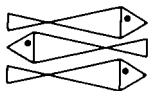


Abraham Joshua Heschel

*A PASSION FOR
TRUTH*



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

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Library of Congress catalog card number: 72-94721

ISBN: 0-374-22992-9

First printing, 1973

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada by Doubleday Canada Ltd., Toronto

Designed by Paula Wiener

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To Elemire Zolla

PART IX



*The Kotzker and Job*¹

¹ This chapter is not an exposition of the Kotzker's views but, rather, an essay on a major problem of faith which is guided by his sayings.

To Exalt the Heavens

WHAT WERE the problems that troubled the Kotzker during his last twenty years, which he spent in seclusion? No answer can be posited with certainty. From his utterances on those occasions when he left his chamber, we can only surmise that he was tormented by the ever-present enigma: why did God permit evil in the world?

What was the Kotzker searching for all along, and what did he expect to achieve? A score of young men who would shout from the rooftops, "The Lord is God!"? But what, after all, could mere individuals accomplish? Would so few be able to reshape the world? The Kotzker's vision was more daring. A balancing of reverence and intrepidity, of awe and audacity, was an ongoing activity in Reb Mendl's soul.

"Who is like you, O Lord, among the silent, who sees the abashment of His people and remains silent!" was the outcry of Rabbi Ishmael in an age of martyrdom. According to an old Jewish tradition, tzaddikim, holy men, have a power to which God himself is willing to yield. God may issue a decree, but if it is too severe, the tzaddik has the power to annul it. At a time of grave adversity, his disciples pleaded with the Kotzker to act accordingly.

"Yes," the Kotzker responded, "but how about reverence?"

Underneath his reverence, however, was dissent and contentiousness, a sense of outrage at the depth of falsehood afflicting the world as well as silent animadversion. For who was responsible that we hurried about in a world of phantoms? Was only man to blame? The Kotzker uncompromisingly castigated his fellow men. But did not castigation itself cast reproach upon their Maker? What about the Heavens above that permitted, or even ordained, that the predicament arise and persist? The affliction over this issue was even deeper than the predicament itself. Something had gone awry in Heaven.

Had there been no alternative to burying Truth when man was created? Ultimately the Kotzker arrived at the austere conclusion that the goal and purpose was not to purify man but to exalt the Heavens.

During a visit to Kotzk by Reb Yankev Arye of Rodzhimin, Reb Mendl asked him, "Yankl, why was man created on this earth?"

"He was created in order to restore the purity of his soul," Reb Yankl replied.

The Kotzker Rebbe roared back at him, "Yankl, is that what we learned from the rebbe in Pshyskhe? Surely man was created to exalt the Heavens!"

If man was created to seek the purity of his soul, then his entire worship was for his own benefit. And if serving God meant to serve the self, what happened to faith? Did not the Kotzker insist that the meaning of faith derived from disregard for the self? To do what was Holy in order to please oneself was an act of idol worship. Thus, the doctrine that man was born in order to strive for personal salvation would signify that he was intended to worship an idol . . . No, the supreme purpose could not be personal salvation.

I Am Choking

Severity may be allowed where gentleness is futile. Yet few men can afford to express anger without causing harm to their own souls. The Kotzker carried anger as a flint bears fire. His silence was grim, his speech an outcry, his indignation a moment in which unmixed agony, unceasing bitterness blasted all restraint, corroding every comfort. His way was not to explain and elucidate but, rather, to protest, to contradict, to reject in the name of higher visions, of hidden sufferings.

But could a creature of flesh and blood overturn the Heavens? Could he reach that high and bring order into the upper spheres? Besides, how dare he challenge God? Reb Mendl drew his conviction both from Scripture and from the Talmud and Midrash. Since the day Abraham argued with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jacob wrestled with and overcame the angel, many Prophets and rabbis had occasionally engaged in similar arguments. The refusal to accept the harshness of God's ways in the name of His love was an authentic form of prayer. Indeed, the ancient Prophets of Israel were not in the habit of consenting to God's harsh judgment and did not simply nod, saying, "Thy will be done." They often challenged Him, as if to say, Thy will be changed. They had often countered and even annulled divine decrees.

As mentioned earlier, the Heavens were open to the great tzaddik; he could accomplish great things if only he would raise

himself high enough. If he struggled out of holiness and in Truth, he might break through all the way to Heaven.

The Kotzker once said, "If I were told by Heaven that there was no way for me to repent, I would overwhelm the Heavens." He also interpreted the verse "This is the law of the guilt offering. It is most holy" (Leviticus 7:1)—as follows: "Where is the guilt to be found? In the most holy." A Hasid is he who discards the world, declared the Kotzker. Underlying this statement was an awareness of the contradiction between the world and Truth. Only by saying "no" to the world could one live Truth.

The Kotzker conceived of living as an ongoing encounter, a fighting to the end, in which thought of surrender was inconceivable. He held moral cowards in contempt, disliked pusillanimous souls. The battle waged was fierce: it was an encounter with the ego and its treacherous delusions.

This was the Kotzker's position as expressed in his teaching. But privately, beyond the ken of his disciples, in his passionate solitude, he was also engaged in another battle, a battle with God, a battle for the sake of God.

The disaster was greater than people imagined. If the fault were only in the nature of man, restoration would be so much easier. But the calamity had occurred even before man was created.

"Show me Thy glory," Moses implored, and the Almighty said to him, "and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:18, 23). This meant that everything appeared back to front in the world, that what prevailed was the reverse of what, according to man's conception, ought to be. The world stood with its back to reason; the face of Providence was hidden.

One could endure such a world only with a heart of iron. One

was overcome with nausea when he started thinking about mendacity, cruelty, malice. That was why the Kotzker maintained that a Hasid is he who discards the world. The fate of the entire world did not deserve a single moan, he said, for it was a world of phantoms. "The world is putrid, it makes me choke!" he cried.

The Kotzker felt the agony, knew the tragedy, but what was the remedy? There was only one way to survive: to be Holy in challenging God, to pray militantly, to worship heroically, and to wait. Above all, not to be fooled by false concessions from Heaven.

Such audacity was not to overshadow man's awareness of his pettiness. Reb Henokh of Alexander, Reb Mendl's disciple, once said, "Do you know what we learned in Kotzk? 'That man should know that he is a stinker.'" Here lies the ambiguity of man and the paradox of his destiny: although he is utterly trivial, he is called upon to elevate the earth to the level of the Heavens.

Reb Henokh interpreted a passage from the Psalms, "The Heavens are the Lord's Heavens, but the earth He has given to the sons of man" (Psalms 115:16), as follows: the Almighty created the Heavens for Himself, while He handed the earth over to man to make it into a Heaven. The Kotzker, then, had a tremendous task—to convert the earth into a Heaven.

Reb Henokh believed that Moses succeeded in this, for when the Torah was given at Sinai, a miracle happened: even dulled hearts became Heavenly. "While the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven" (Deuteronomy 4:11)—the mountains burned until the Jews received "a heavenly heart."

Perhaps this explains Reb Mendl's bitterness. He was himself encompassed by flames, like Mount Sinai. Ablaze, he carried a vision of transforming earthly men into Heavenly people. Then

came the realization: their hearts were cast in clay; no fire ever burst from clay.

Submission?

The Kotzker himself was involved in the paradox of man's triviality and audacity on the ultimate level of his existence. Though certain of the power of the tzaddik to affect decisions made in Heaven—"the tzaddik decrees and the Holy One fulfills, the Holy One decrees and the tzaddik annuls"—he refused out of reverence for a higher Truth to make use of it in particular cases. On the other hand, God's consigning of Truth to the tomb exceeded the limits of the Kotzker's acquiescence. Though he cloaked his accusations in silence for the most part, occasionally he would shout out biting words. Was it fitting for a tzaddik to have complaints against God, and even to voice them?

This problem had aroused a controversy among Jewish sages in antiquity. Rabbi Akiba held that one ought always to acknowledge the justice of God's ways. Even if a man was consumed by utter darkness, he was to accept suffering lovingly; to complain against God was impudent. Rabbi Ishmael, on the contrary, refused to consent to the sufferings of Israel without remonstrating. He dared to challenge the Almighty. "Who is like you, O Lord,

among the silent, who sees the abashment of this people and remains silent!" was the outcry of Rabbi Ishmael in an age of martyrdom.

Most sages of Talmud and Midrash regarded Job as one of the few truly God-fearing men of the Bible. To others he was a blasphemer. One scholar said of his orations: "Stop him! Put earth into his mouth."¹

In the Jew of our time, distress at God's predicament may be a more powerful witness than tacit acceptance of evil as inevitable. The outcry of anguish certainly adds more to His glory than callousness or even flattery of the God of pathos.

Reb Mendl adopted Rabbi Ishmael's position. A man who lived by honesty could not be expected to suppress his anxiety when tormented by profound perplexity. He had to speak out audaciously. Man should never capitulate, even to the Lord.

Did a man who argued with God have the slightest hope of winning? The thought of a victory over God was totally incongruous in the Kotzker's view. No matter how painfully palpable the perplexity, any possible solution to it was hidden. A man of flesh and blood was simply not meant to comprehend the divine response to the deepest of human problems. Divine secrets were not compatible with the human intellect. Did we have to conclude then that all controversy between man and God was futile?

The Kotzker loved the ruthless turbulence of protest and anger. Such turbulence, he thought, should never cease to defy the Heavens. It was apparently God's will that man not surrender but confront the Heavens and storm them. Nature, God's creation, provided him with an example.

"Thou dost rule the raging of the sea, when its waves rise, Thou praiseth them" (Psalms 89:10). There seems to be an inherent con-

¹ *Baba Batra* 16a.

tradition here. For the Creator had "placed the sand as the bound for the sea, a perpetual barrier which it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail; though they roar, they cannot pass over it" (Jeremiah 5:22). Why then do the waves rage and beat against the shores, trying to break the barriers with violence and flood the land? Why does the sea rebel against God's will and fight so fiercely, spewing forth foam like a dragon without end. Surely it knows it cannot destroy God's established order? It cannot possibly prevail. The land will not be flooded. Nevertheless, the Almighty praises its passionate desire to ravage the boundary. The sea knows that it has not the power to win, yet it struggles on.

Submission and blind obedience repelled the Kotzker. He hated the milksops who knuckled under, the docile, pious yes-men. A man must be a rebel in his very existence; he must refuse to be what he is. Reb Mendl's teacher, Reb Bunam, had no end of praise for the revolutionary spirit of Rabbi Abraham Ibn-Ezra. "I simply cannot make out how his shoulders did not crack with fear of the Lord," he once said. One ought not to be servile even before God. Even in defeat, continued courage was essential.

The Kotzker had tremendous respect for dissenters who refused to be pushed around. Did not Jewish tradition consider offensive those who flatter God? He admired the rebels in the Bible, such as Korah and Pharaoh.

Korah, leader of the revolt against the authority of Moses, Reb Mendl once explained, was not just someone off the streets. Of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, he said, "Pharaoh was a man of mettle; were even half a plague to strike anyone today, he would be yielding in no time. God is just and His judgment is just! he'd cry. Pharaoh was hit by a host of plagues, yet he remained true to himself."

In describing the last plague sent against Egypt, the Scripture says: "And Pharaoh rose up in the night . . ." (Exodus 12:30). In his

commentary, Rashi adds, "He arose from his bed." What difference does it make whether he rose from a chair or a bed?

The Kotzker explained that Rashi had added a crucial insight to the passage. Freethinkers of today brag about their heresy though they are actually faint-hearted cowards. The moment one of them has a headache, he immediately begins to recite Psalms or runs off to a witch [doctor]. They are not heretics, just sissies.

Pharaoh was of another breed altogether; he was a full-scale heretic. He saw all the plagues Moses prophesied come true, and that same day Moses warned him: "About midnight . . . all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die . . . And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever shall be again" (Exodus 11:4ff.). Even though Pharaoh was himself a first-born son, he was not perturbed and lay down as if nothing would happen. He slept like a man after a heavy meal and awoke only when all of Egypt was deafened by weeping. Thus "He arose from his bed" takes on an extra dimension of non-acquiescence.

Unlike some other rebbes, the Kotzker did not teach that man should under all circumstances be meek because he was a nothing, that he should be quieter than calm water and flatter than mown grass. On the contrary, he should hold his head up high; for a feeling of meekness and inferiority was the worst possible trait in the fight for Truth. Even if he were to lose the battle, he should not fall like a dog.

The heathen prophet Balaam once said of Israel, "He couched, he lay down like a lion" (Numbers 24:9). Even when he fell, he lay like a lion.

There are some forms of suffering that a man must accept with love and bear in silence. There are other agonies to which he must say no.

“I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:6). Why does Scripture say “burdens” rather than “slavery”? To this Reb Bunam replied that the greatest evil of the Egyptian exile was that the Israelites were able to tolerate anything. No matter how tough the work, they gradually got used to it. When the Lord saw them toiling away with mortar and bricks and patiently resigned to their slavery, He said to Moses, “If they can tolerate this, things are bad, and we have to get them out of Egypt soon, otherwise they will be slaves the rest of their lives.” Their redemption began when they ceased to tolerate their slavery: “who has brought you out from under the *burdens* of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7).

This inner attitude is what counts—how one feels about suffering.

Problems with God

Time and again the Kotzker returned to this issue: was it conceivable that the entire world, Heaven and earth, was a palace without a master?

Whenever an exceptionally knotty Talmudic problem was raised, just one person’s interjection, “Lord of Abraham!” would force the opposition to change its course. Reb Mendl often referred to the following parable:

A man once wandered from city to city and came upon a palace that seemed unattended. He wondered: Could it be this palace has no

lord? Finally the lord of the palace peered out at him and said, "I am the lord of this palace."

Similarly, Abraham looked around at the world and thought: Could it be that this world has no lord, no master? Then the Lord of the universe peered out at him and said, "I am the master, the sovereign of the world."

In the original Hebrew the phrase describing the palace, *birah doleket*, is ambiguous. It could mean "a palace full of light" or "a palace in flames." According to one interpretation, Abraham saw a world of infinity, beauty, and wisdom and thought: is it possible for such grandeur to have come into being accidentally, without a creator? The second interpretation is that he saw a world engulfed in the flames of evil and deceit and thought, Is it possible that there is no Lord to take this misfortune to heart?

Apparently, Reb Mendl accepted the latter meaning. He also considered Abraham's question to be the central issue in the search for faith.

"Could it be that this palace has no lord?" This problem tormented Reb Mendl. He, who never ingratiated himself with anyone and spoke the truth to everyone's face, did not delude himself with facile solutions.

Once a man came to Reb Mendl and poured out his heart. His wife had died in childbirth, leaving him with seven children and an infant. He himself was in rags.

"I cannot console you over such cruelty," said the rebbe. "Only the true Master of Mercy is able to do it. Address yourself to Him."

Difficulties always arise during Torah study. While other people are merely bothered by these problems, they were a source of pain to the Kotzker. For instance, before his seclusion in 1840, Reb Mendl sat at the table in the House of Study, surrounded

by his Hasidim, on the Sabbath of the weekly portion Toledot. He asked, "How could Isaac at first have intended to give his blessing to evil Esau?" He became so engrossed in the matter that he fainted. All his Hasidim were seized with fear. Their rebbe was unconscious, his head thrown back over his chair. Then one of the leading Hasidim carried him out and laid him down on his bed. Reb Mendl lay sick in bed for several weeks.

The Talmud relates the experience of a sage.

Rabbi Yose says, "I was once walking along the road, and entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Elijah of blessed memory appeared and waited for me at the door till I had finished. Then he said, "Peace be with you, my master!"

And I replied, "Peace be with you, my master and teacher!"

And he continued, "My son, why did you go into this ruin?"

"To pray."

"You ought to have prayed on the road."

"I feared that passers-by might interrupt me."

"Then you ought to have said a shortened prayer."

Thus I learned from him: one ought not go into a ruin to pray, one may recite his prayer while walking on the road, and if one is on the road, he recites an abbreviated prayer!

It was an act of grace from Heaven to send Elijah to teach Rabbi Yose that one ought not go into a ruin to pray, for one must not expose oneself to danger. But why did he not appear to him *before* he entered the ruin? "Indeed," said the Kotzker, "this is how God deals with man. First he lets him act the way he pleases, then he appears and criticizes him, saying, "What have you done!"

Once, when the Kotzker heard that someone had died, he posed the question: "Lord of the universe, what trouble would it have been to you to let him live out his years?" Sometimes he was tormented by serious doubts. "Yitzhak Meir," he once said to

his best disciple, "if only I could be certain that there is punishment in the world to come, I would go out into the streets and dance for joy. If only I could be certain . . ."

The man who has doubts about serving the Lord and eventually clarifies them stands above the man who insulates himself from all doubt. This idea is to be found in the writings of one of the Kotzker's disciples, Reb Mordecai Yosef, who later left the master. He added, however, that this principle applied only to certain souls.

Perhaps all doubts can be mitigated by the metaphor alluded to in the Pentateuch. The Heavens that God created had open gates, but man's heinous sins caused the gates to lock and the Heavens to become like copper. No man on earth, however virtuous, can penetrate them. Since copper is cold and indifferent, calling on Heaven is like knocking your head against a wall.

Of all the terrifying curses threatening the people when they stray from the path of righteousness, Reb Mendl considered "And the Heavens over your head shall be copper" (Deuteronomy 28:23) the most dread-filled curse of all.

One Foot in Heaven, the Other in Hell

Doubts and uncertainty did not evoke any shock in Kotzk. Fundamental certainty could be achieved only after experiencing radical uncertainty, after crossing the gulf of disbelief. The mind

must be kept open. Each thought called for deliberation. There was no censor of rebellious thoughts.

Once a Hasid came to Reb Mendl with a problem.

"Rebbe, I have terrible thoughts."

"Well?"

"I am afraid to utter them. I am appalled to have such thoughts. Even Hell could not atone for them."

"Out with it."

"What a wretch I am. Sometimes I think there is neither judgment nor Judge, that the world is lawless, God forbid."

"Why does it bother you so?"

"Why?" shouted the Hasid. "If there is no judgment and no Judge, what purpose is there to the whole world?"

"If the world has no purpose, what concern is it of yours?"

"Rebbe, if the world has no purpose, of what use is the Torah?"

"Why should it bother you if the Torah is of no use?"

"Woe is me, Rebbe. If the Torah is of no use, then all of life is meaningless! That troubles me enormously."

Reb Mendl replied, "Since you are so deeply concerned, you must be an honest man, and an honest man is permitted to harbor such thoughts."

The Kotzker knew well that his path was treacherous. One day he said of himself, "I stand with one foot in the highest Heaven and with the other in hell."¹ Again, "Do you think this is a light matter? It is easier to jump into a burning furnace."

"I am honest!" he cried. "I was created to be honest!" Another time he said, "Even in Heaven I have no true friend. The angels

¹ *Siah Sarfe Kodesh*, III p. 32. Reb Ephraim of Sudlikov, at the end of his *Degel Mahane Efrayim*, reports the following from the Baal Shem Tov: I swear to you that there is a man in the world who hears Torah directly from God and the Shekhinah, and not from an angel or a seraph . . . and he does not believe that he will not be pushed aside by God as he can easily be plummeted into the deep abyss of evil.

and the seraphim are against me. Yet I have no fear of them, for I am honest . . .”

Why did he think the angels and seraphim were opposed to him? Reb Mendl apparently felt that his temerity bordered on impudence. His thoughts were presumably even more offensive than his words.

One view expressed in the Talmud criticized Job on similar grounds: “With his lips he did not sin, but he did sin within his heart . . . Job sought to turn the dish upside down [i.e. to declare all God’s works worthless] . . . dust should be put in the mouth of Job!”

Dramatic, cryptic, Reb Mendl’s voice occasionally revealed the turmoil of his soul. “Though the heart may burst, the shoulders may crack, heaven and earth may crumble, still man must stand firm and not capitulate,” he once exclaimed. These words sound as if, in the midst of a bitter battle, he had to address a call for unyielding determination to himself.

The contestant with whom the Kotzker wrestled remains visually anonymous. To put into words what the soul could hardly bear would have been blasphemous. The precarious dividing line between righteousness and presumption was better couched in silence.

It was after midnight on the closing evening of Rosh Hashanah. Some of the Hasidim were ardently engaged in study, while others, exhausted, lay dozing on the wooden benches in the House of Study. Suddenly the Kotzker threw open the door and burst in upon them.

“Faces! Tell me, is there a face that can challenge the face of the Almighty?” [Meaning “Who is there who would dare to confront God?”]

The disciples, overcome with consternation, leaped up from their benches while Reb Mendl continued.

“Do you know what I want? This is what I want. Heaven should bend, the earth should crumble, and man should refuse to capitulate.”

And all the disciples exclaimed, “Yes, yes.”

And the Kotzker continued. “Seek [demand of?] the Lord while he may be found!” (Isaiah 55:6) he cried, leaving his disciples stunned.

The Eloquence of Silence

Job had many successors. The Kotzker was one of them. His mind did not, however, follow traditional ways of asking Job’s questions. The Kotzker never imitated or repeated. In his eyes all imitation was forgery, all repetition spurious. To challenge God’s judgment or His failure to exercise judgment without restraint would have been foolhardy. The Kotzker reasoned with audacity but walked in awe.

Job was provoked by suffering, by apparent injustice; the Kotzker by falsehood, by lies. To him untruth was the cardinal evil, not suffering. He interpreted “Even the darkness is not dark to Thee” (Psalms 139:12) to mean: knowing that darkness comes from Thee, even the darkness is not dark. But one thing remained dark without redeeming comfort: falsehood.

We find that the Holy One, blessed be He, created everything in His world, only this stuff of falsehood He did not create, did not fashion. Out of their own hearts did mortals conceive false words, as

it is said: "They conceived and uttered from the heart lying words" (Isaiah 59:13).

So we read in a medieval Hebrew work.

"Many are the pangs of the wicked" (Psalms 32:10)—the evil-doer is in great pain; he is full of complaints and nothing is to his liking. "But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy encompasses him." Said Reb Mendl:

He who trusts in the Lord sees everything around him as a great mercy. "Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (Psalms 34:11). Why? Because they see each of God's deeds as for the good.

Suffering can be accepted then. Falsehood, however, cannot. For generations people had answered Job's terrifying question by saying that all of God's deeds are just, though His ways cannot always be comprehended. One must trust in the Lord.

The liturgical poems recited on New Year's Day say that His justice is hidden, we do not see it. Reb Mendl maintained in faith that "the ordinances of the Lord are true, are righteous altogether" (Psalms 19:10). Though in this world it might seem at times that God's ways were unjust, ultimately all His ways would be revealed as just.

A Jew is called "Yehudi" after Judah, about whom Leah, his mother, said, "This time will I praise the Lord." Rashi commented, "I have reason to praise, for I have taken more than my share." Indeed, every Jew should know that whatever the Almighty does for him is more than he deserves. According to this view, then, there are no grounds for complaint against God.

The Kotzker certainly never thought of measuring devotion in terms of reward and punishment.

Even if a reversal were to occur in the divine order, whereby I would be punished for observing a divine commandment and re-

warded for transgression, even so I would not swerve from my path and would serve God as before.

These were the words of a Kotzker Hasid, Reb Avrom of Porisov.

I have already mentioned that Reb Mendl was most troubled by the problem of why God had buried Truth *before* creating man. The whole world trembled when God proclaimed, "You shall not swear *falsely* by the name of the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:7). How, then, could He have cast Truth into the ground?

This was a terrifying question, especially since men were allowed to dance upon the grave of Truth. Why did man accept the diabolical role of dancing in preventing Truth from being resurrected?

There was yet another difference between Job and the Rebbe of Kotzk. Whereas Job thought aloud, Reb Mendl's thoughts mostly remained in his heart. He was a man of few words, realizing that man could make a fool of himself by questioning, challenging, or criticizing the Creator. The phrases that a man thrust against Heaven could easily boomerang.

In his wisdom and awe, Reb Mendl knew full well how the most fiery accusations could sound like gibberish when articulated. One of the Kotzker's disciples said, "To think a thought is easy but to express it is no mean feat. That is why we pray: 'Open the mouths of those who put their trust in Thee.'" In Kotzk they cultivated the eloquence of silence.

Reb Mendl Vorker, another disciple, kept silent for several hours at a time surrounded by the Hasidim. Complete stillness. They sat in dread and awe. One could hear a fly crawling along the wall. After the concluding grace, one of the leading Hasidim exclaimed: "That was some gathering! He took me to task and pumped me with ques-

tions, but I held my own. I answered every single question he put to me."

The less spoken, the better. It is better to put off uttering a word, even a syllable, as long as possible. *Wayelekh haranah*—Jacob left Beersheba and went "toward Haran" (Genesis 28:10). Rashi commented that whenever the Hebrew preposition *lamed* is called for to denote "to" or "toward" a certain place, the Torah prefers to place the letter *hay* at the end of the word (as in *haranah*): this has the same meaning as the letter *lamed* preceding. Reb Mendl asked what advantage there was in using the letter *hay* at the end instead of *lamed* at the beginning of the word? It teaches us to restrain our speech; and to delay articulating a syllable even for a second is worthwhile.

A lock ought to hang over one's mouth. He who reveals what he knows has little to say. "Let your heart burst before uttering so much as a moan."

"When a man has reason to scream, and cannot though he wants to—he has achieved the greatest scream." This was Reb Mendl's interpretation of the Talmudic passage "If one enters [a house] to visit a sick person [on the Sabbath], he should say, 'It is the Sabbath, when one must not cry out, and recovery will soon come.'"

In Kotzk one did not cry. Even when in pain, one did not weep. "Silence," the Kotzker said, "is the greatest cry in the world."

"When she opened it, she saw the child, and lo, the boy was crying. She took pity on him and said: 'This is one of the Hebrew children'" (Exodus 2:6). When Pharaoh's daughter opened the basket, she was amazed. The Scripture says she saw rather than heard the child weeping. Then she said, "This must

be a Hebrew child, because only a Hebrew child could weep so softly."

Job's mistake consisted in his crying out when in pain but keeping silent when all went well. Real questioning should occur in both cases. Why are things so good for me, as well as why are they so bad?

Mankind may be compared to chains that shackle the hands of God. Job's outcry today ought to be to free God from our chains. A teaching of the Baal Shem Tov.

The Romans had issued an edict forbidding Torah study. When Rabbi Akiba, one of the great masters of the Talmud, defiantly continued to teach, he was imprisoned and then tortured to death by having his flesh torn from his body with "iron combs." He bore his suffering with fortitude, welcoming his martyrdom as a unique opportunity of fulfilling the precept, "You shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul . . . even if you must pay for it with your life."

"All my days I have been troubled by this verse 'with all your soul'—namely, even if He took my soul. I said, 'When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?'"

He stretched out the word *ehad* ["One" in "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One"] so that he was still saying it when he expired.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, was asked by Moses, "Is this your reward for the study of Torah?" God replied, "Silence! Thus it has risen in Thought" [Meaning "such is My decree"].

What was the meaning of this answer? The Baal Shem continued:

The answer is ambiguous. Its true meaning is: Silence! Thus *he* has risen in Thought. There is a spiritual realm to which one can

only rise (or attain) through martyrdom. The Almighty loved Rabbi Akiba deeply and wished to uplift him to this realm of Thought, where there was an answer to every question.

The Cossack Wants a New Song

As discussed earlier, the Kotzker suffered from an inability to overcome his melancholy. He himself did not consider silence the ultimate response; this can be inferred from the following saying, which he cherished:

Three ways are open to a man who is in sorrow. He who stands on a normal rung weeps, he who stands higher is silent, but he who stands on the topmost rung converts his sorrow into song.

In this spirit, a contemporary of the Kotzker, Reb Shloymo of Radomsk, maintained that the degree of excellence achieved by Aaron, Moses's brother, was surpassed by that of King David.

Of Aaron the Priest it is said, "And Aaron was silent" (Leviticus 10:3). Two of his sons had perished in a gruesome manner, and he had remained silent. King David, on the other hand, went further than holding his peace. "That my soul may sing praise to Thee, and *not* be silent" (Psalms 30:13).

The fact that this utterance by Reb Shloymo made a deep impression on the Kotzker is indicated by the latter's search for a

more powerful response to his human quandary than silence. Did he achieve it?

Those were difficult times. Grief was no rare commodity. Each person carried his own burden of sorrows, knowing that no final blessing would come his way. When the heart was heavy the eyes flowed. But the Kotzker Hasidim, I repeat, did not weep. "Let the faithful [Hasidim] exult in glory; let them sing for joy upon their couches" (Psalms 149:5). Said Reb Bunam, "Hasidim, even when they are bedridden, manage to sing."

Hasidic song expressed exultation in the Lord. It seemed to celebrate Israel's marriage to God. One must make merry at a wedding; moreover, a gift was called for. But what kind of gift would be suitable? A song, for life was a song. The Almighty wanted to hear a good song.

Answers to the ultimate perplexity cannot be expressed in words. Response is facilitated by song. Singing is not the mere repetition of notes, or even the expression of joy or sorrow. Singing means uplifting all of existence to the level of perfection. Singing means raising oneself above all words and all ideas, to the realm of pure thought. "Thus has [Rabbi Akiba] arisen in Thought." One cannot truly sing by repeating an old melody. "God loves novelty," said Reb Mendl; one must sing a new song each time.

Reb Henokh, his disciple, loved telling piquant stories. Those who did not know him well broke into laughter. Reb Yekhiel Meyer of Gostinin remarked, however, "Henokh is lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, and they are laughing."

When Reb Henokh lay on his deathbed, his friend Reb Avrom of Porisov came to visit him. Reb Henokh told him the following tale:

When Russia occupied Poland in 1792, few Jews knew the Rus-

sian language. Once a Cossack visited a Jewish homeowner and asked him, "Are you the *khazyayen* [the owner]?"

The Jew did not understand. His wife translated wrongly: "The Cossack says: 'Are you a cantor [a *hazan*]? Sing for me.'"

So the Jew began singing the chant "The Sons of the Temple." The Cossack lost his temper and began to beat him.

So his wife explained: "He obviously doesn't like that song. He wants another one! A new song!"

With these words Reb Henokh breathed his last.

Did Reb Henokh feel that the Cossack, which is to say the Lord, was angry and therefore harsh with us? Was this an admission that he had failed to understand Him? Is it at all within our power to sing the song that the Cossack wishes to hear?

The Kotzker taught his disciples that to have faith in God was no game, for the Lord could carry out His words "with destructive force." Perhaps the Almighty directs the world by means of wrath because he dislikes our way of worshipping Him with our worn-out, old tunes. Was Reb Mendl, then, in search of a new song, a new path, which he could not find?

Barrels Full of Holes

The Kotzker hinted that all of human endeavor might be fruitless labor, that our finest convictions may be mere affectation. Surely moral attitudes depend upon a belief in the congruence

between human values and the nature of the world. And if the world is in its very being devoid of Truth, is there any validity to man's moral efforts?

Reb Mendl struggled with this dilemma. Was it not self-delusion to think that we were accomplishing anything worthwhile on earth? Perhaps all our labors were worthless.

In a conversation with several of his disciples, the Kotzker quoted from an old Midrash:

"Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the gate he does not open his mouth" (Proverbs 24:7). "This reminds me," says Rabbi Yannai, "of a fool who once stood staring at a high pole, on top of which was a tempting loaf of bread. The fool was hungry; his mouth watered, but all he did was gape and exclaim, 'Who can bring this down? How tasty it looks!' His companion, wiser than he, answered: 'You, silly fellow! The pole is no higher now than when the loaf was first put up there. I will show you how to get it down.' He took a long ladder, mounted it, reached the top, and brought the loaf down."

Another sage said: "This reminds me of a thirsty fool at a well. The water looked fresh and most alluring, but the well was too deep for him to draw water. His companion, wiser than he, took pieces of cord, tied them together, attached a bucket and brought it up with water."

Rabbi Levi said: "This may be compared to the case of the punctured barrels. The king who owned them hired laborers to fill them with water. One of them was a fool. 'What good is all this?' he said. 'What goes into the barrels at one end, trickles out at the other.' The wise laborer, however, said, 'Surely I am to be paid for every barrel! I shall fill them; for this clearly means that my obedience is important to the king.'"

Reb Mendl explained the difference between these parables. The reasoning of the first wise man was simple: he saw the loaf of bread on top of the pole and realized that it could be reached

since someone had placed it there. The wise man of the second parable was more perceptive than the first. Perhaps no one had been able to haul up water from the well. Some means had to be devised. Now he knew the goal, he needed only to devise the means of reaching it.

The third man was wise indeed. He saw no goal. Pouring water into a barrel full of holes seemed to make no sense. So he explained to the other workers that the object was not to fill the barrels; it was to fulfill the king's desire.

And the Kotzker concluded, "Do you understand what I think?"

What did he intend to convey? That all our efforts were as futile as pouring water into punctured barrels? What we achieved might have no meaning, life might be absurd, vanity of vanities. But act we must, it was the will of God.

The last parable is reminiscent of Sisyphus, the son of Aeolus, king of Corinth, noted in classical mythology for his trickery. His punishment in Tartarus was to push a huge boulder up a hill till it reached the top; but it always rolled back, so his work was endless. Sisyphus realized the futility of his task yet persisted in carrying it out with melancholy courage. Similarly, in Reb Mendl's parable the wise worker understood not only the absurdity of filling leaking barrels but also the point of carrying out the king's will.

Kierkegaard emphasizes the irrational in order to encourage the strongest possible faith. The Kotzker's parable also points up the absurdity of existence. All searching for rational meaning must yield to the reality upon which Judaism is built: to live is to obey.

So many of us are haunted by the ugly futility of human effort, the triumph of brute force, of evil, and man's helpless mis-

ery. Is not any form of hopefulness false, unreal, self-deceiving?

What is Truth as available to us? Is it a curse, a path toward defeat laden with torment? Are we doomed to live with delusion while searching for Truth in vain? We spend a lifetime looking for the key, and when we find it, we discover that we do not know where the lock is.

Is this how we should define our predicament? Man is called upon to regard Truth as his goal, but his own nature does not provide him with adequate means to attain it.

We are stunned by the discovery that *our* meaning may be meaningless, *our* purpose futility. What many had cherished as a utopia has turned out to be a nightmare. What we had acclaimed as purpose has turned out to be poison. Our designs become distorted in the process of being carried out. Our failure is greatest when we think we have succeeded. We think we have arrived, only to discover that we have gone astray. The means we use are unrelated to our vital goals. The acts we carry out are not designed to satisfy authentic needs. We are conscious of acting absurdly but seem powerless to bring about our emancipation from absurdity.

Reinterpreting the Kotzker's view, to the human mind the enterprise of living looks absurd indeed; yet, just as we must disregard self-regard in thinking about God, we must transcend our sense of values in evaluating the enterprise of living. In faith we can accept that there is *meaning beyond absurdity*, a meaning which is *supra rationem*, above reason, not *contra rationem*, against reason.

All moral action is subject to this deadlock. The world as we experience it fails to satisfy our hope that the good can conquer through our moral efforts. Nor are the guarantees offered by hu-

man reason capable of serving as a basis for an ethic. The validity of moral distinctions rests solely on obedience to God.

The supreme category accessible to man, then, is that of command. And the supreme response of which man is capable is obedience.

But is it possible that we misunderstand the king's assignment? that his intention was for us to repair the barrels rather than to continue pouring water into the shattered vessels?

The Solution Is in the Problem

Was this the last word, the ultimate conclusion the Kotzker reached: no sense, no hope, except obedience? Is it conceivable that he who always demanded audacity, defiance, should at the end advocate submission, surrender? Is it not a repudiation of all meaning to say "Amen" to the seeming absence of meaning? How ludicrous to build a paper bridge across the terrifying abyss that extends between hope and absurdity.

The barrel was full of holes, the whole enterprise absurd. Only one thing held significance—Truth—and to live truthfully meant, first of all, not to delude the self into believing that triumphs of falsehood are of lasting importance.

The essential point of the parable was that the laborers knew that they were hired and would be compensated for their toil.

Therefore, it had meaning in the king's eyes. Besides, he was responsible for having ordered the job to be done. Therefore, he alone was concerned about its purpose and ultimate effect.

Moreover, granting that their efforts were absurd, what alternative did they have? Would not the refusal to carry out the assignment have been equally absurd? And if everything was meaningless, so were men's statements that it was so.

Then how could one take anything seriously?

The complete failure of all consolation, the love of life despite its absurdity, holds out the certainty of a meaning that transcends our understanding. We encounter meaning beyond absurdity in living as a response to an expectation. Expectation of meaning is an *a priori* condition of our existence.

One thing we can be sure of: the king has hired us, and the original responsibility is his. What we must do is to remember Him Who has engaged us.

There is a strange contradiction in man's bringing charges in the name of Truth about the absence of Truth; such an argument can be meaningful only if it presupposes the presence of Truth. Is not our agony over the burial of Truth evidence of the life and power of Truth?

What lends meaning to our problem is the premise that God and meaning, as we understand them, are one. We would not, for example, ask how to reconcile the vast power of nuclear energy with its tremendous potential destructiveness.

It was faith in the mystery of God's justice that made Job's outcry possible. No Job arose in Hellas. Indeed, his outcry is part of the drama in which God and man are involved with one another.

Plato maintained:

God, if he be good, is not the author of all things, as many assert, but he is the cause of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to men; for few are the goods of human life, and many are the evils, and the good only is to be attributed to him; of the evil things other causes have to be discovered.¹

It would have been simple for the Prophets of ancient Israel to say that evil issues from another source, that God is not responsible for it. The Supreme God of the Avesta is Ahura-Mazda, conceived as good, and the author of all that is good; contrasted with him is the Destroying Spirit, Ahriman, of later Persian literature.

Out of his absolute certainty that God is One and the Creator of all things, the Prophet proclaimed, "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness. I make weal and create woe. I am the Lord, who do all these things" (Isaiah 45:6f.).

God is Truth. We carry out His orders, pour water into leaking barrels, believing in the activity for its own sake. Is it conceivable that God Who is Truth would be deceiving us? Truth cannot lie—there can be no doubt about that. There *is* meaning, though it is concealed from us. Truth is buried, and so, too, is meaning.

Jews have always believed in the resuscitation of the dead. The soul of Truth lives in concealment, and one day it too shall be resuscitated.

Reb Mendl wished to cultivate a sensitivity to higher concepts in his Hasidim. Abstract notions often assumed crude, earthy formulations. More exalted ideas were to be grasped in a wink, at a glance. Neither the senses nor simpleminded parables could help to achieve this. The Heavens did not spoon-feed; all they

¹ Republic II, 379c.

offered was a taste, an intimation. The focus of man's study was to detect what his senses and his intellect had missed. Reb Mendl interpreted, "Now . . . Jethro . . . heard . . ." (Exodus 18:1), as "Jethro's ear detected"; it absorbed a hint, an intimation.

The Kotzker wished men to be capable of Heavenly thinking. The approach, the style, and the way of conceiving issues pertaining to the Divine had to be absolutely different from the manner in which worldly matters were understood. How could one speak of God based on human models and clichés? Only a fool would do so.

God as the Antecedent

Theologians usually start their speculation with a concept of God's essence and then proceed to prove or simply discuss His existence. Yet the belief in God does not come through anthropocentric speculation, but in overwhelming moments of the awareness of His existence. These lead to an understanding of His essence.

The reality of God is antecedent to all ideas and values comprehended by man. It is a mistake to start with a human model and then seek to accommodate God to it.

Martin Buber's declaration "Nothing can make me believe in

a God who punishes Saul because he did not murder his enemy" must be contrasted with the Kotzker's statement "A God whom any Tom, Dick, and Harry could comprehend, I would not believe in."

"You shall make for yourself no molten God" (Exodus 34: 17), no God fashioned in human images. You could think of Him only in a Heavenly way. Moses's call "Hear, O Heaven" (Deuteronomy 32: 1) was interpreted as an injunction by Reb Mendl: "Hear in a Heavenly manner."

The Biblical writers approached the problem free of emotional predispositions and without rationalist dogmas, in fear and trembling and full of wonder and love for Him Who is overwhelmingly gracious. They were able to accept His severity in the same spirit in which they appreciated His compassion. "A man must offer a Blessing over evil just as he pronounces a Blessing over good," the rabbis teach us.

This conception does not exclude any understanding by man of God's ways. It merely states that while some of those ways seem absurd from man's perspective, they are nonetheless meaningful in the eyes of God. In other words, the ultimate meaning of God's ways is not invalidated because of man's incapacity to comprehend it; nor is our anguish silenced because of the certainty that somewhere in the recesses of God an answer abides. To understand God, we must pluck thought from a deadly conceptual thralldom and steer it back along the path of ineffable comprehension, returning it to its roots.

Yet if anyone proposed a definitive formulation of the ultimate meaning of the infinite universe, a meaning which our finite mind could fully comprehend, we would reject it as pompous trash. It is beyond man's power to come upon an adequate

solution to the great enigma. Every solution reached by our intellect would be an attempt to accommodate within the narrow confines of the human mind the secret of the *En-Sof*, the Infinite One, of God as He is in Himself.

Meaning beyond Absurdity

The opposite of absurdity is not always intelligible. On what basis can we believe that there is a meaning transcending all apparent absurdity?

No one can deny the reality of our anxiety at the absence of meaning in human life. It results from our frustrated expectation that there must be meaning somewhere. This unease and cry are themselves a sign of sense and meaning. To assume that humanity's cry is an isolated wave of sense in an infinite ocean of non-sense would condemn it as presumptuous. Our goal is not to come upon ultimate solutions to all problems but to find ourselves as part of a context of meaning.

"The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is His name" (Exodus 15:3). God is fighting for meaning. There is a state of war between God and chaos.

We do not need to drink the whole ocean to know what kind of water it contains. One drop yields its salty flavor. Our very

existence exposes us to the challenge of wonder and radical amazement at the universe despite the absurdities we encounter. It is possible on the basis of personal experience to arrive at the conclusion that the human situation as far as one can see is absurd. However, to stand face to face with the infinite world of stars and galaxies and to declare all of this absurd would be idiotic.

We are not the final arbiter of meaning. What looks absurd within the limit of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity.

The Kotzker taught that faith did not derive from rational evidence. Man had to live by faith despite his agony, despite his perennial subjection to disputing its validity. "Be in a hell of a mess and survive on faith," he taught.

To be overwhelmed by the transrational majesty of God one has to accept the risk of not understanding Him. The incompatibility of God's ways with human understanding was, according to the Kotzker, the very essence of our being. To rebel against this inadequacy would be like complaining that man was not created Divine. God is God, and man is man, and the twain rarely meet. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways . . . For as the Heavens are higher than earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8f.).

If we maintain that God's ways and man's ways are mutually exclusive, that man is incapable of understanding God, then the impossibility of our comprehending His ways *a priori* excludes the possibility of finding an answer to the ultimate question. And if this is the case, of what avail are man's arguments or reproaches?

Man's inability to understand the ways and acts of God is obviously due to an inherent inadequacy or privation in his nature, to the banishment of Truth from his life. So it is precisely the incapacity of man to share God's Truth that is both the source and the object of his pain.

The wonder is that, while our meaningful efforts sometimes lead to absurdities, we are also given infinite opportunities to carry out acts rich in meaning. At the beginning there was chaos, until the Lord said, "Let there be light!" and the chaos was partly overcome, but partly it stayed on. Lamentably, we take the light for granted and voice our misgivings because of the continuing darkness enveloping us.

The concealment of Truth, in upsetting the equation of existence and meaning and depriving man of clear knowing and right living, was an invitation to falsehood, which rules abusively, oppressively, tyrannously. Falsehood, exceedingly fertile, gives birth to a multitude of shams and delusions, as well as guile and deceit. It is raging like a volcano, and to offer answers would be like pouring buckets full of water to quench it.

And yet if Truth were manifest and strong, man would lose his major task, his destiny: to search for it. He would live without a reason for being. Is it not in the essence of freedom to grope, to choose, to work out rather than to be given Truth? As Lessing wrote:

If God should hold enclosed in his right hand all truth, and in his left hand only the ever-active impulse after truth, although with the condition that I must always and forever err, I would with humility turn to his left hand and say, "Father, give me this: pure truth is for Thee alone."¹

¹ G. E. Lessing, *Anti-Goeze*, a series of letters published by Lessing in 1778 in reply to Pastor Goeze's inquiry as to what Lessing meant by Christianity.

Thus, concealing the Truth was necessary in order to make possible man's greatest adventure: to live in search. If Truth had not been concealed, there would be no need to choose, to search.

If Truth had been permitted to prevail, Divinity would have overpowered the world and humanity would not have been possible.

If it were possible to demonstrate the existence of God, conclusively—*ecce signum*—putting an end to all debate, then there would also be an end to the humanity of man, the essence of which is to choose and to search.

Man's Responsibility for God

We usually formulate Job's dilemma as a contradiction between God's justice and the presence of evil in human life. A careful examination of the Biblical view of history uncovers man's attempts to oust the Lord from his world and His gradual withdrawal.

A major problem, then, is how to reconcile God's omnipotence with man's effort to defeat Him.

The central ideas in the Bible are the covenant between God and man and the effect of man's conduct upon God's relationship to him. Providence is not a divine ivory tower or a recess beyond the reach of all that human beings think, say, and do.

In a world where God is denied, where His will is defied, Truth flouted, compassion sloughed, violence applauded; in a world where God is left without allies—is it meaningful for man to court-martial Him? The growing awareness of history's tragic predicament gives birth to an intuition that man was responsible for God as God was responsible for man.

In the light of God's mysterious dependence upon man, the problem of anthropodicy and theodicy cannot be separated. The cardinal issue, Why does the God of justice and compassion permit evil to persist? is bound up with the problem of how man should aid God so that His justice and compassion prevail.

Many portions of the Hebrew Bible are implicitly related to the outcry of Job. Some of Israel's Prophets wrestled to reconcile God's silence in the face of evil with their certainty of His goodness. Their ongoing pain over violence and corruption echoes the tacit queries: "Where is God?" "Why does He keep silent?" "Why does he permit iniquity to flourish?"

God's response to Job related to the desire to understand the *why* of evil. His answer to the Prophets related to the issue of *how* to abolish evil. There is no human solution to God's problem, and God's only answer is the promise of messianic redemption.

The Kotzker's concern was not theological, an intelligible answer to the problem of theodicy, but messianic, the defeat of falsehood. As I pointed out earlier, his concern with Truth was existential—how to live Truth—not theoretical—how to know it. His primary demand was not for an explanation of why, at the creation of man, there had been no alternative to burying the Truth. What he craved was an end to falsehood, the resurrection of Truth.

Indeed, the question tormenting us is: will there be no end to

agony, to falsehood? Going beyond all speculation as how to reconcile the belief in Divine Providence with the immense torrents of madness and atrocities, our concern is not to find an apology for God but, rather, to put an end to evil, an end to the epilepsy of God's presence.

While Job asked *why* the innocent should suffer, the Prophets addressed themselves to the question of *when* suffering would cease. Our present order is but tentative; at the end of days, in the messianic era, there will be an end to mendacity and violence, as also to death.

Messianic redemption is a marvelous promise. The present chaos will not last forever. But fulfillment did not come during the Kotzker's lifetime, nor in the many years since. All he had, as we have today, is a promise and the expectation. The waiting goes on.

However, mere waiting may be a moratorium, a way of marking time, postponing our response to the challenge. The task is never to forget that by each sacred deed we commit, by each word we hallow, by each thought we chant, we render our modest part in reducing distress and advancing redemption.

Rabbi Jose relates:

Once I was traveling on the road, and entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. And there appeared Elijah . . . and waited for me at the entrance until I finished my prayer . . . He said to me, "My son, what sound did you hear in this ruin?"

I answered him, "I heard a divine voice moaning like a dove and saying: 'Woe is me, that I have destroyed my house, and burnt my sanctuary, and exiled my children among the nations!'"

And he said to me, "My son . . . Not only in this hour does it so exclaim, but each day it thus calls out three times! And . . . when the

people of Israel go into their houses of prayer and study and respond 'May His great name be blessed!' the Holy One nods His head and says, 'Happy is the King who is thus praised in His house!'"

All pain is shared anguish. Theodicy is a problem for God, not only for man. Why is it that the king's barrels are full of holes?

Medieval Jewish philosophers, motivated by the necessity of eradicating widely spread crude anthropomorphic notions of God fostered by vestiges of apocalyptic phantasmas, advanced a theology of radical transcendence. The profound doctrine of the immanence of God emphatically taught by Rabbi Akiba and his disciples in the classical Talmudic era, the doctrine of the *Shekhinah*, found no echo in Saadia, Ibn Daud, Maimonides, or Gersonides, for example.

It would be a mistake to assume that the purpose of the wrestling that the Kotzker and other Hasidic masters engaged in was to come upon an intelligible answer to a malignant enigma. What would be achieved by such an answer? Can any explanation obviate the terrible agony the world is writhing in?

Deep in meditation about the ultimate mystery, we are suddenly overcome by shame and trembling. How can we reproach the Lord? Does He not bring reproach upon Himself? God Himself is the quintessential Job. "In all their affliction He was afflicted" (Isaiah 63:9). When man is in distress, there is a cry of anguish in Heaven. God needs not only sympathy and comfort but partners, silent warriors.

The perplexity must endure. Saints turn from acquiescence to defiance when adversity seems to contradict the certainty of God's justice. Perhaps it is God's will that man give Him no rest . . . that he cooperate in seeking a way out of the tragic entanglements.

Life in our time has been a nightmare for many of us, tran-

quillity an interlude, happiness a fake. Who could breathe at a time when man was engaged in murdering the holy witness to God six million times?

And yet God does not need those who praise Him when in a state of euphoria. He needs those who are in love with Him when in distress, both He and ourselves. This is the task: in the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into a song. To know the monster's rage and, in spite of it, proclaim to its face (even a monster will be transfigured into an angel); to go through Hell and to continue to trust in the goodness of God—this the challenge and the way.

God writes straight in crooked lines, and man cannot evaluate them as he lives on one level and can see from only one perspective. We are not the final arbiter of meaning. What looks absurd within the limits of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity.

The shattering queries continue to come in such overwhelming cascade, the agonies pile up so dreadfully, that they rinse away the power to speak.

Farewell comfort, farewell tranquillity. Faith is the beginning of compassion, of compassion for God. It is when bursting with God's sighs that we are touched by the awareness that *beyond all absurdity* there is meaning, Truth, and love.

The agony of our problem fomented like a volcano, and it is foolish to seek finite answers to infinite agony. Buckets of water will not quench its fury. The pain is strong as death, cruel as the grave. But perhaps it will be in the grave, the dwelling place of Truth, that our own death will somewhat hasten its resurrection.

At times we must believe in Him in spite of Him, to continue being a witness despite His hiding Himself. What experience fails to convey, prayer brings about. Prayer prevails over despair.

Faith comes about in a collision of an unending passion for Truth and the failure to attain it by one's own means.

A friend of mine, Mr. Sh. Z. Shragai, went to Poland as a representative of the Jewish Agency in the late 1940's, when Poland still entertained good relations with the state of Israel. His visit was an official mission concerning the emigration of Jewish survivors of Nazi extermination camps. After finishing his work in Warsaw, he left for Paris and, as a very important person, was given a whole compartment on the train. It was crowded with passengers.

Outside he noticed an emaciated, poorly clad Jew who could not find a seat on the train. He invited him to join him in his compartment. It was comfortable, clean, pleasant, and the poor fellow came in with his bundle, put it on the rack over the seat, and sat down.

My friend tried to engage him in conversation, but he would not talk. When evening came, my friend, an observing Jew, recited the evening prayer (*maariv*), while the other fellow did not say a word of prayer. The following morning my friend took out his prayer shawl and phylacteries (*Talit* and *Tefillin*) and said his prayer; the other fellow, who looked so wretched and somber, would not say a word and did not pray.

Finally, when the day was almost over, they started a conversation. The fellow said, "I am never going to pray any more because of what happened to us in Auschwitz . . . How could I pray? That is why I did not pray all day."

The following morning—it was a long trip from Warsaw to

Paris—my friend noticed that the fellow suddenly opened his bundle, took out his *Talit* and *Tefillin* and started to pray. He asked him afterward, "What made you change your mind?"

The fellow said, "It suddenly dawned upon me to think how lonely God must be; look with whom He is left. I felt sorry for Him."

