LEHRHAUS
Over Shabbat

Terumah

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

THE SECRET QUIETNESS

David Dephy (he/him), is an American award-winning poet and novelist.

The Day Passed So Quickly

Strangely at dawn,
when you float on the edge of a night dream,
you hear a voice. It whispers in your ear,
the light lazily comes in, and the city appears,
but you are silent, frightened by the delayed seconds.
In your thoughts, your childhood dives up, and you recall
your parents and the summertime,
when you caught locusts and didn't know
that your father's breath would never leave you.
Your mother was young at that time,
her kind smile makes you cry now,
as if the smell of that summer has reached you.
The secret quietness the crickets' noise,
comes from a distance,
and the day passes so quickly,
you don't notice the twilight.

The Mirrors

I am not going to change you.
You are the mirror of myself.
As I am yours.
I still remember that bird
flying above Pearl Street
in the Financial District in Manhattan,
as if the sky was its mother,
the bird hugging and kissing the air,
the sky so close to me,
so clear, reflecting the buildings
on its transparent body with centuries of revelations.
The sky was the mirror of earth, that day,
and I felt that smell,
the smell of expectation we both love.

Two Poems from Knock-knock

Owen Lewis, is author of three collections of poetry, Field, Marriage and Sometimes Full of Daylight.

A Lesson for This Life?

All morning I'm humming:
the world stands on three things:
Torah, prayer, & kind acts.

Even in the Minsk shtetl
they sang it. And even in Florida,
a warm version of over-there.

How can the world stand
on three things? How about
two? Two feet, two legs.

Condense the phrases: Torah acts
& kind prayer, or, kind Torah
& prayer acts. How to sing it?

Square peg in a round hole.
Lyrics have to fit the music
or no one will remember.

Maybe it's a one-legged pillar
holding it all up. Standing on one leg
like the Rabbi and the flamingo.

A *midrash,* but I can't remember
the color-name of flamingo.
They don't have flamingos in Minsk.

My great-grandfather is a Rabbi,
studies all day and I never met him
until last night. I thought to call him
Grandpa—but he doesn't answer.
He has three legs, counting the cane,
so maybe the song got it right.

I know who he is. In my mind
I've heard his voice, soft and pure
purling Yiddish and Hebrew.

From his face, a cascade of white beard,
beautiful curls of *peyis* he twirls and
twirls. *Zayde's* arrived. That's his name.

Blessed who comes. *Baruch ha-bah.*

What to Do with Pocket Change

is in another book. Not mine.
If there's a coin for the ferryman,
drachmas or zlotys, not two-bits.

If and when I'm just a body—
Zayde told my father who told me,
the soul returns to Blessed-

Be-His-Name with an indelible
name-tag that never washes out.
When I'm just a body, one coin

for the committee who washes me.
The other I've carried from the tray
of the *pidyon haben.* The Kohen

needed five silver pieces. Not sure
we had it. Was I redeemed? I am
still here, still counting—Doctor!

Doctor, your patient is calling.
If he's dead he'll want his eyes
closed. Or maybe, he'll want one

left open, the secret, roving one,
the sacrilegious one. Only Moses
could look into G-d's face. (Holy

Moly!) Afterwards he glowed
in divine sunburn. If and when . . .
a coin on just one eye.

(Knock-knock . . .
I don't want to miss a thing.)

The Agunah

Talya Jankovits, a multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, has been featured in numerous magazines.

An agunah*, "chained woman," is a Jewish woman whose husband refuses to give her a* get*, a Jewish divorce document, thus trapping her in the marriage.*

Adina reaches down, her slim fingers outstretched, finding the eggplant bruises decorating the delicate bulb of her ankle. She caresses them—the black, blue, and mauve gems that color the hurt of her skin. She is careful when lifting the wide metal cuff, bringing it up her leg a few inches—the only wiggle room its width allows—so that she can reach the damaged parts beneath. Offer it attention. Relief. Hope.

The act is secondary now. She doesn't think of how careful to be anymore. The bruises come and go, as do cuts, depending on how forgetful she becomes in her movements. She knows exactly how to lift the cuff just so, to reach the normally hidden skin, to allow it to breathe a bit but not irritate any skin above or below it. It was like scratching a scalp itch or adjusting a slipping bra strap. Mindless movement. Familiar. Temporary. The relief, that is—not the cuff that her husband secured to her left ankle three years ago. Its long, heavy chain nailed to the center of the floorboard, a flat metal piece that anchored her every movement to the middle of the room. Chilling to her bare feet in the winter, cooling in the summer. The chain linked together much like Adina used to link strips of colorful construction paper to create decorative cuffs for her family's *sukkah* when she was a little girl—her tiny body stretching up and up, straining her arms to reach a low-level palm branch where she could secure her hard work. But those chains always broke. Soggy from rain, they'd break in two, hanging dejected yet free.

Once, many years before, her husband adorned her with shiny things, with actual jewelry. Diamonds sparkled around her waif wrist, his soft fingers trembling as he tried to secure the bracelet in the marital room just after the *chuppah* ceremony. He only just touched her skin for the first time minutes before, and everything felt like fire, shocking and electric—like that first grasp of each other's palms, holding hands for the first time as they made their way down the aisle away from the wedding canopy. Streams of

dancing family and friends escorted them to a room, where after all that time, they were finally alone together.

You have to slide that long piece inside, then press the clasp down. Adina instructed, almost in a whisper, nervous with anticipation at her first time alone in a room with a man. Her husband. She felt unsure of herself, ill-prepared to converse with the opposite sex in so intimate a moment. The whole room filled with only the two of them, their heavy breathing colliding and mixing in the small space between their bodies.

I know! His voice came out a little rough, but Adina knew he was nervous. And then, once he properly clasped the bracelet, he held her hand in his before leaning in toward her face, placing a kiss on her cheek as gentle as morning dew. She felt she couldn't be happier.

She couldn't.

On each anniversary before she was chained, he gifted her a box from the same jeweler in Brooklyn. It was a blue box with a silver ribbon that was attached to the top and bottom separately, so that each time she opened his gift, she never actually unwrapped anything. She used to save each box, keepsakes that morphed into bitter reminders.

Her husband spared no expense. He didn't need to. His family was exceptionally wealthy. They were known in Brooklyn for their immense generosity. Their last name was featured on many school buildings and *shul*s, spelled out in calligraphy on the invitations to the many fundraiser banquets that honored them. It was their commitment to *tzedakah*, charity, that prompted Adina's parents to encourage her to accept the *shadchan*'s suggestion.

He was the very first boy *redt* to her. Of course, she knew who the boy was, who the family was. Everybody did. She was twenty years old and, like her peers, she was primed for marriage. But she was also very nervous, waiting a full year post-seminary before accepting any matches. She still felt too young to be a wife at just nineteen. She had hardly even talked to a boy yet; to live with one alone felt terrifying. So she kept busy with her undergraduate studies in pursuit of speech therapy, and while she wanted to marry, she also didn't mind taking her time.

Adina wasn't from a family with *yichus*, prestigious lineage, or any influence in the community, so it was a surprise when the *shadchan* called her parents asking about Adina for the son of one of the most influential families in all of Brooklyn. Quickly, they all became infatuated with the idea of the match. Apparently, the boy's mother saw her at a mutual friend's wedding and was adamant, the *shadchan* said.

His mother called me the night of the wedding. My goodness, what we had to do to try and figure out which girl at this wedding she was talking about! But then she said green eyes and auburn hair, and I knew it was your Adina! She is a beauty, that one. And so lucky! Imagine, your daughter marrying into such a family!

The *shadchan* didn't hold back on her insistence that Adina pursue the match. Adina, while

flattered, even a little giddy at the prospect of such a match, was concerned about the disparity in the two family's incomes. Her father, a podiatrist, and her mother, a physical therapist, earned a comfortable living together, but by no means were they wealthy. Adina felt that the boy's family might look down on hers. It was her father who convinced her to go on the date. He pointed out that if the boy's family had agreed to the match, it meant they were above the kind of pettiness of comparing incomes and she should be as well.

On their first date, he took Adina to paint pottery. He said the *shadchan* told him that Adina enjoyed drawing and painting. Adina was touched by the gesture of him considering her interests. She settled on a spoon rest, and her husband chose a small salad bowl. At first, Adina painted self-consciously. But soon, she forgot any discomfort and found herself fully invested in his company. By the time they both finished their pieces, they hardly realized three hours had passed. Adina returned home gushing to her parents about the date.

The *shadchan* called that very night to confirm a second date.

They went on twelve more dates before they were engaged. Adina was one of the lucky ones—the first boy she ever went out with was her *bashert*, her soulmate.

Adina's mother-in-law, whom she met only a week before the engagement, chose the ring before Adina even met her. A large, ornate thing that badly clashed with Adina's style. It was the talk of all her friends during the engagement party. Adina accepted the compliments with a shy smile. She couldn't imagine telling her *chosson,* groom, that she didn't like it, nor could she stomach her mother-in-law being offended. After all, she was marrying her only son. He was also the eldest, the first to be married, and the only child set to inherit the responsibilities of his father's medical supply company.

Get used to being the envy of all your friends. You'll never have to work a day in your life, he told her after everyone left their engagement party. Adina thought of the speech therapy program she was interested in. *Oh, but I kind of want to work.* She never considered not working. Both her parents worked. *Adina! You'll be too busy to work, taking care of the home and our family. Four to six!* Adina smiled, a nod to their conversation about how many children they wanted to have. Maybe he was right. Maybe she wouldn't work.

The diamond ring was only the first of the engagement gifts. When her husband showed her the brownstone his parents purchased for them, Adina hardly knew how to react. The home was bigger than her own parents'. It was remodeled from rooftop to basement, fitted with the best appliances and, to her surprise, fully furnished by her mother-in-law—linens on the bed included.

Did she fill the drawers with underwear for me too? Adina joked.

My mother had these linens custom-made. There is even a second set in the linen closet already,

that way when the maid comes there is already another set to put on the beds. She didn't want you to have to worry about a thing!

A maid? Adina thought. *What do I need a maid for?*

He walked her through the house, proudly displaying the double sinks, two dishwashers, and two ovens, a kosher kitchen fit for a princess. After touring the main floor and the bedrooms, he brought her down to the basement where there were two guest rooms, a bathroom, and a large, carpeted area where he proudly announced: *Here is where our children will play one day!* She wondered how she'd ever invite her married friends, all of them cramped in small apartments they could barely afford rent on, into her large and fancy home.

You don't think it's all a bit too much? Adina asked. Her husband smiled, *Why start out in a starter home when we can begin our lives in our forever home?*

Everything is so beautiful, she said, trying to sound gracious.

I knew you'd love it! I told my mother that my bride has fine taste. I told her nothing too modern, to choose items that reflected your personality.

Adina was wondering how her mother-in-law knew much of her personality when she noticed a door at the end of the hall. She left her husband busy in front of a utility closet where he was muttering about some loose wires to investigate. The hinges on the door moaned softly as she opened it. She poked her head in enough to see that the room was empty. It was dark, save a bit of sunlight pouring in from a small, frosted glass window. In the center of the room was a heavy metal chain. It seemed to glow, spotlighted by the filtered sunlight. Adina squinted, trying to get a better look. There was something sinister about the room; it appeared devoid of the same lightness as the rest of the house. The hairs on Adina's arm stiffened as goosebumps erupted, sending a stark chill down her spine. *What could this room be for*, she wondered, but before she could step inside, the door was being pulled shut, forcing her to step backward into the light-filled hallway.

Don't worry about this room. Every house has one. It comes with every marriage. But you are a wonderful girl, Adina, and I know we are going to be so happy together. Best we just ignore this room.

Is it already fitted with linens as well? Adina joked, though really she wanted to ask what he meant. Every marriage? Ignore it, a room in her own house? She knew every nook and cranny of her family's home, and she was certain there was no such room in her parents' home.

Her husband ignored the remark, signaling for her to follow him upstairs. He wanted to show her the pavers in the driveway that melt the snow in the winter. She followed him, still wondering about the room downstairs.

As she admired the intricate laying of brick for the driveway, she thought of the room. Was it true? Was there a room like this in every marriage? She

meant to ask her mother, but there was so much to do before the wedding that she forgot all about the room and the chain. She was too busy even for school, dropping out after the end of the semester. She figured she could always re-enroll later.

During all that time, she didn't think much more about the room with the chain. Not as she married her husband under the *chuppah*. Not during the shattering of the glass beneath his stomping foot. Not during the eruption of hundreds of guests who witnessed their union all calling out "*mazel tov*" as the thirty-piece orchestra played the infamous Jewish wedding melody.

The first year of marriage was a strange dance of learning how to live with each other. Adina learned which toothpaste brand her husband preferred. His sounds in the bathroom. How he took his coffee and the intimate thrill of going to bed together each night. But she also spent the first year figuring out how to fill her time. Her friends were busy with school, jobs, or newborn children, and she was surprised by how lonely she felt as a married woman. She considered going back to school, but then her husband reminded her that she could get pregnant at any moment and would need time to be home with the baby. So, she attended a Torah lesson here and there, volunteered at local charitable organizations, and cooked fresh dinners each day.

The first time she cooked for her husband, she made roasted chicken with rice. He ate it enthusiastically and complimented her, but then, right before bed, he casually mentioned that his favorite dish of rice and chicken was the one his mother made. She felt wounded, but she called her mother-in-law the next day for the recipe. And the next time Adina's husband complimented his own mother's brisket while eating Adina's brisket, she knew to request that recipe as well. Until slowly, all the flavors familiar to her, the recipes she meticulously wrote down from her mother, were replaced with her husband's family recipes. So, Adina felt lonely even as she chewed her food each night across from her happy husband.

While both Adina and her husband's family lived in Brooklyn, they prayed at different synagogues and lived on different sides of town. The brownstone was conveniently located near her in-laws' home. In the first year of marriage, they ate frequently at her parents for Shabbat meals and split all the holiday meals. But in the second year, Adina's husband complained about how long the walk was to Adina's parents. Soon they were joining her family for Shabbat meals less and less until barely at all. And then Adina's in-laws invited them to Israel for Sukkot and to Panama for Passover. There was always a destination holiday that Adina's husband wanted to join, and Adina could hardly remember when she last shared a holiday with her own family. When Adina brought this up in their third year of marriage, her husband spat back at her, *If you get pregnant, then we'd stay in our own home.*

Adina didn't need reminding that she wasn't pregnant. She didn't think too much about it when the first year of marriage came and went, marked by the diamond eternity band but not a swollen belly. When she still wasn't pregnant by the time she received the second anniversary box, inside of which was a set of sapphire and diamond

earrings that her husband helped to fasten to her ears, she was in a panic. Her husband's younger sister, who got married the year after them, was already so big in her stomach that she could barely walk straight. Adina was ashamed; she didn't know who to turn to. She asked her husband if he thought they should speak to a doctor, or even a *rav*, but he was incensed. The idea of anyone knowing the details of their intimate lives enraged him. And Adina realized he was clearly hurting too. A gnawing guilt ate at her, that this was a secret to be kept. But it became clear to her that people were taking inventory.

Her mother-in-law elbowed cousins at family weddings, shoving a *kiddush* cup full of the wine that all the ceremonious blessings were made on, insisting that Adina drink the wine right there as she repeated in front of uncomfortable onlookers, *It's not just a* segulah *(remedy) for marriage, but it is also a* segulah *for children!* Adina gingerly sipped from the sterling-silver cup, her cheeks as red as the sweet wine. Nosy elders would *nu-nu* her, asking when she was finally going to be a mother. And friends and family continued to announce pregnancies, tote slobbery babies on their hips, and say the dreaded "*G-d willing by you!"*

It all became too much, and slowly Adina invented excuse after excuse until she finally stopped attending celebrations altogether. Her husband still went anyway, dressing carefully for a wedding or a *bris* as Adina lounged in her bed, reading a book, trying to pretend there wasn't a balloon of angst between them.

They'll notice your absence more than your stomach. Her husband threw these kinds of comments at her as he readied to attend whatever it was he was attending without her. *Worse than not getting pregnant is your self-pity about it.* Sometimes Adina waited until he left the room to cry herself to sleep, and other times she threw a retort back. *And how do you think it looks that you keep showing up without me?* Sometimes he slammed a door. Sometimes he slammed a door so hard it knocked a picture frame down.

Things were shifting at home. An unsettling atmosphere was festering, and Adina was consumed with figuring out how to undo it. More than ever, she was desperate to have a baby. It was the only explanation for why things were changing. If she could just have a baby, things would go back to how they once were.

And just as Adina stopped going out, her husband stopped coming home.

She found herself frequently eating dinner alone. Those meals that were once the part of her day that she most looked forward to were now just cold food in a lonely kitchen. He said he was late because of work. Because he was going to a Torah lecture. Often, he gave no reason at all.

After too many consecutive nights alone, Adina feigned impromptu visits to her childhood home. Her family was so happy to see her that no one thought much of it. Until Adina stopped visiting altogether.

Adina arrived home one night after having dinner with her family to find her husband waiting for her. She walked in as usual, dropped her keys and purse on the console, and headed to the kitchen, where she found the shadow of her husband sitting at their table in the dark. She jumped, emitting a small scream. His eyes focused on hers, as if he had been staring at that very spot for hours, just waiting for her. Without a word, he lifted the dinner plate she left for him, wrapped in aluminum foil to keep it warm. In one swift motion, he raised it above his head and hurdled it toward Adina.

Chicken, rice, and green beans exploded in a shower mixed with broken ceramic around her feet. A small piece of the plate scraped her just below the ankle. Adina stood frozen in place, her body unable to respond to the shock of such a violent reaction to her absence. She clenched her eyes shut, as if she could will this all away by simply not witnessing it. But the cut on her ankle was throbbing, and she could feel the moisture of blood wetting the thin material of her stocking. She opened her eyes and looked down. The food she had spent the afternoon cooking was scattered across the otherwise spotless white tile of the kitchen floor. Without a word, she stepped over the food, reaching for a roll of paper towels. It felt easier to address the mess on the floor than the cut on her foot. As he sat, watching her clean the mess, her husband said, *It's a wife I want to come home to, not a cold plate of food.*

That was the last time Adina had a weeknight dinner with her family. But it was not the last night that her husband threw something. Always in her direction, even if not aimed directly at her. Always a thing that shattered. Always a broken thing that she cleaned up alone.

The first few times, she said nothing. Maybe if she didn't bring attention to it, it would go away. But then she said nothing because when she spoke up, when she told him he was out of control, he threw a second item. She learned to navigate his moods. She learned how to sense that something was stirring and could often enough avoid it ending in something shattering. But it was exhausting and time-consuming. She stopped answering calls from her friends. She barely spoke with her parents. She stopped volunteering. No one thought to check on her. No one thought to ask. Because she was Adina, the wealthy, lucky woman in the big, fancy house.

When Adina finally got pregnant in their fourth year of marriage, she told her husband by painting the words "we are having a baby" on a resting spoon, a tribute to their first date, a plea to return to happier times. He wept with joy, embracing her, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his head against the baby growing inside her. Maybe he had been hurting all this time. She forgave him. It was easy to do because he was nothing but kind, gentle, and loving throughout the whole pregnancy. After Adina delivered a healthy baby boy, there was a blue box waiting for her: a pearl necklace he fastened with gentle fingers behind the base of her neck.

Life became a storm of diapers and sleepless nights. Time moved in fragments, marked by well-visits and baby milestones, so that the space between Adina and her husband was filled with the care of a newborn. They were both so elated

at being parents that neither of them was concerned with what kind of spouses they were to each other. Adina almost forgot that things ever shattered.

But it was only so long until his outbursts began again.

One Shabbat afternoon, Adina dozed off while their two-year-old son played quietly next to her in the basement playroom. She woke abruptly to shouting. Her eyes snapped open, finding her husband hovering over her, scolding her for falling asleep on the couch while their son was still awake. Great globs of angry spit landed on her face as she trembled beneath the shadow of her husband. A reprimand so loud it made their son cover his ears and hide in a corner. Then her husband ran suddenly in the opposite direction toward their son, and Adina jumped off the couch and threw herself over the toddler to protect themselves.

What in the world are you doing?

Adina looked up at her husband, wondering the same thing about him.

I thought you were going to hurt him!

What kind of person do you think I am? I would never hurt my son.

Only your wife, then?

I have never hurt you, not once.

What do you call this then? What do you call what you are doing to me right now?

Without another word, her husband turned from her and left her on the floor, her body still a human shield. She listened as he went up the stairs and slammed the front door, signaling his exit, likely on his way to afternoon prayers. Beneath her, her child trembled. She pulled back and looked down at her son.

Why is Abba being so mean to you?

Mean. *Yes*, she thought, *my husband was mean to me*.

Is Mommy sad? he asked.

Adina nodded, not realizing she was crying until her son lifted his small, sticky hand and wiped a tear from her cheek. And this is when she realized she was not happy. She did not like her marriage. Her husband was mean.

Will you play with me?

Adina reached for the Lego on the floor and, as she helped her son construct a tower, she took inventory of her life.

She was now twenty-seven years old and married for six years. She dared herself to ask if she was ever truly happy. Maybe she was happy for just one or two years and not even consecutively. And when she was happy, was she happy with her husband? Or was it because of the conceptual life she earned by marrying her husband? How could this even be, with the giant ring and big, fancy house? How could the man who used to make her

laugh and open doors for her now throw things at her and hover over her in a rage?

She stacked Legos and stacked her life. She lived in a house whose deed had her in-laws and her husband's name on it. She never finished school. She hadn't held a job since she married nor had any credit, as all the bank accounts and credit cards were under her husband's name. Logistically, there was no sound financial exit strategy. And what of her son, her beautiful son? She couldn't compete with the kind of legal team her in-laws could provide her husband. And even if she did choose to fight him in court, what were the risks of losing her son?

Her son stacked more and more Legos atop each other. The tower wobbled, top-heavy on a faulty foundation. The tower buckled, collapsing. Prime-colored pieces of plastic scattered across the floor. Adina laughed. Her son, thinking she was laughing with joy, laughed along with her. There was nothing she could do except restack the tower until it fell again.

Another year passed before Adina decided she would no longer restack her fallen tower.

After their son's celebratory haircut at age three, hosted in a hall lavish with her in-law's wealth, Adina needed four stitches.

Her husband counseled her over and over on what to say when the hospital asked how she cut herself.

You were trying to take out the pit of a small avocado.

An avocado?

It's one of the most common hand-abrasion injuries the ER treats.

But why wouldn't I tell them what really happened?

Because they won't think it was an accident.

Adina found the excuse to be so boring that she was concerned the ER doctor wouldn't buy it. But he did. Why wouldn't he? The cut was across her left palm, and she was a righty. The cut was deep enough but also still shallow enough that it could have been self-inflicted, a wound that could form with enough time for the nerve sensors to kick in and for her to react and retrieve the knife from inside her palm.

She was not to tell them that her husband grew so angry at some trivial matter that he grabbed whatever object was closest to him, which was a glass picture frame, and threw it at Adina. Adina impulsively tried to catch the frame, thinking it might hit her precious son. It was best that she did try to catch the frame because it likely otherwise would have hit her in the head.

Barely a minute had passed after both Adina and her husband registered what had just happened. Her husband ran over to her, apologizing, almost compulsively. As she bled over their carpet, their son screaming and crying, Adina, finally enraged, yelled at her husband. *Get away from me!* It was chaos—their son crying, Adina shouting repeatedly at her husband to get away from her, and her husband making promises over and over.

He'd stop throwing things. Dishes. Vases. Sharp-edged toys. A glass salt shaker. The book of Genesis. A wine glass. But Adina already decided by the time he came up with the fake avocado story that while she'd go along with it, she wouldn't go along with their fake marriage.

Adina plotted as the doctor stitched.

The first step in Adina's exit strategy was to tell her parents. At first, they were disbelieving. There was no way their son-in-law, from his prestigious family, had an anger problem. And how could it be that this was the first time they were hearing of it in seven years? Yes, okay, maybe they didn't see her very often. And come to think of it, she didn't call very often, and he certainly never called or came by. But they tried to get Adina to explain away the unexplainable. Maybe he tripped and dropped the plate by mistake. Maybe the vase was at the end of the counter, and he accidentally knocked it down at her feet. Adina was hysterical. *How come you don't believe me*! She held up her palm, the stitches still visible. *But you said that was because of an avocado.* She looked at her parents, from one to the other. *When have I ever eaten an avocado?* That's when her parents remembered that she was allergic. Her parents were at a loss. What to do? They asked her if she might try to stay a little longer so that they could all think and make calculated and informed decisions, for the sake of the child, they told her. Her parents knew too well how situations like these ended. They didn't want their child to lose access to her own child.

The next time, she came over with a round, red bump on her temple, her son at her side. *Abba got really mad and threw his Shabbos shoe at Mommy.* That's when Adina's parents understood that their daughter needed rescuing.

Adina wanted to move into her parents' home with her son immediately. Her parents counseled her against it.

If you remove your child from the home without due consent from the father, he might claim parental kidnapping, Adina's father explained.

Adina tightly grasped the mug of tea that her mother had made her. While her son played in another room, they spoke in whispers, like conspirators.

But there is domestic violence, Adina said, *both physical and emotional.*

Her father nodded. *What about documentation? How will we prove it? I spoke to a lawyer. We have to be careful about how we go about this. Did you take any photographs of the broken items he threw? Of your cuts or bruises from the things he threw? Anything at all? Text messages? Emails? Anything?*

No. The opposite. I've spent the last several years trying to hide it. What am I going to do?

Adina's mother reached her hand out to her daughter.

We are going to call his parents.

Adina stared at her mother blankly. *What good will that do?*

She is the head of that household and yours too for that matter. If we can appeal to her, she can influence your husband to make this as painless as possible for everyone.

She'll never believe it. She will blame me. She will turn this whole thing on me.

Her parents insisted. They claimed she was a mother too. A woman. A good person.

Her mother-in-law reacted exactly as Adina had anticipated.

These are outrageous claims! To even dare to accuse my son of such despicable actions is an act of slander!

Adina's parents tried to intervene, to appeal to her as a mother of daughters.

But I am the mother of my son. If you insist that Adina is so unhappy, if you want to perpetuate lies, then let's bring this to the rav*!*

Adina's parents agreed. It was not unreasonable to ask a *rav* to consult on *shalom bayit* issues, matters of the peace of the home.

You want me to sit with a rabbi and tell him my husband threw his dress shoe at me and ask for what? For a blessing? We are wasting time! He didn't throw anything at me until our third year of marriage. How many years will he wait until he throws something at our son?

Don't shut this down so fast. Maybe the rav *can help. Maybe he can talk to your husband. The* rav *can be a middleman! A* rav *can appeal to your husband, talk to your in-laws, rally on your behalf!*

Adina's muscles spasmed. She swallowed repeatedly, finding her mouth dry. Her heart beat furiously inside her chest. She felt trapped. Every exit shut, locking her inside. What choice did she have? She agreed to see the rabbi.

It was no surprise that Adina's husband insisted that they see a rabbi of his choice. Adina begged him to see a rabbi who knew neither of them, an objective individual, but her husband told her that there wasn't a *rav* in all the Five Towns that didn't know his family.

The rabbi's office was lined with shiny, mahogany bookshelves custom-built, ceiling to floor. The rabbi kept them waiting, despite their appointment. The office, located in a *shul*, bore a large plaque on the exterior boasting the family name that Adina had gone by for the last seven years. When the rabbi finally joined them in his office, both Adina and her husband stood to give him honor, but Adina's husband also leaned over, his arms outstretched, embracing the rabbi like an old friend. Adina watched the two men, interlocked, wide palms gently patting the other's back. Her armpits grew sweaty. Her husband chose an ally.

I understand we are all here because we want to be. Yes? The rabbi said as he took a seat in the worn leather chair behind a great, dark desk ladened down with stacks of Talmud.

Adina's husband shook his head.

No? The rabbi asked leaning backward, more deeply into comfort.

I am here because Adina wants to be here. Because that is the kind of husband I am. I am not sure why Adina feels the need for us all to meet.

You're not sure why!? Adina asked.

Adina, please, let me finish. We have a beautiful home, a small but beautiful family, and a loving marriage. Look, look at Adina's beautiful diamond necklace. I just gifted this to Adina to celebrate our seven-year wedding anniversary.

Kaneina hara! The rabbi said.

Adina's husband nodded his head, accepting his rabbi's well wishes.

But it has come to my attention recently that my wife suffers from a serious sadness, maddening degrees of sadness-

Maddening? Adina asked, her eyes wide, her mouth falling open.

Adina, please! Let me talk. Adina's husband shifted back to the rabbi who nodded at him, signaling him to go on. *As I was saying, my wife has maddening degrees of sadness that cause her to forget her wifely duties and sometimes even her motherly ones. I remember one moment in particular when she fell asleep while our son was wide awake! The fear that gripped me when I thought of all the terrible things that could have happened to him while unsupervised!*

Unsupervised? There was a gate blocking the stairs and nowhere else for him to go! And where, might I ask, were you when I fell asleep? Adina was shocked by her boldness. But she had never heard her husband utter such deceptive lies, and she was shaking with anger.

Now, now, let's talk one at a time. In a healthy marriage, it's never good to interrupt someone. We must allow each person to feel that what they are saying is important, of value to you.

Adina bit her bottom lip to keep from exclaiming out again.

Thank you, rebbe. And this here, this is an example of what happens at home. Interruptions. A rudeness, if you will. A disregard for safety! A lack of accountability and, if I might, there have been delusions.

Delusions? Adina blurted out.

Her husband reached out a hand and placed it on Adina's, which was gripping the armrest of her chair so tightly that her knuckles went as white as her face.

It's okay, Adina. We are in a safe space. I do not want a divorce. We are here because I want to work on this with you. I am here for you. And my rebbe *is here for us.*

If it's okay with you, I think we should write some of this down so that it's documented. Yes? The rabbi asked as he reached for a ballpoint pen from his desk.

I think that's very wise, Adina's husband agreed.

Write what down? These lies? These outright lies?

Adina, let's refrain from accusations, the rabbi said.

Everything started spinning. The room was blurring. The rabbi's face, her husband's, just melting images, converging into each other. The rabbi didn't believe her.

I want a divorce. I want one right now. Adina turned her body toward the rabbi and leaned toward the end of her seat. *Write that down. Please. Write down that I want a divorce, that I am asking for a divorce. All of what he says are lies! He has a terrifying anger, throwing things at me whenever he loses his temper.*

Rebbe, you have known me for a long time, since I was a boy. You know my parents, MY parents. Adina's husband tapped his chest with both his hands. *These very shelves that line your office were a gift to you from my own father. Would you ever think I would lie? That I would make up such serious claims? I? A G-d-fearing Jew who prays three times a day at your very own* shul*?*

Tsk tsk. The rabbi shook his head without really saying anything. *This all breaks my heart, to see a home in so much turmoil.*

Adina watched in disbelief as a careful and quiet transaction took place in front of her.

Mental illness is an illness. I do not blame my wife. She is a victim of her own mind. I am here, rebbe, because I love my wife, I love my son, and I only want what's best for us.

Of course! Of course! What husband doesn't want that for his family? Adina, the rabbi shifted his gaze, *what do you want for your family?*

To be safe. To be valued. To be loved. None of which I am getting.

That is a serious allegation, Adina. Do you understand what the ramifications of such a statement are? To say you want to be safe? Are you not safe? The rabbi asked, leaning closer across his broad desk.

He throws things. When he is angry, he becomes enraged. Blinded almost. It's like he doesn't have control of his hands and he throws objects in fits of anger. Look! Adina held out her left palm for the rabbi to see. *This scar is from him. And there are scars you can't see too, scars inside my head, from his verbal assaults, which are as damaging as the physical ones. He gets right up to my face, and he yells furiously. It is terrifying. My son is scared of him too. He suffers from night terrors.*

That looks like a very small cut, the rabbi remarked.

Adina's husband laughed as he leaned back in his seat, crossing one leg over the other.

Ironic to hear her accuse me of lying when she is lying right now! Read the hospital report, rebbe. My wife cut herself trying to pit an avocado.

Is this true, Adina? Is there a hospital report?

Adina froze. Her husband was three steps ahead of her.

Ah! Suddenly she has nothing to say. Her husband smiled at her, without an ounce of joy in his face.

The rabbi nodded his head.

And really, rebbe! You have known me since before my first haircut. Have you ever seen me lose my temper? Even once?

It is true, you have always been such a calm, well-mannered, well-behaved boy, ever since your father first brought you to shul*.*

But my wife, Adina—how long have you known her? How well do you know her? Her family? Who will vouch for her? She hardly has any friends. She barely attends social gatherings. She's a recluse. She's a hermit. She hardly even visits her own family! This is not a woman of stable mind. She deserves the help she needs, not a divorce!

The rabbi stroked his beard, rocking his body back and forth as if his entire being was agreeing with Adina's husband.

It's my recommendation that you have Adina see a shrink. It will be of benefit to both of you to have that kind of documentation. If Adina does truly have a mental illness, then we can get her the help she needs. But I think you should check in with me each week and update me on how things are going at home.

And who should I call? Who should I check in with? Adina asked.

No one answered.

Thank you, rebbe, really. You've been a tremendous help. As a token of gratitude, I'd like to make a donation to the synagogue. I will leave a check with your secretary. Adina's husband rose from his seat, leaned over the desk, and vigorously shook the rabbi's hand. "*Tizku l'mitzvos!"*

And like that, two men decided.

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Adina stood up, reaching her arms far above her head. Her torso stretched as she elongated herself so that the tips of her fingers could nearly reach the belly of the basement ceiling. Then she folded her body over, hands to toes, feeling her spine curve and extend. She stretched like this each morning after she woke, rising from the small bed provided to her. She repeated the same routine: washing her hands three times each with the bowl and cup on her nightstand, reciting the morning prayer, ridding herself of the impurity of sleep—a near-death experience—only to wake up to her hell. Prayers always came first after dressing, and followed by her calisthenics. This was every morning, each morning since the day her husband secured her left ankle to the chain cuff.

There was little movement to be had in her room, but there was value to both mind and body to have daily movement. Adina repeated these stretches three times a day: after her morning prayers, again after lunch, and once more shortly before bed. She reached one arm over her head,

arching herself like a rainbow, closing her eyes, and focusing all her might on the small rays of sunshine that bullied their way through the frosted glass window, allowing her a broken but reliable warmth.

Her entire day was structured around getting her through each hour until 4:30 P.M., when her son came to visit her in her room for thirty minutes. He was always escorted by her mother-in-law, who now was the one to wait for him at the school bus stop and walk him home. Her husband's mother brought him down the stairs and through his play area, where Adina often listened with her ears up against her door to hear any sound of him that might escape down the hall and into her own bedroom. Her mother-in-law never came close enough for the two of them to see each other; to each, they were phantoms. And during these visits, Adina arranged the quilt from her bed around the center of the room, shielding her son from the sight of the chain that kept his mother from him.

Sometimes her son brought his homework, and Adina helped him with it. Other times he brought an after-school snack, and Adina peeled a banana or opened a bag of pretzels. A few times he carried a stack of picture books, and he'd curl his body up onto Adina's quilt and listen to her read to him. Now and again, he asked when she was coming back upstairs. He asked if she was feeling better, and Adina lied to him so as not to complicate whatever falsehoods were fed to him by his father as to his mother's long absence. And always the visits sped past them both so quickly that neither of them could ever believe the sound of the small timer her mother-in-law wound and set and placed by their door, indicating that time was up.

More often than not, Adina's son was resilient and strong, accepting of the bizarre new circumstances. He embraced his mother, kissed her cheek, and wished her good night, telling her he'd see her tomorrow. But there were enough times when he did not leave nicely at all, when he would throw tantrums, kicking and screaming and begging his mother to come upstairs with him. Cook him dinner. Help him into the bath. Tuck him into bed. And these were the worst moments of all. She folded his arms into her, steadying his body against hers, as if she could reabsorb him, and she talked him down. She soothed his fears and fed him promises she knew she could not keep. All the while, the harsh, scolding voice of her mother-in-law would drift down the hall, never addressing Adina, only ever the boy. Admonishing him, threatening him until he finally listened, not to his grandmother but to the false hopes his mother had whispered into his ear like a prayer. A prayer he obediently swallowed and carried upstairs with him, burrowing his face into it like it was the bosom of his own mother.

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After the meeting with the rabbi, Adina began to better grasp the dangerous situation she found herself in. She spoke with her parents in secret meetings while her husband was at work. They took careful notes. Their son-in-law, Adina's husband, had managed to convince an influential member of the community that their daughter had a mental illness. That she was a disobedient wife. A danger to her child. Suffering from

delusions. All of this with documented paperwork from the hospital, the rabbi himself, and now a marriage therapist that Adina and her husband saw for one session, during which Adina barely was awarded the opportunity to speak. Adina refused to return to the therapist, convinced he was under the manipulative financial power of her husband. Her husband had the therapist document her refusal to see him.

He talked not just to the therapist but to everyone he met. In *shul*. At weddings. In supermarkets. He would speak of his wife, her struggle, her illness, and the jeopardy she posed to their child. Friends, family, and neighbors nodded, sympathetic, and then they spoke to their friends, family, and neighbors at weddings. In *shul*. In supermarkets. Until the whole of Brooklyn was convinced that Adina was a threat both to herself and her family and that her husband was quietly suffering.

Then, her husband took away her cell phone. It disappeared from her nightstand one night. Then her car disappeared one night from their specially heated pavers. He removed her name from their bank account. He canceled all her credit cards. She watched the careful, calculated deconstruction of all the liberties in her life.

It's time to take this to Beis Din*.* Adina's father spoke confidently. Adina looked at her father from across the kitchen table where she once did her homework as a little girl.

His rebbe*, the one who met with us all those months ago, sits on the* Beis Din*.*

The weight of this realization was like a death sentence. And no one spoke after this. Adina simply left, careful to be home before her husband so that his dinner would be hot and ready and not thrown, cold, and scattered at the tips of her toes.

The *Beis Din* threw the case out of court.

She has a mental illness!

She has self-inflicted wounds!

She suffers from depression!

She refused to cooperate with the marital therapist!

She endangered the life of their only child!

She is prone to bouts of manic episodes!

Adina fell to her knees crying out in prayer as if the room of men before her were the court of G-d Himself. As if the mere goodness of her soul, the merit of all her righteousness, and the debts paid through all her suffering would be enough to incite justice from mere mortals. Men whose offices were lined with the custom shelving purchased and donated by her in-laws, the very shelves that held the books of Torah law meant to instruct a righteous life. As if these pious men, dedicated to the careful observation of six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot*, were capable of exacting true justice.

Despite all of this, Adina, your husband is

committed to you. He wants to be married to you. You should be thanking him, not trying to ask for a divorce. At this time, your husband will not provide a get *to you, and we, as a court, rule in his favor. If you still wish to insist upon a divorce against the will and permission of your husband, then you shall be sentenced to the chains of marriage. We hereby declare that henceforth, until her husband sees fit, Adina is an* agunah*.*

Adina looked up from the tiled floors of the *Beis Din*, noticing now how filthy they were. How dirty. They were deceptively clean when she first arrived, separately from her husband, accompanied by her mother and father who now wept quietly in the corner, mourning the verdict of their daughter, destined for chains. Who was responsible for allowing so much filth to collect on the floors of the *Beis Din*, she wondered, her eyes steady and staring as she remained hunched over as if praying the *Aleinu* of the high holidays.

Her husband crossed the courtroom and, in one swift motion, lifted Adina to her feet.

Come, he beckoned, *you know where you have to go. Make it easy and go without a fight.*

And for the first time, she remembered the room. She remembered the chain.

Adina pulled her arm back.

Think of our son! Her husband spoke in a harsh whisper. *Think of what can happen if his mother doesn't comply with the ruling of the holy court. Think of what the court might rule next about a mother who refuses to abide by Torah law.*

Fear constricted, wrapping its claws around Adina's neck as tightly as her husband's fingers grasped her arm now. He was right. The only way to fight for her son was by not fighting at all. She followed willingly. The entire *Beis Din* accompanied them to their house to assert that their ruling be carried out to the law.

They all walked through the front door, Adina and her husband first, followed by the men of the *Beis Din*. Down the steps to the basement, they passed the carpeted room with recessed lighting lined with drawers and shelves of all their son's toys, a plush sofa, a toddler-sized art table. Down further, through the hallway, toward the door that Adina once briefly poked her head into when she was still a young bride.

Adina entered the room. To the right was a small, twin-size bed, fitted with sheets, a quilt, and a pillow. There was a nightstand with a single lamp, a bowl with a washing cup inside it, and a *siddur* and *Tehillim*. There was a desk to the right with a chair and a narrow door that led to the bathroom, where a toilet and single shower stall stood beside a small sink with a cup that already held Adina's toothbrush. And there was the chain: the metal cuff at the end of a long chain that was attached to the center of the room and bolted into the ground.

Adina's husband signaled her to sit in the chair by the desk as the room crowded with the judges. All standing with their beards of varying length and color. Their *tzitzit* hanging in white threads down the outer thighs of their dress pants. Their black velvet hats sitting at different preferred angles on their heads, hiding their velvet *kippah*s beneath.

Their suit jackets open, too small now to close around the gut of their protruding bellies. Their pockets lined in gold and silver threads, sewn in by the family whose name she was destined to bear until the end of her days.

Adina sat. She watched her husband pick up the cuff from the center of the room and walk it back across to her. The heavy chain link dragged across the wooden floor, filling the room with something louder than Adina's humiliation. It stretched all the way across to the very end where she sat waiting.

Remove your shoe and sock. Adina's husband's voice sounded unfamiliar, as if it were a different voice from the one that asked her many years ago to be his wife.

Adina bent over, slipping off her loafer and the nude stocking sock, never once lifting her skirt or revealing even an inch of skin. The rabbis looked down at their shoes during this time anyway, waiting for Adina's husband's next command to signal their need to witness this act. To give this their seal of approval. So that every person in that room could acknowledge that Adina was now an *agunah* under all their watchful and approving supervision.

Adina's husband pulled out his ring of keys. There on it was a small key she had never noticed before. Had it been there all this time, hiding, waiting, lurking? He took it and unlocked the cuff, the metal splitting open in two, and then he brought the open mouth of it behind Adina's lower leg, snapping it shut around the slope of her ankle. It locked in place with a gentle click.

It is done. You are now chained to me.

The rabbis nodded and, one by one, they turned and left her. They left her chained, locked in a room, taking everything from her, binding her to this sickly root of her home. A prisoner of all their making.

Her ankle bled for days, the sensitive skin chafed and eaten raw. She found bandages in her nightstand drawer, and she applied them each day until calluses grew. The skin grew tougher, more resilient. It still bruised often. She woke in the middle of the night in pain if she didn't sleep carefully.

At first she tripped often over the chain, the chain that was so heavy to lift, and it still is. No one besides her son has entered her room since the day it was filled with judges. She hasn't seen her husband since he last uttered those words: *It is done*. *You are chained to me*. Sometimes she would repeat those words over and over in a manic and compulsive way. It is done. She married him. It is done. She let him manipulate her. It is done. She let him throw things at her. It is done. She let him chain her. It is done. She let him take her son. It is done and cannot be undone without her husband's permission.

Outside her window, she listens to the proverbial sounds of Brooklyn life: Honking horns, stroller wheels rolling across cement, children squealing, the revving power of a lawn mower roaring to life, the sirens of a distant ambulance. But inside, it is quiet. It is empty. The world cycles and re-cycles, and another day, another week passes with her chain weighing her down from the ankle up. Her

parents send letters with her son, secret messages, informing her of how they are pleading on her behalf, pleading her case, protesting. But she has already heard about the banquets honoring her in-laws, her husband being invited back to speak at the *yeshiva* he graduated from. All their honor and prestige while they keep her chained in a basement one hundred feet from where her own son loses himself in imaginary play.

And when she cries herself to sleep at night, she can hear them. The others. Chained in basements and attics across the city, across the country, across oceans. Women who have fought in chains for years. Women who have died in them. The sounds of the men who put them there drowning out their weeping, as they link arms, dancing in dizzying circles, growing in mass and strength. Their voices shouting up songs of prayers while the loud, clapping, thunderous sound of their dress shoes slam atop the wooden boards that seal the fate of the women they put there. All their pious rejoicing pushing forward, drowning out the women, so that all G-d can hear are the sounds of men stepping higher on the backs of chained women.

JEWISH THEOLOGY FOR A NEO-TRADITIONAL AGE

Steven Gotlib is Marketing Manager at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, Director of CJX: the Capital Jewish Experience, and Interim Rabbi at Young Israel of Ottawa.

Review of Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *The People, The Torah, The God: A Neo-Traditional Jewish Theology* (Boston; Academic Studies Press, 2023).[1]

In his newest book, Yehuda Gellman seeks to articulate a "neo-traditional" theology that "provides a new concept of the Jews as God's chosen people; gives a new way of thinking about the Torah being from Heaven… and puts forward a conceivable way of squaring God's perfect goodness with a good deal of the evil in God's world."[2] While admitting that he must "depart from the standard understandings of these three principles in order to meet challenges that cannot be ignored," Gellman is committed to making "only the minimal changes needed to solve the problem in a satisfactory way."[3] As such, his intention is only to demonstrate that these concepts are true "*in an important sense.*"[4]

Notably absent from the book are arguments for God's existence.[5] This is presumably because Gellman's "primary audience is people who are

[1] All unspecified references to Gellman are to this work.

[2] Gellman, vii. It is important to note that Gellman views this book as an expansion of his most recent trilogy of works: *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People* (2012), *This Was from God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (2016), and *Perfect Goodness and the God of the Jews: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (2019).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[5] For a discussion on that, see Samuel Lebens, *a Guide for the Jewish Undecided* and my review.

traditionally minded… or are attracted to tradition, and for whom the topics in this book are of importance."[6] In other words, Gellman is not interested in convincing non-believers, but in providing justification for continued belief. Taking God's existence for granted, this review will evaluate the three pillars of Gellman's theology one by one, with a particular eye towards whether that "important sense" is maintained. This will be determined by whether or not they pass the "satisfaction criterion" that Gellman lays out in his previous work, *This Was From God:*

> A contemporary approach to traditional Judaism must leave one with a good religious reason to make great personal sacrifices for the sake of his or her Judaism and to teach one's children (and others, when relevant) to make similar sacrifices.[7]

The Jews: A Designated People

Jewish chosenness is important because "without a theological explanation for why Judaism should be for Jews only (including converts who become Jews), Judaism is in danger of being a mere elaborate folklore, a vehicle solely of ethnic identity, or simply what Jews happen to do."[8] At the same time, we ought to "be careful to reinterpret Jewish election in a way that prevents racist understandings as much as possible."[9]

Gellman responds to this challenge by contending that God loves all people equally and that the Jewish people are meant to be a figure of that universal love displaying to the world that, despite the trevails of life, God stays the course for all.[10] This is explained with a conception in which the Jewish people "have been and continue to be a sacrifice for God, participating in all of the joy, and all of the tragedy, of being God's designated people."[11] In this way,

> Jewish pain is a picture of the world's pain. Our suffering, a figure of the suffering of Gentiles. Our sinning, a mirror of the sinning of others. And our goodness, a depiction of theirs. And our past redemption from the suffering of slavery, our continued existence despite all, and the promise of our future redemption are the hope held out to all humanity.[12]

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *This was From God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Brighton; Academic Studies Press, 2016), 13.

[8] Gellman, 5.

[9] Ibid.

[10] This articulation of his main contention is based on personal correspondence with Gellman. One may note that it avoids addressing the problem of evil, which will be addressed below.

[11] Ibid., 14.

[12] Ibid., 16. Gellman explains elsewhere that this is God's way of saying to the world, "See my passionate desire to be God to the Jewish people. For here, in my turning to the Jews, is a concrete figuration of my desire for all humanity. Keep this before you when you discern my presence as non-compelling. Keep this in mind when I call to you but do not compel you. Don't take that as insufficient interest on my part. Here, in the Jews, is proof of my wanting all of you with

Gellman places his approach against that of Michael Wyschogrod, who wrote that God's exclusive love for the Jewish people is a direct carry-over from God's love for Abraham:

> "If God continues to love the people of Israel – and it is the faith of Israel that he does – it is because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children as a man sees the face of his beloved in the children of his union with his beloved. God's anger when Israel is disobedient is the anger of a rejected lover. It is above all jealousy, the jealousy of one deeply in love who is consumed with torment at the knowledge that his beloved seeks the affection of others…
>
> God also stands in relationship with [non-Jews] in recognition and affirmation of their uniqueness. The choice, after all, is between a lofty divine love equally distributed to all without recognition of uniqueness and real encounter, which necessarily involves favorites but in which each is unique and addressed as such… As a father, God loves his children and knows each one as who he is with his strengths and weaknesses, his virtues and vices. Because a father is not an impartial judge but a loving parent and because a human father is a human being with his own personality, it is inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he loves some more than others."[13]

Gellman rejects this understanding for three reasons. First because God, unlike human beings, would be able to love every person and all nations equally. Pulling no punches, Gellman writes that Wyschogrod's understanding of Jewish chosenness "works, if at all, only for those who share his severe humanizing of God."[14] Furthermore, if God can literally fall in love, then God can fall out of love, or fall in greater love, with

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me." Therefore, in Gellman's words, "every act of God's love toward the Jewish people also speaks to all peoples. Each such act is an invitation, a call, an offer, by God to all peoples to receive God's love, as demonstrated by God's relationship to the Jewish people" (Jerome Gellman, "Jewish Chosenness - A Contemporary Approach" in Alon Goshen-Gottstein (ed), *Judaism's Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity* (Brookline; Academic Studies Press, 2020) 79).

The immediate response to this is, of course, "What about the Holocaust? Doesn't that present a counter-example to God's love for the Jewish people?" Gellman is not oblivious to this objection and writes that "the Holocaust stands out as a black hole in every Jewish theology asserting God's goodness and God's irrevocable love for the Jews" (14), and that he will return to the question when addressing God's Goodness in the third section of the book.

[13] Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, cited in Elliot N. Dorff and Louis S. Newman (ed.) *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1999), 250-251.

[14] Gellman, 40.

someone new. This is especially true if God *only* loves the Jews because of His love for Abraham. Indeed, a doctrine of Jewish chosenness has to maintain the idea that "the Jews exemplify God's love no matter what suffering they endure and how much of a nuisance they make. This requires a steadfastness that survives all events and all challenges."[15] If such a framework is not clearly in place, perhaps God "falls madly in love with Jesus or Mohammad and grants a divorce to the children of Abraham to now love the followers of Jesus or Mohammad."[16]

This critique may also apply to Gellman's position. While quick to note that he does not see the Jewish people as a Christ-like figure of atonement, one cannot help but read Gellman's articulation in conversation with Augustine's claim that Jewish survival has been divinely orchestrated to serve as "a testimony to [Christians] that we have not forged the prophecies about Christ [in the Hebrew Bible]."[17] Gellman writes elsewhere that his position is an inversion of Augustine's. The latter is ordinarily understood to say that God keeps the Jewish people in perpetual suffering to "be witness to what befalls His deniers," while Gellman understands Jewish survival and resilience in the face of suffering as "a positive, rather than negative, testimony to God's grace."[18] An Augustinian, though, could respond that Gellman has simply mis-read history.[19] As such, we still require a definitive reason to accept Gellman's position over that of Wyschogrod.

One reason that Gellman offers is that although Wyschogrod's understanding of divine love is not overtly racist, it is perhaps too vulnerable to racist tendencies. After all, if God loves one person so much, there must be something superior about them that made God feel that way. This leads to

[15] Ibid., 41.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Augustine, *City of God*, 18:46. This also supports the Christian theology of supersessionism, which posits that Jesus "has obtained a more excellent ministry [than Moses], inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6) and that "In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13).

In private correspondence, Gellman clarified that his view differs from Augustine's in that the latter viewed Jewish suffering as a punishment, while Gellman views it as a model of steadfastness under God. Gellman's primary point is that the Jewish people serve as a figure of God's love for all humanity. The Jewish history of suffering demonstrates that the Jewish people have been prepared to witness God through all strife and problems that we face. In doing so, we serve as a model to others of how to move forward in their own times of trouble.

[18] Gellman in Goshen-Gottstein, 80-81.

[19] Another Christian thinker to weaponize Jewish history against the Jewish people was Martin Luther who, according to Goshen-Gottstein, "appealed to Jewish history and to the present condition of the Jews as proof for the invalidity of Jewish interpretations [of Scripture]. What validates interpretation is God, and Jewish history shows that God has abandoned the Jews. Luther could not conceive of any other explanation for 1,500 years of exile and the almost subhuman conditions of Jewish life. What for Jews is the highest sign of faith was not recognized by this theologian and was rather taken as a sign of rejection and invalidation of Jewish religion and scriptural interpretation" (Alon Goshen-Gottstein, *Luther the Anti-Semite: A Contemporary Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2018) 35-36). Goshen-Gottstein notes on the very same page that this position demonstrated internal inconsistency and a "theological failure of nerve" on the Protestant Reformer's part, Luther's position is still a prevalent one.

Gellman's final critique of Wyschogrod's view: God does not *really* love the Jewish people, for when He looks at them, He does not see them for who they are; only for who their ancestor was. In Gellman's view, God only loves the Jewish people because they are Jewish, but "Jewishness is a foundational fact about me, not an incidental fact. [It] permeates my being as oil permeates the olive through and through."[20] An olive may have to be squeezed for the oil to reveal itself, but when God loves someone because they are Jewish, it is still them that God is loving in a true sense. God's love for all Jews then shows all of humanity that such love is equally available to them as well.[21]

Gellman claims that his view should be preferred over Wyschogrod's because it avoids unnecessary anthropomorphism, avoids falling into racist tendencies, and allows for specific divine love to flourish. On the other hand, Gellman's approach can be read to neatly fit into Christianity's narrative of continued Jewish survival as bearing witness for the world to see (albeit that Augustine viewed such survival as divine punishment while Gellman views it as a demonstration of Jewish steadfastness). One must then choose between a theology which overly humanizes God and one that is perhaps too easily compatible with Christian theological narratives[22]

Both views pass Gellman's satisfaction criterion, since either living as an example for others to be inspired by, or being favored with divine love, provide ample reason for self-sacrifice. Gellman's neo-traditional approach to chosenness, then, succeeds at maintaining chosenness *in an important sense* even though it may also provide a brds-eye view view of Judaism that may be too hard for some of his readers to swallow.

Torah Guided by Heaven

Gellman notes that in our time, "natural sciences, biblical studies, archeology, and the study of ancient civilizations have together formed a broad, reasoned agreement among scholars that the Torah is not a dependable source of historical information."[23] Combatting this, thinkers like Sam Lebens and Tyron Goldshmidt have taken to utilizing a modern version of the infamous *Kuzari Principle*:

> A tradition is likely true, absent evidence to the contrary, if: 1) it is accepted by a majority of a nation or a significant majority; and 2) describes an alleged national experience of a previous generation of that nation; and 3) the national experience would be

[20] Gellman, 42.

[21] One may ask how God feels about Jews who are non-religious. A Gellmanian perspective may be that the fact that accepting observance is always an option for them implies that God's love extends to them as well. In fact, any time that an otherwise secular Jew stands up to antisemitism or the like, they may be seen as returning God's love in a real sense.

[22] Of course, compatibility with Christianity is not in-and-of-itself a reason to reject a view. Nor does it imply any implicit agreement with Christianity on Gellman's part. It is simply a fact that might give more traditional readers pause.

[23] Ibid., 46.

> expected to create a continuous memory on a wide enough scale until the tradition is in place; 4) is insulting to that nation; and 5) makes universal, difficult, and severe demands on that nation.[24]

Those utilizing this principle assume that the stories in the Bible must be more-or-less true since people would not just accept such narratives if they had no tradition already, especially those that come with high demands. Gellman, however, notes that people might be inclined to accept them if given a good enough reason why they had no memory of them. Therefore the *Kuzari Principle* stands "*unless at any time in the past the telling of the traditional story was accompanied by the telling of a reason convincing to the listeners for why they had no memory of it*."[25]

Gellman also notes that the Torah itself provides numerous commands to remember/not to forget its most important narratives, and that multiple references in Tanakh report that the people *did* forget such things. Therefore, "someone who wants to invent stories of miracles has only to point to the authority of these verses to explain how it could possibly be that their ancestors experienced those miracles and yet the miracles had been forgotten."[26]

While Gellman grants that the *Kuzari Principle* highlights "an intuitive likelihood that *something* of utmost religious importance took place back then,"[27] he finds it difficult to believe that the Torah is a reliable historical document on that basis. This is because the principle itself does not "have what it takes to neutralize the considerable evidence *against* the truth of at least the details of the stories of the stay in Egypt and the sojourn in the desert."[28] This reality "too often leads people to conclude that the Torah is no longer relevant to their lives and no longer commands their allegiance."[29] Therefore Gellman proposes a

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[24] Ibid., 58. Gellman's summary.

[25] Ibid., 59. Emphasis original.

[26] Ibid., 65-66. Gellman also notes that one could come up with a "Maimonidean" reply to the *Kuzari Principle*, saying that one never heard of certain miracles because over time the stories of them were replaced by naturalistic accounts.

[27] Ibid., 61.

[28] Ibid. One of Gellman's primary arguments here is that the lack of evidence of the Exodus from Egypt and travels in the desert have left no evidence that has yet been discovered. This goes against his Expected Evidence Principle which posits that if an event occurred that "would have left behind an imposing body of relevant material evidence that would have come to the surface after extended massive efforts to find it," then "if little or no such evidence does surface after extensive efforts, then probably [that event] never occurred" (62). See Footnote 41 for how some have attempted to counter this principle.

Another objection that Gellman raises against the *Kuzari Principle* is that the argument is actually *too* successful. If the argument "works to establish Torah miracles, it also works to establish the historical veracity of miracles in the scriptures of the world's dominant Buddhism" (78). Discussion of this argument, however, would be too lengthy for this review.

[29] Ibid., 53.

new understanding of revelation.[30]

His proposal revolves around a notion of "moderate divine providence" in which "God can direct desired outcomes without needing to control all specific events down to their last details."[31] This places certain constraints on what ends up happening while still allowing for unordered or even random events.[32] These lower levels include "not only unprogrammed specific natural events in relation to God's aims, but also free human choices… within outside framework boundaries imposed from above."[33] That is to say that the divine plan can encompass a large number of potential decisions made within it.[34]

Gellman believes that "the undermining of the historical reliability of the Torah is the culmination of millenia of gradual guidance away from the centrality of historical content of the Torah as it appears" and leads towards "an understanding of the divine word free of a commitment to the historical accuracy of those narratives."[35] Just as it was the divine plan for human beings to believe in the Torah's historical truth for centuries, it is now the plan for us to embrace new understandings. Such a view not only "allows for human choices in the Torah content and for textual criticism of how human choices lead to alternative writings,"[36] but also supplies readers license to view the Torah's narratives through their unique subjective lens.

This approach seems similar to Tamar Ross' idea of cumulative revelation. She wrote, based on her understanding of Rav Kook, that "revolutionary developments in the world of ideas… are a clear sign that humanity has outgrown more primitive forms of spirituality and is ready for a new, more sublime level."[37] This view also "allows for the liberty of conceiving of the Torah of Moses in terms of a revelation that occurred over a period

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[30] This articulation can also be found in Gellman's 2016 book, *This Was From God: a Contemporary Theology of Torah and History*.

[31] Gellman, 83. Gellman utilizes principles of quantum mechanics to demonstrate how such a process might work. Other recent works which have done so include Ari Tuchman's *Principled Uncertainty: A Quantum Exploration of Maimonides' Perfect and Infinite God* (Kodesh Press, 2023) and Avinoam Frankel's translation and elucidation of *Shomer Emunim: The Introduction to Kabbalah* (Urim, 2021).

[32] Gellman also relates this idea to evolution, noting that on the "micro level" there can still be random mutations on the ground while the "macro level" is still moving in a particular direction.

[33] Gellman, 86.

[34] One might object to calling this free will due to the constraints that it is operating under. Gellman responds by noting that such a restriction "simply joins any number of other limitations on human free choices… freedom of the will does not mean freedom utterly unconstrained" (86). Similarly, the atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett has noted that "in the vast space of possible configurations of 'matter' there are some that persist better than others, because they have been designed to avoid harm. The process by which these entities emerge uses information gleaned from the environment to anticipate general and sometimes particular features of likely futures, permitting informed guidance. This proves that *evitability* can be achieved in a deterministic world." Daniel C. Dennet, *Freedom Evolves* (New York; Penguin, 2003), 62.

[35] Gellman, 90.

[36] Ibid., 90-91.

[37] Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* 2nd Edition (Waltham; Brandeis University Press, 2021), 207.

of time, via a process that is totally consonant with the findings of biblical criticism and archeological discoveries (to the extent that these are scientifically verifiable and convincing)."[38] It would simply have been God's will for such a process to unfold over time.

Ross herself clarified that she and Gellman

> differ regarding the ontological status of such God talk itself: [He] is prepared to acknowledge that context can change the import of religious claims relating to the natural world, but he is not prepared to apply that same measure of flexibility to the realm of metaphysics… I, on the other hand, emerge more skeptical and regard even this looser picture of God's nature and His relationship to the world, which [Gellman] proposes, as a picture grounded in human choices and interests rather than in inescapable constraints regarding the facts of the matter.

Gellman even notes that his satisfaction criterion is a corollary of his belief that Judaism is an "ultimatist" religion which

1. Endorses that an ultimate being, state of affairs, truth, or mode of being is ultimate, that is, signifies the deepest fact about the nature of reality, and in relation to which an ultimate good is to be attained and
2. Has an ultimate commitment to cultivating the attainment of the ultimate good, through organized participation with others in a tradition of revered texts, rituals, and/or other activities for expressing, advancing, or understanding, and living in accordance with clause 1.[39]

Ross' view, then, fits neatly within a postmodern philosophical context in which fundamental truth is inaccessible, while Gellman's position is modernist in that he makes a genuine, epistemic truth claim about God's hand in the Torah's formation.[40]

While acknowledging that his project is ultimately "a theological exercise built on *emunah* in the truth of something," Gellman maintains that "we do not *doubt* God when we walk through that threshold [of rejecting the Torah's historical accuracy]. We *follow* god when we go forward,"[41]

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[38] Ibid., 223.

[39] Gellman, *This was From God*, 14.

[40] For a more recent articulation of Ross' theology, see Behind Every Revelation Lurks an Interpretation: Revisiting "The Revelation at Sinai" - The Lehrhaus, as well as my response.

[41] Gellman, 90.

in a very real sense. Science "cannot say that the Torah is not from God, as long as one accepts the theory of moderate divine providence." At the end of the day, "the Torah remains the result of God's holistic providential regard, and, so, being from God, is holy."[42]

While Gellman's theology is more traditional than many,[43] it still falls to the left of others. For example, Sam Lebens proposed the following view:

> At an event at Sinai, God gave an endorsement to a religious tradition that would evolve among the nation of Israel. That tradition would come to view the Pentateuch as a sacred written constitution, never to be amended (at least not without a second Sinai-like event). His endorsement demands that, today, we should relate to the Pentateuch as if it were dictated word for word by God to man (which, perhaps it really was). Whether or not this is an historically accurate account of the genesis of the Pentateuch (which, perhaps it really is), God foresaw that the religious tradition stemming from Sinai would (at least) evolve to endorse this attitude as central to its very identity. Accordingly, even if God didn't write the Pentateuch word for word (which he may well have done), it is as if God has now appropriated the text of the Pentateuch as his own, by his very appearance at Sinai. The Pentateuchal text is only one part of the Torah. That which is fixed is the words; not their interpretation. God also endorsed, at Sinai, the process of evolving traditions and interpretations that

[42] Ibid., 93.

[43] Gellman's view is also substantially different from Benjamin Sommer's participatory theory of revelation that "the specific words found in scripture are a human response to God's commanding but nonverbal self-disclosure" and, as such, "all Torah, ancient, medieval, and modern, is a response to the event at Sinai [in which God wordlessly revealed Himself to the Jewish people]" Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2015), 95.

While both believe in a true God truly revealing Himself, Gellman notes that "the paradigmatic form of revelation in the Torah, far before Sinai, is God speaking directly to a person and that person understanding precisely what God is saying and wants" Jerome Yehuda Gellman, *This was From God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (Brighton; Academic Studies Press, 2016), 163. He then writes that this can be justified in his theology because

On my conception of Torah from Heaven, *always and forever,* God is hovering over the face of the earthly Torah process, not merely by being present but by imposing higher-level, top-down organizational grids on what can take place. And at times God "descends" to see what humans are doing and will intervene in the course of Torah with revelational moments, sometimes noticeably, at other times imperceptibly, nudging things along when necessary. God's providence blends with, *yet dominates,* the paths of human endeavor in Torah. Hence, the best way to think of the Torah is that it is God's Torah. To think otherwise is to take for our own credit that which we could never have done without a great deal of *siyatah dishmayah*, "help from Heaven," at every moment (ibid., 165).

> the faithful of Israel would develop over time, including their relationship with other books of the Bible. There may be wrong turns from time to time, but guided by *ruach hakodesh* (the holy spirit of God), the general trajectory is such that the unfolding content of the revelation, through the religiously observant communities of the Jewish people, brings the content of the Earthly Torah ever closer to the content of the Heavenly Torah.[44]

While Gellman takes the academic consensus against the Torah's authenticity for granted, Lebens remains agnostic. Perhaps the Torah really was dictated word for word by God, and perhaps it really is an accurate historical account.[45] He goes on to write that this is because

> we don't have *overwhelming* reason to think that the national narratives of the Bible are inaccurate… [W]hen you're dealing with the miraculous stories of the Exodus and the wilderness years, there are good reasons to assume that there *wouldn't* be too much empirical evidence left over—Egyptians wouldn't have been keen to record their own downfall, and the miraculous sustenance of the wilderness encampments wouldn't have left behind regular archeological remains, nor do we

[44] Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2020) 220. A less rigorous exploration of this idea is also featured in his more recent book, *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided.* It is important to note that Lebens proposed this view "not with the apologetic motivation of standing up to its contemporary critics [but rather] in response to the internal problems that it had to circumnavigate within the Jewish tradition itself (ibid.).

[45] Lebens counters Gellman's Expected Evidence Principle by noting that "the encampment in the wilderness is reported to have been so miraculous that you might not expect any remains to have been left." Furthermore, Lebens argues that

> Gellman doesn't argue that lack of evidence is proof that something didn't happen. Gellman rather argues that where there's a strong *expectation* of evidence, then—and only then—does a conspicuous *lack* of evidence suggest that something didn't happen… And yet what we call the Sinai desert is 60,000 km2 of forbidding terrain. The Israelites often stayed for long periods of time in just one place. Place names in the narrative are ambiguous, making it hard to retrace their steps. Archeological surveys may have been extensive, but surely, we're talking about needles in a haystack. Moreover, we also have no reason to think that what we call the Sinai desert is the same expanse of land as that which the Bible calls the Sinai desert. When are we to assume that the failure to find traces of the Israelites, in such a massive, difficult, and ambiguously located terrain, constitutes proof that the story didn't happen? How many stones have been left unturned? How many need to be turned in order to render the story unlikely to a person already assuming that God exists and that the revelation at Sinai likely occurred? (Lebens, *Principles*, 213-214).

It is important to note, though, that he also acknowledges that "as long as we have reason to think that there was a theophany at Sinai, even if it happened only to one or two tribes—who were, at that time, an entire nation— that later merged with others, you still have reason to think that the national religious traditions that tumbled out of that moment received a divine stamp of approval" (ibid., 216).

> really know exactly where to look.[46]

Furthermore, Lebens strongly believes that the Torah "is divine, so long as we have reason to think that the theophany at Sinai occurred. We can have such reason, without transforming the Bible into a history book against its will."[47] Gellman leaves it to his readers to decide between Lebens' points and "the strong expectation that *something* should have shown up *somewhere*,"[48] and this review will do the same.

Ultimately, Gellman and Lebens both provide justification to make significant sacrifices as a result of their views of revelation.[49] However, if the Torah being from Heaven is understood as requiring an accurate, word-for-word revelation, then Gellman's view may have a hard time finding acceptance.[50]

Goodness in a World of Evil

Gellman's argument about divine goodness is based on Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This implies that we are commanded to love God *maximally*. If every single person is required to love God to the greatest possible extent, then it follows for Gellman that God can only be a *perfectly good being* as well as *perfectly deserving of such love*, since all humans could not possibly be called upon to love God in such a way if He is anything less.[51] This is the basis for Gellman's position elsewhere that

> The criterion for a *religiously* adequate conception of God in my tradition should be that God be such that it be most appropriate to love God with a love than which there can be no greater. Here we

[46] Lebens, 216.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Gellman, 51.

[49] Due to the nuances of their positions, I do not believe that Ross and Sommer are able to provide sufficient reason for personal sacrifices to be necessitated.

[50] One major weakness of **both** arguments is that they are ultimately unfalsifiable and can easily be applied to **any** religon's texts. One who accepts either Lebens' or Gellman's argument must then accept the fact that a Christian, Muslim, or even paganist can make a similar argument to justify their belief in the divinity of their own texts.

[51] For Gellman, a perfectly good being must
1. Have a *perfectly good character,* such that "God acts with perfect moral goodness, with full moral empathy, always doing what is of overriding moral importance" (101);
2. Be able to "*actualize* the good acts, intentions, and sentients of God's perfectly good character" (ibid.);
3. Possess "all the *knowledge* God needs for perfect use of his goodness and power for the good" (Ibid.);
4. Be "metaphysically secure to be reliably there for doing good, both now and into the future" (102).

God, however, need not be a necessary being, and *cannot* be fundamentally simple, as that would contradict His ability to be good (which is inherently complex). This conception of God also need not be all-powerful or all-knowing, but only powerful and knowledgeable **enough** to be able to actualize His perfectly good character. Even a God like this still must confront the fact that there is evil in the world despite His goodness, which is why Gellman next attempts to present a response to that problem.

> are talking about a being to whom maximal love is *most* appropriate for *everyone* across the board and in *every* situation. Love of God is not context dependent but valid for all contexts and always. [This] criterion of God being worthy of our utmost love plausibly yields a God suitable for the required degree of awe of God. This sounds credible since whatever being is most appropriate for maximal love likely will be more than adequate for being the object of the desired awe.[52]

The existence of evil, then, ought to give one pause before accepting the existence of such a being.[53]

The most common response is the Free Will Defence, popularly presented by Alvin Plantinga:

> A world containing creatures who freely perform both good and evil actions – and do more good than evil – is more valuable than a world containing quasiautomata who always do what is right because they are unable to do otherwise. Now God can create free creatures but he cannot casually or otherwise determine them to do only what is right; for if He does so then they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; but he cannot create the possibility of moral evil and at the same time prohibit its actuality.[54]

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[52] Jerome Gellman, "A Constructive Jewish Theology of God" in Steven Kepnes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology* (Cambridge, 2020), 456. One may argue that such a God is still not necessitated by anything other than the biblical verses that Gellman quotes (which could perhaps have been commanded by any being regardless of their truly deserving such maximal love). Gellman preemptively responds to this objection by writing that "agreeing with me on what traditional Judaism demands of the concept of God does not mean that you must believe that such a God exists or that such is your God. Recognizing that Judaism makes a particular demand does not in itself entail your having to accept that demand." Indeed, as a result of that admission, Gellman explicitly omits from his argument "any reasons from outside the tradition one might have for rejecting the God that I propose" (ibid., 454). This is consistent with Gellman's admission in *The People, the Torah, the God* that his arguments are meant to bolster those who already hold traditional beliefs rather than convince non-believers or even neutral observers. Since Gellman is explicit about who his intended audience is, this admission does not in itself constitute a weakness in his argument, though it does seem to allow for those who come from a different starting point to reject it off hand.

[53] Samuel Lebens frames the problem of evil as follows:

1. If God exists, He would be powerful enough to remove all evil;
2. If God exists, He would be knowledgeable enough to know where the evil is and how to remove it;
3. If God exists, He would be loving enough to want to remove all evil;
4. Evil Exists;
   THEREFORE
5. If God exists, there would be no evil;
   THEREFORE
   God doesn't exist. *Philosophy of Religion: The Basics* (New York; Routledge, 2023), 111.

[54] Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca; Cornell

This certainly addresses human-caused evils, but what of natural evils like earthquakes, hurricanes and the like? Elsewhere, Plantinga writes that perhaps certain people "would have produced *less* moral good if the evils had been absent."[55] Witnessing the damage of an earthquake or tsunami may, for example, inspire activism and greater relief efforts in the long run. Richard Swinburne even goes so far as to argue that "being allowed to suffer to make possible a great good is a privilege."[56] He also argues that natural evils caused by the laws of nature working as they do gives humans knowledge of how to bring about or prevent such evil moving forward while also providing a choice in how to respond to the suffering caused by them.[57]

While these sorts of arguments show that there is not necessarily a logical contradiction between the existence of a good God and evil, they do little to confront what Gellman calls the "autobiographical problem of evil" which "is not a claim of a contradiction or even a claim of improbability. It is rather a direct, visceral, emotional reaction to evil (as such, or its amount, or its horrendous quality) experienced or known about."[58]

It was in facing this particular challenge that Rav Soloveitchik wrote that "man, submerged in the depths of a frozen fate, will in vain seek the solution to the problem of evil in the context of speculative thought, for he will never find it."[59] Rather, one should say

> "There is evil, I do not deny it, and I will not conceal it with fruitless casuistry. I am, however, interested in it from a halakhic point of view; and as a person who wants to know what action to take."[60]

He then notes that, on a halakhic level, suffering is meant to inspire confession and repentance. Gellman, however, finds this response wanting. It may provide an answer for why criminals and sinners suffer, but "loses force once the subjects of the suffering are those who do not have the mind-set to realize or believe that they are suffering for that reason [of spiritual development]."[61] This is especially so if those who are suffering are minors or little children who cannot yet require such atonement.

University Press, 1990) 132. Jewish readers may be familiar with this style of argument from the early chapters of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato's Derech Hashem.

[55] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids; Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1974) 57. He alternatively suggests that many natural evils could be attributed to "Satan or to Satan and his cohorts… So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of nonhuman agents'' (58). Since Judaism rejects such a conception of the Satan, this answer is unhelpful to us.

[56] Richard Swinburne, *Is there a God? 2nd Edition* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2010), 89.

[57] Ibid., 94-95.

[58] Gellman, 106.

[59] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen - My Beloved Knocks* (New York; Yeshiva University Press, 2006), 4.

[60] Ibid., 7.

[61] Gellman, 111.

The problem of evil, then, is hard to solve, and Gellman does not even attempt to do so. Nor does he attempt to win over those who do not already believe in a perfectly good God. His goal is to "alleviate the problem somewhat for the believer or would-be believer, to the point that *emunah*, faith, might well prevail in the face of the challenge"[62] by offering a *conceivable* explanation in order to "show that *a* justification for many evils is at least *imaginable*, even if the explanation is not the real one."[63]

The explanation that Gellman offers is based on the idea that all human beings are destined to eventually join with God in eternal intimacy.[64] God, in Gellman's understanding, knows not only what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future, but also every possibility of what can happen in the present.[65] For every possible person He could create, God knows exactly what they would do of their own free will in any possible situation. By using this knowledge, God can selectively create those whom He knows have the best chance of achieving such intimacy. That, in turn, would allow as many created human beings as possible to achieve that goal while still making free decisions.[66]

Given that "God's creative abilities for good far surpass the ability to create only one world… God being perfectly good would create a plurality of separate universes, the better to do good."[67] There is still, though, evil in this multiverse, so this proposal alone does not address the problem at hand. Gellman responds with the explanation that since it is the case that there is so much evil in the world and it is also the case that God is good, it follows that "this lifetime cannot be the only lifetime of a person." If one is not able to achieve intimacy with God in their current life, they will be

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[62] Ibid., 108.

[63] Ibid., 112. Emphasis my own. It is also important to note that Gellman's suggestion "will not be enough of an alleviation of the autobiographical problem for those of us challenged by the methodological murder of Jews in the Holocaust and its haunting aftermath… the holocaust is a black hole, emitting no light, in every theology since then. Every theology, when finished, must face the response of "Yes, but…" Still, I am just trying to do the best I can with what I can, for others, for myself." (108).

[64] Possible exceptions being the likes of Hitler, Stalin, etc.

[65] This does run into the problem of free will and divine foreknowledge, but Gellman purposefully leaves that aside since "the traditional Jew is asked to juggle both, as twin operative pictures in her mind" (115, n. 10).

[66] This understanding seems consistent with Rav Soloveitchik's articulation of the Maimonidean understanding of creation:

> Before God created the physical world, He created the blueprint, the scientific idea of that world. But where does that scientific world exist? Maimonides answers: In God's thought. Later the concrete world crystallized, which is just a reflection, an echo of that scientific universe. We have here an idealist notion where thought precedes existence… Thus cognition is a monistic intellectual act performed by a universal agent; God Himself. In the moment of intellectual illumination man is permitted to partake in this universal act of divine knowledge, in this great act of divine cognition. Lawrence J. Kaplan, *Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide for the Perplexed* (Brooklyn; Ktav Publishers, 2016), 148.

[67] Gellman, 118.

able to achieve "continuous development of character in future lifetimes"[68] which may be lived in different, better, universes:

> When one dies, or otherwise exits a universe, one will preserve a memory of life in the universe one has left and regain the memories of all previous universes one has inhabited. A person knows them as *her* life, thus able to integrate the latest universe into her accumulated trans-universe memories. She looks to the future with these memories in place. But more than that happens. A person is now able to look back on that life and draw lessons from it for the future. And God will have created only people who will in fact freely draw conclusions from the way life was back then. Taking it all to heart, the person is now placed in another universe with a personality consequently somewhat different from that of the previous universe to the extent of having been able to learn from the past lives as remembered. One might start out in a new universe closer to God than before or it might take several universes for a person to even start to become closer to God.[69]

By passing from universe to universe, a person's essence progresses closer to the Divine. The universe one finds themselves in is the one most conducive to their growth towards attaining intimacy with the Divine in their current life. But why does our universe, with all of the evil that it contains, exist as part of this multiverse at all? Gellman answers that

> On earth, we learn what it is like to live with chance, while being ourselves equipped with a robust quantity of self-concern and self-indulgence. We come to know what it is like to experience pain as suffering. We become acquainted up close with how it is to respond to events as severe disappointments and causes of paralyzing sadness… Our life on earth is one, perhaps among many, in which we are shown the consequences of self-absorption and the ideal of self-giving. It is one in a series of universes from which, looking back at it from the vantage point of what follows it, we gain a measure of appreciation as to what extent our *suffering* is in our hands, both as perpetrators and victims of evil. With the new understanding as our starting point, we proceed to the next universe-station, where we might

[68] Gellman, 117.

[69] Ibid., 122. Gellman clarifies that his understanding of reincarnation and the ultimate attainment of intimacy with the Divine is "for all human beings, not only for Jews." (118).

> do more of the good and less evil, and where natural evils are lessened to the degree we have learned our lesson in the previous universes we have inhabited. Some universes along the way will be over-brimming with goodness and closeness to God, with their inhabitants having gained from living in earlier universes. The amount of good and freedom from suffering that accumulates at an accelerated rate through the universes we occupy, together with the rich goodness of the future Messianic Age universes, justifies the journey in the best way possible.[70]

The universe we are in has so much evil within it because it is a place to witness and learn from the great power that we possess and the responsibility that it takes to wield it wisely. The pain and suffering is caused by a combination of chance events and the human ability to fall into self-centeredness. It is ultimately worthwhile because our experience in this universe will lead us to a better and better-informed one in the future.

Gellman admits that many may object to such a theodicy, since reincarnation is "not exactly a chief doctrine of traditional Judaism,"[71] despite being common in Hasidism and *kabbalah*. It may also seem too similar to a view in which future lives are lived as punishment for sins rather than additional opportunities for growth. However, we must recall that Gellman's theodicy, by his standards, need not be *probable* but only *possible*. Are all of these universes really out there? Gellman does not know, and only advocates that "it would be fitting for God to have created them to bring as many people as possible to become freely one with God, in line with perfect goodness. The existence of such multi-universes is consistent with everything we know. And their existence is coherent with theism. Hence, a conceivable theodicy."[72]

But if the multiverse does exist, it is completely unobservable to us. Scientists may very well predict its existence, but, at the end of the day,

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[70] Ibid., 129-130.

[71] Ibid., 120.

[72] Ibid., 130. The multiverse hypothesis is, in fact, quite popular amongst contemporary cosmologists. Sean Carroll has written that

> "it's completely possible that out beyond our visible horizon, there are regions where the local laws of physics… are utterly different. Different particles, different forces, different parameters, even different numbers of dimensions of space. And there could be a huge number of such regions, each with its own version of the local laws of physics." Sean Carroll, *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself* (New York: Dutton, 2017), 306.

While scientific methodological naturalism provides no possible way for a single identity to move between universes, Gellman notes that his traditional audience already posits a non-material realm through which that would be possible.

Sean Carroll notes that "some physicists would put the chances [of a multiverse] at nearly certain, others at practically zero. Perhaps it's fifty-fifty."[73]

Are there other conceivable responses to the autobiographical problem of evil that do not require a multiverse? One attempt was offered by Lebens and Goldshmidt:

> Imagine that God gives us free will and then, so to speak, He says, like a film director, "Take 1." Then we live our lives. We do some good and we do some bad. All of it is of our own creation. At the end of time, God says, "Cut." Imagine that scenes 1 and 3 are fantastic, but that scene 2 is horrific. Well then, wouldn't God simply edit the film and cut out scene 2, because, even after the scene has happened, God can change the past? Admittedly, this would leave a gap in the history of the world. But then God can say, "Scene 2, take 2." We'd then get another shot at linking scenes 1 and 3 together. Take 2 of scene 2 would, once again, be of our own authorship. God is a patient director. We can do a take 3, or 4, or however many more takes are required. Every evil that now exists will one day never have existed. These evils aren't just temporary; they are what philosophers might call hyper-temporary. A temporary evil is one that doesn't last forever. A hyper-temporary evil is one that will one day never have existed at all – once the past has been edited.[74]

Like Gellman, Lebens also makes the case that "it doesn't matter whether the Divine Proofreader theory is true or not. What matters is that it *could* be true, and that it doesn't seem like an *ad hoc* explanation."[75]

The major hole in Lebens' argument is that he himself admits that although natural evils like earthquakes, diseases, and animal suffering can ultimately be edited out, we have "no explanation as to why those things had to occur in the early takes of this film called history."[76] Lebens' theodicy, however, can directly respond to the "but what about the holocaust?" objection that

[73] Ibid., 309.

[74] Samuel Lebens, *A Guide for the Jewish Undecided: A Philosopher Makes the Case for Orthodox Judaism* (New Milford: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2022), 165.

[75] If we can understand "why God might want to create a history in this proofreading way" which, in this case, maximizes free will while minimizing the evil that is actually done at the end of the day, then it is demonstrated that "the existence of evil is no slam-dunk proof against the existence of a loving and powerful God." Ibid., 166.

[76] Ibid., 165. Another apparent hole in Lebens' and Goldshmidt's argument is that as long as God Himself still remembers the evil having occurred in a prior version of the timeline, then it still can be said to have occurred in a true sense. The extent to which the Divine Proofreader theodicy adequately responds to the problem can then be thrown into question.

serves as an explicit counterpoint to Gellman's.

Gellman's argument, reliant on a multiverse and reincarnation, may be less than compelling to Jewish "rationalists" who find reincarnation too mystical of an idea. However, it also provides a reason for why evil had to exist in the first place, while Lebens and Goldshmidt's does not. Both theodicies, though, are weakened by their admission that they are merely *possible* and not *probable*. Without active reason to believe either, and without clear precedent in Jewish sources pointing to them, there is seemingly little reason to accept either. It is only if one can accept that significant limitation that both arguments pass the satisfaction criteria and provide justification for one to make personal sacrifices on the assumption of a good God despite the problem of evil.

Conclusion

Gellman's exploration exemplifies the heights to which theology can go in conversation with philosophy, while also showcasing the limits of traditional responses when faced with modern challenges. While he is able to walk his readers part of the way on their journey in constructing a neo-traditional theology, it is ultimately up to them to "raise up the experience of God both in individual terms and Jewish peoplehood" and "to appreciate the goodness of God, so that God will no longer be a stranger."[77] In that his target goal is justifying Jews who already believe, one might call it a successful project in Jewish apologetics.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. Emmanuel Bloch noted that apologetics "is not another word for "hypocrisy": a good apology facilitates the transition from an older mindset to a more contemporary one [and] makes it possible to incorporate modern moral insights while remaining loyal to tradition." Indeed, Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has written that good apologetics serve not only to strengthen believers and potentially convince non-believers, but also to shape the culture that they are offered in. The way that religious people talk about religion impacts how the surrounding culture sees religion. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said on many occasions, "Non-Jews respect Jews who respect their Judaism."

Agree or disagree with Gellman's final proposals, *The People, The Torah, The God* is an invitation to all of us to think about Judaism more seriously and confidently. Are we up to the task?

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[77] Gellman, 123