

From Something to Nothing

From Something to Nothing:

Jewish Mysticism in Contemporary Canadian Jewish Studies

Edited by

Harry Fox, Daniel Maoz
and Tirzah Meacham

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IN MEMORY OF

REB ZALMAN SCHACHTER SHALOMI

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PREFACE

DANIEL MAOZ

If you want to study mysticism, start by studying the Bible, then the prophets, then Midrash, and then the Talmud, and then and then and then, and finally at a certain age, you enter mysticism.¹

From Something to Nothing is a literary extension of the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies whose young history is well documented.² The Society has experienced iterative and incremental development since its inception in 2004, making its modest influence appreciably felt, in part due to its annual conferences and in greater part due to the publications with Cambridge Scholars Publishing that mirror the conferences' proceedings. As an international academic organisation, the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies has hosted members from Canada, the United States, South America, Europe, and Israel. Maintaining minimalist goals to serve its nascent core membership limited the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies to meet annually at the Canadian Congress for Humanities and the Social Sciences under the umbrella of its birth-mother (the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies). The conference programs produced by the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies have showcased innovative scholarship from the beginning, due in large part to the quality and commitment of the scholars it attracted. The Society's relationship with Cambridge Scholars Publishing began prior to its 2009 conference when an editor from CSP approached Daniel Maoz in his role as vice president and program coordinator. CSP asked if the Society might consider the possibility of publishing a new series that would represent the annual conference proceedings. The executive committee welcomed this offer, although we considered it best to vet more than one year's worth of conference presentations per volume. This decision resulted in a regular

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Conversations*, ed. Robert Franciosi (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 86.

² Cf. Daniel Maoz, "Jewish Studies in Canada's Academy: The Births and Lives of ACJS and CSJS," in *Canadian Studies/Etudes canadiennes: The State of the Art*, Klaus-Dieter Ertler et al, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 501-507.

rather than an annual publication. The first Cambridge Scholars Publishing monograph of the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies reflected a strong first step in representing our academic offerings in 2011.³

From Something to Nothing represents a second step in what may well become a continuing and regular series of publications, a literary arm of the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies. This collection aims to represent the best of scholarship by our members, including extended contributions through collegial networking. The present volume traces the central theme of Jewish mysticism in its various incarnations and historical appearances. What began as a second request by Cambridge Scholars Publishing now manifests through papers presented at the Society's 2014 meeting, as well as through networking with fellow Canadian scholars, to produce this important composite collection. Each contributor is first a scholar of the Bible, the prophets, Midrash, and the Talmud, resulting in an alignment of energy and perspectives seldom experienced within a single volume. This, however, is the expertise required to do research in Jewish Mysticism.

Any work involving multi-language offerings inherently challenges editors. This is especially true of collections that include Canada's two official languages, French and English, as well as Judaism's core language, Hebrew. Formatting English and French articles imbedded with Hebrew offers its own inimitable challenge – right to left pericopes within left to right texts and notes. Hebrew-only articles present other specific demands when turning these texts composed in a program designed specifically for the Hebrew language into Word documents. Therefore, a volume such as this offers its readers a unique linguistic experience: to be able to turn from a chapter in English to the next in French. The Hebrew articles are found in the Appendix with pagination continuing left to right. While every effort has been made to present an error-free manuscript to the publisher, extant errors contained in the final printed version remain the sole responsibility of the editors.

Any compilation is the coordinated effort of many, as is the case here. Many details required expertise beyond the contributing authors and editors. The editors are grateful for Elyssa Wortman's willing and generous contribution of the apt cover image. Chapter contributors and peer reviewers made helpful comments and assisted in proofreading contributors' works, strengthening the integrity of the form of the volume. Esti Mayer, a PhD student and lecturer at Concordia University in Montreal, offered exceptional formatting assistance at several points

³ Daniel Maoz and Andrea Gondos, eds., *From Antiquity to the Post-Modern World: Contemporary Jewish Studies in Canada*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

where we were at wit's end; her expertise and generous spirit were both timely and essential to a properly formatted final product. We wish also to acknowledge Dr. Timothy Hegedus for lending his expertise in ancient magic to offer helpful suggestions that added clarity of expression to particular elements of this volume's contents. Several eulogies (*hespedim*) bookend the contents of this memorial volume to Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l, highlighting the importance of our topic by means of reflection on the many contributions of such a notable scholar of mysticism. Jonathan Chipman's detailed *hesped* begins this work and, shorter *hespedim* by Herb Basser, Harry Fox, Aubrey L. Glazer, Matya Schachter, and Shalom Schachter conclude it. Whereas Reb Zalman's Festschrift *Worlds of Jewish Prayer* (1993) dealt with his huge contribution to contemporary Jewish liturgy, our volume deals both with an earlier phase in his odyssey, one which finds him exceptionally experimental, and his latest phase which finds him in a deeply mystical mode.

Harry Fox applied a punctilious critical eye to each chapter, resulting in a tightening up of thought and expression that greatly enhanced the overall coherence of the volume. Tirzah Meacham, in coming on board as co-editor when a multiplicity of challenges unexpectedly arose, may very well be the sole reason why this volume has reached publication. To each I am deeply and gratifyingly indebted.

Finally, much gratitude is expressed to Cambridge Scholars Publishing in continuing to serve the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies' scholarly goals, for extending the invitation to produce this volume, and for their commitment to seeing the project through to a desirable end. Of particular help were Commissioning Editor Samuel Baker; Assistant Publisher Anthony Wright; Designer Sophie Edminson; Typesetting Manager Amanda Millar; and Victoria Carruthers. Annabel Wynne very helpfully edited the English articles. Each applied their expertise to help effectively transform vertical experience into horizontal expression.

Daniel Maoz
Vice President, Canadian Society for Jewish Studies

INTRODUCTION

HARRY FOX

I

I first met Zalman Schachter in 1966, at a summer retreat located north of Montréal, which was organized by David Hartman. Hartman was a charismatic rationalist rabbi engaged in the philosophy of Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Hirsch and Soloveitchik. He mainly advocated for an intellectually challenging liberal orthodoxy. At the time, his brand of Judaism was a breath of fresh air compared to the depressed Holocaust survivors who were my main teachers in the Hebrew day school and high school at the Hebrew Academy or, as it was better known in those days, Adath Israel. What Hartman had to do with Zalman, a Hasidic rebbe¹ working in Winnipeg, requires some explanation. I suspect that the link was through Shlomo Carlebach. Hartman knew that at least one additional route into the teenage Jewish psyche of third and fourth year McGill students was needed to have them fully encounter and re-engage with a Judaism that was different than the synagogue norms of the time, where the rabbis were far more interested in proper English accent and diction than in any Jewish content. The other interests of the Jewish community included Israel's welfare and the Holocaust, which chiefly boiled down to how everyone hated us and it was our duty to make Israel as strong as possible.

The road Hartman² travelled would include “joy” in Judaism, which would be expressed in religious songs as sung by Carlebach and prayer

¹ To understand the group that Reb Zalman belonged to and identified with, two recent works may be consulted: Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History* (New York: Harperwave, 2014); Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

² There is by now, of course, a considerable bibliography one may present on Hartman. Here, we shall suffice with but one item: David Ellenson, “David

experiences led by Zalman. That became my personal immersion into a non-traditional tradition. In a relatively short time, these experiences influenced my abandonment of my doctoral studies in molecular biology (August 1968), in favour of talmudic studies at The Hebrew University, Jerusalem (October 1968), much to the dismay of those Hebrew teachers and my parents who were concerned with maintaining a familiar orthodoxy and getting ahead in their new world. Hartman, through Carlebach and Zalman, sought something beyond that orthodoxy, something which would not only attract the teens and twenty-somethings, but would keep them engaged as they made their way in a very different world.³

What spoke to the Canadian seekers who trekked out to this retreat with Hartman and Zalman was the distinctly embodied experience of Judaism that had otherwise been disembodied and highly intellectual, at best. This helps to set the stage for the larger malaise against which most of us were rebelling as Canadian Jews, namely, the alienated condition of being moderns. What fellow philosopher, Charles Taylor, also from Montreal, began to contemplate is how the thoroughly modern conviction that ‘a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile’⁴ affects the contours of the ‘objective spirit.’ Whatever it is that is worthwhile about artistic creation, specifically in the lyrics of Leonard Cohen’s song book, in many ways is what was serving Zalman as a pathway into the torn modern subject in search of spiritual sustenance. This points to a recurring intention underlying Charles Taylor’s philosophic investigation namely, that the identity of the modern subject aims to ‘put an end to the stifling of the spirit and to the atrophy of so many of our spiritual sources which is the bane of modern spiritual culture.’⁵ Overcoming this atrophy of the spirit requires the willingness and courage to confront a *disengaged subject*. This was precisely where Zalman’s gift manifests in his capacity to reach out and delve into the disengaged self of Jewish seekers who were suffering post-traumatic *Shoah* syndrome, manifest most acutely as ‘an exacerbated mind-body dualism, with an emphasis on self-mastery.’⁶ To realize any degree of

Hartman on Judaism and the Modern Condition: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 21 (2001): 256-281.

³ I thank Aubrey Glazer for the following comments on my Introduction and on where Zalman fits into a Canadian perspective on notions of spirit. His remarks and essays in this volume are part of a much larger study in progress.

⁴ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22. There are over 75 references to “spirit” in *Sources of the Self* alone.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

such mastery of self, however, requires an openness to self-exploration, bordering on radical reflexivity, which Taylor juxtaposes alongside a necessarily deeper disengagement.⁷ Gifted *ba'alei tefillah* like Zalman, stand as charismatic leaders, who sought to break down the philosophic delineation between 'subjective' and 'objective spirit' as evoked by Charles Taylor.

If Zalman is to be analysed as an exemplar of Canadian Jewish mysticism in his Winnipeg phase, then one must turn to the theoretical contours of such an analysis that would include "the spiritual relevancy of the exile-redemption dialectic. As indicated in an earlier study, 'the Jewish diaspora is the repeated experience of rediasporization leading to the transformation of exile as redemption through Canadian Jewish Mysticism.'⁸ As well, such experience embodies the lived reality of a third solitude whereby "exile as refuge in Canada [serves] as a home base for further traveling back and forth to other homelands."⁹ Finally, the Canadian Jewish Mystic "is one exceptionally equipped to transform exile into homecoming all the while succumbing to the transformation of his/her soul within the host culture [...] so that through the process its very demarcations are transformed."¹⁰ Are there any parallel textures, from Winnipeg to Montreal in terms of the influence of Canadian Jewish Mysticism that bind each province into a "cultural preoccupation with 'exile, dislocation and memories of an abandoned homeland?'"¹¹

Clearly, the legacy of Zalman's modern mysticism has been influenced by its phase of Canadian Jewish Mysticism, as well as the indelible imprints of European devotional Judaism, including its iterations experienced from Zholkiew, Poland, to Vienna, Austria. As well, his immersion in Chabad while exiled in Antwerp, Belgium with diamond cutters in 1939, then fleeing to Marseilles, France and meeting Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, who later becomes the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe left their mark. This relationship grew over the years and their voluminous correspondence remains in archives, yet to be analyzed critically.¹² Upon Zalman's arrival in New York in 1941, he enters the *Tomkhei Tmimim Yeshiva* as he meets up with Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. Itinerant teaching takes Zalman across America, from

⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁸ Aubrey L. Glazer, "Leonard Cohen and the Tosher Rebbe: On Exile and Redemption in Canadian Jewish Mysticism," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 20 (2012): 149-189, especially 150.

⁹ Ibid., 156.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² This correspondence in Hebrew and English is only just beginning to be evaluated and analysed by Shaul Magid in the first ever post-Holocaust Judaism archive, which holds the Zalman M. Schacter-Shalomi archives at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

teaching in New Haven, Connecticut, to Rochester, New York at *Yeshiva Aḥei Tmimim*, then serving as rabbi and principal for *Avodat Aḥim* in Fall River, Massachusetts. It is here in 1949, under the direction of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, that Zalman joins forces with Reb Shlomo Carlebach as the first two *sheliḥim* of American Chabad Ḥasidism.

Concerning genius, given clarity by Harold Bloom, one must always consider precursors. The current volume attends to the mysticism of the Canadian Québécois Tosher Rebbe (recently deceased August 13, 2015); yet Reb Zalman must be seen in quite a different light despite Ḥasidic affinities.

Important is whether Reb Zalman saw his mission as a kabbalah ‘continuous’ or ‘discontinuous’¹³ of the Friediker Rebbe’s messianic vision within the Chabad dynasty. Lest one forget the deep ties to Chabad Ḥasidism from which Zalman emerged and never really managed to escape, Wolfson’s magisterial analysis¹⁴ serves as an essential grounding. And so too with Reb Zalman, before his *de facto herem* with the “State of Jewish Belief” in that now infamous August 1966 issue of *Commentary* as well as more recently. For Wolfson, before his spiritual escapade with the Age of Aquarius and using LSD to further accelerate that quest, Zalman saw his mission to be a ‘continuous’ rather than ‘discontinuous’ emissary of Chabad.

Reb Zalman’s contributions to Canadian Jewish mysticism often seem to be exercises in negative theology, namely, that all must remain *unsaid*. Most recently, the issue of Reb Zalman’s precursors becomes evident in Magid’s rendering as the theological voice of American post-Judaism.¹⁵ Rather than reading Reb Zalman in the arc of ‘continuous kabbalah’ of Chabad Ḥasidism as is possible through the lens of Wolfson, what Magid powerfully argues is that here we have a ‘discontinuous kabbalah’ of the ‘American Dream’ – a dream of pragmatic pietism grounded in the American Metaphysical Religion of Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau. The ‘discontinuous kabbalah’ Zalman pioneers for Judaism is indebted to the anarchic call to renewal espoused in Emerson’s 1838 address to the Harvard Divinity School called ‘Self-Reliance,’ ultimately leading to Taylor’s disengaged modern self. The counter-cultural moment that Zalman launches into the post-holocaust moment of his mission echoes with Emersonian motives that remain anti-clerical to the core. Something unique happens on North American soil – whether it is the post-messianic messianism of Reb Menahem Mendel Schneerson in Chabad or whether it

¹³ Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision* (New York: Columbia University, 2009).

¹⁵ Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013).

is Reb Zalman's post-monotheism. The *unsaid* question that resonates through this volume is whether or not Reb Zalman's mysticism stands as a unique expression of Canadian Jewish Mysticism or whether it breaks from its formative Winnipeg years to become a more universally oriented American Post-Judaism of Renewal.

I wrote of my own personal impressions of Zalman back in 1966 and published them in the *McGill Daily* on January 13, 1967. I thank my sister, Rosalie Fox, for the recovery of that article which proved to be a rather more difficult and onerous task than anticipated. Thanks must also go to the editor, for releasing the article for re-publication. A slightly corrected version of that early article is included in the section of *hespedim* as a "time warp" perspective on what Glazer so forcefully discusses.

It is safe to say that I did not know then where the early Zalman was heading. The most unique public elements of his personality were expressed in prayer, but he also seemed to encourage drug-taking, particularly LSD, as a shortcut to mystical experiences and that was a path I never chose or found attractive. I have never had difficulty emptying my mind, or expanding it, or intensely focusing without chemical aids. I also became a feminist, something which neither Hartman nor Zalman had yet discovered in any worthwhile or meaningful political form, although they both did later on in life. At that time, it had not yet informed their Judaism.

Indeed, it has taken me much learning to understand the eclectic openness to the world that was central to Zalman's thought, as I have now come to understand it and as demonstrated in, for example, the Herb Bassler-Justin Lewis interview. In esoteric Buddhism, Adepts made talismans for themselves. If they used cosmographs, these were to be crafted by these initiates for their own purposes. They would use incense for smoke clouds to be penetrated by the Adepts. This was in order to yield a stage of non-retrogression. Such ideas remind us of Zalman the craftsman or his idea of the "regression stopper." In many ways, this also reminds us of William James,¹⁶ who saw similarity in mystical ideas everywhere. Zalman was receptive, eclectic and transformative. His talismans would be gigantic menorahs, or coloured lamp *sefirot* that lit up, or the *ein sof* ideas that permeate Judaism and Jewish mysticism. If the many tributes and testimonials by myself, Herb Bassler, Justin Lewis, Jonathan Chipman, Shalom Schachter, Matya Schachter, and Aubrey

¹⁶ See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

Glazer (all male perspectives),¹⁷ spanning over 50 years of Reb Zalman's career are any indication, he left an indelible mark wherever he went. Ours is also mainly a Canadian perspective, emphasizing his early phase in Winnipeg. If we have not censored some critical reactions to Reb Zalman, it is because this too was part of his greatness. Like all great individuals, he was a highly complex character who was larger than life.

At this point, it should be obvious why a group of mainly Canadian scholars would gather studies and tributes to Reb Zalman, especially in Jewish mysticism and magic. This, however, does not mean that a single definition of mysticism governs all these studies. Indeed, they would seem to range from mind-expanding LSD (a very dangerous hallucinatory drug),¹⁸ with which Reb Zalman experimented and, in some ways, is perhaps akin to Dionysian ecstasy, all the way to a mysticism¹⁹ that absorbs and accommodates Sufiism as outlined by Aubrey Glazer in this volume. Indeed, Glazer's study shows how contemporary notions of hybridity inform the permeable permeability of Reb Zalman. Hyphenated identity informs his spirit. Unlike the eclecticism of contemporaneous societies which appropriate mores and customs as they see fit, here the unification of two mystical paths comes from deep study and integration.

Lewis's examination of the Toshi Rebbe's thought is also very timely. The Rebbe (recently deceased, August 13, 2015) has been at the helm of his community for as long as I can remember. He was one of the few Jewish leaders who supported the *Parti Québécois*, thereby alerting the rest of Canada's Jews that, as a minority, it was in their best interests

¹⁷ I did see a book dedication to Zalman by Leah Novick, in *On the Wings of Shekhinah: Rediscovering Judaism's Divine Feminine* (Wheaton, Ill, Channai, Indiana: Quest Books, 2008). This remains an important matter in the scholarship of Jewish mysticism, which must be approached through the bias of the male lens as a constant point of reference. Given how Moshe Idel can still claim that he has "little use" for feminist critique, one needs to speculate on what may have been missed or overlooked given this bias. See Moshe Idel, *Representing God*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), 187.

¹⁸ Nothing, however, is absolute and although it is now banned worldwide, LSD may have had a good effect on Zalman. See the recent headline in *The New York Times: International Weekly* in collaboration with the *Toronto Star* (May 16-17, 2015) where, on page 1 (continued on page 6), the byline of a report by Andrew Higgins is "In Drug-Wary Norway, a Push to Legalize LSD."

¹⁹ On the difficulties of defining mysticism, see Boaz Huss, *The Question About the Existence of Jewish Mysticism: The Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism and the Theologies of Kabbalah Research* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz HaMe'uhad, 2016).

to gain bipartisan support for their communal aspirations. Certainly all the early ideologues of that party were highly influenced by Zionism and its political success in creating a homeland for the Jewish people.

Judy Barrett and Justin Lewis are able to describe the study of Aramaic (before learning Hebrew) as “mind blowing.” Indeed, it is, and it suffers the handicap of not yet having an accompanying grammar, though perhaps a grammar of Babylonian Aramaic may help. The problem is not new. As indicated by Moshe Idel, it was already felt in the Middle Ages and in Renaissance Italy, where reading the Zohar was considered difficult due to its Aramaic.²⁰ This problem is also addressed in Ira Robinson’s article on the convergence of positions articulated about the Zohar by Gershom Scholem and two Rabbis, Yudel Rosenberg and Yehuda Ashlag. In the end, Scholem left it to Isaiah Tishby to popularize the Zohar in Hebrew selections, whereas the rabbis did so in lengthy commentaries and other translations of Aramaic sections.²¹ Ira Robinson’s contribution to the subject of Elijah de Vidas was during an earlier stage in the process of the popularization of the Kabbalah in the 16th century. This also provides a direct link to the (Italian) Hebrew *tehinot* studied by Tirtzah Meacham (and further addressed below). In Robinson’s own words:

In the sixteenth century, it definitively began taking its place as an integral part of the religious and intellectual discourse of ordinary Jewish men and women, so that, starting in the sixteenth century and continuing well into the eighteenth century, kabbalah became ‘public property’ of all Jews, utilized by intellectuals and lay people alike.

Needless to say, the personal beliefs (or disbeliefs) of the scholars in this volume or those cited in bibliographic references may have some influence on any given outcome or analysis, as academically objective and detached as any study may appear. Despite that disclaimer, each chapter appearing in this volume has been vetted by two or more peer reviewers and deemed worthy of publication. This means that some submissions, as worthy as they may have been in their own right were, unfortunately, considered not to be appropriate for the standards [which] we set for this particular volume. I also ask forgiveness if I dwell on certain studies more than others. All included have, in my opinion, achieved a high standard

²⁰ See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy 1280-1540: A Survey* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 225.

²¹ To this end we must also see the translations of the Zohar into English, such as the Soncino publication and especially the efforts made by Daniel Matt, as part of the same process of democratisation.

but to any given reader, myself included, one article may be of greater interest than some others.

II

Daniel Maoz deals at some length and in considerable depth with the title that he gave to this work, *From Something to Nothing*. Inherent in the title is the notion that God, of course, cannot be something, because that would be delimiting, so God is literally no-thing. This definition could make atheists happy as they believe that God is nothing and hence believers are involved in wishful thinking and are wasting their time, energy, and money, etc. Maoz is indeed involved in wishful thinking, yet he does so in a positive manner, in the way we send our best wishes to those we encounter or wish the sick a speedy recovery. We may not affect the outcome of all our wishful thinking but it is a hallmark of our hopefulness and optimism.

In my own confrontation with the title and topic addressed by Maoz, in which God's silence nonetheless reverberates with meaning and speaks to us, I make note of some fairly frequent phenomena. It turns out that the wishful thinking that surrounds the topic of God's silence has engaged some of the world's finest minds. I feel that indication of just how widespread this phenomenon is, just from my engagement with the preparation of this volume for publication over the past two years, is a good indicator of its utmost importance. I could easily see several doctoral theses devoted to different aspects of wishful thinking. As I cannot turn to such an endeavour I wish to at least indicate some of its seriousness .

The commonplace theological expression for the biblical concept of creation is "something from nothing" or, more philosophically phrased, "ought from nought." The title of this volume of essays is its exact obverse which at first blush makes no sense – creation in reverse. Yet, in a volume dedicated to various deliberations on magic and mysticism, the ultimate reality may receive expression as nothingness, that is, no-thingness, no quality associated with things. What adds to our difficulty today is that nothingness is inextricably linked with silence. Is silence also an element or indication of an ultimate reality or its absence? Or is it merely the reflection of nothing whatsoever? This is at the heart of modern debates between atheists and believers. Believers feel that even this silence speaks to this ultimate reality whereas atheists claim that if you cannot show it, then you do not know it. In other words, believers are victims of their own wishful thinking.

To illustrate the persuasiveness of the subject of silence and afterwards, especially the problematic aspect of God's silence, I turn to two items freely available to subway riders in Toronto. One celebrates speech that is well-timed as an antidote to silence, as expressed by the social alienation of suicidal youth. Say "hello" — it can save lives. The other relates to the rise and fall of two friends and their so-called "locker room talk": one brags about the molestation of women and becomes president of the USA; the other loses his job. He does so because his response to his interlocutor was silence. He did not register any objection, he did not go to the police or, as he indicates as his own regret, did not go to the FBI.

The topic of silence receives some attention in Pirquei Avot 1:17, where silence is extolled as a balm for the body. This text is further elaborated in numerous quotations within amoraic literature and beyond, including *mussar* literature, such as *Orhot Tzaddiqim*, The Ways of the Righteous.²² Initially, it would seem that prayer would be antithetical to silence. Yet, no lesser a philosopher than Franz Rosenzweig²³ sees liturgy as a prelude to silence and its function is to "introduce man to this silence." It would seem this has some affinity with Eastern mysticism as found in the *Dhammapada*: (19, 10) "But he who always quiets the evil tendencies, small or large, is called a religious man because he has quieted all evil."

Silence then is the main problem. The Talmud struggles with whether silence is a form of agreement or if silence is a form of disagreement.

In what follows, I hope to give expression to a variety of statements about silence. The topic indeed is so very vast that it too ought to inform several many research projects. So, we can only provide meagre illustration to what should receive serious attention.

Needless to say it would be wishful thinking to believe that this essay could list all of the occurrences of the word "silence" in the titles of books found in the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto. A search yields some 2547 occurrences in titles and a further 425,201 occurrences in scholarly articles. Similarly, our bibliography includes articles on the concept of nothingness in various expressions. So, what I listed is happenstance, that is, items I consulted in the two or three years I spent on this project from time to time. The items were mainly gathered from the sorting shelves on the ninth floor where new books entering the library system are first placed before the attempt, more often than not in vain, to

²² See a new edition and translation by Seymour J. Cohen, trans. and ed. (Jerusalem and New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1969), 348-367.

²³ Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Itallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2014), 308. My thanks to Matthew Katz for this reference.

find space for them in a system where the new pushes out and displaces the old at an ever increasing rate. Even though the old may be recovered in the powerful digital search engine just now mentioned, it is also true that rapidly out of sight also becomes out of mind. Thus, the list that is here is the result of serendipity, not system. The bibliography to the Introduction therefore lists only items I saw, glanced at, sometimes read, in order to slowly come to the realization that resulted in this articulation of wishful thinking. I trust it is useful to be able to formalise that which I initially only intuited in response to the title of this book: *From Something to Nothing*. The footnotes which then refer to actual references to quotations and arguments made in this essay are meant to aid in the realization of what an important topic wishful thinking was, is, and has become. I must admit that I am not particularly prone to wishful thinking myself, though I do like to end e-mail letters more formally than most as I still begin these with “dear” plus name, as opposed to “hi” or nothing at all. The same is true for the e-mail’s conclusion with “best wishes” and the like — more than mere humbug as I sincerely do wish the people I correspond with the best of luck. To conclude these introductory remarks, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is more likely to be quoted at the mention of silence than the musings or usage of lesser personalities. This does not always guarantee the very best statements, though Shakespeare is Shakespeare for a reason and engagement with Shakespeare yields insight. Hopefully (another synonym for wishfully), I have given a sufficient taste of this topic to whet the appetite both of my readers and those who may wish to pursue it in a more serious manner.

On May 14, 2015, the free *Metro News* (p. 3) greeted Torontonians on the subway with the headline: “What’s behind the Silence?” The sublime beauty of the by-line is that it asks the universal question. One could substitute an enormous number of events and scenarios and our question would remain. Silence is the stuff of journalists, philosophers and theologians for it is open to speculation. As a species we, like our primate cousins in the monkey house at the Toronto Zoo, are given to the production of noises in whatever form we are capable of emitting them. When we put our eyes and ears to the heavens above we become eerily aware that we are all participants in a Knohl-like temple of silence. So if the question is universal, and the participants as well, why does Daniel Maoz need to use such fancy androgynous words as “kabbalistic silence” and Latin phrases such as *Crux Interpretum* while invoking these as some sort of “divine response” to, of all things, “human suffering”? What is the nature of the speculation in this group of collected essays? First and foremost, it is a Canadian collective of academics. What distinguishes

academics from journalists, theologians and philosophers is that unlike journalists they only rarely and then largely unsuccessfully are able to address anyone other than academics, though most hold fantasies that what they say is of the utmost significance. Unlike theologians they hold no allegiance to any institutional ideologies or dogmas or responsibilities to communities or congregations, so their speculation is less encumbered by so-called baggage. Unlike philosophers, they are not under the threat of hemlock. When the public uses ideas of philosophers to interfere in the daily affairs of humanity, like Kant's "perpetual peace", it is academics who show the paradox of how the intellectual founders of the aborted League of Nations and its continuation, the United Nations, collectively helped to produce more violence, bloodshed, and suffering of human beings and their environments than any theological idea such as "perpetual warfare" could have ever produced. God's war against Amalek is said to be perpetual in the Bible. Indeed, though Kant was against warfare, there are nonetheless those who see Kant's ideas as a recipe for perpetual warfare.²⁴ Academics, therefore, have what all the others lack: freedom of independent expression not tied to any form of enslavement, be it worry about wages or what people may think. Indeed, we are the freest individuals on the planet. So the immediate problem an academic has with silence as a response to suffering is that most people desire (or so they imagine) just the opposite. They wish to know, to understand, to solve the riddle in their heart. Most of all they want to be told that they are really not the cause of their own suffering. When it comes to the Holocaust, Jews particularly want to know why or how an interventionist deity failed so utterly to intervene. So, for example, Aharon Appelfeld, an Israeli novelist and Holocaust survivor, said the following in an interview (translated by Barbara Harshaw):²⁵

In January 1945, the wheels of destruction in Auschwitz stood still. The few people left alive describe the prevailing silence as the silence of death. Those who came out of hiding after the war also described the shock of liberation as freezing, crippling silence. Nobody was happy. Human language, with all its nuances, turned into a mute tongue. Even words like horror or monster seemed meagre and pale, not to mention words like anti-Semitism, envy, and hatred. Such a colossal crime can be committed only if

²⁴ Harry Fox, "Kant vs. God: Perpetual Peace vs. Perpetual Warfare," Canadian Society for Jewish Studies, Canadian Learned Society Conference, Montréal, June 2010 (unpublished).

²⁵ Quoted from the pamphlet *Yom HaShoah 5775* (April 15, 2015), *First Narayerver Congregation*, Toronto, 6-7.

you mobilized the darkest darks of the soul. To imagine such darkness apparently needs a new language.

This reaction is due to, as Appelfeld related, the experience of one religious doctor who survived: “We didn’t see God when we expected him.”

What is demanded by the homilist who dares to put words into the figurative mouth of God ultimately boils down to one demand: silence. God is said to be fixing coronets to the letters of Torah delaying Moses’s descent from Sinai, and shows him Rabbi Akiva who understands the hidden secrets of these coronets. The narrative in the name of Rav continues in bMenaḥot 29b.²⁶

‘Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah through me?’ He replied: ‘Be silent, for such is My decree.’ Then Moses said: ‘Lord of the universe [...] show me his reward.’ ‘Turn around,’ He said, and Moses turned around and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. ‘Lord of the Universe,’ cried Moses, ‘Such Torah, and such a reward!’ He replied: ‘Be silent, for such is My decree.’

There are mysteries of divine justice that even Moses cannot comprehend. There are rewards that only a mystic like Rabbi Akiva may understand. For at his martyrdom (bBerakhot 61b) he is finally allowed fulfilment and insight into how one’s entire being may come to perform a mitzvah. More uncompromising texts do not exist and the demand for silence is equally uncompromising. It is interesting to note that silence itself is considered a form of comfort (Avot deRabbi Natan, version A, Chapter 14).

The history of the study of Jewish attitudes to silence does not, of course, begin here. They were preceded by significant studies, the most general of which is George Steiner’s, *Language and Silence*.²⁷ The most classical study is André Neher’s *The Exile of the Word*.²⁸ Our poets and

²⁶ For a recent study of this much referred to text see Yadin-Israel, “Bavli Menahot 29b and the Diminution of the Prophets,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 5 (2014): 88-105; N. Levine, “Reading Crowned Letters and Semiotic Silences in Menachot 29b,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* (2002): 35-47; B. Visotzky, “Jots and Titles: On Scriptural Interpretation in Rabbinic and Patristic Literatures,” *Prooftexts* 8.3 (1988): 257-269.

²⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1982).

²⁸ André Neher: *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, trans. David Maisel (Philadelphia: JPS, 1981). See also Patrick Petit-

sages,²⁹ of course, are constantly addressing this difficulty. At the end of *The Unnameable*, Samuel Beckett (*Selected Works 2*, 407 quoted by Pecora) wrote: "... If it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."³⁰ Or, perhaps, consider these words by Maurice Blanchot, consistent with Maoz's determination: "And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible. That is why we desire it."³¹ After having contemplated the matter of silence, especially God's silence, Maoz leads into the concept of nothingness.³² Clearly God cannot be a thing and is literally no-thing (*ayin*). This truism leads us directly to one of Gershom Scholem's enigmatic poems.³³

Only thus shall Your face be revealed, Oh God,
 To a generation that has thrown You off.
 Your nothingness is all that is left
 For him to experience of You.

Gershom Scholem, With Copy of Kafka's *The Trial*.

Since "Your nothingness is all that is left," it marks the supreme desire for mystical "death." In a typical reversal, Blanchot expresses this "death" as "he who sees God dies: for 'dying' is one manner of seeing the invisible,

Ohayon, *Neher le "sourcier" du silence: Lecture accompagné de L'exil de la parole*, (France: Biblieurope, 2007), David J. Wolpe, *In Speech and in Silence: The Jewish Quest for God* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992); Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, (Hebrew) Jerusalem: Keter, 1993; B.E. Becking, ed., *Reflections on the Silence of God: A Discussion with Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Marjo C.A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *The Silent God* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

²⁹ See, for example, Admiel Kosman, "R. Simeon Ben Elazar and the Offended Man: The Ugliness of the Haughty Scholar," *European Judaism* 40 (2) (2007): 106-115, especially 112 and 115 note 21.

³⁰ Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2015), 48.

³¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, (New Edition), 1995), 11.

³² Daniel Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence. Fine, (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 121-159.

³³ The poem is taken from Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 172.

of saying the ineffable.”³⁴ Blanchot continues to express this idea in the name of “the suicide” as “I leave nothing behind me, and it is defiantly that I set out to meet you, God – or Nothingness. [...] Life is but the belled cap worn by Nothingness. [...] All is Nothingness.”³⁵

Having mentioned some elements of the ever-changing contemporary scene first, I now turn to the beginnings of the beginning where even more radical change is afoot.³⁶

III

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I taught an introduction to biblical theology in which one of the assignments was to construct the Song of Songs’ theology. Now on the face of it, this seems a strange request, for it would seem that either one believes that the beloved of that text is to be identified with God or otherwise we could imagine a series of songs more appropriate to the tavern than any place else. This, it would seem, is buttressed by the lack of any divine names or any obvious theophoric elements, as is the case only with the Book of Esther, whose plot seems on the surface of it far more amenable to concepts of fate or a providential hand. As it would happen, this topic became a matter of discussion between my son, Tzemah Yoreh (a biblical scholar) and myself. Over time, he worked at discovering the structure of this biblical book, given that its repetitive nature begs for the types of biblical parallelism that interested him. For a long time, attempts at a single unitary structure, either chiasmic or symmetrical, eluded him until the discovery of the more complex, dual structure presented in his essay contribution to this volume. The early result of that research referred to by Fox (oral communication) was that the Song of Songs did indeed have allusions to divine names. It is over the course of further reflection that Yoreh discovered (also with the help of other scholars) that the Song of Songs taken in its entirety is an extended inter-textual reflection by its author on the first 11 chapters of Genesis. From the perspective of the sages who interpreted the Song of

³⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶ This, of course, is but a rhetorical flourish as we are always in the middle of the story as long as we are not dealing with events themselves. For example, Dionysiac traces in the Old Greek version of Psalms, William Horbury, “Benjamin the Mystic (Ps. 67:28 LXX),” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer*, Ra’anana S. Boustani et al, eds. Vol. 2, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 733-749.

Songs allegorically and mystically, this made the Song of Songs into a Deeds of Creation (*ma'aseh bereishit*) text and not, as had been previously considered, one that belonged to the Works of the Chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*). Furthermore, it would shift our understanding of *Shi'ur Qomah* from *ma'aseh merkavah* mysticism, linked to Ezekiel's vision of the Ancient of Days,³⁷ to *ma'aseh bereishit* and creation mythology. This in itself would be a profound shift. There is, however, far more to tell.

It turns out that Yoreh has demonstrated³⁸ that at the very centre of the Song of Songs, the one verse that belongs neither to its chiasmic outer shell nor to its inner symmetry is Song of Songs 5:1: "I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride." Structurally then we have discovered the very heart of the Song of Songs — a location hidden in its core that resonates with very strong palpitations and a traceable pulse. This verse is further linked by Yoreh (and the rabbinic sages in the midrash *Song of Songs Rabbah*) to the verse in Genesis 3:8: "And they heard the voice of God walking in the garden." If this is the case, then it is no longer midrash nor interpretation that links God to the beloved of Song of Songs, but the very core intention of its author. It becomes the *sensus plene* which justifies and secures the place of the Song of Songs in the canon of biblical literature.

From the perspective of the history of Jewish mysticism, this is the mother lode of its lengthy tradition, at least as ancient as the book of the Song of Songs itself, which most biblical scholars date to the Hellenistic period and by Yoreh to the Persian period. By tradition, it was attributed to Solomon, and by tannaitic midrash variously to God or the angels. The mystics then secured for the Song of Songs 5:10-16, through its mantric power, the ability to stand for the entire *Shi'ur Qomah* speculation, which guarantees protection from the travails of this world to those who repeat it daily. It also guarantees a place in the world to come.

This hypothesis, which is at the heart of Fox's study, is now corroborated by the new evidence presented in Tirzah Meacham's paper, about at least one mystic's wife whose husband wanted her to repeat the Song of Songs 5:10-16, presumably because of its mantric power. The

³⁷ See a recent discussion by C.A. Strine, "Ezekiel's Image Problem: The Mesopotamian Cult Statue Induction Ritual and the *Imago Dei* Anthropology in the Book of Ezekiel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76 (2014): 252-272 in light of the philosophical discourse on the topic below.

³⁸ Many have attempted to deal with the structure of the *Song of Songs*. See J. Cheryl Exum, "On the Unity and Structure of the Song of Songs," in *Shai Le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, its Exegesis, and its Language*. Ed. Moshe Bar-Asher, et al. (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2007), 305-316.

quotation from this text, more than any other, is convincing, especially alongside the *kavvanot* and *yihudim* to demonstrate the strength of her hypothesis. In earlier research, Tirzah Meacham based her contention that these must be considered mystical on the use of *kavvanot* and *yihudim*, as well as the mention of angels and the like which I had resisted as a conclusion until now.³⁹ I believe that her evidence not only corroborates her own hypothesis but also, amazingly, the one put forward by Fox.⁴⁰

Given the importance of Tzemah Yoreh's inter-textual conclusion, with regard to Genesis and the history of the biblical canon, and on the meaning and structure of the Song of Songs, at least one agonistic misprision seems warranted. Like the trail of all belated readings, this one also leaves doubts in the mind of the sceptic at the same time that it achieves certainty in the hands of the strong reader/writer. Given the identification of the Song of Songs' beloved with God, further speculation concerns Genesis 1:26, which is now newly informed by Elliot R. Wolfson's study of "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of Hasidei Ashkenaz." Given the dual nature of the beloved as both the protagonist of the Song of Songs and God, it should no longer be surprising that mystical speculation would choose to reflect upon Adam in cosmic terms, as he was created in the divine image. Adam thus becomes variously identified with Metatron, the Prince of the Countenance (*sar ha-panim*), the demiurge (*yotzer bereishit*), the *Shekhinah*, and an angel. *Metatron*, however, as demonstrated by Wolfson,⁴¹ can also be variously identified with the tetragrammaton, Shaddai, the omnipotent, the visible glory, and the assumption of "the corporeal dimensions specified in the esoteric tradition of the Shi'ur Qomah." This speculation lends itself so naturally, readily and easily to Genesis 1:26 that, in light of Yoreh's work, one can almost identify this strong reading to be the *sensus plene* of Genesis, at least as it was already read and reinterpreted by the Song of

³⁹ See further on this below concerning Chavah Weissler.

⁴⁰ Though Sweeney is not the first to point to liturgical links to the *Shi'ur Qomah* reception, his survey is the most recent and comprehensive. See Marvin A. Sweeney, "Dimensions in the Shekhinah: The Meaning of the Shiur Qomah in Jewish Mysticism, Liturgy, and Rabbinic Thought," *Hebrew Studies* 54 (2013): 107-120. Sweeney also makes mention of the necessary metaphoric interpretation of that which literally is beyond our comprehension. See further on this Moshe Idel, *Representing God*, 93.

⁴¹ See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of Hasidei Ashkenaz," in *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazic Judaism*, eds. Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1995), 60-92.