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Challenging the Idea of Divine Omnipotence: Jewish Voices and a Christian Response

John C. Merkle

P R E C I S

It is a widespread assumption that among Jews, as also among Christians and Muslims, omnipotence is considered one of God's essential attributes. Many people also assume that the idea of divine suffering is a non-Jewish idea, but many Jews, including prominent philosophers and theologians, have challenged the idea of divine omnipotence, and many have spoken of God's suffering along with God's creatures and of needing help to redeem creation. In the first part of this essay, I focus on four Jewish religious thinkers—Abraham Joshua Heschel, Hans Jonas, Edward Feld, and Melissa Raphael—for whom the idea of divine omnipotence is problematic, three of whom espouse the idea of divine suffering, and each of whom speaks of redemption as a collaborative task between God and human beings. In the second part of the essay, I begin by noting that many Christians are surprised to hear that Jews speak of the suffering of God, assuming that this is more of a Christian thing to do because of the suffering of Christ whom they believe to be God incarnate. I suggest that many Christians would likely agree with renowned Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann that “we can only talk about God's suffering in trinitarian terms” or they assume that talk about God's suffering must be related to the doctrine of the Incarnation. After pointing out that classical Christian theology actually rejects the idea of divine suffering and arguing that taking the Incarnation seriously should compel us to be open to insights about God that are not tied to Christian doctrines, I offer my own appreciation of the previously summarized insights of Heschel, Jonas, Feld, and Raphael. In the process, I suggest how their insights about God's limited power, God's suffering, and God's need of human help in redeeming the world, which at first may seem to conflict with traditional Christian views, can have a positive effect on Christian ways of relating to God and in formulating more realistic and thus more tenable views of God.



I. Four Jewish Voices

While it is widely assumed that for Judaism, as also for Christianity and Islam, omnipotence and impassibility (the inability to suffer) must be considered essential attributes of God, many prominent Jewish scholars reject this assumption and advance theologies of God's limited power and God's suffering. The most well-known Jewish challenge to the idea of divine omnipotence comes from Rabbi Harold Kushner in his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,¹ but in this essay I concentrate on the thought of four other Jewish scholars—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), Hans Jonas (1903–93), Rabbi Edward Feld (b. 1943), and Melissa Raphael (b. 1960)—who challenge the idea of divine omnipotence, three of whom speak of the suffering of God, and each of whom speaks of redemption as a collaborative task between God and human beings.

A. Abraham Joshua Heschel

Fully aware that many Jewish philosophers and theologians, like their Christian and Muslim counterparts, have regarded omnipotence as an essential attribute of God, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the foremost religious thinkers of the twentieth century, boldly claimed that “the idea of divine omnipotence . . . is a non-Jewish idea.”² The point Heschel was making with what some might regard as his hyperbolic claim is that in the Jewish Scripture and rabbinic literature, and especially in the Jewish mystical tradition, rather than being portrayed as all-powerful, God is generally portrayed as both powerful and vulnerable, as the source of all power and yet in need of human cooperation to accomplish the divine redemptive goals

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Teaching Jewish Theology in the Solomon Schechter Day School,” *The Synagogue School* 28 (Fall, 1969): 12. As might be expected of anyone whose writing career spanned more than four decades, Heschel was not entirely consistent on some of the issues he addressed throughout his career, and this is true of his reflections on the issue of divine power. Some of Heschel's statements, particularly in his earliest publications, appear to take God's omnipotence for granted. But, in my reading of Heschel, far more often than not he suggests that God, having created creatures with degrees of power and freedom, is not able to exercise power totally independent of the cooperation of creatures.

for the world. Thus, according to Heschel, God's presence in history should not be understood as God's dominance of history. "To regard all that happens as the workings of Providence is to deny human responsibility,"³ as it is also to deny the love and mercy of God. "God's mercy is too great to permit the innocent to suffer," wrote Heschel. "But there are forces that interfere with God's mercy, with God's power."⁴

Given that Heschel said, "God's mercy is too great to permit the innocent to suffer," his claim that "there are forces that interfere with God's mercy" obviously should not be interpreted to mean that God's mercy is limited but that forces at work in the world sometimes prevent God's mercy from preventing the suffering of the innocent. What he suggests here is what he explicitly stated in various contexts, that the power of God is limited, rendering the unlimited divine mercy less effective than God desires. "Between mercy and power," wrote Heschel, "mercy takes precedence—and to the mercy of Heaven there is no limit!"⁵

Heschel's rejection of the idea of divine omnipotence is rooted in his interpretation of the prophets of Israel as emphasizing the pathos of God rather than the power of God: "In the interpretation of religion it is generally assumed that God is, above all, 'the name for some experience of power.' . . . Such interpretation, valid as it may be for the understanding of other types of religion, hardly applies to the prophets. Here the reality of the divine is sensed as pathos rather than as power, and the most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern."⁶

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Faith," *The Reconstructionist* 10 (November, 3, 1944): 13.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer," *Conservative Judaism* 25 (Fall, 1970): 4.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah As Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and tr. Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), p. 121. This book is a translation of the three-volume work *Torah min Hashamayim Ba-Aspaklariah shel Hadorot* (Vols. 1 and 2, London and New York: Soncino Press, 1962 and 1965; Vol. 3, New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990). One has to be especially careful about suggesting that statements made by Heschel in *Heavenly Torah* actually reflect his perspective. This is because in this book, far more than in his other books, he summarized different interpretations usually without indicating his preferences. In fact, while one of the main purposes of nearly every other one of Heschel's books is to argue in favor of one or more theological perspectives, the main purpose of *Heavenly Torah* is to demonstrate the diversity of interpretations within rabbinic literature on various issues concerning divine revelation. But, at times, Heschel's preferences do come through in *Heavenly Torah*, and I am confident that I am accurate when suggesting this is the case.

⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, and Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), p. 241. On that same page, Heschel also wrote: "The

In the vision of the prophets, according to Heschel, “the grandeur and majesty of God do not come to expression in the display of ultimate sovereignty and power, but rather in rendering righteousness and mercy.”⁷ However, God needs human cooperation for this divine righteousness and mercy to be rendered in this world. Out of “sympathetic solidarity with God” as a result of being “moved by the pathos of God,” the prophets of Israel exemplified and championed this human cooperation, not relying on some imagined divine omnipotence but laboring with God in the divine-human cause of redemption.⁸

In Heschel’s view, this idea of divine pathos, which throughout his writings he repeatedly associated with divine compassion and suffering, is “the central idea in prophetic theology.”⁹ Heschel interpreted the prophets of Israel as suggesting that “God does not stand outside the range of suffering and sorrow.”¹⁰ Human history is, to a large extent, a record of human misery, and, since the prophets declare God’s love and compassion for human beings, “God’s participation in human history . . . finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer.”¹¹ Thus, according to Heschel,

power of God is not the ultimate object of prophet’s experience of the divine. . . . Spirit, not power, is the ultimate reality for the prophetic consciousness.” Originally published in 1962 as one volume, *The Prophets* was later published in two volumes by Harper & Row in the Harper Torchbooks series (Vol. I, 1969; Vol. II, 1971). Page references in this essay’s notes are from the original 1962 edition.

⁷ Ibid., p. 214.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 313 and 314.

⁹ Heschel, “Teaching Jewish Theology,” p. 12. See also idem, *The Prophets*, p. 222, where Heschel referred to “the divine pathos . . . as a central category in prophetic theology.” Divine pathos, a theme found in many of Heschel’s books and articles, receives its most extensive treatment in *The Prophets*, which greatly expands the work he had done at the University of Berlin on prophetic consciousness for his doctoral dissertation, published as *Die Prophetie* (Krakow: The Polish Academy of Sciences, 1936). I agree with Fritz A. Rothschild that, in his theology of divine pathos, “Heschel has propounded a truly revolutionary doctrine, challenging the whole venerable tradition of Jewish and Christian metaphysical theology” (Fritz A. Rothschild, “Architect and Herald of a New Theology,” *America* [March 10, 1973]: 211). But, as revolutionary as it is from the standpoint of traditional (particularly medieval) *metaphysical theology*, Heschel’s theology of divine pathos is deeply rooted in other traditional Jewish theological perspectives. As his daughter, Susannah Heschel, herself a prominent scholar of Judaism, pointed out, “My father bases his understanding of divine pathos on a long, deep tradition within Judaism, most prominent in kabbalistic and Hasidic writings, but also found in the heart of rabbinic Judaism” (“Introduction,” in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996], p. xxii).

¹⁰ Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 224.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 259.

“compassion for God” is an expression of faith in God.¹² Even more important than expressing compassion for God is to become convinced that, in the task of redemption, “God needs not only sympathy and comfort but also partners.”¹³ The surest way for us to live up to our partnership with God is to enact “deeds in which God is at home in the world.”¹⁴

B. Hans Jonas

Grounded in his interpretation of the biblical prophets, Heschel’s theology of divine pathos is also related to the medieval Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, particularly as it was advanced through a popular creation myth by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–72). According to Luria’s mystical vision, the infinite God underwent a voluntary “contraction” (*tzimtzum*) in order to bring the world into being. Prior to Luria, kabbalists had taught that the world, which was filled with God, came into being as a result of repeated divine emanations. Luria suggested that, since God filled all of reality, or since God was the only reality, God first had to contract or pull back, as it were, to create a vacuum—a vacuum infinitely surrounded by God—to make room for a world other than God. In other words, God’s self-limitation was the condition for the possibility of God’s creating a world. In order to create a world of beings with their creaturely powers of being, God had to give up having all the power of being. In Luria’s vision, God created the world out of nothing inside the “space” of the nothingness that resulted from divine self-limitation, which entailed the divine surrender of omnipotence.

Four centuries later, now in the aftermath of the Holocaust, prominent Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas developed another creation myth, taking account of evolution, which, of course, Luria could not have done, and taking account of evil even greater than the evil Luria knew to spoil God’s creation. Commenting on what he called his “tentative myth,” which he “would like to believe ‘true’—in the sense in which myth may happen to adumbrate a

¹² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), p. 301.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), p. 145.

truth which of necessity is unknowable,”¹⁵ Jonas said “my myth at bottom only pushes further the idea of the *tzimtzum*, that cosmogonic center concept of the Lurianic Kabbalah.”¹⁶ While Luria had already taught that God needed creatures to help restore the world (*tikkun olam*) to its original wholeness, Jonas claimed that “we literally hold in our faltering hands the future of the divine adventure and must not fail Him, even if we would fail ourselves.”¹⁷

Speaking of the suffering and caring God portrayed in his creation myth, Jonas put it bluntly: “This is not an omnipotent God.”¹⁸ He argued that “for the sake of our image of God and our whole relation to the divine, for the sake of any viable theology, we cannot uphold the time-honored (medieval) doctrine of absolute, unlimited divine power.”¹⁹ Claiming that “from the very concept of power it follows that omnipotence is a self-contradictory, self-destructive, indeed, senseless concept,” Jonas began his argument on a purely logical plane: “Absolute, total power means power not limited by anything, not even by the mere existence of something other than the possessor of that power; for the very existence of such another would already

¹⁵ Hans Jonas, “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (January, 1962): 16.

¹⁶ Hans Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice,” *The Journal of Religion* 67 (January, 1987): 12.

¹⁷ Jonas, “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” p. 20.

¹⁸ Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz,” p. 8. While Jonas said about his denial of divine omnipotence that it “strays far from oldest Judaic teaching” (p. 11), he nonetheless pointed out that “the Jewish tradition itself is not quite so monolithic in the matter of divine sovereignty” and that in the kabbalistic tradition “we meet highly original, very unorthodox speculations in whose company mine would not appear so wayward after all” (p. 12). But, as we have seen, Heschel (who knew the talmudic and midrashic literature, as well as the kabbalistic literature, far better than Jonas did) thought that on the issue of divine suffering the kabbalists were not unorthodox *vis-à-vis* the rabbis of the Talmud and the Midrash and that it is the concept of divine omnipotence, to use Jonas’s words, that “strays far from oldest Judaic teaching.” In this respect, the words of contemporary Jewish scholar Susannah Heschel are instructive: “I do not find divine transcendence and omnipotence the most salient features of most classical Jewish theology. On the contrary, rabbinic and medieval texts more often present God as engaging in empathic resonance to human suffering than as an omnipotent ruler of the universe” (Susannah Heschel, contribution to *Commentary* magazine’s symposium “What Do American Jews Believe?” in *Commentary* 102 [August, 1996]: 49).

¹⁹ Jonas, “The Concept of God after Auschwitz,” p. 8. By here referring to the “medieval” doctrine of divine omnipotence, Jonas showed a better understanding of the origins of the concept within Judaism than in his statement, to which I responded in note 18, that his own position on omnipotence “strays far from oldest Judaic teaching.”

constitute a limitation, and the one would have to annihilate it to save its absoluteness. . . . In order for it to act, there must be something else, and as soon as there is, the one is not all-powerful anymore.”²⁰

Jonas then proceeded to argue on a theological plane. “We can have divine omnipotence together with the divine goodness only at the price of complete divine inscrutability,” which is “a profoundly un-Jewish conception.”²¹ Since omnipotence is a dubious concept simply from the standpoint of logic, and because “goodness is inalienable from the concept of God and not open to qualification,”²² omnipotence must give way to goodness. Jonas, whose mother was murdered at Auschwitz, then wrote, “After Auschwitz, we can assert with greater force than ever before that an omnipotent deity would have to be either not good or . . . totally unintelligible. But if God is to be intelligible in some manner and to some extent (and to this we must hold), then his goodness must be compatible with the existence of evil, and this it is only if he is not *all* powerful.”²³

The fact that Jonas rejected the idea of divine omnipotence, which is appropriately accompanied by criticism of “assertions about God ruling the universe,” does not mean that he completely rejected the idea of divine involvement in the world. God’s “call to the souls” of human beings, and God’s “inspiration of the prophets and the Torah,” were still for him articles of faith. Gone for Jonas was any belief that God intervenes in worldly events “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” but it remained ever important for him that we be attuned to “the mutely insistent appeal of his unfulfilled goal.”²⁴

Precisely because God is not omnipotent, Jonas reminded us that we must not live as if redemption in and of this world is God’s task alone. On the contrary, this realization should help us recognize “the transcendent importance of our deeds, of how we live our lives”; it should compel each of us to live as a “mortal trustee of an immortal cause,” that great redemptive cause in which we must “help the suffering immortal God.”²⁵

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ Jonas, “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” pp. 17 and 20.

C. Edward Feld

Sounding much like Jonas, Rabbi Edward Feld wrote, “What we can never say after the Holocaust is that God is the all-powerful One who controls good and evil, or that history reflects the eventual triumph of the good. Our loss diminishes hope and lessens our sense of divine power.”²⁶ But, a diminished hope is still hope, and having the sense that God’s power is limited is by no means the same as having lost faith in God. The title of Feld’s book quoted here is *The Spirit of Renewal*, and that spirit is necessarily nurtured by hope. The subtitle of this book is *Finding Faith after the Holocaust*, a faith that Feld articulated in a variety of ways, including the following: “We believe not in an omnipotent God who will transform the reality closing in around us, which is the given of our lives, but in a God who in a delicate voice calls from within that reality to break through its hardness and create a resting place for the Divine Presence.”²⁷

Feld acknowledged that, long before the Holocaust, even as far back as the biblical period, God was at times thought of as “a less-than-all-powerful God.”²⁸ Nevertheless, concerning the issue of divine power, Feld suggested (unlike Heschel) that the dominant theological perspective in ancient Israel and throughout Jewish history was that God was omnipotent. But, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, this is no longer the case. “We now realize that when theologians of earlier generations spoke of God’s will and power, when we imagined God watching over creation and playing the games of history, our theological language said too much. Our understanding of God’s relationship to history was false. . . . Our images of God were idolatrous and are now shattered by the events we have witnessed.”²⁹

Feld was convinced that the rejection of the idea of divine omnipotence is widespread throughout the contemporary Jewish world. “The mass of Jewry has given up,” he said, “on the God who would respond by transforming history.”³⁰ This does not mean that Feld and others who have rejected the idea of divine omnipotence and God’s rule over history have given up altogether on belief in divine intervention. “We can no longer believe in a divine

²⁶ Edward Feld, *The Spirit of Renewal: Finding Faith after the Holocaust* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), p. 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

intervention that will come from the outside, but we must learn that we can let holiness enter, that we can make a space for the divine, that which is most deeply nourishing, that which sparks the soul of each of us. When we listen to the silent calling of God, impelling us to reach out and shatter the hard reality constructed by evil, to affirm the humanity of our neighbor—that is divine intervention.”³¹

D. Melissa Raphael

In affirming the suffering of God and challenging the idea of divine omnipotence, Heschel, Jonas, and Feld did not explicitly claim that they were repudiating a patriarchal understanding of God and offering an alternative to it. However, in her book *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*, contemporary Jewish theologian Melissa Raphael showed how the rabbinic and kabbalistic image of the *Shekhinah*, the female figure of divine presence that dwells with and accompanies the Jewish people in their exile, gives rise to a realistic feminist alternative to the “masculinist” views of God’s presence manifested by displays of “mighty acts,” whether they be acts of liberation or destruction.

The Female Face of God in Auschwitz includes a searing critique of Jewish post-Holocaust patriarchal theologies that assume omnipotence must be an essential attribute of God; theologies that take for granted the idea that, if God exists, God could have intervened to prevent the Holocaust. Since God did not intervene according to patriarchal expectations, God is thought not to exist or is accused of remaining silent and hidden, thereby abandoning—and, in the view of one post-Holocaust theologian, even abusing—the Jews and others who fell victim to the Nazis. Unlike the post-Holocaust theologians whom Raphael challenged, she was not interested in trying to reconcile God’s supposed omnipotence and moral perfection with God’s alleged hiddenness and nonintervention. This is because “religious feminism considers that model of God and its ideological aspiration to omnipotence to be morally flawed from the outset, irrespective of the Holocaust.”³²

³¹ Ibid., p. 141.

³² Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 37. Thoroughly cogent in her criticism of post-Holocaust patriarchal theologies, Raphael’s alternative feminist post-Holocaust theology is even more impressive. This book is one of the most profound and moving works of constructive theology that I have ever read.

From a feminist perspective, even though the catastrophe *did* occur in the world created by God, what is to be distrusted is not God but a particular model or figure of God. It is certain notions of power that are abusive, not God, who, if he is abusive is demonstrably not God. . . . Without acknowledging the distinction between God in God's-self and God as an ideological projection, post-holocaust protest theology [that is, theology that protests God's failure to prevent the Holocaust and thus God's abusive complicity in it] is knocking its head against a brick wall of its own making.³³

Raphael spoke of this sort of protest theology as "anger at God's failure to meet the patriarchal expectations of which he is in large part a projection," and she suggested that "were God less supremely powerful, the protester might feel compassion for God; as it is, he feels betrayed."³⁴ Many people suggest that the persistence of evil indicates the absence or the indifference of God, and Auschwitz is often cited as the prime example of either or both. Other people claim that catastrophes, even of human making, are somehow in accord with the divine will. Raphael, however, pointed out that the traditional idea of the Shekhinah's accompanying people into exile leads to an altogether different view. God is neither absent from places of evil nor indifferent toward evil and its victims. Nor is God's will or presence ever manifested in acts of violence. No, God is present even in the midst of hell, revealed in the actions of those who resist their degradation by attempting to live honorably while under assault and expressing love and kindness for others who have been assaulted.

³³ Ibid., pp. 48–49. In responding to patriarchal post-Holocaust theologies, Raphael focused primarily on writings by Richard L. Rubenstein, Ignaz Maybaum, Eliezer Berkovits, Emil Fackenheim, Arthur Cohen, and David Blumenthal. In launching her criticism of their theological positions and in advancing her own alternative feminist theological position, Raphael did not draw upon the writings of Heschel, Jonas, and Feld. This is understandable because they were not writing from feminist perspectives and because Raphael made her case persuasively without referencing their theologies. Still, I would have liked to see her engage or at least mention their theological views as alternatives to the ones she refuted—alternatives that, insofar as they challenge the ideas of divine omnipotence and God's ability to control historical events, are compatible with her theology over against the theologies she so cogently criticized. Raphael did quote Heschel once (p. 60) in the context of advancing her argument about "God as an accompanying God whose nature may not be to quasi-magically alter our historical conditions, but who does not abandon us" (pp. 60–61), but she did not refer to Heschel's theology of pathos, which I believe could have been an additional support to her theology of divine presence in the midst of an anti-divine and completely inhumane situation.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

Rejecting the idea that the Holocaust indicated the absence of God from the lives of its victims, and drawing on the image of the Shekhinah, Raphael argued that God was present and manifest in Auschwitz through the care and love that inmates displayed toward each other in that most dreadful of worlds. “Relational care, rather than quasi-military intervention or the miraculous suspension of the laws of cause and effect, is the sign and medium of God’s power within the world,” wrote Raphael. “God’s power is invested in the power of interpersonal and social relation to mediate its blessing and to institute justice and judgement on those who violate it.”³⁵

A covenantal, relational theology acknowledges that God’s power was not such as could stop the destruction of relationship, but it affirms the infinite flow of God’s power to renew it. . . . God’s presence, as one who creates, loves, orders, and sustains the world, is revealed in the act of welcome. . . . That is the redemptive moment. It is not an interventionary fiat which overrides history and persons. If that does not seem enough it is because love has been made secondary to sovereignty and because what we may see as God’s limitation is part of how God is known: namely, as the transformative power of love laboring to break into history as its redemption.³⁶

Acknowledging that both male and female inmates in the Nazi concentration and death camps performed redemptive acts of loving-kindness, Raphael concentrated in her book on the humane actions of Jewish women inmates and how they revealed the healing presence of the suffering God whose love is infinite but whose power to convey that love is limited by the conditions of finitude and, even more, by the demonic conditions into which the victims were thrust. In Raphael’s moving words,

God hides her glory and comes hidden in the rags and filth of her suffering. She is, as it were, smuggled into Auschwitz: that is, or what should be, meant by the hiddenness of God. And yet, within its gates, she is also held aloft by the women who carry other women, who lift them up.

To hold up another woman, to raise her face from the ground, as has been recorded of women in Auschwitz, was to raise God’s standard in Auschwitz. To drag or carry another woman along was not only to save her from

³⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 41. See also *ibid.*, p. 156, where Raphael wrote of God as “once having entered into the conditions of the world is not of a nature to alter them by fiat.”

death; it was to carry Shekhinah through the camp as she went in her ragged, blood and mud-spattered tent on her way to Jerusalem. According to tradition, where there is peace, Shekhinah returns to Jerusalem. These women lifted up the face of God and carried it as a sign of peace. They bound up her wounds (a definitive act of *tikkun*) and sent her on her way.³⁷

What Raphael here called “a definitive act of *tikkun*” is, indeed, a definitive act of redemption—an act certainly not reserved for God alone. “God’s creation will only be redeemed by mutuality of divine and human labor,” wrote Raphael; “the world is mended not solely from above but also from below.”³⁸

II. A Christian Response

Many Christians, I have found, are surprised to hear that Jews speak of the suffering of God. They assume that speaking about God’s suffering is more of a Christian thing to do because, after all, Christians focus on the suffering of Christ, whom they believe is God incarnate. I suspect that many Christians agree, or would be inclined to agree, with the claim of Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) that “we can only talk about God’s suffering in trinitarian terms.”³⁹ But, without the help of our doctrine of the Trinity, and without our related doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Christ, countless Jews have come to believe in God’s suffering in the midst of the flesh-and-blood suffering of God’s creatures; many have expressed compassion not only for creatures who suffer but also for the Creator whom they believe shares in that suffering.

Contrary to what Moltmann suggested, perhaps a higher percentage of Jewish religious thinkers, without recourse to trinitarian terms, have spoken

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 156–157.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 25. Ironically, on the very page that Moltmann made this claim, he called attention to Rabbi Heschel’s theology of divine pathos. How could Moltmann have missed the point that Heschel did not speak of God’s suffering in trinitarian terms? Adding to the irony, right after his claim that speaking of God’s suffering can only be done in trinitarian terms, Moltmann added, “In monotheism it is impossible.” It is one thing for Moltmann to contrast trinitarian doctrine and monotheism (playing right into the hands of monotheists who suspect that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity indicates an attenuation of monotheism); it is another and more inexplicable thing for him to have done this on the same page where he cited one of Judaism’s great defenders of monotheism as a source of inspiration for his own theology of divine suffering!

of divine suffering than have Christian theologians. This likely has to do with the fact that classical Christian theology, having assimilated the Aristotelian idea of suffering as an imperfection unworthy of God, actually rejects the idea that God suffers. The traditional Christian view is that Christ suffers in his human nature, not in his divine nature. There are, of course, Christian theologians such as Moltmann who nowadays repudiate this classical theological view. There have also been Jewish thinkers who have tried to explain away the biblical and rabbinic allusions to God's suffering because they, like many Christians, have been influenced by Aristotelian philosophy. However, the idea of God's suffering is widespread within the Jewish tradition, and it is good for Christians, even those who reject the classical view of God's impassibility, to realize that others, without our doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, affirm the suffering of God—suffering born of the Creator's compassion for creatures.

Ironically, claiming that “we can only talk about God's suffering in trinitarian terms” or because of our Christian doctrine of the Incarnation indicates a failure to appreciate how incarnationally present in the world God can be—for example, through flesh-and-blood human experiences such as those fostered by Jewish covenantal life. Taking seriously the incarnation of God in Christ should lead us to discern how God, present in the real stuff of human living, may inspire awareness of God, including a sense of God's suffering, apart from belief in Christian doctrines. God's incarnation in Christ need not—and should not—be understood as limiting how God communicates with human beings, though this is precisely what is implied by suggesting that belief in the Incarnation or the Trinity gives Christians knowledge unattainable apart from belief in these doctrines. My own view, which I know that I share with a growing number of Christians involved in the study of Judaism and in interfaith dialogue with Jews, is that what Jews understand about God's presence in the created world is every bit as profound as what Christians know through faith in Christ.⁴⁰

Specifically, then, learning from Jews that God suffers *with us*, rather than focusing solely on how Christ suffers *for us*, can have a profound effect on

⁴⁰ What, then, do I make of the claim attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John that “no one comes to the Father [and, by implication, to knowledge of God] except through me” (14:6)? For my nonexclusivist interpretation of this text, see my article, “Why Christians Can Be Enriched through Interfaith Engagement,” *Interreligious Insight: A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* 18 (December, 2020): 42–45.

our understanding of God and on our way of relating to God. Along with the idea that God's power is limited, this idea of divine suffering can help us overcome our tendency to blame God for the evils that befall us, and it can save us the time and energy we might otherwise spend in the fruitless attempt to solve the insoluble problem of how God, thought to be not only all-good but also all-powerful, either causes or permits evils to occur. Focusing on God's suffering with us, we may be inclined, as are so many Jews, to question the idea of divine omnipotence, freeing us to appreciate as never before that the true mark of divinity—what makes God divine and thus worthy of worship—is not absolute power and control but infinite compassion, unending love.

Heschel, Jonas, Feld, and Raphael, along with many other Jews who share their understanding of God's suffering and limited power, have not blamed God for the evil that happened at Auschwitz or anywhere else. In their view, God tries to prevent evil by addressing the consciences of those who do it and of those who can stop it and also by inspiring and empowering people to resist it through acts of justice, love, and compassion. In Heschel's words, "The world is torn by conflicts, by folly, by hatred. Our task is to cleanse, to illumine, to repair. Every deed is either a clash or an aid in the effort of redemption."⁴¹

Can we Christians, believing, as our tradition claims, that redemption has already taken place in and through Jesus Christ, accept this Jewish view of redemption? I am convinced that, without compromising Christian faith, we can. To do so we must recognize that, generally, Christians and Jews have meant different things by the word "redemption." In the Jewish tradition, this word is commonly used to refer to events of liberation *within this world*—for example, God's liberation of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt—while in the Christian tradition the word "redemption" is generally used to refer to God's offer of salvation *beyond this world*, an offer extended to all people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It should also be noted that Jews use the word "redemption" not only for major historical events of liberation such as the Exodus from Egypt but also for all sorts of liberating and transforming experiences in this world. All acts of healing, for example, are considered redemptive acts. Indeed, every good

⁴¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), p. 357.

deed is said to have redemptive significance. Recall that Raphael spoke of the mere “act of welcome”—the welcoming of one human being by another—as a revelation of “God’s presence” and, as such, a “redemptive moment.” Feld also used the word “redemption” in this way when he wrote, “The redemption of evil occurs through deeds that are the very stuff of everyday existence.”⁴²

This emphasis on the dailiness of the redemptive process, as well as the emphasis on certain historical events such as the Exodus as redemptive, does not mean that there has not also been a longing within the Jewish tradition for universal and ultimate redemption. “The vision of a world free of hatred and war, of a world filled with understanding for God as the ocean is filled with water, the certainty of ultimate redemption must continue to inspire our thought and action,” wrote Heschel, while he also reminded us that “redemption is not an event that will take place all at once at ‘the end of days’ but a process that goes on all the time,” in which “good deeds are single acts in the drama of redemption.”⁴³ Notice that this Jewish longing for “ultimate redemption” is for “a *world* free of hatred and war” and “a *world* filled with understanding of God.” Although eternal life with God is a traditional Jewish belief, when Jews use the word “redemption,” even when that word is preceded by the word “ultimate,” they generally are referring to this world, not to salvation beyond this world.⁴⁴ Moreover, belief in eternal life is much less central in the Jewish tradition than it is in Christianity. In Heschel’s words, “the ultimate concern of the Jew is not personal salvation but universal redemption.”⁴⁵

As with the word “redemption,” Jews and Christians also tend to mean different things by the word “messiah,” which is, of course, closely related to

⁴² Feld, *The Spirit of Renewal*, p. 142.

⁴³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), p. 146.

⁴⁴ About Jewish views of the afterlife in relation to Christian views, see my essay “Afterlife,” in Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn, eds., *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 8–9, in which I wrote the following: “There are a wide variety of traditional Jewish beliefs regarding the soul after death, the resurrection of the body and the nature of the ‘world to come’ (*olam ha-ba*). This makes it virtually impossible to articulate a generally accepted Jewish view of an afterlife. It is clear, however, that the emphasis on the sanctity of this life has always been more important in Judaism than belief in an afterlife, and, therefore, the latter is less central to Judaism than to Christianity, which is based on belief in the resurrection of Jesus and on the resurrection of believers to new life in Christ.”

⁴⁵ Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 146.

the word “redemption.” The word “messiah” comes from the Hebrew word “*mashiach*,” which means “anointed” or “the anointed one.” In ancient Israel, this was a title applied to various leaders, especially kings, priests, and prophets who were believed to have a divinely ordained task for which, in some cases, they were anointed with holy oil. In the Book of Isaiah (45:1) this title is even given to a non-Jewish king, Cyrus the Great, for allowing Judeans to return from their Babylonian exile to their homeland and to engage in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple, which had been destroyed in 586 B.C.E. under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar. Eventually the word “messiah” was used to refer to the expected king of Davidic lineage who would usher in the “messianic age” by liberating Israel from foreign occupation and restoring Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. In some versions of Jewish messianism, the Messiah’s role was universalized, suggesting that “he” would inaugurate the messianic age for the entire world—that age of “ultimate redemption,” as Heschel put it, when the world would be “free of hatred and war” and “filled with understanding of God.”

The Greek translation of “*mashiach*” is “*christos*,” one of the titles applied to Jesus in the Christian Scripture from which we get the word “Christ.” The early followers of Jesus undoubtedly had typically Jewish understandings of *mashiach* or *christos*, seeing Jesus as the one who would, for example, liberate Israel from the tyrannical occupation of the Roman Empire and “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6), but over time Christians gave the term “*christos*” a different meaning. By referring to Jesus as “the Christ,” Christians have not so much thought of him as liberating people from suffering and oppression in this world, such as from political tyranny or from slavery in the usual sense of the term, but from the tyranny of and the slavery to sin (the “Original Sin” Christians have believed to be the inheritance of all people as well as their own sin) so that they may enjoy eternal life with God. Jews, too, have spoken of the slavery of sin and of eternal life with God. But, according to Jewish tradition, the messiah’s role has to do with this world, even if with a messianic age for this world, rather than with a realm beyond this world. Also, though there have been various messianic movements throughout Jewish history (sometimes widely embraced but often not), the concept of the messiah has never been as central to Judaism as it always has been to Christianity, which of course gets its very name from its claim that the Messiah, the Christ, has come.

While many Christians assume that throughout their history Jews have been “waiting for the messiah,” the truth is that most Jews in the past never got caught up in messianic movements. And, while Christians often think that Jews are still waiting for the messiah, my own reading of Jewish authors and my experience of interfaith dialogue with Jews leads me to believe that most Jews today, even most of those who are deeply committed to Judaism, have abandoned the idea that an individual messiah will inaugurate a messianic age. Perhaps even most Jews, including most of those who are religiously committed, no longer believe that there ever will be a messianic age, even if they hope for it. My reading and interfaith experience also convince me that there is still a widespread commitment among Jews to work for a better world, to do what can be done to advance the process of redemption.

It is precisely because Jews and Christians generally mean different things by the words “redemption” and “messiah” that I am convinced that Christians can accept the Jewish claim that God needs our help to redeem the world. Given that by these words Christians are referring primarily, if not exclusively, to eternal life and to the one through whom they may attain eternal life, while in using these same words Jews are referring to this-worldly liberation and transformation, in my view Christians need not—and should not—think that Jewish and Christian views of redemption and messianism are contradictory.

Christians who teach other Christians about Judaism and about Christian-Jewish relations, as I do, are frequently asked, even before we begin addressing the topic of redemption and messianism, why Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah, as if it is obvious that he is. However, according to traditional Jewish messianic hopes and expectations, it is clear to Jews, and should be to Christians as well, that Jesus is not the Messiah. This does not mean that Christians should not continue to affirm Jesus as Christ. Christians in the early church had the freedom and the right to adopt and change for themselves the meaning of a term that originated in ancient Israel and to use that term as a title for Jesus—and Christians today have the right to continue to affirm Jesus as Christ. However, Christians have been and continue to be wrong to suggest that Jews have rejected “their Messiah” or “the Messiah.” Jews had the right, and they continue to have the right, not to adopt what became the Christian meaning of the term “messiah,” and

Christians have an obligation to acknowledge that, according to the different Christian and Jewish meanings of this term, Jews are as correct not to affirm Jesus as the Messiah as Christians are to affirm him as Christ.

As appropriate as it may be for Christians to affirm Jesus as Christ, I am convinced that in doing so we must be more modest about this claim than traditionally has been the case. Just as Rabbi Feld confessed that he and other Jews had to “close the book on a certain kind of thinking” and “open a new one that contains a humbled concept of God,”⁴⁶ a concept that rejects the idea of divine omnipotence and God’s “lordship” over history, I contend that we Christians should close the book on a Christology that claims Jesus is “*the* Messiah” or “*the* Christ” and open a new one that confesses Jesus as “*our* Messiah” or “*our* Christ.” In saying this, I do not mean to deny the universal significance of Jesus and to suggest thereby that what he stood for and embodied is relevant only to Christians. Jesus clearly has universal significance because “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6) that he preached and incarnated have inspired and enriched the lives of countless people from all around the globe, even many people who have not themselves become Christian. He is “our Christ,” the Christ of Christians, because we are the ones who accept him as Christ—and this we do according to our own distinctive meaning of what it is to be Christ. To be faithful to Jesus as Christ we need not impose our meaning of the term “Christ” on others; we need not claim that he is the Messiah of the Jewish people, the Christ for all people.

Jesus is the Christ of Christians because the God he worshiped, the God whom both Jews and Christians believe is the God of all creation, has been revealed to us Christians primarily through him, and we respond to God primarily in his name. This is why we are Christians and not Jews. However, interfaith engagement with Jews (and with others as well) compels me, as I know it compels many other Christians, to acknowledge that people who know and respond to God apart from Jesus enjoy a relationship with God that, in Christian terms, is “saving”—not that it saves them from suffering in this world any more than it saves Christians from such suffering. Rather, their relationship with God is salvific for the same reason that any person’s or people’s relationship with God is salvific—because it graces their lives with meaning “in good times and in bad,” even “in the valley of the shadow

⁴⁶ Feld, *The Spirit of Renewal*, p. 147.

of death.” Because God is eternal, this relationship with God bestows eternal significance and, we may trust, even eternal life on the temporal lives of all involved in it, regardless of religious affiliation.

Traditionally, Christianity teaches that salvation is always and everywhere mediated by Jesus Christ as the sole savior of the world, but I am convinced, as I know many other Christians are, particularly those who have been spiritually enriched through interfaith engagement, that this is not a credible teaching. What makes it lack credibility is that it does not take seriously the lived experiences of people who are not Christian, and thus it indicates a failure (ironically for Christians) to appreciate the extent of God’s incarnational and always salvific presence in the world. To be sure, as Christians we must hold that God is the ultimate source of all salvation and that Christ is a principal mediator of salvation, but the claim that Christ is the sole mediator of salvation flies in the face of the obvious. To spiritually discerning eyes, it should be obvious that there are countless people whose lives bear witness to God but for whom Jesus Christ is not a mediator of God’s presence in their personal and communal experience. For Christians to suggest that God’s saving presence comes to these people through Christ, when in fact in their lived experience God is mediated otherwise, seems to me to be a form of magical thinking rather than an appreciation for God’s incarnational presence. Magic is about the apparently real; incarnation is about the really real. I suggest that taking the incarnation of God in Christ seriously should lead Christians to discern how God is present in the concrete real-life experiences of people of diverse traditions—and this, I believe, must lead to a more modest Christology, one that views Jesus as *our* pathway to God—but not the sole mediator of salvation for all people.

Here, I find Heschel’s perspective on God’s revelation helpful. Fervently believing in divine revelation through certain events, he, nonetheless, warned against absolutizing any of God’s manifestations: “We must not idolize the moment or the event [of divine revelation]. The will of God is eternal, transcending all moments, all events, including acts of revelation.”⁴⁷ This, indeed, is a thoroughgoing monotheism: God transcends even God’s revelation. It is a theological position that I find appropriate not only for Jews but also for Christians. Inspired by Heschel, I think it best for Christians to claim that God transcends all divine manifestations, even God’s incarnation

⁴⁷ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 217.

in Jesus. According to this perspective, rather than claiming that Jesus as the incarnation of God is for everyone, we may affirm that the God who was incarnated in Jesus—the transcendent God who has been revealed and is immanent in many and varied ways and not only through Jesus—is for everyone.⁴⁸

Even Christians who reject my call for a more modest Christology, Christians who believe that eternal salvation for anyone is contingent on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, even these Christians may, I believe, without compromising their faith, accept the Jewish views summarized in this essay about God's limited power, God's suffering, and God's need for human help in redeeming the world. After all, the messianic age for which Jesus and many of his Jewish contemporaries longed—and which his disciples seem to have expected him to inaugurate—did not come to pass during or by the end of his lifetime. But, because followers of Jesus became convinced that he was (or would turn out to be) the Messiah—a conviction grounded in their having witnessed his redemptive actions and, especially, in their having experienced his post-resurrection appearances that inspired their belief that God had raised him from the dead—they grew to expect him to return and usher in the messianic age. This was the beginning of what eventually came to be known as the hoped-for Second Coming of Christ. Over time, this idea of the Second Coming was much less emphasized among Christians than the belief that Jesus was their Savior—that is, the Christ—because through him, especially because of his death and resurrection, they had been given access to eternal life with God.

Given this new and distinctively Christian understanding of Jesus' salvific role, I contend that Christians, while affirming eternal salvation through

⁴⁸ The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is rooted primarily in the prologue to the Gospel of John (Jn. 1:1–18), which begins with this verse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The author then said that "all things came into being through him [the Word]" and that "what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (1:3, 4). Ten verses later, the author wrote, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). As I read this, it seems clear that the author of this Gospel is saying that the Word of God was already a life-giving and enlightening presence to people long before the Incarnation. To my mind, then, it makes sense for Christians to believe (not only on the basis of what is observable in the lives of people who are not Christian but also on the basis of the prologue to the Gospel of John) that this same Word of God, which was incarnate in Jesus and remains present through the life of the church established in his name, has remained present also to people apart from Jesus and the church, just as it was before the birth of Jesus and the (much later) rise of Christianity.

Christ, can accept Jewish views of redemption in and of this world—views such as those articulated by Heschel, Jonas, Feld, and Raphael. As I see it, there is no reason why Christians awaiting the Second Coming of Christ need to regard redemption in and of this world as the work of Jesus alone. Just as many Jews who hope for a messianic age feel called to help God move the world closer to that age, I think that Christians awaiting the Second Coming of Christ should recognize that the good deeds they and others do are a way of helping God advance the world's redemption that was heralded and proleptically manifested by Jesus some 2,000 years ago. This we can do for, as Heschel claims and as both Jews and Christians in their own very different ways can affirm, "the Messiah is in us."⁴⁹

The Messiah is in us because God is in us. However, as the Creator who has empowered creatures with creativity and thus responsibility for creation, God does not act redemptively in and through us without our active cooperation. It is therefore up to us, empowered by God, to do whatever we can to help redeem the mortal lives of creatures and thereby, in Jonas's words, "help the suffering immortal God."⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 238.

⁵⁰ Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper," p. 20.