

On the Self-Creation of God

A Critical Theology of the First Verses of Genesis, Following Leibowitz and Hegel

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In this article I propose a re-expression of Judaism—doxa as it tends towards praxis—intended to address those who I would denote as ‘ordinary’ or ‘traditional’ Jews. This more subtle and softer form of belief, which I offer, negotiates the consequences of God’s self-createdness by and through the very cosmogenic act itself. I situate my position between and against the approaches of Leibowitz and Hegel, and in so doing I ultimately suggest that a new understanding of creatio ex nihilo will shed light on both current and futural possibilities of lived Judaism.

Late Overture: Concerning our Formulation of “God”

With the aim of sharpening my own understanding, and more, of the expression “critical theology,” which I have set out in my work on the monotheistic religious and cultural position, and in its appearance in the present article, I offer a cluster of words to the reader. Via this response to the imagined response of a reader, something additional might be learned, and the present article will be made more accessible. Moreover, already at this stage the reader should acknowledge the regrettable—or perhaps not—fact that this is an experiment in theology, tentative, partially unraveled, and open to a number of intellectual and theological conclusions.

Here are late words to those that had been written some years ago, years that have burdened the author with theological and religious withdrawals toward certain imaginary versions of Judaism, and even toward Christianity. These withdrawals were directed, almost unintentionally, toward religious practices that sought to become more flexible—or that were forced to become more flexible—within rigid communal frameworks (as if they were previously guided by the sayings of Rabbi Michel de Certeau concerning the ethics of *daily life*).

This article offers the exegetical possibility of rethinking the meaning of God, of the term, the word “God,” within the historical inflation of these kinds of rethinkings. The exegetical direction here is to write about the *createdness* of God, and, thus, His *dependence* as both a concept and a being (whether real or imaginary) on the cosmic as human connection. The article does this by means of a close reading of the first four verses of Genesis, verses that begin a certain book, as well as a certain reality, which is present as a text and within the text.

This *God* creates by means of the word. And he does so within the text and to the reader as a word *God*, which is present on the page—and no more than that. For there is nothing more powerful and essential than that for theo-logy, even in the pathetic moments when it is sure that it is evading, momentarily, the fact that it is always onto-theology.

In the light of this writer's imagining of the increasing reactions in Israel to everything that touches on religion and politics, as reverberations of states of inner crisis and of the religious turmoil outside, doubt arises within him as to the legitimacy of rewriting God or the word *God*. Indeed, this is a rewriting of God, while extracting the truth that abides within the self-evident: that first of all He is a word. Incidentally, perhaps in the footsteps of Heidegger, the philosopher of *Sein*, this extraction is indeed the truth. Or... actually because of the falseness of the word, that is, the presence of God as a word, which misses what preceded it as a word, or overlaps it and the image that the word bears. For a reciprocal, violent dynamic always exists between the truthfulness and falseness of this statement regarding the priority of the word to the divine essence, or, vice versa—the lie that exists alongside this truth in the violent reverberation between them, which defines each one anew as truth and as falsehood, until it almost, and more, abolishes the distinction between them. The violent turbulence of monotheism is nearly impossible to release, except by means that perpetuate that turbulence. Could it be that monotheism is the history of these releases, these writings and re-writings?

Indeed, the essence of God as we conceptualize it (shall we say that is it not only conceptualized, but also an active substance in human history, and only in human history, following Hegel, the philosopher of *Geist*, and Jung, the psychologist of the *Selbst?*), is tightly bound up with the perpetuating way that this word is inscribed, under the terms “God,” “the Divinity,” “the Lord,” “Allah,” “Christ,” and so on. And all the ways of silencing, erasing the multiplicity of these names cannot blur this fact about the basis of the formulation of faith. The various writings act in the world as experiential revelations or as communal rituals, which are consolidated in relation to the degree of softness or difficulty of these formulations. Moreover, with respect to the pre-religious and pre-reverential feeling about the divine, as derived from a certain form of Heideggerian *Sorge*, as a *voice of hope for the future*, it apparently exists with the imaginary man and woman as *individuals*, in their desire for a better future, very much private. Is this a real pre-verbal basis, which can almost not be conceptualized, which preceded the Word? This dilemma concerned the author in his book, *Abraham's Laugh: a Commentary on Genesis as a Critical Theology*, when he sought to think out the basis of Abraham's faith in a feeling of *future reality*, which was as yet unformulated. The formulation only enters later on, a theological-symbolic formulation, or a way of defining the God word, a formulation, the encounter with which is traumatic, because of the difference between the divine=future as something that cannot be grasped and the figure of God, the figure of Trauma.

In this way faith moves in its daily life between emphases on catastrophe and promise. The promise is something sensed, both pre-verbal and verbal. And the dynamic is in this movement (in the number and variations of directions) with these factors: the movement of hope for the future, generally in relation to a primary catastrophic situation, suffering, lack, but not necessarily >> a feeling touching upon some addressee, which makes the future possible >> the birth of the word that establishes the feeling as a concept >> the primary consolidation and later the theological formulation of the figure of God, which envelops the feeling >> giving existential hope and meaning to the man and woman, while establishing the word in an enveloping community >> the birth of a secondary catastrophe, which derives from the very establishment of the word God in the face of human life, in various

forms of God as an aggressive figure, as in Job (perhaps as the emissary of Satan), God as a figure that defines the catastrophic situation and is responsible for it, breakdowns in human life in the wake of communal-religious tensions, and so on.

It must be emphasized that this is the formulation of a primary and direct sensation, which is enveloped in theological terms, even if then, as in the present instance, it seeks to emphasize the primacy of this feeling to the word. In this respect, the Word is indeed primary, but only in its own verbal arena, and thus it writes the word “God,” perhaps in the same way as I try to do in the following analysis, and to present, regarding the way the phrase “let there be light” wrote God, both on the page and also beyond it. In the sense of reverberation, as well, between the picture of the ink of the word, God, which is created on the page as beginning the book of the Bible and the God that is *external* to the page, which is created there. This precedence preoccupied Judaism in various traditions at the time of the Second Temple like the *logos*, which exists in the Greek world, and these two conceptions ultimately reverberated in the well-known verses that begin the Gospel of John in the manner of Philo. The word is not necessarily primal in the sense of a rational force, but as a life-giving force. Perhaps, as the ancient cavemen felt, more than as they pondered in their thought, or even in today's New Age, through the disciples of Aristotle, who wrote down his meta-physics, and culminating in the theologians of monotheism and its Druse, Bahai, Kabgalistic, extensions, and so on.

These expressions, which I am pointing out here, and which existed at the time of composing the body of the article three years ago, cling to me on the personal level of identity and also on the intellectual level. On the one hand, I still retain remnants of desires from childhood for Jewish sources and existence, as well as for the manner of the tradition from the Persian-Oriental home of my father and mother, from which I come, and on the other hand, discomfort with religious coercion in Israel, with the orthodox religious frameworks that this Oriental identity tends not to abandon. In addition there is discomfort with intellectual discourse on the encounter with the divine and with God as an encounter with the traumatic and/or the Real, as it frequently exists in monotheistic, philosophical, and psychoanalytical discourses.

Two models of a tradition that is an alternative to the discourse of trauma and coercion (which I regard as such, which echo each other, and also reinforce each other, even if sometimes they are presented as opposing each other) accompany me at the moment: the first is an Oriental-Sephardic-traditional one (as I imagine it to myself), and the second is one that I have recently come to know, from the ceremonial point of view. I knew about it from a distance, though apparently I was always close to it intellectually: Reform Judaism. My present connection with the approach of the latter come from attending a number of religious encounters in Beit Daniel, a Reform synagogue in Tel Aviv. These two models describe various possibilities of intra-religious opposition and subversion. How can they exist along with the violence of monotheism? For what is the true religious existence and theological action of monotheism if not anti-religious action, as we were taught by Franz Rosenzweig, the theologian of Jewish existence. They are different in that soft traditionalism (*masorti* in Hebrew) is prepared to act within the frameworks of orthodoxy and to be slightly off key within them, while returning the truth of familial religious experience as waiting for the compassion and mercy of the promise, a return to the official frameworks as their mirror image, flattering or not, while

depending on the approach of those frameworks, whereas the Reform movement, as its name indicates, is building a new community and a new institution, without undermining the traditional framework.

Thus the following reformulation of the verses has the function here of being an agency of the author's broader theo-political strategy. All of this is under the rubric of critical theology and its implementation as hermeneutic-textual work. The proposed theological work is a critical examination of the conceptualizations of the human being, the believing human being, and of God, conceptualizations that are usually bound by an inflationary dynamic of radicalization, as many monotheistic frameworks have known. In many cases, because of inner social and communal circumstances, this dynamic greatly intensifies these experiences as *ganz andere*. A possible product of the discussion is actually the establishment of a new or renewed theological position, but this is not necessary. My motivation for the moment is to propose a slight contribution to the existing religious frameworks, which can be defined as soft, and which were consolidated over the centuries, and especially in the past decades in Judaism, as additional monotheistic traditions.

The reading below insists upon close scrutiny of the verses, but not an overly literal reading. If it is objected that what is described in the verses does not contain everything, it may be answered that I am not interested in the external reality, as it were, which the biblical text represents. In fact, the written text is the reality I wish to investigate. It is not a literal reading in the simple sense, but only a literalness, which is the basis for a critical and liberating theology. All of this is done based on the assumption that the literal here, the biblical wording is serious about itself, believes in itself as describing true reality. The assumption here is not that this is a text presented by some divine agent, but that the writing, by people, was done under *their* assumption that the divine inscribes it on their page. In this respect the text does not have human intentions except for a direction beyond the human, as the human grasped it. In this respect, the *Geist* expresses itself in these verses, the human dimension that was inscribed in the word "God," in the most Hegelian sense there can be, and in the most Jewish sense there can be.

As the readers will see below, Yeshayahu Leibowitz is the most exact representative of the rival theology to the present theological effort. So perhaps in particular in the face of this Judeo-Hegelian formulation of mine, the ironic smile of that radical thinker will stand out, with the claim that here we have fallen into the trap of Christian faith out of our reduction of the divine to the human and out of our ostensible nullification of the transcendental divine dimension in it. Is it not the case that our openness to the Reform Jewish approach also returns us to this Christian-human place? What remains? A traditional existence that is slightly off key within orthodoxy? On the other hand, perhaps, perish the thought, in our dwelling upon the word that is beyond God, a gnostic dimension might have been produced about a divinity that is beyond? Or an anthropological observation of the human gut feeling regarding the vitality of this world, and not real of the dimension beyond the beyond?

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1. Abraham, Leibowitz, Kierkegaard and Hegel

Throughout my readings of the Book of Genesis, I have attempted, among other things, to understand the nature of the religious person as embodied in the figure Abraham.¹ Since time immemorial, Abraham has served as a paradigm for individuals who are obedient and loyal to God (and, by extension, of the obedient Western subject in general).² This is true of the certain Jewish, Christian, and Muslim positions (although among the Sages, there is also a tendency to present Abraham as standing up to God, as in his bargaining about the fate of Sodom). In this article, I examine another way of understanding this figure, an alternative paradigm for such submissiveness. Unlike the majority of exegetical discourses on monotheism, I propose that the figure of Abraham, as portrayed in the Book of Genesis, is in fact quite remote from the accepted paradigm. I perceive him not as an innocent figure confronting God, the Divine Absolute Other, but as a figure, feigning innocence and laughing when found before Him. For the purposes of this study I first examine the complex relationship between God and Man (Abraham), the character of which does not predicate the simple submission of finite Man to the Infinite but, rather, a confrontational and responsive relationship.

This subject's relevance goes beyond some vision of antiquity. I maintain that, at the very basis of historical Judaism, we do not necessarily find a pietistic or fearful relationship towards God; instead, we can observe a form of what I call "soft faith," experienced by what I would describe as the "everyday," "ordinary," or "traditionalist Jew (the *masorti*)."³ (To some extent, this conceptualization may also serve as a model for the partially postmodern believer who fluctuates between various forms of religious behavior while abstaining from total commitment to any particular religious order, in contrast to the modernist-Orthodox form of religious observance, based on principles of fear and alienation.)³ Such "traditionalists" (*masortiim*) are often held in contempt by rabbis and theologians as being pseudo-religious; however, in my view, such a faith is in fact more authentic and true to the source than any fundamentalist or dogmatic faith. This soft type of faith captures a certain primal intuition regarding man's relationship to the Divine, an intuition that has been (and still is) buried beneath the layers of myth and theology heaped over it. I argue that this primal faith is related to the innocent and simple demand that the traditionalist makes of God—namely, that He bring hope to the believer, his/her life and the members of his/her family. Such an understanding of the verses is, therefore, simultaneously the most superficial and the deepest form of faith. The question of this intimate–familial promise lies at the center of this faith and may also be the source of the disastrous degeneration of that same simple faith into harshness and dogmatism.

¹ For my approach to the figure of Abraham throughout Genesis, see Benyamini (2011).

² For my contention concerning Paul's creation of the Western superego and his view of Abraham as a paradigm of obedient faith, see Benyamini (2007), chapters 1-2.

³ For a discussion of religious traditionalism in Israel as challenging the conventional binary-modernist division of secular/religious, see Yadgar (2010). Yadgar, in the wake of Sigmund Bauman's concept "fluid modernity," describes traditionalism as flexible and, hence, as very modern or even postmodern—in the sense that this stream derives from acts of self-shaping or self-formation and choice—as opposed to the usual understanding of traditionalism as "primitive." Compare his approach to that of Buzaglo (2008), especially Part III, Chapter 10, which presents a critique of Leibowitz's thought. For more on the relationship between traditionalism and postmodernity, see n. 6, below.

My interpretation thus seeks to avoid the overwhelming, crippling influence on our reading of the Bible to this very day, as exemplified the Protestant philosopher-theologian Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, fashions the image of Abraham as faith's Knight, someone who traditionally places himself in a position of complete subjugation to God and to his belief in Him, an image conceived against the background of the German notion of *Angst*.⁴ This approach draws extensively upon Christian premises regarding the relationship between man and God as articulated by Paul in his Epistles (such as those to the Galatians and the Romans), where he refers to Abraham as an outstanding example of someone who believes in God.

A traditional (as opposed to an orthodox) Jew is usually thought of as having an instrumental relation toward religious life in general, and God, for him, is only the addressee for expressions of the distress of his daily life. Empathy toward this attitude contradicts the elitist radicalism in the “Protestant” position of Yeshayahu Leibowitz, for example, according to which a Jew is instructed to fulfill the Torah's commandments in the absence of any anticipated reward or recompense, whereby true faith is detached from any negotiations with God. Relying on Maimonides, Leibowitz argues that God is a unique, singular entity, independent of man and the world in every way, a being whose essence is polar to that of the world. This position radically contradicts Spinoza's pantheism. According to Leibowitz, Maimonides holds that:

Creation is within the realm of the possible—unlike the Kalaam [the rationalistic Islamic movement that challenged Maimonides' thought], for which [the Creation] is required by logic and by reality; and unlike Aristotle, for whom it [the act of Creation] is both illogical and unrealistic [in the sense that the world is eternal and not created]. There is no decisive logical or scientific answer to the question of creation, from either a logical or an empirical point of view [...]. Our consciousness of God is independent of our recognition of Him as the Divine Power in the world but [not], rather, of our acknowledgement of Him as God, in disassociation of the issue of the world's creation [...]. The main principle of faith [according to Maimonides] is belief in God in terms of His Divinity and not in terms of any function attributed to Him (Leibowitz 1990, 76-78).⁵

Hence, Leibowitz opposed Hegel's view, whose dialectic seemingly dictates that without the world, there can be no God. In his analysis of the opening chapters of Genesis, Leibowitz states that the Jewish God neither serves the world nor acts as a vehicle or vessel for its creation because:

...as opposed to all the forms of heresy, such as that of atheism, which identifies God with the world, or the polytheistic heresy that situates God within many of the world's objects, or even against the position taken by the greatest Christian philosopher in the Western world during the modern age, the atheist who wraps himself in a religious dress and sees himself as

⁴ See Kierkegaard, especially his “Speech in Praise of Abraham” (1983, 13-22).

⁵ For a systematic examination of Maimonides' understanding of the Creation see Klein-Braslavy (2011). Also, consider the approach taken by Schweid (2004) that Maimonides (1963) did not necessarily oppose Aristotle and, he concealed in practice his true opinion in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides' discussion of Creation is found in chapters 71-76 of volume 1 and 13-30 in volume II (2002).

religious but who is essentially a heretic. I refer to Hegel, who explicitly stated that “If there is no world, God is not God”—that is to say, that God’s Godliness lies in the fact that he is the God of the world (Leibowitz 2000, 2).

Throughout his conversations with his students, it is possible to feel Leibowitz’ perplexity upon reading the first verses of Genesis, aroused by his attempt to negate their simple, literal meaning. Leibowitz’ claim about creation and God is an effort to substantiate his argument that Jewish faith must not be conditional upon reward, that it is the acceptance of the yoke of heaven and the commandments, without regard to any reward or negotiation. For Leibowitz this is embodied in the Binding of Isaac as the highest Jewish example of Abraham’s faith in God. This position also had consequences for his view of the Jews around him and of their beliefs (that they are like all the traditional “idol worshipers” with their irrational superstitions, their amulets, and prostrating themselves on the graves of saints, who promise cures and success, and that sort of foolishness).

In the first chapter of his *Five Books of Faith*, the one on Genesis, Yeshayahu Leibowitz tells about what he said to a “great Jew,” who had lost his faith after Auschwitz:

That means you never believed in God, but only in God’s help, and that faith is truly disappointing. God does not help. But the believer in God is not at all connected to the concept of God’s help.

The categories of reward and punishment do not apply to faith itself, which is demonstrated in the Binding of Isaac. In the Binding of Isaac the mercy of heaven or the righteousness of God are not mentioned, nor is a warning against punishment. This faith is demonstrated in what a person is prepared to do “for the sake of heaven,” meaning: not to satisfy his needs or natural urges, whether material or spiritual, but for the service of God, without any condition (Leibowitz 1995, 5).

Even if he denied it, Leibowitz’s position derives directly from that taken by Karl Barth, the noted twentieth century Protestant theologian. In the third volume of his monumental work *Church Dogmatics* (1932-1967),⁶ Barth writes: “God would be no less God even if He had never performed the work of Creation, even if no creatures had existed whatsoever” (quoted in Plant 1997). Hence, Barth’s opposition to the Spinozist stance directly leads, so to speak, to that of Hegel. In this context we should note that Hegel’s reaction to the accusations of his being a pantheist was that a strong connection does exist between the world and God, albeit not one of simple

⁶ Regarding the similarity of Protestant thought to that of Leibowitz, see the study by Avi Sagi (1995), in which he understands Leibowitz’s thought as a kind of “Protestant Judaism” as well as his article (1989) about the similarities and differences between Kierkegaard and Leibowitz. What is striking in Sagi’s analysis is his identification of the modernist-Protestant element in Leibowitz’s thought, which includes the motifs of man’s loneliness and alienation as well as his freedom within the modern world. In this respect, one could speculate on the relevance of these *modernistic* themes for the believer in the postmodern and the New Age, in which no sharp or clear distinctions are found between life and thought, the holy and the secular, the transcendent and the immanent. In the present paper, I present the traditionalist (pre-modern?) person as a paradigm of soft faith, which may also serve as a preface for understanding postmodern religiosity. One could therefore label my own position as post-traditionalist in the sense that it includes traditionalism but is no longer located within pre-modern traditionalist innocence; instead its gaze does not identify with but does support it.

identity. That connection is dialectical, with the world derived from God as the Other situated opposite to Him. For Hegel, Spinoza's position that no factor is external to the world contradicts the Judeo-Christian position regarding God's revelation, which extends beyond the idea of God's immanence.

For example, in Hegel's 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, one finds the following dialectical, Christological formulation regarding the Creation and God's self-creation:

This is the creation of the world and of the subjective spirit for which God is object. Spirit is a manifesting [...] "Manifesting" means "creating an other" [...] The making or creating the world is God's self-manifestation, self-revealing. In a further and later definition we will have this manifestation in the higher form that what God creates God Himself is, that in general it does not have the determinateness of an other, that God is [a] manifestation of His own self, that God is for Himself—the other [...], the Son of God or human being according to the divine image (quoted in Desmond 2007, 141, n. 2).⁷

At this point I wish to suggest another reading of the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, one that, to a certain extent, is related to Hegel's position yet also derives some inspiration from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in terms of the manner in which God creates Himself through His creation of the other. According to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the infant's primary or initial ego comes into existence through gazing at the other—that is, at his own image in the mirror, at his alienated image, a glance that elicits joy but also aggression towards this same image. The mirror metaphor illustrates the paradoxical principle that subjectivity's creation, while so personal, occurs through imitation and gazing at something else. (Alexander Kojève, who encouraged the young Lacan to formulate his theory of the mirror stage, mediated Hegel's influence on Lacan.⁸)

A certain irony lies in the fact that in order to describe what I perceive as the more authentic situation of the Jew, my approach comes to somewhat resemble that of Hegel, a philosopher that Kierkegaard and others loved to hate. This attitude has retained its force over the years: We continue to enjoy loathing him. Still, I find myself opposing Kierkegaard, the father of "liberating" existentialist philosophy. This may be true because for me, Kierkegaard represents the height of religious-ideological tyranny, executed through the formidable threat of its paradoxality: Kierkegaard's philosophy aims at preserving man's primary spiritual intuition yet, in the name of that same pre-faith intuition, imposes an absolute truth. From there, the path is short to creation of an organization that will courageously defend this truth. Absolute truth strangles the unfortunate individual and mercilessly polices him. This position was nurtured by my reading of Ron Sigad's book on

⁷ Compare with the statement by Meister Eckhardt, the Christian mystic who, in response to Augustine's question of why God did not create the world before He did, answers: "Because He didn't exist; He was not prior to the existence of the world" (quoted in Joseph Schwartz, 2002: 251). Cf. Schwartz's (2002) discussion on the influence of Maimonides' thought as found in the *Guide* on the theology of Meister Eckhardt and the latter's pantheistic position. Also compare with Jonas (1987), who wishes to establish a hypothetical theology regarding the (pantheistic?) spirit/God that came into existence together with matter following the Big Bang, which includes a core of subjectivity that was ultimately embodied in man.

⁸ See Lacan's (2006, 75-101) on the mirror stage.

existentialism, in which he shows how Kierkegaard, who wished to direct the person's attention to the most authentic and existential aspect within him or her self, in the final analysis demanded the absolute submission that destroys, in practice, the self's particularity: "Authenticity demands the destruction of the ordinary man and the creation of a new man, one who devotes himself to the idea of the infinite; that is, to himself, but to himself as he should be and not as naturally is" (Sigad 1982, 116).⁹

Hegel's comments regarding the Creation are scattered throughout his lectures on the philosophy of religion, especially when he writes about the character of Judaism in his discussion of similarities and differences from Greek religion in relation to the sublime.

In order to analyze Judaism and the biblical God, Hegel refers to the theme of world's creation, an event that powers God's self-creation and self-definition as that which is embodied in the world, in the act of creation. However, Hegel does not engage in a close reading of the biblical text and certainly does not confront the Hebrew language, excluding his work on that biblical verse pertaining to Christianity, namely, the creation of light by means of speech (Genesis 1, 3).

I would like to stress still further that my own position is not necessarily Hegelian. First, as I demonstrate below, my interpretation departs from his in several respects; and second, because I consider it impossible to represent Hegel in a resolutely simplistic manner, as Leibowitz, by stating that for Hegel, there is no God without the world. In Hegel's view, God created the world, the other, out of His own self-being, thereby revealing Himself as God; this does not, however, necessarily imply that God existed prior to or in isolation of the Creation.¹⁰ We should note that the Christological dimension of Hegel's teaching is quite blatant in the parallel he draws between the act of Creation and the act of Incarnation—that is, in the transition from being a father to being a son. His teaching also speaks of creation *ex nihilo*,¹¹ a

⁹ I should stress that in speaking about pre-faith intuition I am not referring to claims regarding the non-establishment *religious* experience, as this experience is already rooted within absolute faith. The concept of "religiosity" refers specifically to the approach taken by Rudolf Otto (1958).

¹⁰ Hegel's position, as expressed in his lectures on the philosophy of religion, was developed in several stages, beginning with the first lecture (which corresponds to what he says about religion and the dialectic between master and servant in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*), continuing in his 1824 lecture and culminating in that of 1831. He initially holds an antagonistic attitude towards Judaism but eventually achieves a more balanced and admiring position. See Hegel (2007), particularly 134–141, 423–454, 669–686, 738–742. On Hegel's concept of God, see Desmond (2003), especially Chapter 5, dealing with Hegel's concept of the creation of the universe.

¹¹ One needs to understand Hegel's concepts of "existence" and "non-existence" as being in a dialectical relationship, like that between God and the world. Existence and non-existence, in their concrete sense, beyond philosophical abstraction, are not separate and do not constitute independent entities but are intermingled. See Hegel on "Illusory Being" (2010), and Hegel's concluding remarks in this discussion: "The more precise sense and more precise expression that being and nothingness receive now that they are *moments* will have to transpire from the consideration of existence, the unity in which they are preserved. Being is being, and nothing is nothing, only as held distinct from each other; in their truth, however, in their unity, they have vanished as such determinations and are now something else. Being and nothing are the same and, *precisely because they are the same, they no longer are being and nothing* but possess a different determination; in becoming they were coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be; in existence, which is another determinate unity, they are again moments but differently determined. This unity now remains their base from which they no longer surface in the abstract meaning of being and nothing" (2010, 442).

position with which I do not necessarily agree. I have cited the positions of Hegel and later those of Leibowitz and Barth because they represent two extreme positions, in relation to which I attempt to sharpen own.¹²

2. God, Creation, The Universe

The book of Genesis opens with the following words:

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2. And the earth was barren and chaotic and darkness was upon the face of depth and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. 3. And God said let there be light, and there was light. 4. And God saw the light was good, and God separated between the light and the darkness. 5. And God called the light day, and he called the darkness night, and it was evening and it was morning, first day.

The mysteriousness of these opening verses has invited much complex discussion of their meaning and their syntactical structure. Rather than attempting to present all of these positions, we will present the two main ones. The first belongs to the field of traditional commentary, and the second to that of academic study of the Bible, as, for example, Cassuto's commentary on Genesis, in which he clearly demonstrates that the opening verse *בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ*, usually translated as: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," does not actually describe the initial stage of Creation. In stating this view, he opposes a number of traditional commentators, such as Maimonides, who argue that the Creation was completed in a single act, with the subsequent description of the Creation as taking place in six days meant to explain, albeit not necessarily in chronological order, the various modes of the newly created world. However, Cassuto continues, this same verse later opens the narrative of the Seven Days of Creation while serving as a celebratory summary of what will be told henceforth. (To a certain extent, Cassuto [1996, 10] follows Nahmanides here, who interprets verse 1 as an autonomous statement, not in the sense of Creation as a single act but, rather, as the creation of the earth and the heavens in their earliest, chaotic form, from which the Creation commenced.)

Rashi, in contrast, associates verse 1 with verse 2, while interpreting the former as a subsidiary clause introducing the second verse, namely, that when God set out to create the world, conditions were thus-and-such: "the earth was barren and chaotic," and so on. In any event, whether or not we agree with one or the other, it appears to be reasonable to argue that verse 1 does not describe the beginning of creation or the situation of initial creation *ex nihilo*, for otherwise (assuming that we are reading the basic text chronologically, as an account of the sequence of events), one cannot understand why, after we have read that God created the heavens and the earth (verse 1), verse 2 returns to pre-creation and repeat, further on, that God created the heavens on the second day of Creation by separating them from the lower waters (verse 8). It would thus appear that verse 1 describes the overriding tenet that God created the heavens and the earth whereas verse 2

¹² Indirect inspiration for the present discussion may be found in Edward Greenstein's (2001, 1-22) discussion where he analyzes the story of the Creation in Genesis 1. This is an attempt to refute the understanding of the world's goodness as a result of the act of Creation in order to achieve a more complex understanding of the relationship between God and the world.

describes the situation existing when God first set about creating the heavens and the earth, that is, the universe.

Let us focus for a moment on verse 1: בראשית ברא אלוהים את השמים ואת הארץ (“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”); it is God who created the heavens and the earth, the universe as a totality. This is a primary “fact”, an unqualified statement that opens the entire *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. Cassuto stresses this point in his *Commentary* (1996, 1-10): by no other factor and in no other manner. Moreover, the same statement provides us with the fundamental definition of what is meant by “God”: He who created the heavens and the earth, a condition from which He derives His Divine character together with His responsibility for the universe.

Let us entertain, for the moment, the notion that, in retrospect, there was some entity from which God developed; this possibility is still insufficient to warrant attributing the term “God” to this being. The Hebrew name *Elohim* (God) implies rulership and dominion—attributes derived directly from the act of creation. Just as the terms “mother” and “father” are applied to the person of a woman or a man by virtue of the act of bringing a child into the world, so, too, does the word “God” apply to something that was not initially God at all, only the spirit of God. It is therefore the spirit of God (*ruah Elohim*) that receives or acquires an identity, a body, a function.

Go to the second verse: והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על-פני תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת על-פני המים (“And the earth was barren and chaotic, and darkness was upon the face of the depths, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters”). What was there before the beginning, before God set out to create the world as we know it? Prior to the Creation there was a state of chaos and confusion, with various elements intermingled: the earth, darkness, the depths, the waters, and the spirit of God. These elements already existed: that is, they are dimensions of being that do not depend upon God; they are primordial, predating God's work of creation; they were always with Him, they are eternal like Him. In other words, this is not a description of creation *ex nihilo*, of something made from nothing, as most understand the biblical monotheistic position.¹³ God did not create something from nothing; God created something from something, or He created out of something which is less than something in the full sense. God's main function was to differentiate the various objects within their chaotic existence, somewhat like Plato's Demiurge (in *Timaeus*).

And what takes place in this primordial situation? The earth is in chaos, a state of confusion within itself and between itself and other elements. In like fashion, darkness dominates reality: Darkness is not merely the absence of light; it is itself an element. Darkness hovers over the depths. The meaning of the word “depths” (*tehom*) can be understood from verses appearing further along in the stories of the Creation as well as of the Flood: The depths are waters in their most terrifying form (Gen., Chapters 7–8).

¹³ See the Ramban's comment on Genesis 1:1: “... There was a great need to begin the Torah with ‘In the beginning God created...’ for it is the root of faith, and one who does not believe in this and thinks that the world is eternal or pre-existent denies an essential belief and has no Torah at all.” Note that the Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon), a follower of Maimonides, rather surprisingly supported the Platonic approach to creation, based upon a pre-existent world.

It soon becomes clear that God, like the darkness, hovers over the waters. Two significant points are made here: first, that God and darkness are both described as hovering over the waters, the depths. Hence, we find a correlation between the two, between the spirit of God and the darkness. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that the spirit of God and the darkness are identical. A more reasonable description would state the spirit of God rests completely within the darkness while not quite completing the impending closure.

Second, and more importantly, God is not yet truly present. Rather, the spirit of God hovers. This term, “spirit” (*ruah*), is to be understood as God’s soul, which floats like a draft of air. This is a spirit without a body because a spirit can neither speak nor see until it becomes a body, such as God presently becomes. God as a being dominating over His creations does not yet exist; only the spirit of God exists, a part of Him, God as potential, not yet as actual. God in the full sense has not yet been created, just as the darkness, the waters, and the earth have not yet been created in their full sense, distinguishable from other entities. It is only later that we are told that God, by means of speech, will create the waters and the earth as separate things. So, He will also create Himself by separating Himself from the other elements. By eliminating the confusion between Himself and the rest, He will establish Himself as the one element responsible for the rest. What we have here is neither self-limitation nor contraction, for God is not the entirety of being even though He resides within it to some measure. He just clearly separates Himself from the other primeval elements to become a body as well as a spirit, like man.

And now we turn to the third verse: ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי-אור (“And God said, let there be light and there was light”). We have seen that the word God in verse 1 does not refer to God the Creator prior to the Creation, nor to the primal act of creation, for the reference is to a rhetorical or poetic description. In verse 2 we find God as none other than the spirit of God.¹⁴ This is not yet God but His spirit, a component of God. Now God Himself appears.¹⁵ The spirit of God becomes God once it is capable of speaking, when it functions through speech. Speech, therefore, is the attribute that creates Him and that literally turns Him (the Spirit of God) into God. Hence, something exists beyond God; that something is the word that, once it enters God’s mouth, establishes Him as that which creates and thereby causes Him to exist as the Almighty God.

Therefore the Word precedes God, both logically and chronologically. The word creates God, and the light, and it itself is light. (We point this out in accordance with ancient Jewish and Christian traditions, which conceived of the primal speech, the logos, as tantamount to light. And this could reinforce our conjecture that the basis of monotheistic faith and thought is found in the immediate sense of the power that

¹⁴ See Rosenzweig’s (1972: 153-154) remarks on the Creation story in Genesis, accomplished through the spirit of God: “That his spirit is ‘brooding’—this is the beginning of the divine act of creation. ... Both thing and act here emerge in the form of qualities, qualities, at that, which stand at the very lowest limits where thing and act each arise out of what is as yet respectively neither thing nor act at all. ... God speaks, but his word is still as if something inside of him, not he himself, were speaking.”

¹⁵ If we were to say that the event described in these verses does not include everything that was done, we could respond that we are not interested in the actual external reality, so to speak, which is described in the biblical text. In practice, the text itself is the reality we wish to examine, in the most literal manner, while dwelling on the myth, the story, as a final text, and not in its expansion or contraction to its significance, that is, without immediate demythologization.

moves the world, a kind of logic, not necessarily in the sense of reason, but in the sense of voice, speech, address.¹⁶ This voice supports that which is human, and thereby it is expressed through the human, as in Hegel's view. Hence, it could be that the traditional Jewish position, which does not make the divine human but rather as a support for the human, actually preserves the non-human dimension of the divine, by emphasizing the dimension of the promise for the future that is in it. The similarity between this position and certain elements of Christian faith demands separate discussion, which might not be necessary here.)

God commands: יהי אור “(Let there be light)”. This statement brings on the immediate manifestation of light: “...and there was light.” That is, the *idea* of light immediately materializes in the *form* of light. This idea, once actualized, plants within God the notion that the signifier must necessarily find its signified, that His plans must be realized instantaneously, without hesitation.

We can also suggest that light immediately appears in the course of speech not simply as something opposed to darkness, which comes into the world as a new substance, a new object, but also because the statement “Let there be light” has already served God as a kind of beacon. How so? The act of speech, because it caused God's differentiation from the darkness, because it separated God, created Him as an autonomous being, also created Him as one that goes out into the light. This implies that speech itself is the beginning of enlightenment (perhaps not light itself but the beginnings of light). Hence, the words “Let there be light” caused the immediate concretization of light as light, as that which emerges from God and thus separates Him from the rest of existence. (As if, even had He said, “let there be a window,” that which was created should have been the light, because the expression is itself the light, and it creates the light.)

Light bursts out of the primordial darkness in which all of pre-Creation existed, including God himself, as spirit. But how did the spirit of God and the darkness know by what manner to elicit speech and light from within themselves? What spark lit the flame? Perhaps darkness knew how to do so, much like Baron Munchausen, who extricated himself-and-his-horse as one unit, galloping through the threatening swamp, by pulling the hair of himself-and-his-horse? Or perhaps, as we have come to understand, speech created light through the very existence of the performative act “speech”, which differentiates between God and darkness?¹⁷

A further question thus arises: To which realm does God Himself belongs? On what side is His spirit to be found? After all, the spirit of God resided within the darkness during the primeval pre-Creation period; we may even say that there was some resemblance between spirit and darkness as they hovered over the water's surface. And then, darkness and the spirit of God somehow vocalized light from within themselves. Light was created and broke through the darkness but also separated itself from God. In the next verse (verse 4) God sees the light after His

¹⁶ This could be an extension of Lacan's conception of the Word, or Language, as underlying existence in general, and human existence. For the moment when the child expresses his desire with a word is the moment of the creation of his symbolic world. For this reason, Lacan insists on reading the opening chapters of Genesis as those in which the word preceded everything. See chapter 3 in my *Lacan's Discourse* (Benyamini 2009).

¹⁷ On speech as a performative act, see Austin (1962).

creation has been completed. And if He sees the light, it implies that He sees it as an element or entity external to himself. For our purposes, then, light is the object and God is the subject.

In wake of this scenario, one might perhaps question the nature of our dilemma, which might have been moot from the start, regarding the question of whether the creation was *ex nihilo* or from something. Does this refer to all of creation, or only to the creation of light? For some things were included in existence along with the spirit of God: darkness, water, the land. The light breaks through. Where did it come from? Did God create light from within Himself? As opposed to the claim that God created the world, beginning with light, out of His own essence but separate from himself, I would suggest that God did not create anything—namely, light—as something concrete, as matter but, rather, as a tool for differentiating between Himself and everything else, for it may be that the most important thing wished for by the spirit of God was separation from other things, that is, self-creation. I even propose that this is the main purpose of Creation, with the rest no more than an incidental consequence of its realization. What we ultimately have here is an egoistic desire for self-distinction. This conclusion may nullify the distinction between something-from-something and something-from-nothing because from this perspective, Creation's beginnings did not involve producing anything new; it was, first and foremost, an act of separation or differentiation within the chaotic realm of the already extant. Nonetheless, the author of Genesis does not in effect directly relate to the philosophical categories of existence and non-existence.

We can also suggest that even if we accept the postulate that God was created from nothing and not from something, not even some chaotic primeval mess, we can still argue that this was not a situation of creation of something-from-nothing (creation *ex nihilo*) but of something-from-something because God Himself was the something from which the world was created. However, we have already suggested that God Himself did not exist (other than as spirit) prior to the act of creation, whereas part of the world did exist. That is, something did exist, there was a primal world; hence, if there is any significance to the term *ex nihilo*, it is in the Münchhausian sense in which God creates speech and light in some obscure manner, from within Himself. This gives the impression, perhaps, of energy-from-nothing but not something-from-nothing.

By the very presentation of such loaded claims, we drift between several different notions of creation—the Aristotelian idea of there being no creation, that the universe is eternal; the Platonic notion of a God who creates something-from-something; the Judeo-Christian theory of creation out of nothingness; and the Kabbalistic idea of an infinite God who creates within Himself through self-contraction—which we may either adopt or only express our partial agreement. Alternatively, I maintain that the world's physicality was created as something-from-something, parallel to the creation of God and His power of enlightening speech, as the creation of *energy-from-nothing*.¹⁸

¹⁸ According to scientific theory, it is impossible to create energy *ex nihilo*. The law of conservation of energy is based upon “the axiom that it is impossible to create a moving force from nothing” (see Clausius (1856): “Heat can never pass from a colder to a warmer body without some other change, connected therewith, occurring at the same time”). Contrary to this view, see Max Jammer (1999), who cites Albert Einstein’s theory regarding the possibility of a world in which energy is created

For us there is the physical creation of the world—something from something—along with the creation of God and His illuminating power of speech—*energy ex nihilo*.¹⁹

Moving now to the fourth verse, וירא אלהים את-האור כי-טוב ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין החשך (“God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness”). God now sees light as external to Himself, and He sees—how marvelous—that it is successful! God is not initially certain that the act of creation will succeed, but it does. It is as if God is a spirit trapped in darkness, or is Himself darkness, a being attempting to free Himself from this condition—who has now succeeded in doing so. “It was good” means that light was indeed created but also that light has succeeded in separating itself as light, in distinction from darkness. In doing so, light had also succeeded in distinguishing between itself and God; light has thereby created God as separate and discrete.

In this sense God is redeemed from the darkness and from the confusion between Himself and everything else. But in order for God to remain as such, separate, He needs to preserve Himself as an external subject. He therefore creates, out of sisyphic inertia, more and more things so that each thing, each element, will dominate over that which comes after it, make it permanent and distinct, strengthen it by means of distinction and so prevent it from returning to its previous negative, chaotic state of being. God creates the world in order to be the God *of* the world, in order to be distinct from all the other elements in the chaotic primal reality and to dominate them. He initially creates only light in order to separate Himself from the darkness; He thereafter creates the other objects so that they may be his emissaries in a chain of domination over those things that He has just created. This idea is further articulated when speaking of the creation of greater and smaller lights: ויתן אתם אלהים ברקיע השמים להאיר על-הארץ. ולמשול ביום ובלילה ולהבדיל בין האור ובין החשך וירא אלהים כי-טוב (“And God placed them in the firmament of heaven to shed light on the earth and to dominate over day and night and to separate between light and darkness, and God saw that it was good”).

3. On Excess

I have attempted to show that the representation of God as having been created through the very act of the world's creation enables us to acknowledge a form of soft faith in God as one who is not a totality, who needs the other, the world. Yet, might Leibowitz's remarks regarding the absence of any necessary connection between faith in God and creation of the world nevertheless be correct? He draws this claim particularly from his main authority, Maimonides. However, it is possible to read the words of Moses the son of Maimon somewhat differently, without concluding that his position is one of absolute and dogmatic faith. This alternative approach views faith as open rather than finite, even skeptical, while offering no preference

from naught. Jammer thus connects Einstein's position to the approach of monotheistic theology regarding creation *ex nihilo*.

¹⁹ Following a scientific approach to physics, there can be no production of energy from nothing. The law of the conservation of energy is based “on axioms, it is impossible to create a driving force from nothing” (Clausius 1999, 411). In contrast to this traditional take, see Moshe (Max) Wimmer's (2007) import to Einstein's theory about the possibility of a world in which energy is born out of nothing. Hence for Wimmer Einstein's view is commensurable with the conception of monotheistic theology holding creation *ex nihilo*.

for either of the two positions—i.e., that of the world being created—or not—through an act of God (Seeskin 2000, 66-79). In the act of creating the world, during which God also creates Himself, something very strange takes place, which can be illustrated with the following story, taken from Baron Münchhausen:

One day we [Baron Münchhausen and his horse] were chasing a rabbit and by mistake we went into a deep and sticky swamp. The horse tried to get himself and me out of the swamp, but he did not succeed. I then had a brilliant idea: I grabbed the hair of my head with one hand and the horse's mane in the other. I held fast to his body with my thighs, and in this way I drew both of us upwards out of the swamp. Of course, this was not sufficient; in a little while we would have fallen back in. Fortunately the horse understood, made a great jump, and got the two of us out of the swamp (Bürger 2011, 23).

This tale depicts how the inventive baron, through exaggeration and an excess of his own truth, fell together with his beloved horse into the swamp of chaos, into the primal morass. The swamp gradually sucks them down, apparently making their escape impossible. This swamp's stickiness is not self-evident for we tend to forget that if we do not act properly, if we persist in maintaining the chaos or submitting to it, we are liable to sink still further into the mess. It is worth considering the possibility that the horse's natural effort to resist sinking may even have caused them to sink further. Only Münchhausen's act (which appears peculiar and rather inappropriate to any reader, including those unfamiliar with physics and the laws of modern science) succeeds in saving them. However, Münchhausen had a brilliant idea: By combining the excess energy of the two in unison, he was able to extract himself and his horse from the threatening swamp. And so, the two were extracted although they almost fell back in; only the horse's small "excess" effort brought them out again. We therefore understand that our baron encouraged his horse because he saw him as a partner in the act of mutual salvation. However, what is striking here is the performance of the act itself, which transforms the baron (as God) and the horse (as nature) into one body that, together, can muster their forces *ex nihilo* to separate themselves from the chaos while galloping towards the self-creation of each individually; we are therefore left with a horse, a rider, and a swamp—each distinct from the other.

From a modern scientific, physical point-of-view, the tale is rather silly and irrational (we should remember that this story was written in the 18th century, after the confrontation between pre-Cartesian imagination and scientific thought).²⁰ According to Newton's second and third laws of physics, the actions described are empirically impossible: A closed system's center of gravity cannot be altered without application of some external force; that is, a system cannot remove itself, by itself, from a given situation through application of its own internal force. But for us, Münchhausen's act is somewhat analogous to how I interpret God's creation of the world, in which the system's self-energy allows removing God and the world from a state of chaos. This energy also emerges *ex nihilo*. Although Münchhausen's case does not fully resemble the application of energy involved in divine creation *ex nihilo*, here, too, some sort of energy—excess, additional energy—coming from outside of the system is required to rescue the unfortunate pair from the mud.

²⁰ As highlighted by Terry Gilliam in his 1988 film, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*.

So, when Baron Münchhausen negates Newton's law of physics regarding the impossibility of a system shifting its own equilibrium, he directs us to God's act as another violation of the principle that one cannot create energy out of nothing. Another instance of opposition to this principle is found in the efforts to create a perpetual motion machine—a *perpetuum mobile*—the remarkable mechanism envisioned as creating energy out of nothing, or preserving energy forever. We therefore find that since the Middle Ages and up to the Modern Age, a variety of people, Münchhausenian in spirit, attempted to create a *perpetuum mobile* but failed. Perhaps, one might add rather ironically, that what human beings were able to find was located not *before* but *behind* their eyes—namely, humans themselves. Perhaps they themselves are the true *perpetuum mobile*, manifested in their own surplus energy; contrary to other organic and inorganic beings that have no energy beyond what they absorb, humans exude more energy than they consume.²¹ This is why the concept of God as excess energy is so human (and so imaginative rather than scientific).

We may wonder whether we are in the presence of several ontological possibilities (for that which is written *on the page* and not for *external reality*), several possibilities for understanding the relation between the created world and God the creator, several possibilities regarding the question of whether the *ex nihilo* energy that was resented here is an excess of the system; is it “something else” about which scientists and theologians speculate? Perhaps it is an *excess=God*, which does not exist outside of the system of primal chaos except as *extrusion=God*, because of the distress within the system, which blows the system up from within. Where does this excess of energy come from? Perhaps it is *God=excess* from outside it, which sets the primal system in motion. But even then, conceptually, must we include the excess as part of some system? Perhaps it is *speech-light=the power of the horse*, which can be understood as energy *ex nihilo*, which creates the system, extricates it from paralysis, and also creates itself as *Creator*? Of course we have no clear answer.

Nor do I intend to join religion to science and see them as justifying one another. In this context, it should be said that this article is part of an imaginary debate with the figure of the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz. In fact, the bulk of his professional career was in the field of biochemistry. As a scientist he argued that a man of faith must cling to the tenets of religion without reference to the story that his religion tells. However, in the framework of the meta-scientific debate regarding the tension between biology and physics, and the transition from the inorganic to the organic, he insisted with all his might that there is another dimension, which we do not know. He also argued that one cannot reduce biological processes to physical and chemical ones, meaning that this reduction is inadequate and will never be adequate: there is another dimension that causes the leap from matter to the organic. Here we have added what to what Leibowitz did not want or dare to say explicitly as a scientist (because of his insistence on personally separating his being a believing Jew and believing scientist, a believer in science!).²²

²¹ See the physicist Hermann Helmholtz (1909, 408-410) on the law of the preservation of energy in the organic world and against the vitalistic principle.

²² On this matter, see also the interview of Joseph Neumann (2010, 17-63) on Leibowitz.

Perhaps, following in his footsteps, we may say that faith is precisely belief in this excess: faith in separation, in the excess energy²³ that suddenly bursts forth in order to extract the world from nothingness, to thereby create it. Is there a difference between Creator and the world, a small quantity of energy that He brings to initiate the Creation, the Big Bang? Or, perhaps, in accordance with the laws of physics, there is no guiding external factor? The soft believer recognizes both possibilities; he or she believes that it is impossible to decide between the two (unless he or she believes in the necessity of Excess, of God).

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²³ The belief in *excess* external to a system, which frees the system and operates it, which is not simply an evolutionary process, is nonetheless the biblical position and opposed to Greek as well as classic science. On the difference between these approaches see Margalit Finkelberg (1990, 51-59). Compare this to the position taken by the Kabbalah, which does not accept the concept of creation *ex nihilo* in any simple/straightforward way, together with its concept of emanation, in which the flow of the relationship between the Creator and the created world, and not only the gap between them, it concretizes. See Ephraim Gottlieb (1963). Compare also the approach of the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion (2002) regarding the relationship between theology and the concept of excess. Cf. the concept of excess in psychoanalytic theory in Lacan (1998).

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