

RUPTURE, REPENTANCE AND CULTURAL MEMORY: DAVID WEISS HALIVNI AND THE USES OF *TESHUVAH*

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Abstract

Rupture is an essential construct of Jewish history and text. “Cosmic” rupture initiates Creation and, radically alters the ground of reality. “Cultural” rupture forms and rearticulates social structures. Cosmic rupture originates beyond even the “vertical” axis of the human-divine relationship, while cultural rupture occurs along the “horizontal” historical-cultural axis of history.¹ The *Shoah*, uniquely, is a historical event born of cosmic rupture. Its occurrence necessitates a reexamination and redefinition of repentance (*teshuvah*). After the *Shoah*, *teshuvah* must serve to reintegrate the vertical and horizontal axes of Jewish existence, facilitating the contextualization of cosmic rupture in Jewish cultural memory. David Weiss Halivni’s Kabbalistic exegesis of the *Shoah* serves as a seminal example of *teshuvah* so defined.

Keywords: *Teshuvah*, *Shoah*, repentance, horizontal, vertical, Kabbalistic, rupture, rearticulation, cultural memory.

Introduction: Rupture and Reality

In Jewish history and sacred text, the contours of reality are shaped, ordered, directed and redirected through rupture. Rupture will be defined here, *per* the social theorist William Sewell, Jr., as “a surprising break with routine practice . . . [that] touches off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures and practices.”² A rupture may be massive—on the order of the expulsion from Spain or the *Shoah*—or extremely local, albeit of sufficient force and momentum that it transforms societies through the rearticulation of social structures (such as, for example the Berlin *Haskalah*). However, the *Shoah*, as a human experience of “cosmic” rupture, demands its own existential and theological category. As will be seen below, a mystical approach posits the *Shoah* as originating with the need for regeneration of *tsimtsum*, the divine self-contraction that makes room for human free will. The regeneration that, according to this Kabbalistic perspective, occurred (without precedent) in recent history initiated a period of unlimited human moral autonomy with disastrous consequences. Because this “cosmic” rupture occurred in a space momentarily absent divine presence and power, it requires the rupture and rearticulation of traditional Jewish modes of relating to God and the world. After the *Shoah* a redefinition of repentance, or *teshuvah*, is especially urgent. *Teshuvah* can no longer only or always emphasize the process of seeking forgiveness for sin: it must, as Fackenheim asserts, be a *tikkun*, or repair, of history,³ an urgent, incessant

¹ I am indebted to Professor Paul Mendes-Flohr for drawing my attention to this metaphor, and for his kind and instructive comments on a preliminary draft of this essay.

² William H. Sewell, Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (Dec., 1996): 844.

³ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 320–1.

response to cosmic rupture that *rearticulates that rupture*, beginning its contextualization within Jewish cultural memory.

For the Egyptologist and social theorist Jan Assmann, cultural memory is defined as “knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.”⁴ *Teshuvah*, as a human response to cosmic rupture, is not the seeking of forgiveness for sin: it is a means of gradually absorbing cosmic rupture into cultural memory by accepting responsibility for the *tikkun* of history. *Teshuvah*, in this context, is an *answer to the unanswerable*; that is, the resumption of the progress of Jewish cultural memory along not only the “horizontal” but also the “vertical” axis of history, along which the human moves in search of the divine.

Repentance after the *Shoah*

According to the sages of the Talmud, *Teshuvah*, or repentance, exists prior to time; to the 18th century Rav Nachman of Bratslav, it is “above time.”⁵ Historical events, however, happen within both “the ‘horizontal’ dimension of merely secular time” and the “vertical” vector of human-divine encounter, in what Charles Taylor calls “a multiplex vertical context.”⁶ God requires *teshuvah*, but so does history. The Hebrew word in its theological context means repentance but its root letters (ש.ו.ב) indicate an answer, response, or solution. As an attempt to responsively re-attune one’s actions to divine imperative, *teshuvah* is a turning, returning, and response: “Teshuvah celebrates the competence and capacity to overcome, to change, to grow, to begin and begin again.”⁷ As such, it is a step toward the reintegration and re-elevation of the vertical element of Jewish consciousness and the essential, never-ending dialectic at the heart of covenantal commitment. At the core of the traditional rabbinic definition of repentance is the climax of the “cycle of sin, violence, repentance, and return to God.”⁸ *Teshuvah* “commences with the sinner, but then compels divine response.”⁹ *Teshuvah* in its traditional sense is a return from human self-estrangement into a recommitment to God and God’s commandments, involving “not humiliation but reaffirmation of the self in God’s image, after God’s likeness.”¹⁰ Repentance forms the core of what the philosopher Karl Löwith described as “a movement progressing, and at the same time returning, from alienation to reconciliation, one great detour to reach in the end the beginning through ever repeated acts of rebellion and surrender.”¹¹

However, if during the *Shoah* God somehow was separated from humanity by an unbridgeable gulf, then repentance has lost its meaning and the covenantal relationship that made it required has been nullified. This proposition is, of course, untenable in traditional Jewish religious thought, which not only survived the *Shoah* but, in time, turned its considerable hermeneutical energies to an unflinching search for meaning in the ashes of European Judaism.¹² It is fitting, after the *Shoah*, to

⁴ Jan Assmann and John Czaplica, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” in *New German Critique*, No. 65 (1995): 126.

⁵ Ehud Luz, “Repentance,” in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 790.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57.

⁷ Harold M. Schulweis, foreword to Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), xvii.

⁸ Luz, “Repentance,” 786.

⁹ Jacob Neusner, “Repentance in Judaism,” *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. Amitai Etzioni and David E. Carney (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 183.

¹² Jewish religious thought is not monolithic on any topic, of course, let alone the *Shoah*. This essay will not engage in comparative analysis of Jewish perspectives on the *Shoah*, but will instead concentrate on the Kabbalistic approach of one particular Jewish theologian and survivor. I agree with that survivor that imputing the *Shoah* to Jewish sin is untenable.

contemplate a form of *teshuvah* that responds not only to personal sin, but also to cosmic rupture. A seminal example of this form of *teshuvah* is offered by David Weiss Halivni, a Talmudist, theologian and Auschwitz survivor.¹³ The Kabbalistic response to the *Shoah* articulated by Halivni is a direct turning toward and response to the unbearable; an attempt to both perceive and participate in the restoration of covenantal consciousness after its near-fatal submission to the effects of cosmic rupture. With his hermeneutic of rupture, Halivni contextualizes what has until now threatened to abrogate the Covenant. He demonstrates that the cause of suffering in the *Shoah* was cosmic and that the covenantal relationship, despite even the *Shoah*, endures. This hermeneutical strategy reflects precisely Assmann's delineation of cultural memory: it is "practice-reflexive in that it interprets common practice in terms through proverbs, maxims [and] rituals"; it is "self-reflexive in that it draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically;" and it is "reflexive of its own image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system."¹⁴ That is, Halivni's hermeneutic a) employs traditional textual methodology and sources; b) contextualizes rupture with respect to Jewish theology and mysticism; and c) maintains fidelity to traditional Jewish identity, even while engaging in rearticulation of that tradition. Halivni's hermeneutic of rupture thus reintegrates the horizontal and vertical aspects of Jewish cultural memory, confronting historical events by insisting on their covenantal, theological, and cultural-mnemonic contextualization.

Rupture and Cultural Memory: A Social-Theoretical Perspective

Our consideration of Halivni's contemplation of the *Shoah*, and Assmann's delineation of cultural memory, will be viewed here from a social-theoretical perspective. This is not meant to reduce the *Shoah* to a mere historical or sociological phenomenon; it is rather meant to help us seek the pattern of rupture that occurs at the intersection of mystical and social-theoretical avenues of inquiry—at the intersection, as it were, of the horizontal and the vertical axes. Such an investigation can help initiate an inquiry into the extent to which the rupture shaping and rearticulating social structures has its roots in the elemental constructs of being. In theological terms, rupture most often can be seen as a spike of "vertical" energy into the flow of "horizontal" history, where it initiates a cascade of ruptures and begins its flow toward the stream-bed of cultural memory. There, with the buffer of temporal distance, a rupture takes up residence among other "figures of memory"¹⁵ and participates in the shaping of further sociological, theological, and historical change. Halivni insists, however, that even though the *Shoah* occurred in history, it stands beyond the reach of rational explication: "one ought not, indeed one should not dare, to explain why it took place, why it happened as it did . . . it will inevitably relieve the murderers, at least partially, of their guilt and place it upon the shoulders of the victims."¹⁶

A reconsideration of *Teshuvah* is necessary in order to reorient and rearticulate the relationship between repentance and history, especially after cosmic rupture manifests in history. *Teshuvah* traditionally has served a critical function in the articulation and preservation of Jewish social structures, endowing events with transcendent significance and rupture with divine directive. The dialectical linkage

¹³ Halivni is known for his source-critical method of Talmud study, itself a form of rupture and rearticulation—a form, according to Halivni himself, born in part of his having suffered in and survived the Nazi concentration camps. See David Weiss Halivni, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 149–63.

¹⁴ Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 132.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁶ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 155.

of destruction and redemption passes through the concept of *teshuvah* and it is precisely within it that Judaism continually adjusts its course through the temporal plane. This temporality is readjusted with the help of the vertical markers of rupture that periodically rend and reorder Jewish reality. It is clear, however, from the definition and sources cited above, that the obligation to repent is imposed by God upon humankind. Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden is the sin that sets human history in motion.¹⁷ The temporality of *teshuvah* is thus established as the rhythm of rupture, repentance and assignment to a place in cultural memory out of the symbiotic flow of horizontal worldly events, both ruptured and secured by vertical (theophanic) events, and set beside the prophetic writings.

However, because Halivni asserts that the *Shoah* is not a theophanic manifestation, the form of *teshuvah* contemplated here is not traditional *teshuvah*: it is neither an acknowledgement of sin nor a search for forgiveness. Rather, it is a reification of *tikkun*; that is, an insistence on human (and, here, Jewish) initiative in the re-harmonization of the human and the divine. It is to take up the tools with which to repair cosmic rupture with no imputation or acceptance of human guilt in initiating that rupture.

A Kabbalistic View of the *Shoah*

The rupture of the *Shoah* was of historically unprecedented focus, order, and magnitude. To Halivni, "what happened in the *Shoah* is above and beyond measure (*l'mishpat*): above and beyond any suffering, above and beyond any punishment."¹⁸ The rupture of the *Shoah* was so great that "the Covenant God made with Israel was shaken if not totally abrogated."¹⁹ The *Shoah* constituted either an inversion of the meaning and responsibility for *teshuvah*, or else the end of *teshuvah* entirely. The *Shoah* was not punishment for sin; it was not a vertical spike of divinely-directed rupture, a thrust of theophanic energy, but an *utter absence of that energy*. An unprecedented violation of the Jewish relationship with God had occurred, posing an unbearable choice: "One can either affirm the innocence of Israel or the justice of God at Auschwitz."²⁰ The question *Why?*, Halivni admits, will echo endlessly: "there is no answer."²¹ He nonetheless finds exegetical and hermeneutical pathways to explore, if not toward comprehension, then toward the contextualization of the *Shoah* with Jewish theology and cultural memory.

Halivni sees God's renewal of *tsimtsum* (or divine self-contraction to permit the existence and exercise of human free will) as having taken place at the time of the *Shoah*. Such an event, unprecedented in history, temporarily left human free will unbounded and unchecked. This cosmic gap remained open "until the divine . . . reequalized the normal balance between humanity's bounded freedom and the absolute freedom of God."²² Halivni's depiction of the cosmic rupture caused by the regeneration of space for human free will accommodates the *Shoah*'s historical reality while locating its ultimate source in a cosmic and theological vacuum, utterly devoid of divine presence and power. Halivni's application of the hermeneutic of rupture to the *Shoah* begins the absorption of the latter into Jewish cultural memory. The inconceivable event, contextualized within both the theological and historical

¹⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8.

¹⁸ David Weiss Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 171. Emphasis author's.

²¹ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

spheres, nonetheless stands alone in both spheres: “There were two major theological events in Jewish history: the Revelation at Sinai and the revelation at Auschwitz.”²³

But if the *Shoah*, unlike Sinai, was not an intervention in history by the God of history then how could it be framed in cultural memory? If not an insertion of theophanic energy onto the horizontal plane of history by the God of history, was the *Shoah* outside the bounds of divine inception, and therefore intervention? To these questions, Halivni posits a response that owes its debt to Lurianic Kabbalah, which itself flourished after the massive rupture of the Expulsion from Spain:

Lurianic Kabbalah teaches us that, before the creation of humankind, God contracted Himself, as it were, in order to leave space for the creation of an autonomous creature—the human being. But God’s presence in the formation of humankind caused the “Divine Contraction” (*tsimtsum*) itself to be contracted and thus limited, which meant that space for human freedom was also limited. In order to nurture human autonomy, it was therefore necessary to readjust the *tsimtsum*, to restore and strengthen it and, thereby, to expand the area in which humanity could exercise its free will. This readjustment was necessary because, as God contracts into Himself, He leaves a vacuum in his wake (*chillel rek*); and, since a vacuum is not self-maintaining, the divine must continually regenerate it. . . . Lest the divine presence devour the *tsimtsum* altogether and vitiate free will, the Holy One periodically regenerates the *tsimtsum*: restoring it to its original source and thus enabling free will to function as before. This occurs very rarely and has no parallel in history. However, when it does occur, humanity would be brought to the summit of its moral freedom, to be exercised for good or for evil—from the point at which there is only a minimal of intervention from Above, until the divine has reequalized the normal balance between humanity’s bounded freedom and the absolute freedom of God.²⁴

Halivni, like many survivors, was silent about the *Shoah* for decades; he first spoke publicly about his experiences 50 years after his liberation from Ebensee, part of the Mauthausen complex of extermination camps in upper Austria, on May 6, 1945.²⁵ His application of a Kabbalistic hermeneutic of rupture to the *Shoah* a half century after its denouement indicates that the transition from cosmic rupture to cultural memory is an incremental one. Fifty years on, the *Shoah* has receded in time to the point at which it may begin to be confronted, contextualized, and given a place “in the culturally institutionalized heritage”²⁶ of Judaism and the Jewish societies it decimated. It took time for Halivni and other survivors to fully return to the temporal historical plane of lived experience. He suggests that “those murdered in the *Shoah* lived, as it were, outside of normal history,” because “it was their misfortune to have lived at a time during which cosmic adjustments had to be made between the human creature, as a creature of free will, and the divinity that is immanent in all parts of creation, including the domain of moral choice.”²⁷ The *Shoah* imprisoned its victims in a rupture beyond both the horizontal and the vertical: outside of history and beyond even God’s reach. The effort to survive and to recover was all-consuming; there was no hint of a salvific vertical irruption, with the result, as Fackenheim noted even four decades later, that “Jewish life is in advance of Jewish thought . . . [it] is in the grip of, and responding to, epoch-making events.”²⁸ The passage of so massive a rupture into the pathways of cultural memory is a gradual and delicate process. In Assman’s conceptualization, the “concretion of identity” inherent in cultural memory requires

distance from the everyday. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and

²³ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 128.

²⁶ Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 130. Emphasis author’s.

²⁷ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 33.

²⁸ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 14.

institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these ‘figures of memory.’²⁹

The hermeneutic of rupture in Jewish mystical thought is a means of contextualizing rupture in cultural memory. As Rosenzweig noted, the Jewish calendar is based on figures of memory born of the intrusion of eternity into temporality³⁰. The calendar serves to summon the rupture forward into historical consciousness within an ordered, rhythmic system of referents and then return it to the horizon of consciousness and its coordinates along the horizontal, historical axis (Passover recalls the liberating rupture of the Exodus; Tisha b’Av recalls the ruptures of murder, destruction and expulsion that are recorded as having happened on that day). The junction of the horizontal and vertical axes is the *creation*, the aboriginal cosmic rupture, the archetypal, history-transcending spike of vertical energy onto the unpeopled horizontal plain of “the Great Time . . . when the order of things was established.”³¹ Applying Sewell’s theory of rupture to the Bible, we are compelled to consider that the creation-narrative itself is *a series of ruptures*. The creation-narrative defines the axes by setting context *prior to* creation; creation itself is set in motion at the “point when the Eternal first touch[es] the temporal.”³² The Jewish calendar measures the passage of years from this seminal rupture. Post-creation ruptures recorded in the Book of Genesis are each followed by their own cascade of structural repairs and cultural rearticulations: the creation of Adam, the rupture of Adam’s body to create Eve, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel, the erection of the Tower of Babel and the rupture of human linguistic unity, the Flood, and Abraham’s transformative journey—far from a definitive list—each constitute a cardinal “cultural” rupture: each touches off other ruptures, durably transforms social structures, and is in turn followed by other formative and transformative ruptures within the narrative of the formation of the Hebrew nation.³³ Each of these ruptures, then, is a rearticulation of the dynamic of the cosmic rupture of creation, an echo of that disruptive event.

From both the historical and theological perspectives, Halivni’s hermeneutic also has its roots in cosmic rupture: Lurianic Kabbalah saw creation itself as ruptured, and the Kabbalists’ metaphysical approach to the reification of history was their principal means of responding to the rupture of the Exile from Spain.³⁴ Halivni’s approach, like that of Isaac Luria and his disciples, constitutes an attempt to close the deep spiritual and existential wound caused by a historical event whose cosmic sources, its interpreters claimed, reside beyond human comprehension and divine intervention. From a theological perspective, Halivni’s hermeneutic requires us to reexamine the way Judaism *must employ teshuvah to respond to the reverberations of cosmic rupture*. *Teshuvah*—here, the restoration of divine-human equilibrium after cosmic rupture—and cosmic rupture itself, *both* have their origins “beyond the ravages of time, beyond the natural processes of generation and decay.”³⁵ The possibility, and the *reality*, of cosmic rupture descending into history is precisely what makes a redefined *teshuvah* essential: creation manifests in history, ordering reality by rupturing the “unformed and void” earth (Gen. 1:2). Creation is an inherently *dis-ruptive*, disorderly, and disordering process. *Teshuvah*, as a response to the presence of disruptive energy in every moment of being, must be employed in repair and rearticulation in the constant unfolding of Creation.

The seminal events in Biblical history are not summoned or preserved with historiographical precision, but with what Assmann, quoting Aby Warburg, refers to

²⁹ Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129.

³⁰ David Ellenson, “Eternity and Time,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 191.

³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

³² Paul Mendes-Flohr, “History,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 372.

³³ Sewell, “Events as Transformations of Structures,” 843.

³⁴ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Gershom Scholem,” by Shaul Magid, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scholem/> (accessed January 3, 2011).

³⁵ Ellenson, “Eternity and Time,” 190.

as “retrospective contemplativeness,”³⁶ intended to make the meaning of an event accessible again across the historical expanses that may have intervened. The vertical pegs of theophanic intervention thus serve to mark and secure the horizontal temporal landscape with repeated manifestations of divine will. “It is above all God’s acts of intervention in history, and man’s responses to them, be they positive or negative, that must be recalled.”³⁷ It was this very perception of history that the Nazis were determined to rupture.

To defeat the Jewish messianic threat required the discrediting of history as sacred process. The Jews had had the profound audacity to offer their own tortured history as proof of this world’s promise, a challenge the Nazis accepted. If Jewish history could be aborted, then Marxists, liberal democrats, and all other adherents of ‘Judaic ideological derivatives,’ whom Hitler so despised, would not again dare to imagine a just culmination to history.³⁸

If history is discredited as a sacred process, Jewish cultural memory is delegitimized and the Covenant is rendered absurd. Can the desacralization of history and the delegitimization of Jewish cultural memory be said to have initiated with God? It is a question whose very basis Halivni rejects. “God, as it were, restrained Himself from taking part in history and gave humanity an opportunity to display its capacities, for good or for evil. It is our misfortune that, in the time of the *Shoah*, humanity displayed its capacities for unprecedented evil.”³⁹ Halivni’s view is at odds with that of Yerushalmi, who notes that the rabbis, for whom “the biblical record seemed capable of illuminating every further historical contingency,”⁴⁰ attributed suffering to sin, which was punishable *per* the terms of an eternal and unchanging covenantal relationship. The proclamation of “Scripture as the blueprint of history—past, present, and future”⁴¹ is what causes Jewish cultural memory to contextualize rupture with breaches of covenantal commitment and resultant retribution from God.

Halivni’s view suggests that the world is the way it is because divinity *acts*; it *intrudes* upon a shapeless and formless world. It manifests its actuality and its disruptive essence *prior* to human consciousness. It acts to regenerate self-contraction to permit human free will even though such self-contraction permits the full range of human moral action. Cosmic rupture, as seen from the Kabbalistic perspective articulated by Halivni, does not result from God’s abandonment but from God’s own efforts at renewal of the parameters of the Covenant. The *Shoah*, then, *requires teshuvah to complete the renewal and rearticulation of Jewish social and theological structures—and of creation itself*. *Teshuvah* answers the anthropotropic regeneration of *tsimsum* with a theotropic absorption of rupture and healing of cultural memory. Halivni’s hermeneutic of rupture transforms the memory of the *Shoah* into an essential component of Jewish identity and continuity. This is the reintegration of theophanic energy and human free will around which Jewish cultural memory has been established and reestablished.

It must be reemphasized here that the only equivalence between the *Shoah* and any other rupture in history, in Halivni’s view, would be its facticity. Seeking the *Shoah*’s origins in cosmic rupture is not an attempt to find a “reason” for the murder of six million men, women and children. Nor is the repair of rupture an affirmation of that rupture, or a gnostic or nihilistic justification thereof. Again, the search for reasons, to Halivni, is obscene, as it implies that rational explanation for such monstrosity could exist. A search for concordances in social and cosmic structure, however, enables contemplating human participation in the repair and rearticulation of social structures as a means of initiating or assisting in cosmic repair.

³⁶ Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129.

³⁷ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 11.

³⁸ Yossi Klein Halevi, “Survival,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 948.

³⁹ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 32.

⁴⁰ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 22.

⁴¹ David G. Roskies, “Memory,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 582.

Rupture and Rearticulation

The centrality of rupture—the sacred status accorded the driven, vertical spike—stamps Judaism with its indelible dialectical pattern. It is only through *teshuvah* and the concomitant healing and rearticulation of rupture that “the historical event becomes a theophany, in which are revealed not only Yahweh’s will but also the personal relations between him and his people.”⁴² Judaism’s history relies on rupture and *teshuvah* for the movement and meaning of its narrative and for the making and mending of the fabric of Jewish cultural memory.

Teshuvah, a restorative force rooted beyond the “horizontal” temporal horizon, is essential for restoring divine-human equilibrium when cosmic rupture opens a chasm between humanity and God. Although the *Shoah* is an historical category unto itself, one must ask: Is there any other single event in Jewish history that bore even remote resonance—from which a cascade of ruptures descended not only upon Judaism but upon the societies in which Jewish communities existed? It is important to note that Lurianic Kabbalah fashioned its metahistorical myth in response to the unprecedented rupture of the Expulsion from Spain. The Kabbalists held that the Expulsion was a rupture that echoed the Exodus and Mt. Sinai, revealing God’s active participation in the history of Judaism and the Jews, re-revealing worldly rupture as a symptom of divine rupture. And so it was that

[a]t the end of the sixteenth century those Jews who still sought the meaning of Jewish historical suffering and of the length of exile found it in the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and his disciples, which spread out from a Galilean hill town to rapidly conquer the Jewish world. It is surely more than coincidence that a people that did not yet dream of defining itself in mundane historical categories should now have found the key to its history in an awesome metahistorical myth of a pronounced gnostic character. That myth declared that all evil, including the historical evil that is Jewish exile, had its roots before history began, before the Garden of Eden was planted, before our world existed, in a primal tragic flaw that occurred at the very creation of the cosmos itself.⁴³

In the passage above, Yerushalmi notes that Lurianic Kabbalah identifies evil’s origins as residing *before the origins of history*, and characterizes the Expulsion, born of evil, as an event that was “felt to have altered the face of Jewry and of history itself.”⁴⁴ That is, the expulsion from Spain spoke to the mystical Jewish exilic consciousness not only of the fractured relationship between the Jews and their God, but of the fractured nature of divinity. Expulsion was evidence not, or not simply, of God’s anger at Jewish abdication of covenantal responsibility, but of God’s own brokenness and, as such, in the context of covenant it invoked Jewish responsibility to work for *tikkun*. In other words, rupture was understood to be the intrusion of the cosmic into the cultural. To the mystical Kabbalistic conventicles of Safed, rupture inheres in culture and history *because it inheres in the cosmos*. “Kabbalah, the most theosophical genre of Jewish literature, held that forces within this world mirror those above and vice versa; the two can never be separated.”⁴⁵ Rupture, to the Kabbalists of Safed, was the price God paid for creation.⁴⁶ The Kabbalist had to take up this brokenness as a way of life, and seek to repair it through prayer, to “pray before their Master and to unify, through His commandments, the Holy One, blessed

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 110.

⁴³ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁵ David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁶ Biale, “Jewish Mysticism in the Sixteenth Century,” in Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe: Fourteen Original Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 322.

be He, and His Shekhinah.”⁴⁷ Covenantal commitment required Jews to enact cosmic repair as a means of regaining *shlemut*, or wholeness; of cultivating *devekut*, or cleaving to God; and of hastening redemption, that eschatological endpoint in which man would be restored to God, God to man, and God to Godself.⁴⁸ No history was merely the record of the interaction of men and of nations; no Jewish suffering was merely the result of those interactions. The “deeds of other nations that were profoundly affecting Israel’s vital interests also came to be regarded as wrought by Yahweh.”⁴⁹

For Kabbalists such as Cordovero, *teshuvah* was an essential element of restoring divine wholeness. After all, “the physical world was created with the letter *hei* [ה],” which provides a large opening (at the bottom) for sin, and a small opening (at the upper left) for *teshuvah*. “Therefore, when a person does *teshuvah*, that is to say, *tashuv hei*, when he returns the *hei* to its proper place, then the Holy One, Blessed be He, will return his *Shekhinah* to him.”⁵⁰

From Contemporary Catastrophe to Cultural Memory

The drawing of similarities between the Expulsion from Spain and the Revelation at Sinai exemplifies the use of a hermeneutic of rupture to heal radical disjunction between past and present and between memory and history; and to begin the process of *teshuvah*, that is, of turning rupture from collective trauma into cultural memory. Such a strategy retrospectively endows rupture with theophanic energy and reconfirms the applicability of sacred text to even the unthinkable made manifest. Confronted with the unthinkable, Halivni turns to the hermeneutic of rupture. Yet he refuses to attribute the rupture of the *Shoah*, “the revelation at Auschwitz,” to divine agency. In this way, he establishes covenantally-inflected connections between the *Shoah* and cultural memory while making clear that the *Shoah* was not the result of divinely initiated rupture. This eases what would otherwise be unbearable tension between sacral and cultural memory, and initiates the reintegration of human (horizontal) and divine (vertical) responsibility into harmonious relationship.

However, even though rupture inheres in the reconstitutive force of *teshuvah* in Jewish cultural memory, cosmic rupture demands the development of hermeneutical strategies to comprehend its sources and its theological significance. Halivni’s hermeneutic, initiating transformation of the unthinkable into a contextualized artifact of cultural memory, is *itself* reliant on rupture—in his particular experience of the rupture the *Shoah* caused in his life’s work, and the personal rearticulation that the *Shoah* demands of survivors:

A sensitive survivor must recognize that there was a collapse of norms. Everything we held dear, everything we thought must be, and everything we thought must be pursued turned to nought. The *Shoah* signifies that whatever one considered the pattern of life one should choose—the ideal standard—collapsed. And if you are sensitive, in the face of this collapse you must reexamine what you stood for. You can put it as a test: If not for the *Shoah*, what would you be doing? If the answer is, “The same,” then know that this is wrong. If you were teaching literature, for example, that literature failed, betrayed you. Something must be changed. Something must be different, intellectually—cannot be the same, should not be the same. So somebody who studied Talmud before and studies Talmud after has this problem. Something must be different.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Moses Cordovero, *Or Ne’erav*, 11a.

⁴⁸ R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977), 94.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Street Press, 1963), 23.

⁵⁰ Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Devorah*, trans. Rabbi Moshe Miller (Jerusalem: Targum Press 1993), 22; 26.

⁵¹ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 160.

Halivni refers here to his pioneering method of text-critical Talmud study. It consists of four steps: first, learning text in the traditional manner; second, engaging in critical study of the traditional interpretation; third, determining “if the interpretations are not satisfactory, if the pieces of the text do not fit. If this is so, it is because sometime in the past an element of the text was mistransmitted or problematically arranged. All the pieces need to be reassembled differently from the way they were before.”⁵² The final, most intuitive step is one that Halivni has trouble teaching others to master. This step involves identifying compositional irregularities that may have caused or required exegetical contortion on the part of the sages who redacted the Talmud, and here Halivni is guided by the dialectical task “of criticizing tradition, but of holding steadfastly to it. Criticizing affirms that something went wrong—badly wrong, deeply wrong. Yet there must be something to come home to.”⁵³ Employing source-critical hermeneutical and exegetical methodology while remaining faithful to tradition, to Halivni, “reveals the original context and meaning of the sage’s words,” and in so doing works “to restore the dignity of our sages of blessed memory. It restores the dignity of the text, which in turn bestows dignity on its authors; but it does so at the expense of questioning traditional reliability.”⁵⁴ Halivni’s text-critical method represents the form of *teshuvah* we have explored: it is a turning of experience of rupture back toward the sacred. His Talmud study employs and explores rupture rather than engaging in rabbinic casuistry to elide its inconsistencies; and, in the process, revealing that rupture can further reveal and rearticulate the holy, not only undermine it.

Conclusion: Rupture, Response, Remembering

The trope of rupture, response, and remembering—the structure that undergirds our revised definition of *teshuvah*—is clearly present in Halivni’s response to and confrontation with the rupture of the *Shoah*, as well as in his source-critical method of Talmud study. His hermeneutic ruptures traditional modes, rearticulating Talmudic methodology while remaining firmly within the framework of tradition. It seeks to bring the reader into a search for the hidden or the lost, admitting the possibility of flaws and errors (or ruptures) in the compilation of sacred text. From a social-theoretical perspective, Halivni’s hermeneutic is rupture born of rupture. It emerges from but rearticulates existing hermeneutical methodologies, demanding rigorous critical-historical analysis without abandoning or flouting traditional spiritual perspectives. It is, to paraphrase Löwith, a progression and return from alienation to reconciliation; it is a confrontation and an embrace of traditional contextualization and precedent. In positing the source of the *Shoah* as the regeneration of the vacuum designated for human free will, Halivni demands, in essence, that the God of history be seen as having departed from history and urged also to return, or practice, *teshuvah*. The opening in the letter ך must also permit God to practice *teshuvah*, which is simultaneously theotropic and anthropotropic:

Repentance requires both a human initiative and a response from God; consider the parable of a prince who was far away from his father—a hundred days’ journey away. His friends said to him: Return to your father. He replied: I cannot, I do not have the strength. Thereupon, his father sent word to him saying: Come back as far as you are able, and I will go the rest of the way to meet you. So the Holy One says to Israel: ‘Return to me, and I shall return to you’ (Malachi 3:7).⁵⁵

Teshuvah, after the *Shoah*, must serve as a means of sustaining cultural memory by reintegrating its horizontal and vertical directionalities. Having long viewed

⁵² *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Midrash Pesikta Rabbati* 44:9. Viewed at http://www.hillel.org/NR/rdonlyres/82FEE6A9-FDF8-404E-ADCB-7D0280D032C9/0/YK_teshuvah2.pdf, December 19, 2010.

history as the playing out of redemption through divine intervention, Judaism was confronted in the *Shoah* with the ultimate challenge. “Parodying God, the Nazis chose the Jewish people as their testing ground to prove the absence of a historical plan.”⁵⁶ Judaism’s transcendent challenge was to experience God’s *absence* in history and *still* know God was present; to see the Covenant ruptured, if not abrogated, and to nonetheless see in the existential threat itself the possibility, the necessity of *teshuvah*, in the form of divine-human harmony inching toward restoration. If the ontological and epistemological foundations of Judaism could survive such a threat, the key to that survival would be found in the mystical understanding of the brokenness of the cosmos. It can be found in God’s own need to *maintain and periodically regenerate a rupture, devoid of God’s own saving presence*, in order to preserve space for human free will. When untrammelled human free will fills a vacuum it is no longer possible to say that “everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven.” (*Berakhot* 33b). When the vacuum is in the midst of regeneration, the hands of heaven are removed from the vertical plane of history. The abandonment of humanity to the consequences of its own unchecked free will, as during the *Shoah*, would require not only pleas to God but searches in the crevices of cosmic rupture for shards of transcendent meaning.

The *Shoah*’s origins reside in a singular form of rupture: within God’s capacity to help repair but not prevent. *Teshuvah*, under such circumstances, becomes the responsibility of both God and humanity, but, as the Midrash stipulates, humanity must ‘come back as far as it is able,’ hoping that God will ‘come the rest of the way.’ *Teshuvah*, a “return to one’s source,”⁵⁷ is critical to the re-harmonization of the horizontal and vertical planes of Jewish existence. *Teshuvah* is not only possible but vital even after—*especially* after—a rupture that occurs beyond the vertical axis of God’s dominion over creation. With his hermeneutic of rupture, Halivni has applied a mystical perspective to the impossible task of bridging the “unbridgeable distance between God’s governance of the universe and human understanding.”⁵⁸ He has demonstrated this form of *teshuvah*, lifting cultural memory from the ruins caused by cosmic rupture. He finds a means to reunite Judaism’s “horizontal” cultural memory—its self-reflexive understanding of its horizontal passage through history—with its “vertical” aspirations; that is, the mystical passages through brokenness lead, if not to wholeness, then to a recovery from rupture and a rearticulation of a Jewish understanding of the cosmos and its own role therein. Halivni’s hermeneutic of rupture simultaneously honors and rearticulates traditional exegetical strategies and theological positions. It identifies the *Shoah*’s sources without daring to assert a rationalization of its causes. And it preserves the possibility, the efficacy, the necessity of *teshuvah*, which, in the context of post-*Shoah* Judaism, is a return across the existential and theological chasm created by cosmic rupture manifest in history. It is a leap from the horizontal toward the vertical—from the world-historical toward the transcendent—and toward restored hope for a commensurate, compassionate response.

⁵⁶ Halevi, “Survival,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought* (see note 2), 948.

⁵⁷ Luz, “Repentance,” in *ibid*, 785.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), 35.

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