holy days (High Sabbaths), Steinberg would link past and present in the unity of a pastoral message. His son Jonathan Steinberg (1934-2021) related the following example:

[15] Reference here is to words of Arthur A. Cohen (1928-1986), cited in Jonathan Steinberg, "Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi—Thoughts on his Centenary," Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 95, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 579-600, DOI:10.1353/jqr.2005.0060, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/185082/pdf, accessed 29 May 2021.

[16] Ibid.

On the second night of Rosh Hashanah in 1944 he preached one of his greatest sermons on the extermination of the Jews of Seraye, his father's native shtetl in Lithuania. Later he rewrote it under the title "When I Think of Seraye," which was delivered to the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] in 1945 and published in *The Reconstructionist* in 1946.

> Sometimes when I think about Seraye, I am ashamed to be a human being, ashamed to be a member of a species which could perpetrate the evil done to Seraye and almost as much ashamed of the supposedly good people of the world who stood by when the evil was being perpetrated and who stand idle now.[17]

Shame can lead to despair, of course, especially when one finds the Jewish people impotent to counter and prevail over countless and repeated manifestations of evil in pogroms and genocide. But the reality of death, even mass genocide, cannot permit a pastoral rabbi the human response that settles there. Rather than surrender to the inexplicable, Steinberg sought to salvage what faith was yet to be had. According to his "The Theological Issues of the Hour" (1949), he had "long shared in the exaggerated optimism of our age concerning man's goodness."[18] Those who sought reform of Jewish tradition reminded him of what he had overlooked before: "They have reminded

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[17] Steinberg's successor at the Park Avenue Synagogue, Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove (in his Pesach Sermon, "The Question of Suffering," 10 April 2020, https://pasyn.org/sermon/question-suffering, accessed 22 September 2021) reports Steinberg to have said further: "I have been thinking about Seraye a great deal of late [because] I cannot think of all of Europe's Jews, the six million dead, the one and a half million walking skeletons. Such numbers are too large for me to embrace, the anguish they represent is too vast for my comprehension. And so, I think of Seraye instead…Sometimes when I think of Seraye, I want to hurl hard words at God, that terrible saying of Abraham; 'Shall the Judge of the whole earth not do Justice?!'"

[18] Ibid. p. 593; citing Noveck, Milton Steinberg, pp. 191-192.

me of the depth and tenacity of evil in human nature." Indeed, he added, being a creature of self-love "[man] is more inclined toward evil, and even when he wills the good, it will tend, owing to his self-love, to come out less good than he purposed, most often indeed not good at all." Even so, "conscious with Kierkegaard of the human ordeal and peril", Steinberg insisted, Judaism "does not yield to [Kierkegaard's] despair. It knows that man is stronger, and God is greater in justice and mercy, than he allowed."[19]

For Steinberg, Judaism can appropriate the divine promise of human redemption, even while acknowledging Kierkegaard's fear and trembling. To accept the *eschaton* of divine judgment after death is not to surrender to it as if one is therefore condemned by it, even if one falls short of a theodicy that makes sense of the political evil of Nazi genocide or the natural evil of a pandemic plague. Steinberg left the legacy of being a "prisoner of hope," as his son Jonathan put it, expressed in his systematic, pastoral, and fictional writings. We turn then to the imaginative writing of his novel, focusing on the manner in which death is portrayed therein and on the linkage of the twain problems of death and loss of belief.

"Death" in *As a Driven Leaf*: Connecting Past and Present

Philosopher Baruch Brody (1943-2018) opined that, "A fundamental belief of Judaism is the belief in reward and punishment; those who follow God's law will be

[19] Ibid. p. 596; citing "A Mystical Note," American Jewish Historical Society, SP P-369, folder 1, pp. 150-151.

rewarded for doing so, and those who do not will be punished for failing to do so [...] And indeed we find in the Mishnah [...] a belief in the resurrection of the dead and a belief in punishment in Gehinom for at least a limited period of time."[20] These two beliefs are fundamental to the Jewish hope in blessings of an afterlife and cause in this life for dread at the prospect of divine judgment. Given its "canonical texts" (Mishnah, Tosefta, Midrashim, and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds) in a long tradition of disputation and commentary, rabbinic Judaism presents the Jew with varied meanings of death.[21] At its core, however, as Rabbi Benjamin Mintz (1927-2021) put it, "death is a tear in the fabric of existence."[22] For a survivor of the Holocaust such as Jean Améry (1912-1978), it is *necessary* yet *impossible* to *be* a Jew after having become a living witness to the catastrophe that haunted his own existence consequent to his imprisonment, daily torture, and witness to mass murder in Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen.[23]

How, then, can a Jew such as Améry *live* with what he called the "inner oppression" at the very core of his existence? How was he to *pray* the daily morning prayer (as the *Siddur* instructs, following the tradition of the Talmud), giving thanks to

[20] Baruch Brody, "Jewish Reflections on the Resurrection of the Dead," The Torah U-Madda Journal, Vol. 17, 2016-2017, pp. 93-122, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26203062.pdf, accessed 08 June 2021.

[21] See Kraemer, op. cit.

[22] Benjamin W. Mintz, "Religious Approaches to Death and Dying: The Jewish Approach," Jurist, Vol. 59, No. 1, 1999, pp. 161-174, https://scholarship.law.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1300&context=scholar, accessed 07 June 2021. (N.B. The paper has since been withdrawn from the site; Rabbi Mintz died in April 2021.)

[23] See here Jean Améry, "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," New German Critique, Spring-Summer 1980, No. 20, Special Issue 2: Germans and Jews, pp. 15-29.

God who daily preserves the soul within and promises to restore it after death in the "world to come" (*olam ha-ba*), though the body suffers a tortured death in this world? When he witnessed countless "deaths" in the "death factories," should he—as prescribed by the Talmudic *Tractate Berachot* (54a)—have asserted with every death he witnessed, with sincere piety, that God is a "righteous judge" ("*Baruch dayan emet*")? Améry understood what it meant for him to live "at the mind's limit" as he contemplated the ghastly unfathomable realities of Auschwitz.[24] Having lived at that limit, he later wrote of suicide as "voluntary" death, and then, losing his trust in the world, voluntarily surrendered his life in 1978. He did not—could not—believe in the God of Israel, though he was, as he said, a "Catastrophe Jew"—attested daily by the binding reality of the six digit Auschwitz number on his left forearm.

In the time of Roman oppression of Jews in Palestine, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah likewise lived at the mind's limit as he sought to make sense of the paradoxes of life in the face of inscrutable Jewish suffering and death.[25] Elisha understood the relation of life and death according to his tradition. Elisha's mother died in the trauma of his birth, Elisha's father Abuyah declaring the cost unacceptable, Elisha's life "bought at too high a price." But, "such are the bargains God forces on man," Abuyah lamented, as he reproached the God in whom his community believed for the death of his beloved wife. At Elisha's rite of circumcision, his godfather Rabbi Eliezer prayed that the boy be

[24] See here Jean Améry, At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

[25] See Norman K. Swazo, "Rabbi Elisha Ben Abuyah 'At the Mind's Limit': Between Theodicy and Fate," Philosophy and Literature, Vol. 38, No. 1, April 2014, pp. 153-168, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/552605/pdf, accessed 27 September 2021.

blessed "with a believing heart," while Rabbi Joshua, his second godfather, prayed that Elisha be led into "the study of our holy Law [...] into a life of good deeds." Abuyah, however, declined to pray the father's customary blessing: "'Not I,' Abuyah answered bitterly. 'I have never believed nor observed. Shall I begin now by thanking a God in whom I have no faith for the death of my wife and the mutilation of my child?" Years later, on his deathbed, Abuyah reflected on his own imminent death. According to the teachings of the Jewish elders, as he knew, he must "drink from the cup of wrath" for his "devotion to an alien wisdom" and disavowal of his people's God.

In time, under the tutelage of Rabbi Joshua, Elisha learned from the transmitted works of the Jewish tradition and the law written in "the book of nature." He learned also of the sorts of questions faithful brethren brought to the Sanhedrin for clarification, questions that perhaps disclose Steinberg's philosophical bent of mind and the questions he himself had to ponder in a post-Holocaust world: "Might the evil of the world be imputed to minor angelic beings without impugning the sovereignty of God? [...] Was it heresy to deny the resurrection of the body if one believed in the immortality of the soul?" Answers to such questions have their implications for the Jewish conception of death.

As Brody put it, "The centrality of the belief in the resurrection of the dead is stressed in the Mishnah where it is ruled that there are two beliefs whose denial results in the denier losing a share in the world to come: the belief in the Torah is from heaven and the belief in the resurrection of the dead. But this *mishnah* also introduces the concept of the world to come (*olam ha-ba*), since that is what is denied to the sinner

who does not believe in either of these beliefs."[26] Thus, a Torah-observant Jew prays thrice daily that God is "one who 'keeps his faith with those who sleep in the ground' because he 'gives life to the dead'."[27] Elisha would have to face these questions as part of his own experience dealing with death. At the time of his uncle Amram's death, Elisha received his uncle's benediction, satisfied that he had set Elisha "firmly" in the ways of his people, away from the heathen books of the Greeks and, in particular, far removed from the unbelief of his deceased father, Abuyah.

Some time later, having been married according to tradition and not for love, Elisha's wife Deborah suffered two miscarriages in a little over a year, never to conceive again. Elisha moved on with his life, an obvious emotional distance growing with Deborah as he found himself often dismayed and rankled by his wife's "injudicious" remarks, his courtesy to her measured with "a thin cold covering of resentment." So much for the realization of blessings hoped for in the benedictions of their union under God's providence.

In time, advancing in his training in the wisdom of his people's tradition, Elisha became a Sage in his own right, ordained as Rabbi, declared an Elder in Israel, a member of the Sanhedrin, a "Companion to all the Scholars and Sages," one

[26] Brody, op. cit. p. 94.

[27] Ibid. p. 95.

authorized to judge matters of law and ritual, purity and impurity, and to interpret the Law and the tradition. Such was the promise of his long years of study.

During the early years of his work as a scholar and sage Elisha faced death in a way that challenged his faith at the depths of his soul. The plague had entered Palestine through the seaports and many were stricken, the physicians helpless to heal the suffering and save the people from the Angel of Death. His disciple Meir Baal Haness and Meir's loving wife Beruriah, along with Elisha, faced the calamity of the pestilence as it struck the twin boys of the loving couple, even as Elisha recalled other deaths in the community taken away by the dreadful scourge. "God is just and merciful," Steinberg writes in the murmured voice of Elisha on the Sabbath day, hallowed in its dedication to God and its separation from the profane days of the week. Steinberg's masterful manner of speech, written in the scene of anxious parents faced with the death of their children, cannot be gainsaid, as Beruriah relates a story to her devoted husband Meir in the hearing of Elisha on their return from the synagogue and the day's devotions:

> 'A man came to see me some years ago,' she said in a voice quiet and half-hypnotic. 'He left in my care for safekeeping two precious stones. Today, just before you returned, he appeared again. I am loathe to part with them. Tell me, must I give them back to him?'

Steinberg's imagery is pregnant with anticipation, portraying this loving mother's tortured conflict on this particular Sabbath day as she tended with all due and loving care to her ailing children. The question, directed to her husband in the presence of his master Elisha, required Meir to answer truthfully:

> 'Of course,' Meir responded guardedly. 'They never really were your property, no matter how long you have held them. But why is it so still here? Are the children asleep? Why do you talk such strange matters?' His voice faded to a whisper, word by word. 'Why do you say nothing about the boys?'
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> Without waiting for an answer, Meir turned toward the children's chamber, moved as if to enter and then stopped, struck with sudden comprehension. Like one in a trance, he came back until his face was close to Beruriah's. He stood staring into her eyes, waiting for the interpretation of the parable he dreaded to hear.
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> Beruriah raised both hands to her quivering lips.
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> 'The jewels,' she said, through her fingers, 'are in that room.'
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> In the feeble light of the lone flame the face of Meir was transfixed. He pushed abruptly into the children's chamber. For a moment there was only silence behind the swaying curtains. Then through it there cut the horrible rasp of rending cloth. Elisha covered his face. He knew that sound. It was the tearing of a garment in the presence of death.

That sound, that rending of cloth,[28] we must recall as noted earlier, has its profound significance beyond that single moment of death: *Death is a tear in the fabric of existence*—in this case, for Beruriah, for Meir, for Elisha, each faced with an inscrutable moment in time. What else could Meir say now that the interpretation of the parable

[28] In the Torah (Genesis 37:34), the patriarch Jacob rends his cloth consequent to his belief that his beloved son Joseph has been killed. This practice becomes part of halacha as an expression of loss and bereavement.

was clear? The tradition gave him his words: "'The Lord hath given,' he droned, 'the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the righteous judge.'"[29]

Such were the "fitting words" of benediction to be pronounced according to his faith, and so Meir uttered them through his deeply felt pain and then wept as a father must at the surrender of the two precious jewels God had entrusted to him but for a short while. And Elisha? Steinberg links this fateful moment to Elisha's loss of his own through Deborah's two miscarriages: "And Elisha, to whom these children had become as his own might have been, dug his fists into his chest to keep his tortured heart from breaking." This moment tore the fabric of Elisha's existence, never again to be mended, the required week of mourning disclosing to him "the seething chaos of his anguish."[30] Despite continuing his rabbinical duties thereafter, Elisha remained perturbed. Steinberg presents the scene of Elisha's agony:

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[29] Steinberg's representation of Beruriah's remarks is from Midrash Proverbs 37:76-29, but perhaps also recalls the narrative according to which the sage Rabbi Elazar ben Arach offered consolation to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai when he lost his son. Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson, "Chapter 9: Losing a Child," https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/3240790/jewish/Chapter-9-Losing-a-Child.htm, accessed 06 July 2021, provides the narrative, thus: "A king entrusted one of his subjects with a precious object to keep safe for him, and the man worried incessantly, for he had to return this object to the king undamaged. Only when he returned the precious thing to the king intact was he relieved of his anxiety. You, my teacher, are in the same situation. You had a son who has left this world without sin. Let it be a consolation that you have returned to God in a perfect state what he entrusted to you." For further opinion as to Steinberg's sources, see Rabbi Professor David Golinkin, "As a Driven Leaf by Rabbi Milton Steinberg—Notes and Sources, Responsa in a Moment, Vol. 9, No. 7, July 2015, https://schechter.edu/as-a-driven-leaf-by-rabbi-milton-steinberg-notes-and-sources-responsa-in-a-moment-volume-9-issue-no-7-july-2015/, accessed 10 October 2021.

[30] Though the two boys were sons of Rabbi Meir, Elisha had come to love them as his own. In this sense his loss is multifold—that from his wife's two miscarriages plus the death of Meir's boys. In this sense, it can be said that Elisha suffered starkly what Jacob did when he characterized the loss of his son Joseph as "shakhul," a word, Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider remarks, "specifically for parents who endure the bitterness and pain of child loss." See Aaron Goldscheider, "A Permanent Tear: On the Loss of a Child," The Jewish Week, 08 December 2014, https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/a-permanent-tear-on-the-loss-of-a-child/, accessed 07 July 2021.

> On his long journey to Jamnia, at the sessions of the Sanhedrin, pain continued to flow through him like a deep unfailing river, pain for two little boys who would never laugh or weep again, pain for Meir and Beruriah, who behind the drawn veils of pallid, impassive countenances, restrained gestures and considered speech, were wrestling each with a private horror too monstrous for him to conceive.

Steinberg's choice of words here paints a picture of death that combines the horrible and the monstrous, both beyond an ordinary conception of human suffering. The Angel of Death had come and taken away what was too cherished to be lost to an unspeakable and incurable malady. How can a benevolent and beneficent God permit such a private horror, such a monstrosity, when the doctrines of the Torah and the tradition speak of blessings to those who obey the commandments of God? Where was God's justice in all of this, when Meir and Beruriah had both shown themselves devoted to the ways commanded by the Torah and teachings of the Sages?[31] Even on that dreadful Sabbath in which the precious jewels were taken away, thus to make an otherwise sacred day wholly profane, Beruriah had shaken the spice box "so that the Sabbath angels might depart in a cloud of fragrance…" And so, some days shortly thereafter, breathing in the autumn breeze as he looked out upon the land, Elisha "was reminded of the heavy fragrance of the spice box, and he knew then that always the scented dusks of Sabbaths would be associated with tragic memories."

[31] Steinberg would not have accepted the theodicy—or, as he termed it, "this primitive philosophy"—according to which "God treated with Israel as a unit," such that if some members of the House of Israel sinned against God then God punished Israel as a whole. Nor would he, citing the protesting dissent of "the Apocalypse of Ezra," accept the subsequent rabbinic "theodical calculus" that promised injustice rectified in the world to come. See here Steinberg's "Job Answers God: Being the Religious Perplexities of an Obscure Pharisee," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 1932, pp. 159-176, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1196999, accessed 21 September 2021.

Thus began Elisha's interrogation of the paradoxes of human existence as he asked in view of the death of the two boys from the dreadful plague: "where were the justice and mercy of that God?" The paradoxes were innumerable, even as he knew he ought not impugn the justice of God (Job 40:8), since it is axiomatic that a mortal cannot be more righteous than God (Job 4:17). Yet, it had been written in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die;" and so Elisha uttered the protest of his conscience with its mounting doubt: "Where was the offense of those two innocents?" Is one to ignore the manner of their death in view of belief in God's justice rendered in the world to come? "No future bliss would render less wanton a present cruelty," Steinberg wrote in expression of Elisha's thoughts. Where was the power of the dicta of the Sages from whom he had learned? "Was there in all the realms of the Tradition no light equal to the menacing darkness? Were its doctrines so weak against reality, so impotent to save when the challenge of evil crowded close and would not be denied? A vast inchoate misgiving welled up in him." With these words Steinberg presents, for all to see, the challenge to faith that arises in moments of death perceived to be unjust by human measure.

The plague that took the lives of Beruriah's precious jewels was thus the onset of the plague of persistent and unresolved doubt that infected Elisha from that day forward. Turning introspective, Elisha did not immediately listen to the warning of Rabbi Eliezer to the Jews that the plague that was abroad in the world was not just the one that destroyed the body, but also the "plague of godlessness and immorality" that was caused by "the cultivation of pagan wisdom" which contaminated his Jewish

brethren: "there are those in our midst, here among us, entrusted to preserve the sacred faith of our fathers, who sanction and defend this fornication of the spirit." Accordingly, he proposed total isolation from that plague. But, aligning with his godfather Rabbi Joshua in the spirited debate in the Sanhedrin, Elisha voted against Eliezer's proposal.[32]

Having in his youth received from his father Abuyah and tutor Nicholaus instruction in the wisdom of the Greeks, Elisha understood from that vantage point one vital truth: "To the death of Meir's children they would not have responded with an assertion of divine rectitude." That was for him, in that moment of introspection, a valid dissent from the dicta of the scriptures and the exegeses of the Sages, though it be said in protest that if "truth is the seal of God" then it is to be found only in the Law and Tradition of his people. But, the implication of Elisha's doubt was clear: "if the authority of Scripture were shaken, then there was no firm basis for the Tradition which rested upon it." The oral law (*halacha*) expounded in rabbinic tradition, in short, derived from and depended upon the written law of the Torah, the teachings of the

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[32] It is to be noted, as Rabbi Jacob Neusner (1932-2016) observed, in his The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism, (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 98, that it is a "quite remarkable quality of the intellectual character distinguishing the Mishnaic age in the formation of Judaism" to present in that text of codified oral law "the persistent introduction of conflicting opinion, in the form […] of the opposed and conflicting positions of two named sages, both of which as a matter of definition cannot be right." Thus, furthermore, as Neusner adds (p. 99), "as the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmuds themselves realized, the Pentateuchal laws do not form an internally harmonious statement but set forth rules in conflict with one another." In their methods of exegesis the rabbis offer only opinion subject to contestation, not apodictic certainty—a fact by no means lost on Elisha as he found himself faced with the contradiction of doctrine and lived experience. Thus, one must distinguish between "justification that appeals to tradition (gemara)" and "justification that appeals to reason or logical deduction (sevara)." See here Moulie Vidas, "Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud," PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, September 2009, University Microfiche Number 3378029, ProQuest LLC, Ann Arbor, Michigan; subsequently published under the same title in 2014 by Princeton University Press.

Prophets, and the Writings. If the Scriptures as foundation for the oral law are shaken by radical doubt that diminishes the warrant for appeal to the truth of divine revelation, then the works of the scholars and sages likewise lose their authority. That proposition was unsettling in its disturbance of Elisha's mind. His experience of the death of Meir's twin boys as an inexplicable horror moved him along, gradually but surely leaving him to "totter" at "the brink of apostasy."

Steinberg thus presents Elisha as one soundly trained in the Law and the Tradition, yet as one who in his all-too-human response to death falters in his belief, his recovery entirely uncertain. Such was Elisha's "crisis" of faith—his moment of fateful decision—as he faced a future increasingly darkened by his compulsion to settle his doubt or, failing that, be overcome by it. The central question was at hand: "Now what other function could there be for reason except to corroborate the truths of revelation?" On a chance meeting in Caesarea, his old tutor Nicholaus offered him his friendly counsel in genuine solicitude, as Elisha purchased Greek texts for him and his closest associates to study, as they engaged the central question he had posed. "Go back to your people and its traditions and be happy," Nicholaus tells him. "Why should you open a Pandora's box in your heart or sow your mind with dragons' teeth?" But Elisha's refrain said it all: "The box is already opened."

Steinberg portrays Elisha's growing power of insidious disputation as, over the course of two years of study of Greek texts with Rabbis Simeon ben Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, and Akiba ben Yosef, Elisha met their expositions incisively with questions so "detestable" that they "exploded" the eloquence of the rabbis to nil effect. The

foundation for faith—proofs formulated alike to the propositions of Euclid's systematic logic that Elisha sought—remained wanting. The methods of the disputants were at odds, the rabbis employing their skill in exegesis, Elisha all the while seeking apodictic demonstration. Hence, Steinberg wrote, "After two years of travail [Elisha] was no nearer to serenity," the quest for an unshakeable foundation manifesting its futility. And, as he learned time and again, as he said, "We all want more than life permits." Such, Steinberg suggests, are the limits to human understanding that God has imposed.

But, alas, the Angel of Death struck yet again as Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai, having studied the Gnostic texts in seeking to assist Elisha, realized that he had sought the divine in all the wrong ways, that the body was a barrier to the sight of the transcendent God, and that he would have to limit it to overcome that barrier. Then, while the three were at ben Azzai's home awaiting his entry from his study, the rabbi entered as if blinded and in a daze, speaking words of seeming intoxication, "chanting a strange perversion of the Song of Songs," turning to face the wall, calling out to somewhere unknown: "Now do I, Simeon the son of Azzai—see—I see…" he said as he slipped to the floor. "'He is dead,' Akiba cried out incredulously. 'Blessed be the Righteous Judge.'" And so said Elisha and ben Zoma, as well.

In the days that followed, whether said or unsaid by anyone who knew of the four rabbis, Elisha declared to Nicholaus, "It is taken for granted pretty generally that in some devious way I who loved him dearly, who owed him so much, am responsible for what befell Simeon […] I cannot help feeling that had he not tried to help me, he might never have met so sudden, so tragic an end." Driven yet in his quest, he explains

to Nicholaus what it is he sought: "I am seeking a theology, a morality, a ritual, confirmed by logic in the fashion of geometry so that one need not forever wonder whether what he believes is true."

Steinberg's Conservative Jewish alignment perhaps speaks through Nicholaus's pointed refrain: "Do you think man capable of attaining certainty in these matters? Do you imagine that life is as simple as lines, points and planes to be reduced to a series of propositions?" Perhaps, in short, Elisha's "obsession" with the logic of Euclidean method was too costly even as it was misplaced in its guiding assumptions. Steinberg presents the learned and devoted Rabbi Joshua to have said, as the militant Jews of Palestine were assembled to consider a rebellion against the might of Rome, "It is not given in our present world order for men to be absolutely free"—thus, the elect of God neither free of doubt, of suffering, nor of death, even horrible death inflicted by the cruelty of the Roman military in their governance of Palestine or a dreadful disease such as the plague.

To that assertion the dictum may be added that, it is not given in our present world order for men such as Elisha to possess an unshakeable and indubitable rational foundation for faith, in which case neither faith nor reason alone is sufficient to explain or deduce fully the causes of human misery and death, much less the existence and nature of a hidden God. The rabbis issue forth their exegeses in untiring disputation accounting for the Law and the Tradition, even as philosophers formulate proofs accounting for multifarious logics, all with inevitable incompleteness in results. In the end, however, each person surveys these learned doctrines for him- and her-self, faced

inescapably with a fateful decision that either tries to mend the torn fabric of existence or, failing that, lives and dies suspended always and at all times over an abyss, the depths of which perhaps shall never be fathomed or covered over by the best of human reason.

Yet, Elisha took Job as the measure of his quest, of what he deemed the consequence of a "stark inner compulsion" rather than a volition he could otherwise set aside: "Job who stood before the inscrutable universe and demanded an answer to its mystery. It did not reply. Therefore he repeated his question, hurling it again and again into its unresponsive face." Elisha could do no less as he tried to work his way through his seemingly insuperable psychic injury caused by the inexplicable death of the twin sons of Meir and Beruriah, even as he himself said at one point, that he had to confront "the inquisition of his own conscience" as it protested the consequences of his insistent interrogation of his faith. The Roman commander in Palestine added to Elisha's dismay at the hideousness of death—a "diversity of horrors" that had him "despise his senses"—as he witnessed torturous crucifixions and burnings at the stake of those among his brethren who had fomented rebellion against Rome's oppression, as well as beloved rabbis suffering grievous modes of execution.

Steinberg's "normative," yet conservative, Judaism perhaps has its expression in Rabbi Akiba's remarks to Elisha as he defended his faith against Elisha's doubt as they with all haste sought some refuge away from the ghastly scene of Roman torture. For Akiba, and perhaps also in testimony of Steinberg's pragmatic comportment, "there is a higher logic, a rationality that springs from the necessities of human nature."

Accepting that, Akiba added, "Does not man face life with greater assurance if he believes that a benevolent providence foresees the future? And yet he must at the same time be confident that his will is free, otherwise moral effort is meaningless altogether." Indeed, he continued, acknowledging Elisha's disquiet: "As for our people, persecuted and dispersed, they live under the shadow of death, cherishing a dream that is recurrently shattered by the caprice of tyrants and then dreamed again half in despair. What can enable such a people to persist except a conviction of a special relationship to God?" But, of course, Elisha could not but retort from the fount of his undeterred intellect: "And the objective truth of that conviction?" Where is that to be found? Akiba would not defer to the deductive certitude of syllogistic logic such as Elisha demanded. For him it is the *consequence* of belief, the *effect* of belief, the pragmatic comportment in life that matters: "If any doctrine enlarges life, then it possesses a truth in realms beyond Aristotle's logic."

Still, Elisha remained without the objectivity he required for belief. And, in due course, his plight would suffer its next assault. Steinberg describes the last incident of Elisha's lived experience that united with the first in the deaths of Meir's twins. This one delivered the final cut to the fraying thread that held him to his faith and to his people. It was a serene evening at sunset, Elisha with other Elders present in a garden after the conclusion of their day's deliberations. A peasant with his son were observed moving round a lone tall tree, the man directing the boy to get the eggs from the nest, but in doing so to be sure that he first send the mother bird away. As the Sages watched the boy climb the tree, a Sage spoke: "That boy will live long [...] for

observe, in one act he is fulfilling two commandments, the reward of which is expressly stated as [prolonged] length of days." As the mother bird's wings fluttered to flee the nest and as the boy came near it, "a terrible cry shattered the silence. A sprawling body plummeted downward. Simultaneously a deeper voice sounded, inarticulate with panic." As the Sages rushed to the scene and determined the boy to be dead, to the inexplicable horror of his father, again Elisha heard the familiar benediction spoken, "Blessed be the Righteous Judge."

Steinberg continues the moving narrative of this scene: "Elisha trembled from head to foot. A cold perspiration covered him. Nausea writhed through his entrails [...] A wild protest stormed up in him against the horror of it, its wanton cruelty." And then, "A great negation crystallized in him." Refusing to hear the rationalizations of the Sages, Elisha decried the scene of contradiction: "It is all a lie [...] There is no reward. There is no judge. There is no judgment. For there is no God." Such was the final blow of death upon Elisha's fragile mind and the public evidence of his apostasy that the Sanhedrin could not overlook.

But the Angel of Death would not yield and leave Elisha in peace. After he had fled Palestine for Antioch, there to seek out the wisdom of the Greeks to find the certitude he lacked from the Torah and the Tradition, Elisha would hear the dreadful news from his friend Pappas that the Sanhedrin had indeed excommunicated him, but that his godfather Rabbi Joshua and his friend Rabbi Akiba did not vote against him. Nonetheless, in his grief at this sad outcome, contrary to his prior judgments, Rabbi

Joshua called for a vote to outlaw all reading of the Greeks,[33] which was adopted forthwith, and then, as Steinberg writes, Rabbi Joshua returned to his home and died a rueful death. On hearing this, Elisha once again felt deeply the tear in the fabric of his existence as he rent his garment in "guilty sorrow, regret, remorse," indeed rending all his garments, in remembrance of a ritual of respect due his beloved godfather, though he was a believer no more.

Even so, Elisha persisted in the renunciation of his old faith. Over the course of several years he read much of the Greek scrolls, including its epic literature. It had its beauty, he admitted, but he was disturbed by what he found therein—"stark fear, artfully concealed, [...] an aura of yearning and regret, [...] melancholy stirred, the more desperate because unspoken. [...] The poet loved life so ardently because in the end he despised it for its meaninglessness and futility." All was not well with the worldview of the Greeks, as the history scrolls he read informed him of successions of wars: "Thousands of lives had been extinguished in each generation, millions had been subjected to bereavement, pain and misery...all to no point or purpose." Even the *Pax Romana* under which he had lived in Palestine could have no undisputed saving grace.

And, as for Greek philosophy, perhaps Steinberg expresses his own view through the character Demonax, a moralist who, when visiting Antioch, tells Elisha their methods differ essentially. Elisha thinks philosophy "a method of discovering the

[33] It is written in the Mishnah (Sotah 9:14) that a man is not to teach Greek to his son. Then, it is stated in the Gemara (commentary on the Mishnah), "Cursed...be a man who teaches his son Greek wisdom [hakhmat yevanit]!" (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 49B); see Jacob Neusner, ed., The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982-1994).

truth," whereas Demonax sees it as "an art…a guide to noble living." In short, *theoretical* philosophy will always have its limits, and all too often one must be content with a *practical* rationality that informs human conduct without an insistent certitude as to practical principles: "It is guidance in their behavior which men need, a vision of immediate, attainable objectives to which they can dedicate themselves, not high-flown schemes of reality." This much Steinberg likely accepted as he engaged his rabbinic pastoral duties rather than commit to refinement of propositions of systematic theology.

Philosophy will ever have its epistemic limits as well: "The human scene," Demonax explained to Elisha, "is not some philosopher's garden, but a confusing, dark struggle. […] Can we withdraw into books and their abstrusities when men need insight into their souls, balms for their wounds, and healing of their sorrows? [...] We dare not, for an intellectual luxury, forget our aches or those of our brothers." Indeed; for, the plague struck yet again in Antioch some time thereafter as Rome engaged the rebellion of Simon ben Kochba in Palestine. This time, as his beloved friend Manto laid on her deathbed in the last stage of the dreadful disease, Elisha "searched the wisdom of philosophy for lines which might sweeten the bitter taste of death. But among all the books he studied there was none invested with such potency." Instinctively, or by the training of his rabbinic past, he spoke the words of the psalmist again, even if without faith, as "muffled sobs escaped him" as Manto died in his arms.

Concluding Reflections

Seeking in his day "an indisputable interpretation of reality and moral system drawn from it," as Steinberg imagined, Elisha could not have known in his time what we today know about the crisis of Euclidean geometry that began a modern foundational crisis in mathematics or about Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem[34] with its "proof" that the truth-value of some mathematical propositions (well-formed formulae) in a mathematical system will remain undecidable.[35] Mathematics indeed has a methodological rigor that requires, at minimum, internal consistency of method and results (i.e., truth as coherence), but "truth" is not to be found indisputably in the correspondence of idea and reality.

Despite scholarly efforts to articulate a post-Holocaust theology for Judaism, there is no incontrovertible rationale to secure an indubitable and unshakeable foundation for the Law and Tradition that yet govern Torah-observant Jews in the conduct of their lives. As Milton Himmelfarb (1918-2006) observed, "Living with modernity, embracing and repelling it, doubting and believing—these are old experiences for religious modern Jews."[36] Our present-day vantage point, with its

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[34] Gödel (1906-1978) published his theorems in 1931. See his On Formally Undecidable Propositions in Principia Mathematica and Related Systems, trans. B. Meltzer (New York: Dover Publications, 1992).

[35] Steinberg narrates a discussion between Elisha and a philosopher named Charicles on the seeming uncertainty of the parallel postulate of Euclidean geometry, during which deliberation Elisha realized (partly under the influence of his reading of Zeno of Sidon) that this uncertainty would undermine his reliance on Euclid's method, and therefore doom his own project and reveal his quest to have been a travesty. Steinberg expresses awareness of the work of Russian mathematician Nicolai Lobachevsky (1792-1856), to wit, "that the principles of geometry are no longer as self-evident as we once thought them to be." For a review of Zeno's critique of Euclid's geometry, see Gregory Vlastos, "Zeno of Sidon as a Critic of Euclid," in L. Wallach, ed. The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 148-159.

[36] Milton Himmelfarb,"Introduction: The State of Jewish Belief—A Symposium," Commentary, August 1966, https://www.commentary.org/articles/jacob-angus-2/the-state-of-jewish-belief, accessed 28 September 2021.

"postmodern" awareness of the finitude of human knowledge (both theoretical and practical), diminishes the validity of the assumption that guided Elisha's quest for certitude about the foundations of Jewish faith. Moreover, as Steinberg opined, an *evolving God-concept* over the centuries of Jewish history unavoidably entails an *evolving theodicy* and correlative apologetics, all of which speak to present-day concerns for a Jewish theology.

Steinberg's conservative (in contrast to reconstructionist) theological inclinations meant a rejection of both the "death-of-God" theology of the early 20th century as well any decidedly rationalist "philosophical" theology; but also a rejection of the "new God" theology[37] of Reconstructionism as articulated by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983).[38] He did not take up the audacity of Job (thus to speak "words without knowledge") or of Ezra (thus to "think thoughts of vanity" and, protesting with "glorious impudence and majestic insolence," so "refuse to exonerate God of his responsibility")—despite his deep-seated inclination in the face of Nazi genocide, as he

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[37] Committed to a "metaphysics of reality" qua cosmology (in the sense of a meaningful account of the universe), Steinberg held to a concept of God as "an existential reality," notwithstanding his acceptance of the reconstructionist ethos and program of "making the world better." This means Steinberg sought a theological explanation for the problem of evil without a modernist's "Panglossian" optimism, thus in contrast to Kaplan's rejection of such "speculative" questions in favor of a pragmatics of action. See here Simon Noveck, "Chapter 6: Kaplan and Milton Steinberg: A Disciple's Agreements and Disagreements," in Emmanuel Goldsmith, et al., The American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp. 157, 158.

[38] See Mordecai Kaplan, Judaism as Civilization: Reflections on a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life (New York: Macmillan, 1934). For a more recent discussion of the so-called "new God" theology, see Mitchell Silver, A Plausible God: Secular Reflections on Liberal Jewish Theology (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

admitted in his sermon on Seraye, to "hurl hard words" that *would* impeach the justice of God in the present world, no matter the promise of felicity in the world to come.

In the end of the narrative of *As a Driven Leaf*, Steinberg perhaps discloses something of his own intellectual settlement upon the struggle that reason and faith present to one seeking a foundation such as Elisha did. Speaking to Rabbi Meir, Elisha tells his former disciple wistfully of the failure of his fateful decision, of having achieved no "heroic triumph of the intellect" such as his tutor Antiphanes in Antioch had intuited a likely outcome of his studies. Having been forced to witness the gross injustice of the Roman governor of Jerusalem as the Elders of the Sanhedrin were flayed, beheaded, and murdered at the stake in a public spectacle in the city's amphitheater, Elisha confessed the lesson of his contempt: "I did not see then, what I perceive now with such fearful clarity, that no society, no matter how great the achievement of its scholars, can be an instrument of human redemption if it despises justice and mercy. [...] Aye, that was my great error—this reverence for the intellect, this overweening reliance on it. [...] Only when it was too late did I come to understand that the processes of life overflow the vessels of reason..." Elisha then tells Meir of a lesson he had learned long before, as "the only sure principle" of his life, received from Rabbi Yochanan ben Zaccai, viz., that "There is no truth unless there be a faith on which it may rest."

In the end of our deliberation, would Steinberg have us, therefore, judge Elisha to have had a life of inquiry at once futile and wasted, to his own detriment, notwithstanding death's repeated rending away at the fabric of his existence? One

surmises, most likely not. It is written, "And the Lord blessed the end of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12). One may aver that Elisha's adherence to the example of Job's persistent interrogation of God had its merit, even if Elisha could not be declared righteous from his beginning as was Job.[39] Whether a function of merit or divine grace, perhaps in death the same is to be said of Rabbi Elisha, so that in the long awaited world to come he would yet have his victory over the seeming irrationality of death. Therein is a vital lesson from Steinberg's normative Judaism, with its emphasis on the individual's *inalienable home* in the Jewish community—even and especially for those who struggle with a dubitable faith and the incomprehensible phenomenon that senseless death has ever been and perhaps always will be.

Yet, it is perhaps Rabbi Meir who understood and said it best. Despite Elisha's exile from the Jewish community of Palestine, despite the Sanhedrin's edict that no Torah-observant Jew was to have any relation with Elisha, Rabbi Meir in all his piety before the Law and the Tradition continued to honor his troubled but beloved master. Steinberg narrates the scene of a chance meeting between Elisha and Meir on the road leaving the city of Tiberius. It was the High Sabbath day of Yom Kippur. Embracing Elisha with sincere affection and then engaging him about his wellbeing, about the

[39] The narrative presents Elisha correcting Meir in his exposition of the text by referring to Rabbi Akiba's teaching, thus privileging its interpretation: "'And the Lord blessed the end of Job more than his beginning'—in the merit of the mitzvot and good deeds that he possessed from his beginning" (emphasis added). Further, Elisha clarified, "'The end of a thing is better than its beginning'—when it is good from its beginning" (emphasis added). See Devora Steinmetz, "Interpretation and Enactment: The Yerushalmi Story of Elisha ben Abuyah and the Book of Ruth," Association for Jewish Studies Review, Vol. 40, No. 2, 23 November 2016, pp. 359-392, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ajs-review/article/interpretation-and-enactment-the-yerushalmi-story-of-elisha-ben-abuyah-and-the-book-of-ruth/6081F325FFE47202ABD2A87BC578E698#, accessed 27 June 2021.

outcome of his intellectual quest and learning of its failure, Meir appealed to Elisha to return to his people. In that moment Elisha could not return, of course, as he continued on his solitary way. The tear in the fabric of his existence meant no *tikkun ha-olam*, no repair of the universe, without a theodicy he could accept.[40] Even so, all was not therefore lost; for, as the rabbis permitted it to be written in the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Chagigah (2:1):

> They said to Rabbi Meir, 'If they say to you in that world [to come], 'Whom would you like to see?' [Would you say] your father or your teacher?" He said to them, "I would see my teacher first and then my father." They said to him, "And will they listen to you?" He said to them, "Have we not learned in a mishnah: We save the container of the Torah with the Torah, the container of the Tefillin with the Tefillin. Elisha is saved because of his Torah."[41]

[40] It is to be noted that the tradition of the Talmud allows for a plurality of opinion even as it presents a majority view, but also presents disputation among the rabbis that ends up without resolution of the question at issue. That is important counsel for those who seek answers to vital questions such as about death and suffering. The fact is that despite our questioning of the facts of lived experience and the search for guidance from Torah and rabbinic tradition the answer may remain lacking, leaving the matter open for further interrogation and the prospect of future resolution. In this sense, questioning such as that of Elisha is not ever a futile endeavor.

[41] Wendy Amsellem, "Elisha ben Abuyah and Rabbi Meir: The Heretic's Disciple," http://s3.amazonaws.com/media.guidebook.com/service/VGx5JMmtg3hqeS7B2czwuQCy8snZDajA/ElishaBenAbuyah2.pdf, accessed 25 June 2021. Steinmetz presents a translation of the passages from the Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah 2:1 (77b-c), wherein it is written that Meir believed Elisha repented on his deathbed, which therefore permitted Meir's response that Elisha would be saved:

> [Rabbi Meir] said to him: Will you not repent/return?
> He said to him: And if one repents/returns, is he accepted?
> He said to him: Is it not written 'You cause the human being to return to dust' (Psalms 90:3)?—they accept until the crushing of life.
> At that moment, Elisha cried and he departed and died.
> And R. Meir was glad in his heart, and he said: It seems that master departed repentant [mitokh teshuvah].

Steinberg's attention to Rabbi Meir's steadfast loving concern for Rabbi Elisha—despite the Sanhedrin's *cherem*—even to the point of Elisha's death and supposed *teshuvah* on his deathbed, his redemptive act at Elisha's grave, etc., speaks volumes about Steinberg's pastoral sympathies as a congregational rabbi in recognizing how loss of faith can follow from profound shocks wherein perplexity and paradox combine and therefore require time, even a lifetime, to resolve. For Steinberg the theologian, Torah and Tradition[42] yet have their place for a meaningful post-Holocaust Judaism. But, they are subject to the operative pragmatic principle that a doctrine is to be retained for only so long as it enlarges life, and, as Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove (b. 1972) put it, insofar as it enhances the dignity of humanity. Otherwise, it is subject to renovation, e.g., consistent with reasonably warranted claims of modern science and the methods of historical criticism, although Steinberg does not defer to either as having final authority. As with Meir in his unwavering solicitude for Elisha, so for the present generation the same solicitous pastoral sympathy is to be granted to *any* post-Holocaust Jew—even one subjected to *cherem*—who struggles with a life lived somewhere between faith and reason. For every Jew *qua* Jew aware of the historical solemnity of Yom Kippur, there remains the human and uniquely Jewish overture of *teshuvah*. It is through that entreaty that a Jew may "do justice, and love mercy" (Micah 6:8), thus to mend the tear in the fabric of life and in the fabric of the universe.

[42] For Steinberg, tradition is pertinent for its vast "corpus of moral insights." See here Milton Steinberg and Moshe Davis, "Contemporary Social Problems in the Light of Jewish Tradition," Jewish Education, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1942, pp. 194-198.

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