For Bryan, who will never read it,
and for Martin, who already has.

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Comparison does not necessarily tell us how things "are"; like models and metaphors, comparisons tell us how things might be conceived, how they might be "redescribed."

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*

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Preface

When did the Holocaust begin? I do not refer to what Lucy Dawidowicz referred to as "The War against the Jews" from 1939–1945, the horrific and diabolical genocidal program of the Nazis. I refer rather to the "Holocaust," a term that came into use in the 1960s to describe those events. In Dov-Ber Kerler and Jeffrey Veidlinger's extensive interviews with Jews in Eastern Europe who were old enough to remember these events, now archived and available for viewing at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music, their interviewees often referred to what we call the "Holocaust" simply as "the *milkhome*" (the war). The "Holocaust," of course, is a different matter.

Conventional wisdom suggests that most survivors did not speak openly and publicly about "the *milkhome*" until the 1960s and Jews did not begin to "theologize" about it systematically until the publication of Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* in 1966, followed by important works by Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, and others. Hasia Diner's *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (2009) exhibited that, in fact, there were groups of Jews who memorialized and talked about the Holocaust before it became more popular to do so in the 1960s.

In any case, if we are speaking about the Holocaust and Jewish *theology*, the beginning was in fact the 1960s, with Rubenstein et al. There were exceptions: for example, Fackenheim learned of R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira's collected wartime sermons *Aish Kodesh*, which was only published for the first time in the early 1960s, and noted that exposure to this work enabled him to complete the final chapter of his book *What Is Judaism: An Interpretation for the Present Age* (1986). These new theologians knew a bit about wartime sermons by ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) rabbis but not much, and they did not consider them consequential. This is in part because most

post-Holocaust theologians were committed to an anti-theodicy model that argued that giving reasons, certainly theological reasons, for the Holocaust, was blasphemous. They claimed that the very notion that God was responsible for the murder of six million Jews would break the back of any future Jewish theology. Rubenstein was perhaps most open and honest about this, but it underlies much of the larger post-Holocaust theological project.

Other scholars, most notably Gershon Greenberg, Steven T. Katz, and Eliezer Schweid have examined *haredi* writings during the war as a way to uncover how traditional Jewish thinkers conceptualized and understood the fire that was engulfing them years before the moniker of "Holocaust" came into existence. In this present study *History, Metahistory, and Evil: Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust*, Barbara Krawcowicz takes the whole enterprise of theologizing about the Holocaust to new heights. Rather than viewing post-Holocaust theology's "anti-theodicy" in isolation, Krawcowicz puts these post-Holocaust theologians in comparative proximity to wartime *haredi* responses to the events unfolding from 1939–1945. Lest one be skeptical of such a comparison, Krawcowicz deftly deploys a nuanced reading of Jonathan Z. Smith's work on comparison to make her case that indeed these two very different sets of thinkers, anti-theodic post-Holocaust theologians, and traditional *haredi* Jews shared enough, and differed enough, to compare them responsibly and constructively. In fact, I think she successfully brings out nuances in the post-Holocaust theologians and the *haredi* thinkers that were missed by previous scholars precisely through the act of comparison.

Many previous readers of wartime *haredi* writings that responded to the genocide held that they had no real conceptual framework to understand what was happening around them, and except for a few such as Shapira and Shlomo Teichthal, whose *'Em Habanim Samekha* is one of the few *haredi* works of the time that turns toward Zionism as a solution to the Jews' existential crisis, they were simply stuck in a covenantal paradigm that prevented them from seeing what would become the Holocaust in a way different than other Jewish tragedies of the past.

What Krawcowicz offers us in *History, Metahistory, and Evil* is a theoretical framework for understanding what is at stake for *haredi* writers and thus why they could never quite adopt the post-Holocaust theological model proposed by Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Berkovits, or Greenberg. Borrowing Jacob Neusner's notion of "paradigmatic thinking" that Neusner uses as a way to understand rabbinic notions of history, and J.Z. Smith's

notion of comparison as the articulation of sameness and difference, Krawcowicz argues that the *haredi* writers she analyzes had quite a sophisticated understanding of history and of their relation to the covenantal promise of Torah. She writes in her Introduction, "I argue that the network of mutually dependent and reinforcing paradigms constituted a framework for understanding the vicissitudes of Jewish history and allowed for their meaningful religious interpretation within the boundaries of the master framework of covenantal theodicy."

Krawcowicz joins Neusner's model of "paradigmatic thinking" with Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi's popular dictum of Jewish responses to history. "What has occurred now is similar to the persecutions of old, and all that happened to the forefathers has happened to their descendants. Upon the former already the earlier generations composed *selihot* and narrated the events. *It is all one*." Krawcowicz's *haredi* subjects did not, could not, view what was happening to them as historically unprecedented, even as they may have viewed their circumstances as such. Close reading of their writings reveals a mighty struggle of how to fit such events into their "paradigmatic thinking." In some inchoate way, Krawcowicz claims, they understood the challenge of wedding their proximate horror to the larger scope of history refracted through a covenantal promise, a promise that was, for them, unbreakable.

By offering us a sophisticated reading of some of these *haredi* voices instead of suggesting they simply could not make sense of a reality in which they found themselves, Krawcowicz urges us to look back at the post-Holocaust theologians in a new way, suggesting that while their views have become somewhat normative in our day, in fact, they suppose a radical break with tradition beyond what is already articulated by Rubenstein.

I would suggest that in some way the fundamental, one might even say monumental, difference between the *haredi* writers and the post-Holocaust theologians, is this: was the Holocaust an unprecedented event in Jewish history or not? (The question of it being unprecedented in human history is another matter taken up by Steven T. Katz in his recent work.) If the assumption is one of uniqueness, one can choose from Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Berkovits, Greenberg et al. as to what makes the most sense. If on the other hand, you maintain that a historical event outside the purview of God is simply unthinkable, post-Holocaust theology is not only unacceptable, it is blasphemous. This does not mean, however, that the Holocaust is just one more catastrophe that befell the Jewish people. Krawcowicz shows us

that, in fact, these *haredi* writers were quite sophisticated in their assessment of their situation. But it does mean that it will need to be understood "paradigmatically," that is, as a part of a larger covenantal framework that can sustain the horror without rupturing the covenant. What Krawcowicz shows in this book it how much these *haredi* thinkers struggled to keep their paradigmatic thinking intact as the events unfolded and stretched the elasticity of their imaginative faculties to the brink. Interestingly, living through what Shapira called "the days of rage," they somehow believed the Jews would survive, and thus while also writing for their suffering constituents, they also wrote for those not yet born who would carry the burden of all this on their shoulders.

Much has been written on post-Holocaust theology and also on *haredi* responses to the Holocaust. But *History, Metahistory, and Evil* is the first book that puts both camps in complex conversation with the intention of understanding both more deeply and also enabling us to see the weaknesses of both in light of the other. Comparison is a precarious enterprise, but when it works, and it does here, it helps us understand each subject in new and interesting ways.

As we move further from the Holocaust, as it slowly becomes more history than proximate memory, as survivors become exceedingly rare, *History, Metahistory, and Evil* will help guide us in the new territory of a more distanced understanding of the theological and philosophical travails of those who struggled with God in the fire, and those who later struggled to understand Judaism in its wake.

Shaul Magid
Fire Island, NY

Introduction

In the late fall of 1941, commenting on the biblical passage where God commands Abraham to leave his homeland (Gen. 12:1), Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, a rabbi of the Weidritz Alley synagogue in Bratislava, wrote: "If we probe the portion of the week . . . we will find that God spoke explicitly about the current situation."[1] Bratislava became the capital of the nominally independent Slovak Republic in March of 1939. Acts of anti-Jewish violence had occurred in the town before, but the situation worsened with the official installation of the pro-Nazi Slovak regime. By the fall of 1941, Bratislava Jews were effectively excluded from the rest of the society. They saw their communal organizations banned, newspapers liquidated, and property confiscated. They wore yellow stars of David, were subject to forced labor, and suffered abuse in the streets of their town. In September 1941, ten thousand of Bratislava's remaining fifteen thousand Jews were forced to leave. They were told to abandon their homes and wander into the unknown, Unsdorfer wrote. What happened to the patriarch also happened to his descendants. In the past, God tested Abraham's faith. Now the faith of Abraham's progeny was submitted to the same trial.

Or was it? Were the circumstances not vastly different? For contemporary readers, and for Unsdorfer, certainly they were. But for Unsdorfer—and probably not for us—this was also something very familiar, as every Jewish congregation read the story of Abraham leaving Ur every fall, three weeks after Rosh Hashanah. In the Bible, it is God who addresses Abraham with the fateful command. The order to leave Bratislava came from the hostile Slovak authorities but Unsdorfer had no doubt that the authorities' decree had not originated solely in human minds. Ultimately, its origin was to be found in the divine will. In his war-time sermons, Unsdorfer

1 Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, *Siftei Shlomo* (Brooklyn, NY: Balshon Printing, 1972), 31.

protested the divine decrees and pleaded for mercy. He confessed he could no longer fathom the will of God. He asked how God could let the innocent suffer and acknowledged his inability to come up with an answer. But he never questioned the fundamental assumption of God's active involvement in what was happening.

Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer was murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944.

In 1943, Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich told his congregation gathered in the Transylvanian town of Şimleul-Silvaniei that "all the troubles we suffer today by the hands of the evil ones—it is not the evil ones who are hitting us. They are but the staff of God. God is chastising and hitting us."[2] His words echoed those of the prophet who had the enraged God exclaim: "Assyria, rod of my anger, in whose hand, as a staff, is my fury! I send him against an ungodly nation, I charge him against people that provokes me" (Is. 10:50). God uses various instruments to discipline his people, Ehrenreich observed. There was the Pharaoh and there was Haman. Then there was Rome, and then there was Christendom. And then there were the Nazis. In each case, beneath different dress, language, creed, and custom, the same agency lurked: the wicked Esau, as the rabbis invariably referred to him, who has always hated his twin brother Jacob. But even Esau's undying hatred was ineffectual unless God decided to use it to chastise the Jewish people, Ehrenreich stressed. Why was the punishment so severe? What terrible transgression could have warranted this outpouring of divine wrath? Ehrenreich did not have all answers. Like Unsdorfer, he resorted to silence filled with the certainty of redemption. He did not doubt that redemption would come and bring restoration as well as understanding.

By June 6, 1944, most of the Jews of Şimleul-Silvaniei, including Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, were murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In the post-war period, Jewish thinkers who grappled with the Holocaust struggled to understand its impact on Judaism's core concepts. In the spring of 1966, in his submission to the survey "The State of Jewish Belief" organized by the journal *Commentary*, Richard L. Rubenstein declared that "the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps" and asked "how can Jews

2 Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, *Drashot Lehem Shlomo* (Brooklyn, NY: Edison Lithographic and Printing Corp, 1976), 128.

believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz?"[3] Rubenstein's question and emphatically negative answer resonated especially with two other Jewish theologians—Emil L. Fackenheim and Eliezer Berkovits. Fackenheim was one of the few respondents who mentioned the Holocaust as *a* problem for contemporary Jewish theology in the *Commentary* survey. Before long, however, he came to consider it *the* central problem and in 1967 declared that "the events that are associated with the dread name of Auschwitz . . . call everything into question."[4] In his submission, Eliezer Berkovits wrote about the death camps in the context of the relevance of the "death of God" theology for Judaism. For him, the Holocaust proved that the Christian God, the God who promised to redeem mankind through an act of self-sacrifice, was indeed dead. However, it did not undermine the existence of the Jewish God because "what happened . . . is explainable in terms of human responsibility."[5] In dialogue and sometimes in fierce disagreement, these three thinkers undertook the task of rethinking Judaism's central theological categories. Their reflections have been pivotal in the framing of post-Holocaust religious discourse in North America and beyond.

In 1970, Emil Fackenheim wrote that questions prompted by Auschwitz were of such magnitude that "until a few years ago Jewish theological thought has observed a near total silence on the subject of the Holocaust. A well-justified fear and trembling . . . has kept Jewish theological thought, like Job, in a state of silence."[6] Fackenheim did not know at the time that the Holocaust in fact never silenced Jewish theology. Only in the 1980s he was to discover that some thinkers confronted the questions posed by the

3 Richard L. Rubenstein, "Symposium on Jewish Belief" in idem, *After Auschwitz. Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1966), 153. Hereafter quoted as AA. All submissions to the survey were published in *Commentary* 42, 2 (August 1966): 71-160 and reprinted as *The Condition of Jewish Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). They are also available online under the title "The State of Jewish Belief" at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-state-of-jewish-belief/ (accessed on February 15, 2020).

4 Emil L. Fackenheim, "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern Secular World," *Daedalus* (Winter 1967): 193–219; reprinted in idem, *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 278–305; the quotation is from page 281.

5 "The State of Jewish Belief" at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-state-of-jewish-belief/ (accessed on February 15, 2020).

6 Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 70–71. Hereafter quoted as GPH.

destruction of European Jewish life already during the war. In the preface to *What Is Judaism: An Interpretation for the Present Age*, Fackenheim wrote that he "would not have known how to complete the last, crucial chapter of this book" without the exposure to the subtleties of the war-time sermons of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira.[7]

Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the leader of a Hasidic court of Piaseczno, recorded his struggles with the enormity of the Nazi persecutions he was witnessing and experiencing in the form of weekly Torah commentaries. The manuscript was recovered after the war with thousands of other documents collected by the members of Oneg Shabbat, the clandestine group of scholars and activists in the Warsaw ghetto.[8] Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, a graduate of the famous Orthodox Pressburg yeshiva, and Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, a faithful supporter of the leaders of Hungarian ultra-Orthodoxy, also recorded their thoughts in the form of weekly sermons. Unsdorfer's manuscript was found by one of his sons who discovered his father's writings in their family home in Bratislava where he returned after liberation from Buchenwald. The sermons of Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich were most likely preserved by a gentile family. Yissakhar Shlomo Teichthal, the head of the rabbinical court in Slovakian town of Pieštany, wrote a theological treatise while hiding in Budapest. Read together, these writings give us an opportunity to see Jewish theological thought in extremis, struggling to come to terms with the unfolding destruction, attempting to answer questions about the presence of God, about the covenant, about suffering. In other words, questions not unlike those asked by Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Berkovits, and many others in the post-war period.

This book presents the results of a comparative reading of these two sets of materials: on the one hand, the writings of four Orthodox rabbis—Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, Yissakhar Shlomo Teichthal, and Kalonymous Kalman Shapira—and on the other, the works of the so-called post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers—Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Eliezer Berkovits.

Setting aside, for the moment, the question of the internal variegation of these two comparands, one may wonder whether they are not too

7 Emil L. Fackenheim, *What Is Judaism: An Interpretation for the Present Age* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 11.

8 On the Oneg Shabbat (Ringelblum) archive see Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

different for a comparison to yield interesting results. According to scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, whose comments on comparative analysis in the study of religion are especially incisive, "comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end."[9] As many critics observed, comparisons long suffered under the tyranny of similarity. It was a real or perceived similarity, likeness or sameness between various phenomena that prompted scholars to engage in the process of comparison often in order to present an explanation of the resemblance in terms of common origin, mutual or one-sided influence. Such genealogical comparisons were quite frequently falling into the trap of the erasure of difference. In the process of searching for explicable similarities, differences were downplayed or completely ignored, sacrificed on the altar of fundamentally-the-same.

Having learned our lesson, today we know that successful comparisons depend on an interplay of similarity and difference. Comparisons need to somehow find their way between the six-head monster of complete similarity and the equally deadly whirlpool of absolute incomparability. As Oliver Freiberger put it, "difference makes a comparative analysis interesting; similarity makes it possible."[10] The question of how much difference or how much similarity between the comparands is required for a comparison to work, however, cannot be answered once and for all, because neither similarity nor difference exist as such out there. Neither is an objective quality that can be parsed independently of the perspective assumed by the comparativist. Neither is given, as J. Z. Smith noted, and both are results of mental operations performed by the person constructing a comparison.[11]

In principle, there is no limit to what can be compared. This point was argued convincingly by Ralph Weber, who observed that even statements of incommensurability are in fact outcomes of comparisons.[12] Against J. Z. Smith, who claimed that there is no point in comparing red

9 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35. My thinking about comparison in the study of religion has benefited greatly from Oliver Freiberger's invaluable *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

10 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison,* 156.

11 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine. On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 51.

12 Ralph Weber, "Comparative Philosophy and the *Tertium*: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?" *Dao* 13 (2014): 163–165.

and white wine because they are "sheerly different" and "nothing more needs be said,"[13] one can easily imagine a variety of situations when such a comparison can in fact be useful as well as a variety of criteria with respect to which red and white wine can be compared. While Umberto Eco attempted to push the question to its limits by suggesting a comparison between the adverb "while" and the noun "crocodile," Ralph Weber rightly noted that such a distinction "makes for a good comparison in any grammar or etymology."[14] The ubiquity of the saying notwithstanding, it also makes perfect sense to compare apples and oranges—the qualities that they share make the basis for the more general category of fruit.[15] In addition, apples and oranges can be compared, as John H. Elliott observed, and quite fruitfully so, with respect to their nutritional value as well as the methods and costs of production.[16] To his assertion that there is not much to be gained from a comparison of apples and electric light bulbs, Caroline W. Bynum correctly pointed out that if one was interested in surfaces and light refraction such a comparison might be profitable.[17]

Does that mean that all choices in comparisons are in the end arbitrary? Not necessarily. What it does mean is that, as J. Z. Smith put it, "comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind *for the scholar's own intellectual reasons*."[18] Comparisons and judgments with respect to difference are always shaped by the scholar's interests. In each instance, they are determined by the perspective assumed by the person who makes them and should be evaluated primarily in terms of what is it that we gain from a comparison.

The metaphor of the barking dog has been employed to describe some of the uses of comparison in the study of religion.[19] It originates in one of

13 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 28.

14 Weber, "Comparative Philosophy": 165.

15 See Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 4.

16 John H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

17 Caroline W. Bynum, "Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; Or Why Compare?" *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (2014): 345.

18 Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51, emphasis added.

19 See Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, rev. ed. with a new preface, Columbia Classics in Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 27–52 as well as her *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes*, reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 136 and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory:*