

On Imagination & Narrative in Jewish Thought: An Interview with Elliot Wolfson

AG: Throughout your career, your scholarship has focused on bringing to light the imagination as the central faculty of prophecy and revelation in the bible, rabbinic, and Jewish mystical writings. You suggest that, even taking into account the different intellectual influences, eras and geographic locations of different mystical thinkers and groups, there is a common assumption that the imagination is the basic framework for viewing these diverse phenomena of mystical experience.¹ How would you define this shared theory of the imagination, and what is the most significant of its common features?

An added complication is that, as your work has shown, the Hebrew Bible presents both an aniconic representation of God (Deuteronomy 4-6) and an anthropomorphic one (Ezekiel 1).² Within the medieval period, in what ways do you see the Jewish mystical tradition as more successfully reconciling this biblical tension than the medieval Jewish Aristotelian philosophers? In this regard, would you suggest that medieval Jewish mysticism is a more authentic inheritor of Rabbinic Judaism than medieval Jewish philosophy?

ERW: It is true that I have expended much effort in the course of these many years writing about the role of the imagination that can be elicited from the biblical, rabbinic, mystical, and philosophic sources. While I would never attempt to limit the imagination nor would I say that a scholar can ever ignore historical context, I do think there is a common thread that ties together these diverse sources, especially when the focus is,

¹ Elliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1997), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 394.

as it has been in my work, on the imagination and the envisioning of the divine.

I think it best to begin with a brief comment on the philosophical sources that have nourished and sustained my own imaginative faculty. The imagination, as I understand it, reflects Kant's contention in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that human perception as a complex process requires reason, sensation and imagination; the latter is the hidden condition of all knowledge, inasmuch as it is the mental power of figurative synthesis that fosters the interaction between the sensible and the intelligible to produce the very possibility of our experience. Whereas reason and intuition are directed to the thing presumed to be present and thereby attempt to recover what is sensibly immediate, imagination is the faculty that represents in intuition an object that is not present and therefore not recoverable. From that standpoint, the imagination makes present something essentially absent. This idea was to have a major impact on the phenomenology of Husserl and many of the thinkers who succeeded him, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Henry, and Marion, just to name a few of the better known examples. Simply put, the profile of any phenomenally constituted object is accompanied by a consciousness of profiles that are out of sight, and hence every object configured in consciousness is a blend of presence and absence. Phenomenologically speaking, there is no mode of givenness that is not also a refusal to give. Paradoxically enough, the other can give itself only as not given. And this is where the imagination becomes critical, because it is the imagination that affords one access to that which appears in its nonappearance.

In my work, I have applied this understanding to the study of the phenomenon of seeing what cannot be seen, envisioning the invisible. I embrace the Romantic celebration of the creative force of human imagination as the locus of the physical world, a direct outcome of the Kantian emphasis on the reproductive capacity of the imagination and

the subservient position assigned to reason. To say, as Fichte did,³ that *all reality is brought forth by the imagination* is obviously attributing to that faculty a potency that would not only distinguish humans from all other sentient beings but also confers on them a demiurgic quality. Through the exercise of imagination we not only gain knowledge of the world but we impart shape to it, which bestows on us the sense of self without which we would have no fulcrum to determine the sense of the other. In his epic narrative poem *Milton*, William Blake succinctly expressed this sentiment, “The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself.”⁴ The potentially infinite reach of the imaginative capacity through the act of poiesis is precisely the property that delineates the boundaries of human finitude.

The notion that the imagination reveals the essence of human nature through this dialectic of presence and absence has deep affinity with the anthropological paradigm promulgated by masters of Jewish esoteric lore. According to a recurrent exegesis in kabbalistic and hasidic sources, *adam* is linked philologically to the expression *eddammeh le-elyon*, “I will be compared to the supernal” (Isaiah 14:14). The import of this exegesis is to provide a theosophic grounding of the priestly notion that the human bears the likeness and image of the divine (Genesis 1:26-27). In contrast to the scriptural derivation of *adam* from the word *adamah*, which signifies the earthly character of human nature (Genesis 2:7), this mystical wordplay places the superiority of the human species—instantiated prototypically in the people of Israel—in the fact that the human shape iconically mirrors the imaginal body of God.

Some interpreters maintain that the derivation of *adam* from *eddammeh* also conveys that the distinguishing feature of the human relates to its capacity

³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions*, edited and translated by Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), I, 227, p. 202.

⁴ William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition, edited by David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 132.

to fashion a mental image of all things in the world. Kabbalists elevate the imaginative faculty by identifying it—rather than the intellect, as Maimonides notoriously argued—as the divine element within the human through which one can configure the sefirotic emanations anthropomorphically. Maimonides went so far as to identify the imagination with the evil impulse, for every deficiency of reason or character is due its action, but, following Aristotelian epistemology, he could not ignore the instrumental role of the imagination in our acquisition of knowledge, and he even considered it (in accord with his Muslim predecessors, especially al-Fārābī) crucial to all prophecy, with the exception of Moses. However, since imagination apprehends only that which is individual or a composite based on its ability to combine sensory images, it cannot adduce a demonstration of truth, which is derived from intellectual abstraction and the differentiation of the universal from the individual. The intellect, therefore, and not the imagination is the ultimate arbiter of what is possible and impossible. The imagination considers it necessary that God is a body or a force in a body, but the intellect judges this impossible; the intellect considers the existence of an incorporeal God necessary, but the imagination cannot ponder such a possibility.

Medieval kabbalists agreed with Maimonides that the God of Israel is not a body subject to generation and corruption; however, they proposed that the imagination is the agency by which the spiritual form is apprehended somatically, indeed in the shape of a human, the very form that makes up the gnōsis of the divine name. Ironically, the ultimate measure of the imagination is its ability to imagine the unimaginable, to represent the unrepresentable. For the kabbalists, then, we can speak of the imagination as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, wherein the finite self becomes infinite as the infinite self becomes finite, where the image of the invisible God is invested with corporality in the heart of the visionary divested of his or her base corporeality. Using the terminology of Abraham Joshua Heschel, we can speak of the movement of the religious imagination as a twofold conversion, the anthropotropic turning of the divine to the human and the theotropic turning of the human to the divine. However, in consonance with Henry Corbin's criticism of Heschel, I would question

the need to distinguish between these two structures of experience by correlating anthropotropism with prophetic religion and theotropism with mystical religion. In the chiasm between these two turnings, there is the double mirroring, the mirroring of the divine in the mirror of the human and of the human in the mirror of the divine such that the imagistic antagonism to image culminates in the concealment of the imaginal at the fringe of the exposure of the imaginal.

JR: I would like to ask you to expand on what you have just said regarding imagination as not only the faculty where images are received, combined, and separated, but also where they are loosened from their bonds with the sensory world. You seem to suggest that the double mirroring of the human in the divine and the divine in the human always remains something of a fun-house mirror, with opacities and distortions that prevent the observer—rationalist or mystic—from ever being able to assert that they are seeing an absolute truth.

Your recent critique of negative theology⁵ is centered around the fact that negative theology inevitably results in precisely just such assertions, whether spoken aloud or not: for example, to say that the divine is not unjust inevitably invokes justice. Negative theology therefore leads to a form of idolatry—a worshipping of, if not an idol, then the absent space where an idol would have been enthroned. Could you expand on this problem of negative theology? How does the imagination offer a bulwark or perhaps corrective to the idolization of absence, and does this understanding of the imagination depart significantly from the understanding of the imagination in Maimonides and Spinoza, among others? Furthermore, what is the relationship between imagination and poesis that makes poetics a potentially essential touchstone of Judaism as a monotheistic (or a-theistic⁶) tradition?

⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (Zone Books, 2011) p. 28-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

ERW: I am not so comfortable with the image of the “fun-house” mirror, but I concur with the essential point you raise with regard to my work. I do indeed maintain that there is no access to truth but through the guise of untruth, and this is something we can see clearly in the double mirroring of the divine and the human, which can also be expressed as the convergence of theomorphism and anthropomorphism. Epistemically, truth is first and foremost a matter of the virtuality of the image that both manifests and conceals, and indeed manifests to the extent that it conceals and conceals to the extent that it manifests. From this it follows that untruth is as much a part of the framing of truth as truth itself. In the anti-Hegelian formulation of Kierkegaard, which may have influenced Rosenzweig, apropos of the immediacy of experience, the truth arises by way of the untruth because the moment one inquires about truth, one has already asked about the untruth.

This is also implied is the epistemological perspectivism adopted by Nietzsche in his critique of the distinction between the true and the illusory. In Kantian terms, there is no noumenal reality beyond the phenomenal appearance—the opposite of the phenomenal world would not be the “true world”⁷ but a “formless, unformulatable world of the chaos of sensations”—and this implies that the phenomenal itself should not be reified as something true that exhibits unconditional value,⁸ or as Nietzsche put it in one aphorism, the concept “appearance” itself disappears when one is cognizant of the untenability of the antithesis between the thing-in-itself and appearance.⁹ For Nietzsche, the word “semblance” (*Schein*) means “the actual and sole reality of things.” As Heidegger well understood, this does not denote that “reality is something apparent, but that being-real is in itself perspectival, a bringing forward

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, edited by Rüdiger Bittner, translated by Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

into appearance, a letting radiate; that is in itself a shining. Reality is radiance.”¹⁰

A consequence of Nietzsche’s hermeneutical perspectivism, therefore, is an epistemic challenge to the distinction between semblance and reality, mimesis and meaning, imaginability and objectivity. To say that semblance is reality is to imply that being is determined as “perspectival letting-shine,”¹¹ that is, what is shows itself in the multiple perspectives by which it is named. This accords well with the Heideggerian perspective on the linguistic and hermeneutical turn in philosophy, which, on the one hand, denies the factuality of metaphysical realities beyond the play of language, but, on the other hand, acknowledges the inherent limitations of language to disclose fully what shows itself in the saying—what shows itself does so in the concealment of its showing. To maintain this one must accept that truth does not yield a standard by which real appearance is distinguished from the apparently real, an illusion, a lie. The intermingling of truth and deception, rooted in the interplay of presence and absence, has been helpful for me in articulating the veritable deception that is at play in kabbalistic esotericism: there is no disclosure of the secret that is not concomitantly an occlusion of the secret, for the secret is concealed in the disclosure that is disclosed in its concealment. The esotericism cultivated by kabbalistic fraternities thus turns on the paradox that the dissemination of the secret augments the inability to disseminate the secret. In Derridean terms, we can thus speak of the double bind of secrecy: the secret can be disseminated only to the extent that it is held in reserve. The more the secret is exposed, the more it is hidden; the more it is hidden, the more it is exposed.

Alternatively expressed, there is no naked truth to behold, only truth exposed in the dissimilitude of untruth. The messianic goal may very well

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, translated from the German, with Notes and an Analysis, by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), p. 215.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

be to see without a veil, as apocalyptic visionaries from different traditions have emphasized, but the one embarked on that path knows that the goal cannot be attained without recognizing that to see without a veil means to see that there is no seeing but through the veil. In lifting the veil one may glimpse the truth unveiled, that is, to apprehend the truth that there is no way to perceive the truth but through the veil of truth. The removal of the veil, in other words, invariably results in the unfurling of another veil and hence the enunciation of the secret can never coincide with what is enunciated. One is here reminded of Levinas insistence that the saying (*le Dire*) is never identical to what is said (*le Dit*).¹²

In *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination*, I explored the dream phenomenon from this vantage point. That is, the dream may be viewed as the phantasm that allows us to see the chimerical nature of the phantasm, the speculum through which we perceive the speculum as that through which we perceive the speculum. In piercing through this prism, we discern the invariable and unsettling truth that the image is true to the degree that it is false and false to the degree that it is true. In a Platonic reversal, we can speak of the dream as the *semblance of the simulacrum* par excellence: in the dream, truth is not opposed epistemically to error, since the appearance of truthfulness cannot be determined independently of the truthfulness of appearance. The dream exemplifies the paradox of the oxymoron *fictional truth*, a truth whose authenticity can be gauged only from the standpoint of its artificiality.

It is correct that I have been critical of recent attempts to harness the apophatic tradition of Western Neo-Platonism together with Derridean deconstruction in order to construct a viable postmodern negative theology, a religion without religion. Not only are these philosophies of transcendence guilty of a turn to theology that defies the phenomenological presupposition of an immanent phenomenality, but they fall short on their own terms inasmuch as they persist in employing metaphorical language that personalizes transcendence and thereby runs

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 37-38.

the risk of undermining the irreducible alterity and invisibility attributed to the transcendent other. In a recently finished monograph, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania*, I examine the themes of apophasis, transcendence, and immanence in a number of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers. The implications, however, go well beyond the specificity of this cultural formation. Focusing on the thought of Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Edith Wyschogrod, I grapple with the extent to which the discernment that the final iconoclastic gesture of monotheism would entail destroying the idol of the very God personified as the deity that must be worshipped without being idolized.

The undercurrent of this book is the recognition of the codependency of religion and idolatry. Contrary to what is commonly held to be the theological import of monotheism and the greatest contribution of ancient Israel and later Judaism to the history of religion, the turning toward God is not a turning away from idol images. The following portrayal of Judaism from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno can be taken as exemplary of this sentiment: “It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.”¹³ These critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were able to affirm such an excessive aniconism, for they were not concerned with justifying the perpetuation of Judaism as a living community of practice and belief. If, however, one were to evaluate the situation from that standpoint, then it would be transparent that the vibrancy of faith is not sustainable without the veracity of deception; that is to say, all propositional utterances about God, even apophatic statements of what God is not, are not only ambiguous and hyperbolic but, literally speaking, fictitious as they attempt to describe linguistically the indescribable and to delimit conceptually the illimitable. This is the act of poiesis accorded the

¹³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 17.

imagination in Judaism as in other theistic traditions. Many of the medieval philosophers, epitomized by Maimonides and, following in his footsteps, by Spinoza, recognized that imagination has this role to play in forging an image of the imageless and fostering the seeing of nothing to be seen, a configuration of the disfigured that opens the possibility of the disfiguration of the configured.¹⁴ In this sense, one of the features of human imagination—and as far as I can tell this is unparalleled in other species—is to think the unthinkable, to extend beyond the content of sentient experience to access a truth that surpasses the mind but that nonetheless communicates in concrete images.¹⁵

However, if permitted to run its course without the intervention of preexisting beliefs, the logic of apophasis would be to surpass the metaphysical dyad of presence and absence in the atheological unmasking of the mask and the consequent transcending of the need to posit some form of transcendence that is not ultimately a facet of immanence, a something more that is not in fact merely another expression of the totality of what there is, provided we understand that totality as the network of indefinite and ever-evolving patterns of interconnectivity rather than a fixed system of predictable and quantifiable data. On this score, the much-celebrated metaphor of the gift would give way to the more neutral and less theologically charged notion of an irreducible and unconditional givenness. In the giving, there is no giver of which to speak that is not itself a gifting of the given. To think givenness in its most radical phenomenological sense is to allow the apparent to appear as given without presuming a causal agency that would turn that given into a gift.

YF: Your last answer suggests that the apophasis involved in negative theology poses a danger to Jewish communal life and beliefs and that a response to this challenge may be given using imagination and the idea of

¹⁴ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

the gift. Yet at the same time, some of the thinkers we mentioned so far, most notably Maimonides, Spinoza and Kant, took a very critical stance toward the faculty of imagination because they saw in it both a potential path towards idolatry and a means of deluding the masses that are incapable—in their opinion—of sophisticated reasoning.

Imagination has political implications for these thinkers. Thinking the unthinkable is a constant threat to the order of things and, insofar as it brings about social change, can threaten group identity and the coherence of the communal law upon which that identity rests. I want to ask about the way you understand these possible implications as they are manifested in Jewish thought. In *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism*, you problematize the claim that the mystical supersedes the Law, as well as the opposite claim that the two are completely compatible.¹⁶ How does imagination figure into this relation between Law and mystical experience? Furthermore, how does the idea of the gift influence the way we understand inter-human relations and divine-human relations in the political sphere? Could thinking about this relation through the concept of "givenness", as you understand it, potentially bring about a change in the often-denigrating portrayal of the non-Jew in Judaism?¹⁷

ERW: I would first like to clarify that I do not view the motif of the gift used by philosophers of religion and theologians as a way to divert the potential danger of the apophatic to Jewish communal life and beliefs. Quite the contrary, the image of the gift, in my mind, needs finally to be transcended in a gesture that I have called, paradoxically, transcending

¹⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 1; for a somewhat more positive evaluation of the non-Jew in Judaism, based on an analysis of the Noahide law, see David Novak, *The Image of the non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*, ed. Matthew Lagrone (Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

transcendence.¹⁸ It is correct that I was suggesting that the logic of negative theology undermines or at least severely problematizes the personalization of the deity that is fundamental to any theism, including the monotheism of Judaism. This claim is not remarkable or unique. Needless to say, I am not ignorant of the fact that at some point in the development of ancient Israelite culture the seeds of what would later develop into a more robust apophatic dimension were planted. The *via negativa* can be seen as an internal corrective of the tradition against the potential intemperance of the imagination and the peril of positing false images of God—to the extent that the God of Israel is thought to be imageless, every image is perforce erroneous, and every act of worship, accordingly, is potentially theolatrous. Here it is well to recall the seemingly ironic insight of Henri Atlan, “the ultimate idol is the personal God of theology ... the only discourse that is not idolatrous is necessarily an atheistic discourse. Alternatively, whatever the discourse, the only God who is not an idol is a God who is not a God.”¹⁹ Naturally, I am keenly aware of the fact that over centuries exponents of Judaism and the other theistic traditions adopted the apophatic denial of representing the deity in images while at the same preserving the kataphatic depictions drawn from scripture. It is precisely the tension between apophasis and kataphasis that engenders one of the most profound paradoxes of the religious analogical imagination, expressed perhaps most forcefully by masters of the kabbalah: *every saying is an unsaying*, for what is said can never be what is spoken insofar as what is spoken can never be what is said. In *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*, I remarked that the mystical element as it evolved in medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam ensues from the juxtaposition of the kataphatic and the apophatic such that in the verbal gesture of speaking-not, which is to be distinguished from not speaking, the mystics within these cultural

¹⁸ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, pp. 23-41.

¹⁹ Henri Atlan, *The Sparks of Randomness*, vol. 2: *The Atheism of Scripture*, translated by Lenn J. Schramm (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 346-347.

matrices availed themselves of images of negativity less imagistic than the affirmative images they negate.²⁰

Be that as it may, the most important thing to stress here is that I do not view the gift as a corrective. On the contrary, much of my recent thinking is aimed at contesting the strategy of thinkers who use the image of the gift to undergird their own apophatic theologies. It is reasonable to argue that we must marshal the best metaphors in an effort to imagine what technically cannot be imagined, but such efforts ensnare the human mind in representing the unrepresentable and imaging the imageless by the production of images that, literally speaking, are fabricated. In so doing, the very allure of the alleged transcendence is severely compromised. The repeatedly invoked metaphor of the gift in theological discourse keeps the mind entangled in positing a volitional agency—the gift is intelligible only if we presume a giver, a given, and a recipient. As I have written, “There is no need, therefore, to posit a gift of a pure and simple bestowal (the given-being of the being-given) issuing from an invisible source hypothetically crossing the domain of the visible, an ontic irruption of the atemporal and aspatial that is cast theologically as an epiphany. The force of life (for want of a more suitable term) must be assigned the quality of givenness that involves — by the being of its logic and the logic of its being — the reciprocity of the given and the giving. Nonetheless, exactly because this is the case, there can be no compelling reason to deduce that there is a gift, and in the absence of a gift, there is no need to posit one who gives, even if it be admitted that the giver is freed from the constraints of being. No rationale dictates that we speak of this givenness as the gift of divine creation, and surely no justification exists to postulate an experience of revelation by means of which one could chance upon a transcendent being in the phenomenal sphere of becoming.”²¹

²⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 215, 217-219, and see pp. 26-27 and 343.

²¹ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, pp. 32-33.

The apophatic gesture should occasion the unsaying of the unsaying, the apophasis of the apophasis, and hence the true possibility of the gift would consist in recognizing that there is no possibility of a gift. The epochal duty is to awaken to the fact that there is no gift to receive but the gift of discerning that there is no gift other than the giving that gives with no will to give and no desire to be given. In this respect, my thinking is very much in accord with philosophers who have taken a critical stance toward the excess of imagination on account of its potential for fostering idolatry and leading the masses deficient in reason to incorrect views. And I agree that there are serious political repercussions here. It is interesting to consider the act of thinking the unthinkable—what Blanchot called the “limit-experience,” the “experience of non-experience,”²² which involves “thought thinking that which will not let itself be thought”²³—as potentially subversive and a threat to the existing social order. I concur that there is this potential, although it is not necessarily the case that this capacity, which strikes me as distinctive to the human consciousness, will result in a socio-political disruption or a revolution that seeks to overturn the status quo. I do indeed think if we shift from the metaphor of the gift to the notion of giving without a giver, then there is a greater likelihood to narrow the gap that the kabbalah has established separating Jew and non-Jew. The gift, as I noted, implicates one in presuming a volitional agency, and once this is the case, then there is always the prospect of demarcations that lead to impenetrable boundaries between disparate ethnicities or religious identities. The neutrality of givenness may hold the key to affirming a sense of indifference whereby we are all similar in virtue of being dissimilar. In this recognition we may find, to paraphrase the Levinasian locution, the stirrings of the difficult freedom that is the burden and honor of the “universalist singularity”²⁴ at the heart of Israel’s messianic mission, which may in fact be the persistent resistance to any

²² Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 209.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, translated by Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 144.

messianic fulfillment. To await without anything awaited²⁵—that is the watchword of the Jewish hope in the not yet, the infinity of the future. Thus taught Hermann Cohen, and in his wake, other thinkers like Ernst Bloch. Israel’s historical calling does not lie in any past or present but only in the future, for the future alone can become the actuality of history, but *the future can be actual only by never becoming actual*—this is the intrinsic contradiction of Jewish messianism²⁶ or, as Derrida put it, the messianicity, as opposed to messianism, that provokes the hope of the “coming of the other ... as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming.”²⁷

In spite of his efforts to distance his own notion of messianicity from traditional forms of messianism, Derrida grasped the paradoxical corollary of the temporal comportment of the achronic future implied in the Jewish belief—the possibility of the Messiah’s coming is predicated on the impossibility of the Messiah’s arrival, inasmuch as the “*eskhaton* whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of-interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, *at each moment*, the final term of a *phusis*, such as work, the production, and the *telos* of any history.”²⁸ For Derrida, then, messianicity involves the constant advent of what is to come (*l’avenir*), a present

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translation by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 32; idem, *God, Death, and Time*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 139. See the analysis in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Echo of the Otherwise: Ethics of Transcendence and the Lure of Theolatri,” in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, edited by James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 285-293.

²⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, translated, with an introduction by Simon Kaplan, introductory essay by Leo Strauss, introductory essays for the second edition by Steven S. Schwarzschild and Kenneth Seeskin (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), p. 252.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 17.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 37 (emphasis in original).

perpetually postponed to the future, a givenness always yet to be given, the wholly other (*tout autre*) that refuses incorporation into any totalitarianization of the same, “the to-come of the event that cannot be thought under the given category of event.”²⁹

I cannot be certain but perhaps the true ramification of my thinking about the hypernomian surpassing of the law through the strictures of the law and the consequent overcoming of the schism between permissible and forbidden, pure and impure, Jew and non-Jew, is that the excluded will finally be included as the inclusivity of the exclusive and not merely as the exclusivity of the inclusive, a posture that is still implied in the rabbinic taxonomy of the seven Noahide laws, an ostensible welcoming of the other that in truth preserves and amplifies the otherness of the other. If we can imagine the possibility of affirming the inclusive exclusivity in contrast to the exclusive inclusivity, then perchance we will be able to extract a genuine and unapologetic universalism from Israel’s particularism, a universalism that is both universal and particular because it is rooted in and sustained by the space in-between that precedes the binary distinction. I do not pretend that this is an easy matter. The particular and the universal aspects of the tradition need to be constantly negotiated to avert the dissolution or reduction of one to the other.

CM: A dominant theme in your scholarship is the blurring of the categories of imagination and interpretation. Your essay, "Sage is preferable to prophet!: revisioning midrashic imagination," demonstrated this tension between the prophet as seer and the sage as thinker. Following the destruction of the Temple, the sage took over prophecy, as you highlighted with the third century Palestinian amora, Avdimi of Haifa: “From the day the temple was destroyed prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages” (p. 188). Both maintain the ability to see the future, however, only the sage is able to understand the world to

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy,” in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida*, edited by Peter Fenves (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 164

come. Moreover, their tools to see the future differ: interpretation and imagination. A tension thus exists between the two figures, since the sage moves to take center stage. How significant is this conflict between the prophet and the sage, and in a final analysis, do you think that there are in fact any clear distinctions between imagination and interpretation?

ERW: On the face of it, the dominant rabbinic view as it evolved in the course of time leaves the impression of two distinct typologies, that of the prophet and that of the sage. The principle mode of encountering the divine in the case of the former is a direct revelatory experience, which involved most often an ocular and an auditory dimension, whereas in the case of the latter the principle mode is textual interpretation. The distinction is reified, as it were, in the rabbinic tradition that prophecy as an institution ceased at a particular historical juncture. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that two modalities cannot be distinguished in an absolute way. Through the interpretative gesture, the sage affirms the ongoing nature of revelation. Textual praxis is a form of inspired exegesis. The primary issue is not prognostication or seeing into the future but rather the capacity for revelatory experience, being in the presence of the divine that is present through its refusal to be present, the presence that withdraws in its coming into presence as the presence that can never be present but as absence.

Here it may be useful to recall the oft-cited essay by Gershom Scholem, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism.” Tradition, Scholem argued, is the “special aspect of the process that formed rabbinic Judaism,” the hermeneutical method that “embodies the realization of the effectiveness of the Word in every concrete state and relationship entered into by a society.”³⁰ Revelation, consequently, is no longer viewed as “a unique, positively established, and clearly delineated realm of propositions;”³¹ it is, rather, polysemic and multivalent,

³⁰ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 284

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

demanding “commentary in order to be rightly understood and applied—this is the far from self-evident religious doctrine out of which grew both the phenomenon of biblical exegesis and the Jewish tradition which it created. ... A creative process begins to operate which will permeate and alter tradition—the Midrash: the more regulated *halakhic* and the somewhat freer aggadic exegesis of Scriptures, and the views of the biblical scholars in their various schools, are regarded as implicitly contained in the Written Torah.”³² The midrashic perspective makes “absolute the concept of tradition in which the meaning of revelation unfolds in the course of historical time—but only because everything that can come to be known has already been deposited in a timeless substratum. In other words, we have arrived at an assumption concerning the nature of truth which is characteristic of rabbinic Judaism (and probably of traditional religious establishment): Truth is given once and for all, and it is laid down with precision. Fundamentally, truth merely needs to be transmitted. ... The effort of the seeker after truth consists not in having new ideas but rather in subordinating himself to the continuity of the tradition of the divine word and in laying open what he receives from it in the context of his own time. In other words: Not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached.”³³

The locating of rabbinic genius in the domain of commentary as opposed to system accentuates the way in which the midrashic method embraces the paradox of discovering anew what was previously given. Recovering truth partakes of the epistemological paradox that what presents itself as new does so precisely because it is old. I would modify Scholem’s assessment by proffering a complementary hermeneutic based on a conception of temporality that would not necessitate a bifurcation between a “timeless substratum” of meaning and its unfolding in “historical time.” It is erroneous to separate tradition and revelation in the history of Judaism in the way that Scholem suggests; it is not at all obvious that the mediated and conditional status of the former inevitably entails the inability to experience the immediacy and unconditionality of the

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 287-288.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

latter. The rabbinic understanding of a continuing revelation, which unfolds through an unbroken chain of interpretation, is not based on a static conception of the eternity of Torah set in opposition to time and therefore resistant to the fluctuation of historical contingency. Rather, it is predicated on a conception of temporality that calls into question the linear model of aligning events chronoscopically in a sequence stretched invariably between before and after. Hence, as I have argued, the rabbinic hermeneutic champions a notion of time that is circular in its linearity and linear in its circularity.³⁴ The study of Torah demands that one be able to imagine each day, indeed each moment of each day, as a potential recurrence of the Sinaitic theophany, an idea that is derived from, or hyperliterally linked to, the words, “On this day they came to the desert of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1), that is, “on this day” (*ba-yom ha-zeh*), and not merely “on the day” (*ba-yom*), to indicate that it is incumbent on future readers to look upon the Torah as if it were given afresh each time it is studied.³⁵ Every interpretative venture is a reenactment of the revelatory experience, albeit from its unique vantage point.³⁶ One can take hold of the ancient truth only as the truth that is yet to be disclosed, a truth renewed in the gesticulation of its genuine iteration.

To the extent that interpretation can only be understood from the perspective of hermeneutics, and the hermeneutical cannot be severed from the structure of temporality, the transcendental constitution of which, as Husserl suggested, must be regarded as an intentional act of human imagination, I would argue that it is futile to draw a distinction between imagination and interpretation, even as I readily acknowledge that there have been many thinkers who have upheld such a distinction and some have even allocated an inferior role to the imagination when compared to the intellect. I would argue nonetheless that, philosophically speaking, it is not feasible to construe interpretation without recourse to

³⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2005), p. 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

the imagination. Through the intentionality that is apposite to the imagination, which, in my estimation, should be understood in the rabbinic context as equivalent to the inner time consciousness of Husserlian phenomenology, every present can become a replication of the past that induces the disruption of the future, the coming-to-be of what has always never been but the having-been of what is always yet to come. Within the imagination we find the possibility of affirming the heterogeneity of the midrashic condition, the uncovering of the singularity within that which repeats, the novelty within reiteration, the return of the same in which the same is nothing but the recurrence of difference. Expressed in a different conceptual register, we can speak of the task of the imagination to make a presence of an absence by fabricating the image that is a mixture of being and nonbeing,³⁷ or in the language of Corbin, the intermediate plan marked by the *coincidentia oppositorum* between the hidden and the manifest.³⁸ This imaginary fusion of the visible and the invisible is precisely the key to understanding the paradox of the linear circularity that is at the heart of the hermeneutical process that has informed the variegated nature of textual reasoning in Jewish history.

³⁷ Eva Brann, *The Ways of Naysaying: No, Not, Nothing, and Nonbeing*, Lanham 2001, p.xii.

³⁸ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 249