Contending with God: A Reader

By: Yehuda Fogel

In the literature of the Jewish people, we have great works of faith, testaments to a millenia-long fascination with God. This faith, like the people who practiced it, has many different faces. There is the faith of *Psalms*, and the faith of *Kohelet*. The faith of *Shir HaShirim*, and the faith of *Iyov*. In each, we see a different facet of the religious journey, a different road towards God. The religious journey is complex, and sometimes faith can look like its opposite, something that thinkers like Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook were fond of pointing out.

Commenting perhaps on this dynamic, the great Rebbe of Pshischa shared a remarkable teaching. Considering the verse, "rebels you have been with the Lord your God," has an interesting word choice – ממרים הייתם עם ה' אלוקיכם. Instead of saying "you have been rebels" ***against*** God, the verse is "you have been rebels ***with*** the Lord your God." The Rebbe, in his characteristic sweet style, pointed out that many rebel ***with*** God, contending with God in a deeply relational way. This is a disagreement with God that remains on the side of God, deeply unified with God in heated, passionate engagement.

We hope to honor this tradition by putting together a compendium of those that contended with God. The chosen voices here reflect a variety of ages and eras. The first, *Yossele Rackover Speaks to God*, a work with a fascinating backstory that enthralls the reader instantly. The second—a bit dryer, but no less meaningful—is an academic essay (albeit one with heart) by Shraga Bar-On, on Hillel Zeitlin's search for God. If you don't know much about Zeitlin, this is the perfect time to open your eyes to this powerful prophet of the early twentieth century. A man of faith and paradox, Zeitlin lived an intense life, ultimately dying at the hands of the Nazis. If these questions move you, you also might want to check out Dov Weiss's Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism, a sharp read that explores this facet of Jewish thought deeply and movingly. The third piece, by musician Nick Cave, explores what a relationship with God can look like for those who may not believe, for those on the other side of the wall. Cave's beautiful words, while not from the Torah, offer a deep reflection about living a God-oriented life in the 21st century.

We invite you along this journey, and hope you enjoy this ride through God-fascinated Jews from 1920 until today.

Yossel Rakover Speaks to God

Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith

Zvi Kolitz

KTAV Publishing House, Inc,
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idea is fascinating. Doesn't it make the whole thing even better and more mysterious? Isn't the text—almost biblically!—a magnetic work which attracted adapters and editors on its way who then often contributed the best ideas? There is no Yiddish original from the year 1946! But if so, why didn't Zvi Kolitz tell me?

In Buenos Aires telephone information no longer knows the *Yidishe Tsaytung* (but there are thousands of Señor Stoliars; which of them should I ask?). And from Berlin to New York, no Jewish library can help with a copy or even a microfilm of the mysterious paper. I call the Jesuit College in the Argentine capital on the off-chance they'll have some information. An unknown Father Oscar Lateur picks up the receiver. He can't help either, how could he? My article must be finished; I have already failed to make the deadline. Discouraged, I open the newspaper and look at today's wounds: the mutilation of Bosnia, the shadows of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse over Russia, the deadly spiral of pre-Easter terror in Palestine, plans to electrify the barbed wire around the Gaza Strip. Suddenly the fax comes to life, there is a soft purring. I read B-u-e-n-o-s A-i-r-e-s as the first page leaves the machine. It is a chaotic, stuck-together article in Hebrew letters. Only the headline appears in Latin letters: "EL DIARIO ISRAELITA — Miércoles 25 de Setiembre 1946." Gigantic blots of ink decorate each page. The pages are blotchy, here too dark, here too pale, here and there a bit missing, and yet it is clearly legible: "YOSSEL RAKOVERS VENDUNG TSU G-OT — Dertseylung fun ZVI KOLITZ far di Yidishe Tsaytung." There follows an indecipherable introduction, then in clearer fragments: "In eyner fun warschawer geto, tsvishn hoyfns fun farsmolyete shteyner und mentshlekhe beyner is qefunen gevorn . . . di vayterdike tsavoe geshribn fun a jidn . . ." And further on, quite clearly: "Varshe, dem 28stn april 1943 — Ikh, Yossel, der zun fun David Rakover fun Tarnopol, a khosid fun gerer rebn un opshtamiker fun di tsadikim gadoylim un kadoyshim fun di mishpokhes Rakover un Mayzls, shrayb di dosike shures, ven dos Varshaver geto is in flamen . . . "

Yossel Rakover Speaks to God

Zvi Kolitz

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining, I believe in love even when feeling it not; I believe in God even when He is silent.

—inscription on the wall of a cellar in Cologne where a number of Jews hid for the entire duration of the war

In the ruins of the ghetto of Warsaw, among heaps of charred rubbish, there was found, packed tightly into a small bottle, the following testament, written during the ghetto's last hours by a Jew named Yossel Rakover.

Warsaw, April 28, 1943

I, Yossel, son of Dovid Rakover of Tarnopol, a Hasid of the Rebbe of Ger and a descendant of the righteous, learned, and God-fearing families of Rakover and Meisels, am writing these lines as the houses of the Warsaw ghetto go up in flames. The house I am in is one of the few still not burned. For several hours an unusually heavy artillery barrage has been crashing down on us, and the walls around me are crumbling and disintegrating under the con-

centrated fire. Before long the house I am in will be transformed, like almost every other house in the ghetto, into a grave for its defenders. By the dagger-sharp, unusually crimson rays of the sun that penetrate through the small, half-walled-up window of my room, through which we have been shooting at the enemy day and night, I see that it must now be late afternoon, just before sundown, and the sun probably has no idea how little I regret that I will not see it again. Something peculiar has happened to us; all our notions and emotions have changed. Death, swift and abrupt, looks like a savior to us, like a liberator, breaking our shackles; and beasts of the field seem so lovable and dear that I feel deep pain whenever the evil fiends that dominate Europe are referred to as beasts. It is not true that there is something beastly in Hitler. He is, I am deeply convinced, a typical child of modern man. Humanity as a whole has spawned him and reared him, and he is the frankest expression of its innermost, most deeply buried wishes.

In a forest where I once hid, I encountered a dog one night, sick and starving; perhaps mad as well, his tail between his legs. Both of us immediately felt the kinship, if not in fact the similarity, of our situations, because the situation of a stray dog is not, by and large, much better than ours. He cuddled up to me, buried his head in my lap, and licked my hands. I do not know whether I ever cried so much as that night. I threw my arms around his neck, crying like a baby. If I say that I envied the animals at that moment, it would be no wonder. But what I felt was more than envy. It was shame. I felt ashamed in front of the dog to be, not a dog, but a man. That is how it is. That is the spiritual state to which we have come. Life is a tragedy, death a savior; man a calamity, the beast an ideal; day a horror, night—a relief.

Millions of people in the great wide world, who love the day, the sun, and the light, do not know, do not have the slightest idea, how much darkness and unhappiness the sun has brought us. It has been turned into a tool in the hands of the evildoers, and they have used it as a searchlight, to track the footprints of those who are fleeing.

When my wife, my six children, and I hid in the forest, it was night, and night alone, that concealed us in its bosom. Day turned us over to those who were seeking our lives. How can I ever forget the day when the Germans raked with a hail of fire the thousands of refugees on the highway from Grodno to Warsaw? As the sun rose, the airplanes zoomed over us. The whole day long, without letup, they murdered us. In this massacre from the sky, my wife perished, with our seven-month-old child in her arms. Two more of my five remaining children disappeared that day without a trace. Their names were Dovid and Yehuda, one was four years old, the other six.

At sunset, the handful of survivors continued their journey toward Warsaw, and I, with my three remaining children, started out to comb the fields and woods at the site of the massacre in search of the children. "Dovid! Yehuda!"—so, throughout the night, our voices cut, as if with knives, the dead silence around us; and a forest echo, helpless, pitiful, and heart-rending, answered our cries, in tones of lamenting eulogy. I never saw my two children again, and in a dream I was told not to worry about them, because they were in the hands of *Ribono-shel-Oylom.*[1]

My other three children died in the course of a year in the Warsaw ghetto. Rokhele, my little daughter, ten years old, had heard that it was possible to find scraps of bread in the public dump outside the ghetto walls. The ghetto was starving at the time, and the bodies of those who died of starvation lay in the streets like heaps of rags. The people of the ghetto were prepared to face any death except death by starvation. This was because the desire to eat remains even after systematic persecution has destroyed all one's spiritual desires, and even if one wishes to die. I have heard about a half-starved Jew who once said to another: "If I could only have one meal like a human being, I would be willing to die!"

Rokhele told me nothing of her plan to steal out of the ghetto, a crime punishable by death. She and a girlfriend of the same

1. Lit. "Master of the World," i.e., God Almighty.

age started out on the perilous journey. They left home under cover of darkness, and at sunrise she and her friend were caught outside the ghetto walls. Nazi ghetto guards, together with dozens of their Polish underlings, at once started in pursuit of these two Jewish children who had dared to hunt for a piece of bread in a garbage can in order not to die of hunger. People witnessing the chase could not believe their eyes. Even in the ghetto it was unprecedented. One might have thought they were pursuing dangerous criminals. Dozens of fiends running amok after a pair of starved ten-year-old children who did not last very long. One of them, my child, running with her last ounce of strength, fell exhausted to the ground, and then the Nazis drove a bayonet through her head. The other girl saved herself, but, driven out of her mind, died two weeks later.

The fifth child, Yacob, a boy of thirteen, died of tuberculosis on his Bar Mitzvah day, and his death was a deliverance for him. The last child, my fifteen-year-old daughter Khave, perished during a *Kinderaktion*[2] that began at sunrise last Rosh Hashona and ended at sunset. That day, before the sun went down, hundreds of Jewish families had lost their children.

Now my time has come. And like Job, I can say of myself—nor am I the only one who can say this—that I return to the soil naked, as naked as on the day of my birth.

I am forty-three years old, and when I look back on the past I can assert confidently, as confidently as a man can be in judging himself, that I have lived an honest life, and that my heart was full of love. At one time I was blessed with success, but I never boasted about it. I had many possessions and, as my rebbe used to say, very rarely had to make sacrifices. By law and by faith, if I had ever been tempted to steal, it would only have been so as to enjoy depravity for its own sake. My house was open to the needy, and I was happy whenever I was able to do anyone a favor. I served God enthusiastically, and my sole request to Him

2. Lit. "children's action"; a roundup of Jewish children.

was that He allow me to worship Him *bikhol livovekho, bikhol nafshekho ubikhol miodekho.*[3]

After everything I have lived through, I cannot say that my relationship to God remains unchanged, but I can say with absolute certainty that my belief in Him has not changed a hair's breadth. In the past, when I was well and well off, my relation to God was as to one who kept on granting me favors for which I was always indebted; now my relationship to Him is as to one who owes me something, owes me much. And since I feel that He owes me something, I believe that I have the right to demand it of Him. But I do not say, like Job, that God should point a finger at my sin so that I may know why I deserve this; for bigger and better people than I are firmly convinced that what is now happening is not a question of punishment for transgressions but rather that something very specific is taking place in the world. More exactly, it is a time of *hester ponim.*[4]

God has veiled His countenance from the world, and thus has delivered mankind over to its most savage impulses. And unfortunately, when the power of impulse dominates the world, it is quite natural that the first victims should be those who embody the divine and the pure. Speaking personally, this is hardly a consolation, but since the destiny of our people is determined, not by earthly, material, and physical calculations, but by calculations not of this earth, spiritual and divine, the believer should see such events as a fragment of a great divine reckoning, against which human tragedies do not count for much. This, however, does not mean that the pious of my people should justify the edict by claiming that God and God's judgments are right. I believe that to say we deserve the blows we have received is to malign ourselves, to desecrate the *Shem hamfoyrosh*[5] "Jew," and

3. "With all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5), a biblical quotation included in the Shema prayer, the profession of faith recited twice daily by observant Jews.

4. God's "Veiling of His Countenance."

5. Lit. "The Ineffable Name," a phrase usually referring to God, but here applied to the ordinary Jew.

this is the same as desecrating the actual *Shem hamfoyrosh*—God; God is maligned when we malign ourselves.

In a situation like this, I naturally expect no miracles, nor do I ask Him, my Lord, to show me mercy. May He treat me with the same countenance-veiling indifference with which He has treated millions of His people. I am no exception, and I expect no special treatment. I will no longer attempt to save myself, nor flee any more. I will facilitate the work of the fire by moistening my clothing with gasoline. I have three bottles of gasoline left after having poured several dozen on the heads of the murderers. That was one of the finest moments in my life, and I roared with laughter. I had never dreamed that the death of human beings, even of enemies—even of such enemies—could so delight me. Foolish humanists may say what they like. Vengeance was and always will be the last means of waging battle and the greatest emotional gratification of the oppressed. Until now I never understood the precise meaning of the passage in the Talmud that states: "Vengeance is sacred because it is mentioned between two of God's names; as it is written: 'A God of vengeance is the Lord.'"[6] Now I understand it. Now I know why my heart is so overjoyed when I recall that for thousands of years we have been calling our Lord a God of vengeance: "A God of vengeance is our Lord."

Now that I am in a position to see life with particularly clear eyes—something only rarely given people before death—it seems to me that there is a fundamental difference between our God and the God in whom the nations of Europe believe. Our God is a God of vengeance, and our Torah is full of death penalties for the seemingly smallest sins, yet at the same time the Talmud relates that it was enough for the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of our people when it was free in its own land, to sentence a person to death once in seventy years to have the judges considered murderers.[7] In contrast, the followers of the God of

6. Berakhot 33a, citing Ps. 94:1.

7. See Mishnah Makkot 1:20, Talmud Bavli Makkot 7a.

the nations, the so-called God of love, who commanded them to love every creature made in the divine image, have been murdering us without pity, day in, day out, for almost two thousand years.

Yes, I have spoken of vengeance. We have had only a few opportunities to see true vengeance. But when we saw it, it was so good and so worthwhile to see, I felt such deep satisfaction, such tremendous pleasure, that it seemed as if an entirely new life was springing up in me. A tank had suddenly broken into our street. It was bombarded with flaming bottles of gasoline from all the embattled houses. They failed to hit their target, however, and the tank continued on its way. I and my friends waited until the tank was literally passing under our noses. Then, through the half-bricked-up window, we suddenly attacked. The tank burst into flames, and six blazing Nazis jumped out. Ah, how they burned! They burned like the Jews they had set on fire, but they screamed more. Jews do not scream. They accept death as a savior. The Warsaw ghetto perishes in battle. It perishes shooting, struggling, blazing, but no, not screaming!

I still have three bottles of gasoline, and they are as precious to me as wine to a drunkard. After emptying one over my clothes, I will place the paper on which I write these lines in the bottle and hide it among the bricks of the half-walled-up window of this room. If anyone ever finds it and reads it, he will, perhaps, understand the emotions of one of the millions of Jews who died forsaken by the God in whom he believed unshakably. I will let the two other bottles explode on the heads of the evildoers when my last moment comes.

There were twelve of us in this room at the outbreak of the revolt. For nine days we battled against the enemy. All eleven of my comrades have fallen, dying silently. Even the little boy—God only knows how he got here—about five years old, who is now lying dead near me, with his lovely little face wearing the kind of smile that appears on the faces of children who are peacefully dreaming. Even this child died with the same epic

calm as his older comrades. It happened early this morning. Most of us were already dead. The boy scaled the heap of corpses to catch a glimpse of the outside world through the window. For several minutes he stood beside me like that. Suddenly he fell backwards, rolling down the pile of corpses, and lay like a stone. On his small, pale forehead, between the locks of black hair, there was a spattering of blood.

Until sunrise yesterday, when the enemy opened a concentrated barrage against our bunker, one of the last in the ghetto, every one of us was still alive, although five were wounded, each of them still fighting nonetheless. Yesterday and today, all of them fell, one after the other, one on top of the other, standing at their posts and firing until shot to death.

Apart from the three bottles of gasoline, I have no more ammunition. There is still heavy firing from the three floors above me, but they cannot send any help, for the stairway has been destroyed by shellfire, and I think the house is about to cave in. I am lying on the floor as I write these lines, surrounded by my dead comrades. I look into their faces, and a quiet but mocking irony seems to animate them, as if they were saying, "Be patient, you foolish man, another few minutes and everything will become clear to you too." This irony particularly cries out from the face of the little boy lying at my right hand as if asleep. His tiny mouth is drawn into a smile exactly as if he were laughing, and I, who still live and feel and think like a being of flesh and blood—it seems to me that he is laughing at me. He is laughing with that quiet but eloquent, penetrating laughter characteristic of those who know a lot when they try to convey *true knowledge* to those who know *nothing* and think they know everything. Now he knows everything, the boy. It's all clear to him now. He even knows why he was born even though he had to die so soon, and why he died only five years after his birth. And even if he doesn't know why, at least he knows that whether or not he knows it is completely unimportant and insignificant in the light of the revelation of the divine glory in that better world where he now finds himself, perhaps in the arms of his murdered parents to whom he has returned. In an hour or two I too will make the

same discovery. Unless my face is eaten away by the flames, a similar smile may rest on it after I am dead. Meanwhile, I am still alive, and before my death I would like to speak to my God as a living man, a simple, living man who has had the great but unfortunate honor of being a Jew.

I am proud that I am a Jew not *in spite of* the world's treatment of us, but precisely *because of* this treatment. I would be ashamed to belong to one of the peoples that spawned and raised the criminals who are responsible for the deeds that have been perpetrated against us.

I am proud to be a Jew because it is an *art* to be a Jew, because it is *hard* to be a Jew. It is no art to be an Englishman, an American, or a Frenchman. It may be easier, more comfortable, to be one of them, but not more honorable. Yes, it is an honor to be a Jew!

I believe that to be a Jew means to be a fighter, an everlasting swimmer against the turbulent, criminal human current. The Jew is a hero, a martyr; he is holy! You, our enemies, declare that we are bad. I believe that we are better and finer than you, but even if we were worse, I would like to see how you would look in our place!

I am happy to belong to the world's most unfortunate people, whose Torah represents the loftiest and most beautiful body of law and morality. This Torah has been made even holier and more immortal by the degradation and insult to which it has been subjected by the enemies of God.

I believe that to be a Jew is an inborn trait. One is born a Jew exactly as one is born an artist. It is impossible to be released from being a Jew. A divine attribute within us has made us a chosen people. Those who do not understand this will never understand the higher meaning of our martyrdom. "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart," a great rebbe once said,[8] and there is no people more chosen than a people permanently persecuted. If I did not believe that God once picked us

8. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1811); see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Schocken, 1981), p. 148.

to be a chosen people, I would believe that our tribulations have made us chosen.

I believe in Israel's God even if He has done everything to stop me from believing in Him. I believe in His laws even if I cannot justify His actions. My relationship to Him is no longer the relationship of a slave to his master but rather that of a student to his teacher. I bow my head before His greatness, but will not kiss the rod with which He strikes me.

I love Him, but I love His Torah more, and even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still observe His Torah. God means religion, but His Torah means a way of life, and the more we die for this way of life, the more sacred and immortal it becomes.

Therefore, my God, allow me, before death, being absolutely free of every semblance of terror, finding myself in a state of absolute inner peace and assurance, to argue things out with You for the last time in my life.

You say that we have sinned? Of course we have. And therefore that we are being punished? I can understand that too. But I would like You to tell me *whether any sin in the world deserves the kind of punishment we have received.*

You say that You will yet repay our enemies? I am convinced that You will. Repay them without mercy? I have no doubt of that either.

Nevertheless, I would like You to tell me *whether any punishment in the world can compensate for the crimes that have been committed against us?*

You say, perhaps, that it is no longer a question of sin and punishment, but a situation of *hester ponim* in which You have abandoned humanity to its impulses? Then I would like to ask You, God—and this question burns in me like a consuming fire—*What more, oh, what more must transpire for You to again reveal Your countenance?*

I want to tell You openly and clearly that now, more than in any previous period of our endless path of agony, do we have—we the tortured, the humiliated, the strangled, the buried alive and burned alive, we the insulted, the mocked, the ridiculed, the

murdered by the millions—that now do we have the right to know *the limits of Your patience.*

I should like to tell You something else: Do not put the rope under too much strain, because, God forbid, it might snap. The test to which You have put us is so severe, so unbearably severe, that You should—You must—forgive those of Your people who, in their misery and rage, have turned away from You.

Forgive those who have turned from You in their misery, but also those who have turned from You in their happiness. You have transformed our lives into such an unending ordeal that the cowards among us have tried to avoid it, to run away from it any way they could. Do not strike them for it. One does not strike cowards, one pities them. And on them more than on us, O God, have mercy!

Forgive those who have desecrated Your name, who have gone over to the service of other gods, who have become indifferent to You. So severely have You struck them that they no longer believe You are their Father, that they have any Father at all.

I tell You this because I believe in You, because I believe in You more than ever, because now I know that You are my Lord, because surely You are not, surely You cannot be, the God of those whose deeds are the most horrible manifestation of godlessness.

If You are not my God, whose God are You? The God of the murderers?

If those who hate me and murder me are so sinister, so evil, what then am I if not the one who reflects something of Your light, of Your goodness?

I cannot praise You for the deeds You tolerate. I bless and praise You, however, for the very fact of Your existence, for Your terrible greatness, which is so awesome that even what is happening now makes no impression on You! And precisely because You are so great and I so small, I pray You, I warn You in Your own name: stop underscoring Your greatness by tolerating the torments of the persecuted.

Nor am I asking You to strike down the guilty. It is the dreadful logic of the inexorable course of events that they will eventually strike themselves, for in our being killed the conscience of the world has been killed; in the murder of Israel a world has died.

The world will be devoured by its own evil, it will drown in its own blood.

The murderers have already passed sentence on themselves and will never escape it; but may You execute a sentence, a doubly severe sentence, on those who condone the crime.

Those who condemn the murder with their mouths, but rejoice at it in their hearts.

Those who meditate in their foul hearts: "Yes, he is evil, this tyrant, but he is doing a piece of work for us for which we will always be grateful!"

It is written in your Torah that a thief is to be punished more severely than a brigand, even though a thief does not attack his victim physically and merely attempts to take his possessions by stealth.

The reason is that the brigand, who attacks his victim in broad daylight, fears neither man nor God. But the thief fears man, not God.[9] That is why his punishment is more severe than the brigand's.

It would not bother me if You treated the murderers as You treat brigands, for their attitude toward You and toward us is the same, and they make no secret of their murders and their crimes.

But those who are silent in the face of murder, those who have no fear of You, but fear what people might say (fools! they are unaware that people will say nothing!), those who express sympathy for the drowning man but refuse to rescue him—punish them, O Lord, punish them; I implore You, punish them; I pray, punish them like thieves!

9. His criminal acts show that he does not fear God, but since he breaks in at night or when no one is home, it is obvious that he fears other human beings. See Baba Kamma 79b.

Death can wait no longer, and I must finish my writing. On the floors above me, the firing is growing weaker by the minute. The last defenders of this stronghold are now falling, and with them falls and perishes the great, beautiful, God-fearing Jewish Warsaw. The sun is about to set, and I thank God that I will never see it again. The red glow of the conflagrations comes in through the little window, and the bit of sky I can see is red and turbulent like a waterfall of blood. In about an hour at the most I will be with my family and with the millions of other dead members of my people in that better world where there are no more doubts, and where God alone is sovereign.

I die peacefully, but not complacently; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not cynical; a believer, but not a supplicant; a lover of God, but no blind amen-sayer.

I have followed Him even when He repulsed me. I have obeyed His commandments even when He has struck me for it; I have loved Him and will continue to love Him even when He has hurled me to the ground, tortured me to death, made me an object of shame and ridicule.

My rabbi always told the story of a Jew who fled from the Spanish Inquisition with his wife and child, striking out in a small boat on the stormy sea until he reached a rocky island. A bolt of lightning killed his wife; a storm rose and hurled his son into the sea. Alone, solitary as a stone, naked and barefoot, lashed by the storm and terrified by the thunder and lightning, with disheveled hair and hands outstretched to God, the Jew continued on his way across the desolate, rocky isle, turning to God with the following words:

"God of Israel, I have fled here in order to be able to serve You undisturbed, to follow Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, do everything to make me stop believing in You. Now, lest it occur to You that by imposing these tribulations You will succeed in driving me from the right path, I notify You, my God and the God of my father, that it will not avail you in the least. You may insult me, You may strike me, You may take away all that I cherish and hold dear in the world, You may tor-

ture me to death—I will always believe in You, I will always love You! Yea, even in spite of You!

And these are my last words to You, my wrathful God: Nothing will avail You in the least! You have done everything to make me renounce You, to make me lose faith in You, but I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakable believer!

Praised forever be the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, truth, and law, who will soon show His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.[10]

Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit.[11]

10. Deut. 6:4. The first line of the daily Shema, recited also as the conclusion of the Vidui, the deathbed confessional prayer.

11. Ps. 31:6. Recited as part of the Vidui.

To Love the Torah More Than God

Emmanuel Levinas

Among the recent publications devoted to Judaism in the West, there are a great many beautiful texts. Talent is not a problem in Europe. Rarely, however, are the texts real. Over the past one hundred years, Hebrew learning has faded, and we have lost touch with our sources. What learning is still being produced is based on an intellectual tradition; it remains self-taught and untutored, even when it is not improvised. And what worse corruption can befall an author than being read only by people who know less than he does! With no one to check them, no one to put them in their places, authors tend to mistake the lack of counterpressure for freedom, and this freedom for the touch of genius. Small wonder that the reading public remains skeptical; for them, Judaism, with its few million unrepentant adherents left in the world, is no more than a matter of quibbling over religious observances—something uninteresting and unimportant.

I have just read a text which is both beautiful and real—as real as only fiction can be. An anonymous author published it in an Israeli journal; under the title "Yossel, Son of Yossel [sic] Rakover of Tarnopol, Speaks to God," it was translated for *La terre retrouvée,* the Zionist paper in Paris, by Mr. Arnold Mandel, who, it would appear, read it with deep emotion. The text deserves even

Hillel Zeitlin in Search of God: An Analysis of Zeitlin's Meditation "The Thirst"[1]

Shraga Bar-On

A Religious Life of Question Marks

Faith is not a binary characteristic. This seems obvious when considering the semantic field of this term, which includes multifarious accounts of varied occurrences of faith. Phrases like "complete faith," "master of faith," "faith concerns," "simple faith," etc. reflect its varied manifestations and degrees. The vast corpus of religious literature presents heroes of faith who are put to spiritual trials, face temptations and undergo trials of faith. The concept of a "trial" and the complete or partial success of the heroes who withstood them, such as Abraham, Job, Jesus, R. Akiva, Paul, Saint John of the Cross, the Ashkenazi Hasidim, and many others of all generations, not only testifies to their own degree of faith, but also brings to light the existence of other degrees of faith—those of the audience of such literature—of the believers of such myths. Each of these "masters of faith" represents an extreme degree of faith, manifested under extreme circumstances. The readers who are raised within this tradition aim for the same degree of faith which the great and experienced ones had, and place themselves at a lower degree, for if it were otherwise these tales of faith would become meaningless. Still, many philosophical discussions over the terminology of faith tend to regard the person as either a "believer" or an "infidel." These discussions often presume that faith is a defining feature of life. Others define faith as the approach to a fundamental truth or a defended truth-claim,[2] some see in it a personality trait or a personal inclination, and others see in it a complete disposition, so that once a person takes it he is no longer

[1] Translated from Hebrew by Jonathan Howard and Liat Lavi.

[2] See, for instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 153e-154e §§584-587.

subject to the doubt, questions, contemplation, or scepticism that may sprout from the encounter with the world or with alternative metaphysical doctrines; other discussions strive to present faith as a total achievement that derives from a one-time decision. The most famous of these last opinions is Pascal's Wager.[3] However, in life, perhaps unlike in speculative philosophy, "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance," as Mallarme's critique brilliantly points out.[4]

Upon the wide spectrum that lies between faithlessness and faith is a central religious phenomenon which could be termed a "Quest for God." The Quest for God is a faith-characteristic of "Godseekers." The religious drama of the Godseekers is the product of an existential gap. Godseekers live in a constant state of discrepancy between the world of experience, which could be phrased as their "internal faith," and the fashion in which they themselves perceive external evidence. The starting point of this description is introspection. The Godseekers discover a given in their soul: they assume that God exists either because they can feel His presence or because they find themselves thrown into a tradition that planted God in their hearts. Still, and in spite of this initial certainty, they experience a disparity between the assumption of God's existence and the external evidence supporting it. Following M.J. Berdyczewski I shall refer to this state as a "rent in the soul": "we feel that God exists, but, despite our longing, He does not come in touch with us and we do not know Him." God, who is experienced in such a clear fashion, remains an enigma. This problem which pesters the mind of this group of believers sets them on at least three different paths: the eternal search after God and trying to identify His presence in the world; various attempts of defining the span of God's action and His relationship with humanity; and a redefinition of His being. When a Godseeker has found his God or denied Him, he has bridged the gap and therefore no longer falls into this group of believers; when he returns to admitting a gap between what is in his soul and reality, he positions himself again in the realm of search—in the state of faith of a Godseeker.

The Quest for God is a central phenomenon that has many manifestations in religious literature. However, it never conquered a true place

[3] Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*, §§184-241, esp. §233.

[4] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems,* trans. & commentary by H. Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 266.

in the Jewish religious and philosophical literature.[5] It appears that the main reason for this is that this state of faith (God-seeking) does not belong within the traditional framework of philosophical-speculative thought. The traditional scholarship normally deals with statements about reality and perception whose pretension is to provide answers to religious problems and to validate or negate religious statements, whereas the phenomenon of Godseekers is in its entirety a problem, a temporary state rather than an absolute or desired solution. A philosophical or religious essay seeks normally to end with exclamation marks, whereas religious life as it is expressed in the state of faith of Godseekers is a life of question marks. A Godseeker may sit down to write a contemplative essay once he overcomes the "rent" in some way or another, but by that stage, by definition, he is no longer a Godseeker.

Another main reason for the absence of descriptions of this state of faith in Jewish thought is a problem I wish to describe as the "lack of honesty" or "lack of personal touch" of religious philosophical literature. The majority of writers of both general and Jewish philosophical books were either community leaders or those who saw themselves as such. The self-image of a person of such stature carries with it a sense of responsibility. Rabbis bear the responsibility for the education and behaviour of their literary audience. The scholarly literature therefore strove to play a sociological role in modeling religious life and identity, and thus was required to provide answers rather than ask questions. The rabbis normally functioned as the members of society who answer and decree, and as such they normally avoided revealing themselves and their own concerns. Instead, they chose to serve the public and wished to lay the foundations for the beliefs they perceived as desirable. As the agents of this socialisation process, their writing is impersonal, and even where personal testimonies were brought, it was in the name of a greater social purpose and not for the sake of putting down on paper the actual experiences of the writer. It's no wonder then, that descriptions of faith-concerns and the Quest for God would appear instead in

[5] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976); idem, *Man's Quest for God* (Santa-Fe: Aurora Press, 1998); Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale: Jewish Lights, 1992); Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek,* trans. N. Bloom (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing, 2008).

non-normative literature (i.e., non-halakhic and non-scholarly literature) some of whose peaks were expressed either by a secondary elite that did not serve as community rabbis or in the writings of central figures whose writings were not intended to be published, and were published either unauthorised or edited.

Despite the aforementioned, a person who thoroughly studies thoroughly these writings (as well as the canonical books) will discover many expressions of the Quest for God. However, the literary frameworks in which this state of faith is expressed do not belong, normally, to philosophical literature but rather to confessional literature and to the poetic and mytho-poetic expressions abundant in religious literature, and in miscellaneous expressive media such as music, dancing, and fine arts. In contrast to philosophical writing, expressive discourse is more personal in its essence and style; the mytho-poetic language mostly offers descriptions of situations rather than ontological claims. These frameworks—of poetry, fiction, and confessions, music, dancing, and painting—are better suited for expressing the state of faith of Godseekers. They are more flexible and varied in structure and are judged by different criteria than those by which philosophical literature is judged. While philosophical literature is judged by the validity of its claims or its effect upon the intellectual atmosphere of their time, the expressive discourse is also judged by aesthetic criteria and its emotional effect upon its recipients.

The Quest for God during the Hebrew Renaissance[6] Period

The late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, a period of Hebraic renaissance in various fields—including the late literary works of the enlightenment period, the literature of the *Hibbat Zion* movement, and the literature of that renaissance generation, as well as the developments in the fine arts—is sometimes perceived as a period of creation stemming from a revolt, as an expression of a rapture, a crisis facing tradition and the faith of the people of Israel of all generations. This conception,

[6] In translating the Hebrew term "תְּחִיָּה" I followed Harshav's choice of "renaissance" rather than "revival" due to the connotation of the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth century. See Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11 ff.

which has long been a matter of controversy, is only partially true. As Avidav Lipsker beautifully summed it up in the form of an oxymoron, we are faced with a "tradition of a revolution" and not necessarily with genuine revolts. This assertion is reinforced when historically analysing the changes of faiths, beliefs, and lifestyles in Jewish tradition. It seems that a more accurate description of the modern shift in Jewish literature is enabled by using Avi Sagi's distinction between "tradition" and "traditionality."[7] The self-image of Jewish and Hebrew literature as "new literature" turns its back to the ethos of "traditionality"—i.e., relies upon tradition for later innovations, but does not necessarily detach from the "tradition" itself in regards to the inspiration it draws from it. Beside expressions of revolt against tradition and the detachment from the traditional system of faiths and beliefs, and beside expressions of revolt against the parental tradition and the appearances of out-and-out faithlessness, at the heart of this wide-spanned creation stands the conscious Quest for God. Many of the artists of this period saw themselves as Godseekers and expressed this state of faith in various forms. As a counterview to Kurzweil's critical statement, which characterised Modern Hebrew literature as anti-religious and secular, it appears that a significant portion of this Hebrew creation can be classified as "literature of the Quest for God." One can easily identify within Hebrew literature "faithful-yet-secular" voices who called for the adoption of expressions of faith and/or elements of faith from the past in order to serve the renaissance. I shall refer here only to two of the more famous and influential writers in this group, Asher Ginsberg, otherwise known as Ahad Ha'am, and Aaron David Gordon. Ahad Ha'am highlighted the vital element of faith in God for Israeli national identity:

> Any thing whose action in life is evident, even if in itself it is naught but an imaginary illustration, is indeed a real "being" in the historic sense. Hence, even he who does not believe in the existence of God taken in itself, cannot deny His existence as a real force in history; and the national Jew, even if he be an infidel, cannot say: 'I have no part in the God of Israel,' in that force in history that resurrected our people and affected its spiritual charectaristics and its way of life for millennia. He who really does not

[7] Avi Sagi, *The Challenge of Returning to Tradition* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2003), 15-29 (Hebrew).

> have a part in the God of Israel, he who does not sense in his heart any connection to that "higher realm," in which our forefathers gave the best of their heart and mind throughout history and from which they drew their moral strength—can be an acceptable person, but a national Jew he is not, even if he "lives in the land of Israel and speaks the holy tongue."[8]

Ahad Ha'am admits his denial of a realistic existence of God, but he nevertheless wishes to accept the conceptual idea of a god due toh historic effect upon the Jewish way of life, and wishes to clarify and refine the national implications of this idea. Very different from him is A.D. Gordon, who in *Our Dealings with Ourselves* engages in a personal-collective debate with the relation of faith, and as in all his writings rediscovers in his heart a strong religious passion in new apparel:

> The religious approach is an existing, perpetual thing in man's soul. It is the deeper relation in his soul.... Wherever there is a deep spirit and a deep relation to life, that is, first of all to the life of nature without mediation, there we find a religious approach, whether there is in it a faith in God, or even where this faith is missing, and even where it includes a denying of life itself.... Man, as his soul becomes bare and freed from all that is common and accepted, from all that is intellectual and sophisticated, from all the meaningless drivel of men, at the hour when he sees nature in its bareness, and life uncloaked—why then he necessarily relates to all in a religious manner. This religious fashion, why, it is itself the bare and free relation, freed from all that separates man's soul from the soul of the world, a complete unity.... But the highest degree is reached by the religious stance at the time when the entire nation arrives at such a state. This is, in fact, that same national spiritual state that, in the spirit of the ancient generations, that were closer to nature with regard to their spirit, but not close enough with regards to knowledge and awareness, took on the form of the discovery of God. And in that there is truth, but a spiritual truth that is not to be translated to the language of consciousness in a fixed manner, but rather in an ever-renewed language in accordance with the renewal of that language.... And from here you see ... how far we still are from the path, that man (if indeed there is a man, as we wish and can depict to ourselves)

[8] Achad Ha'am, *Complete Writings* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1965), 408 (Hebrew).

> should have walked … researching or arguing about the being of God, if there is a God, or there is none, and we see that God, the true God, the evasive Mind, is not a matter of consciousness, but rather a matter of spiritual approach. The deep spiritual approach, the profound—this is the realisation that man has of God.… He cannot realise more, and whatever more he reaches—that is not God.[9]

However, though Ahad Ha'am and A.D. Gordon differ in their spiritual relation to "Godliness," they both provide a positive statement of faith. They both believe that they understand the function of a religious approach in human life and harness God, according to their understanding, to the personal and national project of redemption. Ahad Ha'am and Gordon do not adopt the traditional illustrations of God, but rather give new content to the concept of God, content that in their eyes may outline the path to a new Hebrew nationality. In that sense, these two great thinkers excluded themselves from the group of Godseekers. Thus, despite the great importance of these opinions, I wish to exclude them from our analysis of the Godseekers phenomenon, a phenomenon which has at its core a problem of faith rather than its solution; a ponder rather than a programme.

While some of the writers of the Hebrew Renaissance rejected faith as such, others were influenced by the upsurge of spirituality brought about by the neo-romantic atmosphere in philosophy and poetry, the focus on the expression and power of the individual, the legitimacy to stray from communal norms of behaviour and expression, the emerging youth culture with its ambivalent view of its parent community, the personal and collective self-examination with regards to tradition, and the expansion of cultural boundaries and those of identity. This rise of the spiritual often expressed the Godseekers' state of faith. This state does not adopt religious dogmas or treat the religious conventions of the past as obvious, yet it could not be farther from heresy. Many of the artists of the renaissance period aimed, even further,at offering a new interpretation of the Jewish tradition. A significant portion of its important literary output deals with the faith difficulties of young Jews. Thus, for instance, Y.L. Perez defined the renaissance in his essay "Paths

[9] Aaron David Gordon, *Writings*, I (Tel-Aviv: Hapoel Hatzair, 1925-1929), 351-352 (Hebrew).

of Alienation from Judaism", dealing with the process of secularisation and assimilation amongst young Jews:

> "Renaissance," a single, small word, and without any additions, without conditions of time and place.... A small word that is a seed, from which an entire world shall sprout, a Jewish world.... And great and proud is this word, nor is it new; why, it is the old word of the prophets! The word of the Messiah!"[10]

Y.L. Perez sees in the renaissance the Jewish answer for the "murderers of God and religion":[11]

> If I seek for my Judaism, I search for it for my own self, I search for it in the future, based on past composition....[12]

Later authors offered a comparison between the spirit of the Godseekers to that of cultural heroes of past generations. Ancient heroes of the distant past, community-members in the diaspora, including the parents of the first pioneers, and literary heroes, both those of the Enlightenment period such as J.L. Gordon and Mendele Mocher-Sforim and those of the early settlements who became legendary within a single generation—all became the objects of modern Hebrew composition. Religious icons, such as the ancient synagogues, traditional prayers, religious requisites, and needless to say the entire corpus and extent of Jewish literature, became the backbone of the new and emerging Hebrew literature. In the process of linking the founders of the renaissance period with traditional literature, a new idealisation of the religious state of the Godseeker began to be marked. Thus, it was possible to see in the renaissance of the Quest for God in modern Hebrew literature a religious renaissance of literature itself and a new interpretative approach towards past writings and heroes, now understood not as "masters of faith" but rather as "masters of the Quest for God."

This phenomenon surpasses the common dichotomised schemes, which strictly differentiate between the "religious" and the "secular," "believers" and "infidels," and even between "Jews" and "Gentiles." This

[10] Isaac Leib Peretz, *Writings*, VIII (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 305 (Hebrew).
[11] Ibid., 296.
[12] Ibid., 310.

phenomenon of Godseeking can be understood neither by questioning the fulfillment of the divine commandments nor by certain sociological characteristics. Rather, the Quest for God in the renaissance period should be understood as a focal point around which certain literary circles and literary composition developed, and to which the standard stereotypes (including those laid down in academic literature) often cannot be properly attributed. Among the Godseekers we can name characters of all political and literary-political archetypes, such as Y.L. Perez, M.J. Berdyczewski, H.N. Bialik, R. Abraham Yitzhak Kook, A.Z. Rabinowitz, R. Binyamin (J. Redler-Feldman), A. Shlonsky, U.Z. Grinberg, J.Z. Rimon, the Meiri, B. Katznelson and others—all gave vigorous expression to the state of Godseeking.

The Thirst: Hillel Zeitlin

It appears that Hillel Zeitlin was the Jewish thinker who placed this state of faith—the Quest for God—in the centre of his literary output and expressed it in the most acute fashion. The Quest for God recurs in Zeitlin's literature through all the biographical changes and shifts of thought he underwent. Following Zeitlin's short autobiographical listing, different scholars tended to develop a linear model to describe his life, starting with his growing up in a hasidic home, followed by a period of secularity, then a quest for a path towards faith, and finally, his arrival at a new state of faith characterised as a "second innocence." However, upon a careful inspection of Zeitlin's writings, it appears that his religious approach was characterised throughout by the Quest for God rather than by His presence. Thus I believe that a developmental, spiral model is better suited with regard to his writing: a spiral model revolving around the axis of the Quest. Zeitlin's strong biographical shifts and the different foci of his public activity should be examined as different expressions of the same basic state of faith, which stands at the heart of his varied literary output.

It was M.J. Berdyczewski who captured the tension in Zeitlin's works: "Divine presence at the feet of this thinking, emotional author; surround with divine presence, and angels of wrath standing before him and blocking his way … his spirit and heart are never at peace."[13] Zeitlin

[13] Micha Josef Berdyczewski, *Articles* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1960), 225 (Hebrew).

phrased the Quest for God in different ways and also tried to ease it or even break out of it at various times. In a relatively short meditation called *The Thirst* which was published in 1910, we can find a very accurate manifestation of the *Godseeker*. In this meditation Zeitlin uses concise and tightly-knit language in short sentences, and does not refer much to the Jewish bookshelf. Therefore it is fit that the sources that are in fact implied in this meditation should be carefully considered. As Zeitlin himself testified, this meditation is a "special merging of thought and poetry," and it is recited in a personal and confessional tone. As aforementioned, these confessional and mytho-poetic characteristics are particularly appropriate for describing the Quest for God. Following Lev Shestov and William James, Zeitlin attributed great value to confessions and regarded them as the very core of religious experience (as well as literature and philosophy):

> The artists … do not mean to write confessions. But intention and truth of life are apart. The confessions peek out from every single page … thus too the great philosophers soundly examine … philosophical doctrines, and in truth all these doctrines reveal … personal confessions of their composers … for that which is religious can be learned only from true confessions, particularly from human confusions, which are grievous and sweeping, smitten and answered with tremendous suffering of body and soul.[14]

These words are particularly true in regard to Zeitlin's own work, and it is through their prism that we should understand the meditation before us as an expression of his philosophical and religious doubts in the form of a personal confession.

Between the Titles

A title and two subtitles were given to the meditation when first published in David Frischman's collection *The Literature*. Between these titles the aforementioned rent in Zeitlin's soul between old and new, conformity with Jewish tradition and his dwelling in the literary and philosophical movements of his time, is noticeable. In its title – *The*

[14] Hillel Zeitlin, "Depths of Doubt and Despair," *Hatkoffa* 20 (1923): 442-443 (Hebrew).

Thirst – is the clear reference to Psalms 42:3: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." As we shall later see, one can easily see the entire meditation as an exegesis of the two famous verses from this psalm that have accompanied Zeitlin in his various writings for years.

The first subtitle which appeared in the body of the meditation—*A Vision of the Heart*—is characteristic of the meditation's genre and its style of writing. Zeitlin's thoughts are expressed here in the first person. He translates in a literary way the speculative philosophy of faith which he has become acquainted with, and responds to it poetically. In the course of the vision, Zeitlin meets various characters who manifest different cultural opinions about God and faith in Him. This personification of the different speculative answers puts a face and body on the philosophical approaches, and formulates the discourse over faith and divinity as a live discourse between believers and infidels. The personification of speculative philosophy and its incorporation into a vision move the discussion from a speculative and supposedly objective plane to a personal one.

Furthermore, the combination "a vision of the heart" places the work within the traditional and ancient heritage of visions and prophecy, yet at the same time binds it with personal introspection. This move plants Zeitlin deep within both worlds—the traditional world, in the company of prophets, on the one hand, but also in the modern world among "those who feel." Indeed, this position does not highlight the gap between the modern and classical prophets. Zeitlin conceives of the phenomenon of classical prophecy through the horizon of the present and brings the two together, not as a meeting with a heteronomic God, but rather as an inner religious experience, which he identifies with a transgression of the boundaries of the regular world. This state is called a "vision of the heart."

Another subtitle (which did not appear in his compiled works) appears in the table of contents of *Hasifrut*: *Mikitvei Achad Hato'im* (*The Literature: from the Writings of One of the Wanderers*), without being part of the title of the volume elsewhere. This title refers quite boldly to one of the foundational novels of the Enlightenment, *Hato'e Bedarchei Hachayim* (*A Wanderer on the Paths of Life*) by Perez Smolenskin. In the choice of both subtitles, which outline the tension between the Psalter and the well-known Enlightenment author, Zeitlin exposes his dialectical worldview. In all his writings Zeitlin claims the identity of

contradictions as expressed in the image of faith and faithlessness. In *Kitzur Toldotai* (*My Brief Biography*), Zeitlin mentions that he came to acknowledging God specifically through the writings of Schopenhauer, Hartman, and Nietzsche, "supposedly, the utter and complete infidels." Using the second subtitle, Zeitlin identifies himself as a wanderer amongst other protagonists who rather earned their name as infidels and as the catalysts of faithlessness and secularity in Jewish society. If at first Zeitlin's paternalistic move in relation to these infidels seems apologetic, why then his self-identification as "a lost one" places him and them elsewhere altogether. In Zeitlin's view, faithlessness is not a methodological move on the way to acknowledging God, but an inseparable part of the phenomenology of contemporary faith, the faith of a Godseeker, a wanderer on his way.

Zeitlin constructs an entire framework of wandering for his meditation. He opens the meditation with a confession made by the Godseeker:

> I lost my way. I sought my God.[15]

But he does not reach his destination even at the very end of the composition. The meditation's end reflects its beginning—the state of being lost does not end by arriving at the destination or finding an answer:

> And I was lost in a great plain and sunk into profound thought,
> and I conversed with my soul.
> "What is the name of your God that you seek?"
> "…I know no name for my God. I know not his boundaries…"
> "And what did the mountains declare to you?"
> "Only that which I seek."
> "And what seek you?"
> "I know not its name yet."
> "And what do men call it?"
> "Wonder."
> […]
> "And what are the ways of your 'wonderment' and what is
> the path to it?"
> "I know not yet. Let me seek."

This state of wandering, as described by Zeitlin, is not unique in Hebrew renaissance literature. Both the Enlightenment and the neo-romantic

[15] Benjamin Harshav, *Hebrew Renaissance Poetry: A Historical-Critical Anthology*, II (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2000), xx-xxvi (Hebrew).

authors intensified the state of wandering—a state of tragic heroes. Although late Enlightenment literature is concerned with tragic characters who are kicked about at the fault of a corrupt and alienating society, Hebrew renaissance literature can be characterised as being mainly interested in the dilemmas of the individual and especially in the psychological dynamicity stemming from his biographical experiences. The lonely protagonist undergoes journeys of identity and apprenticeship while pondering over his internal conflicts. Zeitlin's meditation draws from both movements as if they were one. He describes in the first person his own state of wandering—a personal state of someone subject to doubts of faith. However, in the centre of discussion stands not personal psychology nor biographical events, but rather a dealing with speculative thought seeking time and again to provide a basis for faith, and time and again remaining unfulfilled and rejected.

The Rejection

The journey of the Godseeker passes through several stages where he meets representatives of various solutions for the problem of faith. It appears that Zeitlin begins his journey with a contemporary and attractive opinion of his time—the *death of God*. The first two characters he meets suggest to him that he acknowledge his God's death. The first, "A black-eyed youth with golden curls, and around him bright flowers and fair maidens," announces to him the death of all Gods. This youth can be identified with Dionysus and his announcement with the explicit Nietzschian influence upon Zeitlin. Yet Zeitlin does not follow here the Dionysian that Nietzsche developed, but rather uses it as a representative of a young movement developing in the early twentieth century in Europe; a hedonistic movement, where the death of God serves as a tool for breaking down the weight of the painful past, and focusing on the present. Its opposite is the second opinion, that of the scientist arguing God's death alongside all metaphysics in the name of positivist science. This character is expressed as "an old and bald man, sitting in a chair and around him skeletons, bones, sinews." This old man knows to direct Zeitlin to the *tombstone* under which God is buried, yet with a murky shadow hovering over it, and "poets wandering amongst the trees and picking up the flowers and mystics speaking to the shadow." Magic and mysticism also acknowledge, in effect, the death of God and carry out

their business in front of the shadow on his grave. It is possible, again under Nietzsche's influence, for the old, bald man to be seen as the admired and ridiculed character of old Kant. Heinrich Heine famously saw in Kant the catalyst of God's death. However, the old man whom Zeitlin meets in his vision announces also the death of the remains of metaphysics which Kant left after him, including the grave of the *thing in itself* (*das Ding in sich*) and even of Neo-Kantian doctrines. It is easy to imagine this bald scientist sitting in a chair and surrounded by skeletons, bones, and sinews as an angel of death bringing God and *every spirit* to a shameful burial.

The next character Zeitlin meets is the poet. The poet states that man is God. This romantic view identifies God not as an entity in itself but as a creation of man's genius. The poet advises Zeitlin to adopt this view and rid himself of the pointless voyage in search for God: "hew for yourself a god of your spirit, and if it shall come to be that you shall rage at him—you may shatter him. And if you are troubled or bitter, you may hew of your spirit another god, twice as beautiful as the first one." This suggestion brings to mind the cynical view of religion associated in Jewish tradition with Aristotle and expressed in the *Kuzari* as the philosopher's creed: "invent a religion." A single thread connects this view with the modern criticism of religion such as that of Marx or Feuerbach. According to these views, religion is nothing but a pragmatic human invention, often manipulative, and designed to serve human interests. However, while the modern criticism of religion focuses on political interests served by the invention of God and religion; the poet whom Zeitlin meets describes God as a poetic creation, who serves aesthetic interests in order to achieve inner tranquillity. Leaders invent God in order to control the public, the poets create God in their bitterness of soul, in order to fill their lives with grace and consolation. Both create God and in effect hew a molten calf in their own image. The poet presents the neo-romantic option of returning to God, God as constructed by man, who can be worshipped and destroyed at will—this God serves the "aesthetic"—to use Kierkegaard's typology. We should take note of this proposal and its rejection by Zeitlin. Some interpreters have suggested that his early writing be understood as having a neo-romantic character that he supposedly withdrew from at later stages of his writing. In light of Zeitlin's rejection of this option in *The Thirst,* it is clear that there is no basis for this reading.

The fourth character attempts to persuade Zeitlin to relinquish his quest in the name of pantheistic arguments cloaked in romantic apparel: "Why do you seek God outside you? For he is within you, in the flow of your blood […] in every movement, in every slight emotion, every shock […] in every star, every flower […] in the eternal mountains and grain of sand […] you shall see your God in all, and he is—all."

Later on, Zeitlin meets the representatives of the three monotheistic religions. The old Jew, "cloaked in his prayer-shawl and crowned in his phylacteries and around him numerous books," advises him to give up on the quest for the God of the present and choose the God of the past as embodied in the scriptures. The Christian monk, on the other hand, "as innocent as a dove on the outside, yet wicked as a snake from within," advises him to put his faith in the Son of God and be saved. On exiting to the street, he meets the masses of these three religions and they advise him to turn to the religious institutions of their priests, where God dwells.

Zeitlin rejects all these various suggestions in the name of what he considers an authentic experience of a wanderer. All those who have tried to show him a path to faith, "have not yet known the depths nor have they yet beheld the nether-world […] they know a God of methods and religions and things; but they know not a God to Whom one cries when all has been lost…."

> And I had lost all. And I heard a voice calling me from the depths of eternity: Seek me, please!

The Godseeker refuses to accept the death of his God. On the contrary, he hears a voice rising from the depths, urging him to seek. Nevertheless, he rejects the speculative solutions, seeking to resurrect a dead God. From his response we notice a quest for a living God who is in contact with man and world: "my soul thirsts for God, the living, knowing, loving and omniscient God!" The revelation of this God emerging from the *depths of eternity* appears in the form of a single dictum—an imperative commanding the rejection of the institutional and speculative answers that culture offers the individual. He remains lost and seeking while rejecting those lifestyles: atheist, alienated and philosophised, neo-romantic, simplistic and religious-institutionalised—alike.

The Soul's Thirst

Following the rejection, Zeitlin departs from men's company in the vision and turns to the desert. The scene depicting the Godseeker in the desert is in fact a commentary to Psalms 42:2: "As a deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God." In the verse, the thirst is a metaphor for the poet's thirst for God during crisis. In Zeitlin's interpretation, the metaphor becomes a metonymy: "lo, my soul thirsts for God." In much later writing, Zeitlin returns to clarify his metonymic reference to these verses: "We use illustrations taken from sense and sensation … a longing for God—'my soul thirsts for God' … these expressions are not—as others think—imagery and symbolism, but rather accurate illustrations copied off the external senses to the mental and inner ones."

Using the thirst motif, Zeitlin meticulously analyses the phenomenology of the Godseeker:

> Lo, my soul thirsts for God. I am going to seek him. But even before I shall find him—I know him. I know what I lack, I know *that for which my soul yearns*….
>
> Even before I taste the waters before me, even before I know its nature—I well know that I am thirsty for them.
>
> And even if the creek dries out, and even if all the springs and creeks dry out—my thirst will not be quenched.
>
> And even if I imagine to myself that water is but an empty utterance, that the vision of the water is a mere mirage, even then my thirst shall not be quenched.
>
> Whether there be water in the world, or not—my thirst is certain.
>
> The thirst does not know "is" and "is not," it knows only what is missing and it shall go forth seeking it.
>
> Even if I listen to the babbling of mortals saying "there is no God"—my thirst for Him shall not be quenched. If there is no God outside of me, why then He does exist—in my thirst.
>
> And yet the thirst is always for that which is missing, for that which is external. And so even if God dwells within me and not outside me, I shall always crave Him as something dearer to me than my very soul, and as something external to it, at an infinite distance from me, and so I must go towards Him, and to seek Him all the days of my life.

Zeitlin breaks down the biblical metaphor, replacing it with the metonymy of the thirst for God. The state of thirst functions as an analogy of the state of faith. Faith is revealed to the believer as a propositional state. The identification of faith with a propositional statement leads to the rejection of the faith answers offered by the poet, the pantheist, and the vitalist. Faith thus presents itself as referring to the God external to man. However, at the core of the analysis of the thirst is the recognition of absence. Man thirsts for a meeting with a missing God, a God whom he has not met yet. In general, the metonymy of thirst causes the discourse to veer from God's actual being to the existential state of the believer. It does so without losing the predicate of faith and falling into psychological solipsism. Just as he who thirsts for water senses its absence, so he who thirsts for God senses his absence.

As mentioned, the starting point for this journey Zeitlin undergoes is Nietzsche's death of God. An analysis of the state of faith based upon the phenomenon of thirst is an attempt to deal with the Nietzschean challenge. It is easy to notice that Zeitlin's thirsty Godseeker directs his words directly at Nietzsche's strict criticism of religion:

> How many there are who still conclude: 'life could not be endured if there were no God!'[...]—therefore there *must* be a God! [...] The truth, however, is merely that he who is accustomed to these notions does not desire a life without them: that these notions may therefore be necessary to him and for his preservation—but what presumption it is to decree that whatever is necessary for my preservation must actually *exist*!...[16]

Zeitlin avoids deriving knowledge concerning God's existence from his own state. He analyses introspection itself and the assumptions it contains regarding God. The introspection makes the statements regarding God's death irrelevant. Zeitlin does not deny the option that the statement of faith may be countered; on the contrary, he does not even state a positive *claim* of faith! The believer does not have confidence in a real existence of the faith's object; on the contrary, the analysis of the believer's consciousness reveals the state of faith as almost absurd: depicting

[16] Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 52, §90.

the believer's pining for his god, while at the same time facing His absence. The drama of faith is its dissatisfaction. This lack requires it be filled and motivates the seeker for an action, an action which is a lifelong task—the Quest for God.

The Vision of Souls in the Hall of Truth

At the very centre of the meditation is a dream within a dream, a vision within a vision. Zeitlin highlights this scene and thus implies a reference to the cultural tradition of heavenly journeys designed to unravel secrets and the literary convention of prophetic dreams. The wanderer falls asleep in the desert and dreams of the rise of lost souls and their visiting the heavenly Hall of Truth. It is difficult not to tie this image of the souls swirling around the heavenly Hall of truth to the famous Platonic myth in *Phaedrus*.[17] Plato describes the striving of the souls toward the truth located in the heavens. A soul which has arrived at the ability to grasp the entire truth shall know no more sorrow, yet the souls who only caught a glimpse of it lose their ability to fly and are destined to a human fate, fitting the memory of truth implanted in them. Human suffering is the result of the souls' severed wings. Yet, human experiences that hold a share of the truth awaken the souls and bring their wings to life, wings that begin to grow under the inspiration of memories, and thus the souls turn their faces towards the truth, and soar up high. Zeitlin's seer falls asleep and gets to see types of *Merkava*, yet his use of Platonic myth is ironic. Zeitlin reverses the traditional aim of the visionary genre. While traditionally the prophetic vision in general and the guided vision in particular provide secret information which explains the secrets of reality, as in the Platonic myth, in Zeitlin's vision the souls swirl around the Hall of Truth and are unable to attain any new information or reach the truth. Zeitlin focuses the frame on the souls nearest to the truth; and here we find that it is specifically the various infidels who are described as closest to the truth. That which earned them this attribute is their being Godseekers. Their souls are souls of believers whose uncompromising

[17] Stephanus, 245-252; *The Dialogues of Plato*, III, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 133-189.

and unattainable quest for truth brought them to various types of faithlessness:

> They sought truth, yet they did not wish to seek and wander. They were too afraid of being lost. And from their weakness and fear they took the first "certainty" and dressed it up in holy clothing, the clothing of God.

The argument contained within this dream, which holds the centre of the meditation, is that the human believer must be a Godseeker in his life and probably also after his death. He is unable, even in a dream or a vision, to achieve a state of faith that will fulfill his Quest. The Godseeker suffers on earth not because of his detachment from the source of truth, but because he is able to reach the deepest truth—the inability to attain it. The common believers do not believe, in fact, in God, but in the gods of their hearts' invention. Of all mortals, the closest to faith were the infidels. The intuition of faithlessness of those rejecting conventional faith is a proper intuition which went astray. The infidels' sin was that they were hasty in accepting a solution for fear of remaining in the vacuum of uncertainty and wanderment. In the world of truth, in the Hall of Truth, their faith shall be refined and cleansed. This process that the souls are bound to undergo is ambivalent—full of joy and full of suffering. On the one hand, it is full of the bliss that is to arrive when reaching the truth; on the other hand, it is filled with guilt for the mistakes and faithlessness which were part of these souls throughout their life. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even in this setting of the vision the souls will never reach complete truth. Their ability to keep individuality is conditioned on their entering the *outer* hall only, and not the *inner* one, for in the inner one they shall be annihilated.

Ascending the Mountain, and Descending It

The Godseeker's journey is not yet over. The vision is no longer. Contrary to the literary convention where a vision completely overhauls knowledge or character, in this meditation the vision is nothing but another part of the journey, and *not* a distinct answer of faith. The lost one's quest, seeking his God, does not come to a rest with the angelic revelation that man cannot reach God in his life, that no mortal can face truth.

Even the visions of the heart are part of the varied consciousness of faith rather than an answer to mental and emotional doubts.

After waking up, the lost one continues his journey. The alternative that yet remains is the advice common in East Asian religions of annihilating consciousness and human will, which in this meditation is borrowed from Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy of the "will." Yet even this fails. The protagonist climbs the mountain using a dangerous path that nobody knows and discovers there that he cannot reach nirvana. This sobering up from the climb is similar to the sense attested to by Nietzsche:

> This mountain makes the whole district which it dominates charming in every way, and full of significance. After we have said this to ourselves for the hundredth time, we are so irrationally and so gratefully disposed towards it, as the giver of this charm, that we fancy it must itself be the most charming thing in the district and so we climb it, and are undeceived. All of a sudden, both it and the landscape around us and under us, are as it were disenchanted; we had forgotten that many a greatness, like many a goodness, wants only to be seen at a certain distance, and entirely from below, not from above, it is thus only that it operates.[18]

Having been disappointed by the ascent of the mountain, he descends. This descent, a paraphrase on Zarathustra's descent from the mountain, does not entail an announcement of the death of God as in Nietzsche's writings. The protagonist descends the mountain with the spirit of an announcement beating in his chest, yet this is not a positive announcement of faith but rather a call for Godseeking, as can be inferred from the very end of the meditation, quoted earlier: "I know not yet, let me seek.'"

Death of the Tutor, or the Rejection of Godseeking

There were those who refused to accept Zeitlin's descent from the mountain without the discovery of God and his word to mankind. Thus,

[18] Oscar Levy, ed., *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche: The First Complete and Authorised English Translation*, X, *The Joyful Wisdom ("La Gaya Scienza"),* trans. T. Common (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), 54.

in his student Simcha Bonim Urbach's rephrasing, the meditation has an entirely different ending:

> And out of his terrible loneliness in the mountains, out of the fear of darkness, out of the shivering of terrible heights, Zeitlin heard the Living Voice of God, the God of goodness and mercy, the God bequeathing life, blessings and mercy to all the dwellers of the world. Out of the great fracture in his wounded soul, out of his great sorrow, Zeitlin found the truth of the heights and depths alike, the synthesis of Heaven and Hell, of the profundity of pessimism and the profundity of faith; he found his way to the great Wonder, transcendent to all human will, desire and longing … and with these great and worldly forces of the mountains he seeks to descend with them; to water, to affect, to saturate … his new fire he seeks to carry to his brethren standing at the foot of the mountain.
>
> Then did Zeitlin descend the mountain and the two tablets of the covenant in his hand….[19]

The image of a loved and influential teacher is subject to his followers, sons, students, commentators, and interpreters. This is especially true in the case of an emotional thinker with a poetic style such as Zeitlin. In many senses his son Aaron Zeitlin and his student Simcha Bonim tried to preserve his memory as one who had in his thought more exclamation marks than question marks. Based on the short (and rather vague in this context) autobiographical listing, *Kitzur Toldotai* they described his thought as developing in a linear fashion. Following them, it is common to distinguish four different periods in Zeitlin's thought: the innocent years of youth at a hasidic-Chabadic house; years of adolescence characterised by faithlessness (during this time Zeitlin was known as an "atheist with phylacteries"); years of "lostness" and spiritual questioning that began following the Kishinev pogrom in 1903 and intensified after the 1905 riots, continuing all the way to World War I; and finally a shift of heart apparently earning him a second innocence and bringing him back to Jewish tradition under the influence of the horrors of World War I. This period continued until his murder in 1942. In weaving this linear axis, Simcha Bonim rewrote the end of the meditation, and

[19] Simha-Bonim Auerbach, *History of One Soul: Zeitlin, the Man and His Teachings* (Jerusalem: Shem ve-Yefet, 1953), 75 (Hebrew).

Aaron Zeitlin edited his father's writings extensively so as to moderate views that appeared too radical or doubtful. Yet a thorough study of Zeitlin's writings will reveal that the linear description is inaccurate. Indeed, Zeitlin and his acquaintances testify a strengthening of views of faithlessness and faith during the years of his vast writing and public activity. Yet the comparison of the content of his literary output does not reveal a chronological development, but rather the expressions of different foci in the Godseeker's unresolved Quest for God. The developmental model of Zeitlin's spiritual biography, a model intensified after his murder, described his return to tradition in the rubric of his ecstatic childhood as expressed in *My Brief Biography*. However, with the coming of Hitler to power, Zeitlin gave one more testimony of his childhood, which can shed light on his autobiographical listing:

> And I was yet a mere child of ten years or so, and I chose an hour where my father was absent and there were no strangers at home, and I opened up the Book of Psalms and I read and shed tears reading Psalms 22, 38, and others.
>
> I felt a sense of relief after much crying, reading those psalms.
>
> I read "*My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me*" and cried.
>
> I read "*A Prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed*" and wept....
>
> I do not know any more what is the quality of a man feeling deserted by God ... and I do not know any more what it is being chased for no wrongdoing, and tortured by wicked people, and I—my heart is torn at the misery of all these things.[20]

This late testimony clarifies the content of the ecstatic experience Zeitlin had in his youth. It reveals that already at the core of his childhood's piety stood the absence, the detachment, the quest for closeness that remained unfulfilled. Long before he knew the taste of persecution, his heart was already torn. Thus it is to be said: Zeitlin's biographical and spiritual development rotated all his life around the axis of Godseeking. It took on many forms, but remained what it is: a faith of question marks and a constant dictum—*let me seek!*

Requiescat in pace.

[20] The poem was translated from Yiddish to Hebrew by Shraga Bar-Sela for *Between Storm and Silence: The Life and Teachings of Hillel Zeitlin* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 285 (Hebrew).

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As an atheist I find other people's belief in a god both incomprehensible and fascinating. Is there any way you can explain your faith?

ALI, LONDON, UK

(https://www.theredhandfiles.com/belief-in-a-god-explain-your-faith/)

Do you believe in God? I mean personal, not through your songs.

MAGGIE, LONDON, UK

Does God exist?

JOÃO, RIO, BRAZIL

Can it be you've given up the quest for God?

PETER, DENVER, USA

Dear Ali, Maggie, João and Peter and the many people who have asked similar God related questions.

I've been circling around the idea of God for decades. It's been a slow creep around the periphery of His Majesty, pen in hand, trying to write God alive. Sometimes, I think, I have almost succeeded. The more I become willing to open my mind to the unknown, my imagination to the impossible and my heart to the notion of the divine, the more God becomes apparent. I think we get what we are willing to believe, and that our experience of the world extends exactly to the limits of our interest and credence. I am interested in the idea of possibility and uncertainty. Possibility, by its very nature, extends beyond provable facts, and uncertainty propels us forward. I try to meet the world with an open and curious mind, insisting on nothing other than the freedom to look beyond what we think we know.

I think we get what we are willing to believe.

Does God exist? I don't have any evidence either way, but I am not sure that is the right question. For me, the question is what it means to believe. The thing is, against all my better judgement, I find it impossible *not* to believe, or at the very least not to be engaged in the *inquiry* of such a thing, which in a way is the same thing. My life is dominated by the notion of God, whether it is His presence or His absence. I am a believer — in both God's presence and His absence. I am a believer in the inquiry itself, more so than the result of that inquiry. As an extension of this belief, my songs are questions, rarely answers.

In the end, with all respect, I haven't the stomach for atheism and its insistence on what we know. It feels like a dead end to me, unhelpful and bad for the business of writing. I share many of the problems that atheists have toward religion — the dogma, the extremism, the hypocrisy, the concept of revelation with its many attendant horrors — I am just at variance with the often self-satisfied certainty that accompanies the idea that God does not exist. It is simply not in my nature. I have, for better or for worse, a predisposition toward perverse and contradictory thinking. Perhaps this is something of a curse, but the idea of uncertainty, of *not knowing*, is the creative engine that drives everything I do. I may well be living a delusion, I don't know, but it is a serviceable one that greatly improves my life, both creatively and otherwise.

So, do I believe in God? Well, I *act* like I do, for my own greater good. Does God exist? Maybe, I don't know. Right now, God is a work in progress.

Love, Nick