
Violence, Ethics, and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought

Don Seeman

Although little analyzed, the concept of divine honor or glory (*kavod shamayim*) has been central to formulations of classical Jewish thought and ethics. In the aftermath of the 1994 Hebron massacre, Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg deployed the concept of divine honor as a religious sanction for murder. His tract *Barukh Ha-Gever* treats atrocity as a mystical technique for the attainment of unmediated, ecstatic, and personal experience of the divine. This article examines the genealogy of Ginsburg's anarchic ideology, which it contrasts with that of Rabbi Abraham Issac Kook and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, two important twentieth-century Jewish thinkers for whom divine honor was also central, but whose vision for that honor was antithetical to the quest for unmediated divine experience, or to acts that violate religious law and human dignity. This article assays a phenomenology of divine honor and its relationship to violence in modern times.

العنف والأخلاقيات والشرف القدسي في الفكر اليهودي الحديث

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على الرغم من قلة تناوله بالتحليل إلا أن مبدأ الشرف القدسي أو المجد (كافود شاماييم) كان ولا يزال يحتل مكانة مركزية في تشكيل وصياغة الفكر والأخلاقيات اليهودية الكلاسيكية. فيما تلى مذبحة الخليل عام 1994 وظف الحاخام اليهودي إسحاق جينزبيرج مبدأ الشرف القدسي كمبرر ديني للقتل وتعامل أطروحته التي تحمل عنوان باروخ ها جيفير مع ذلك العمل الوحشي بصفته أسلوب صوفي للمرور بتجربة إلهية شخصية لاوسيطية تغمرها النشوة. يتفحص هذا المقال أصول عقيدة جينزبيرج الفوضوية ويظهر أوجه تباينها مع عقيدة كل من الحاخام أبراهام أيزك كوك والفيلسوف إيمانويل ليفيناس – اثنين من مفكري القرن العشرين اليهود المهمين بعبطيان هما أيضاً مكانة مركزية للشرف الإلهي إلا أن رؤيتهما لذلك الشرف كانت تضادية لفكرة السعي للحصول على التجارب الإلهية اللاوسيطية وللأفعال التي تخرق قانون الدين والكرامة الإنسانية. يعتبر هذا المقال بمثابة دراسة فلسفية ظاهرية للشرف القدسي ولعلاقته بالعنف في الأزمنة الحديثة.

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现代犹太教思想中的暴力、道德和神之荣耀

Don Seeman

尽管很少有人对此进行分析，但神之荣耀或称荣誉 (*kavod shamayim*) 的概念在正统犹太教思想和道德的形成过程中起到了核心的作用。作为 1994 年希伯伦大屠杀的后果，学者 Yitzhak Ginsburg 通过对神之荣耀概念的阐述为屠杀找到了宗教上的依据。他名为 *Barukh Ha-Gever* 的小册子将暴力行为作为获得对神之荣耀的直接、狂热和个人的体验的一种神秘技巧。本文分析了学者 Ginsburg 的荒谬思想体系。学者 Ginsburg 的观点与学者 Abraham Issac Kook 和哲学家 Emmanuel Levinas 这两位二十世纪重要的犹太思想家的理念相冲突。两位思想家也看重神之荣耀，但他们对荣耀的观念与“追求对神的直接体验”的说法完全相反，认为那样的暴力行为违背宗教教义、践踏人性尊严。本文分析了神之荣耀的现象和它与现代暴力行为之间的联系。

Насилие, этика и божественная слава в современной иудейской мысли

Дон Симан

Несмотря на недостаток конкретных аналитических исследований, концепции божественной славы (*kavod shamayim*) принадлежит центральное место в формировании классической иудейской мысли и этики. После кровавой бойни 1994 года в Хеброне раввин Ицхак Гинзбург использовал концепцию божественной славы в качестве религиозной санкции на убийство. В его трактате *Barukh Ha-Gever* проявления жестокости и зверства рассматриваются как мистический метод достижения непосредственного, экстатического и личного соприкосновения с божественной силой. В статье рассматривается генеалогия анархической идеологии Гинзбурга, которая противопоставляется взглядам раввина Авраама Исаака Кука и философа Эммануэля Левинаса, двух видных иудейских мыслителей двадцатого века - для них божественная слава также являлась основополагающей концепцией, но их видение этой славы антитетично поиску непосредственного соприкосновения с божественной силой или действиям, противоречащим религиозными законами и оскорбляющими человеческое достоинство. Статья анализирует феноменологию божественной славы и ее связь с насилием в современном мире.

Violencia, ética y honor divino en el pensamiento judío moderno

Don Seeman

Aunque no ha sido extensamente analizado, el concepto del honor divino o gloria (*kavod shamayim*) ha sido el centro de formulaciones del pensamiento y de la ética clásicos judíos. Tras la masacre de Hebrón de 1994, el rabino Yitzhak Ginsburg desarrolló el concepto del honor divino como una sanción religiosa que legítima el asesinato. Su ensayo *Barukh Ha-Gever* considera la atrocidad como una técnica mística para alcanzar una experiencia directa, extática y personal con lo divino. Este artículo analiza la genealogía de la ideología anárquica de Ginsburg que contrasta con la del rabino Abraham Issac Kook y la del filósofo Emmanuel Levinas, dos importantes pensadores judíos del siglo veinte para quienes el honor divino también era esencial, pero cuya visión de tal honor era la antítesis de la búsqueda de una experiencia divina directa o de actos en violación de las leyes religiosas y de la dignidad humana. Este artículo presenta una fenomenología del honor divino y su relación con la violencia en los tiempos modernos.

Where the name of God is desecrated, one does not accord honor to a sage.

—Berakhot 19b

SOMETIMES THOUGHT BEGINS with a murder. On 25 February 1994, the Jewish festival of Purim coincided with the Muslim holy month of

Ramadan. On that morning, an American-born, Israeli–Jewish physician named Barukh Goldstein entered the “Cave of the Patriarchs” in Hebron, a site hallowed by both Jews and Muslims, and opened fire on Muslim Palestinian worshippers, killing some twenty-nine people before he was reportedly torn apart by the enraged crowd. Mingling his own blood with those of his victims, he added one more landmark to the crowded—and still crowding—landscape of atrocities committed and remembered in a part of the world that has been my home. This article takes its starting point not from the murder itself, but from a set of ideas relating to the honor and glory of God that figured strongly in at least one disquieting response to that massacre and which provoked me almost against my will to begin reflecting critically over the last decade on the meaning of God’s honor in modern Jewish thought. The honor of the divine constitutes a critical but neglected area of inquiry, because it provides a language and a set of rhetorical coordinates that directly link the theological, ethical, and political or sociological arenas, and also because despite its recent neglect by scholars, it bears witness to a long history of careful thinking across a variety of disciplines.

This article is concerned with the genealogy of God’s honor in just three contemporary (and in many ways unequal) Jewish writers—Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, and the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Other writers could have been chosen, but I begin with these three because of their contemporary influence, because of the scant attention on this subject that their works have received, and because they are in different ways central to the story of divine honor in modern times. Ginsburg has used the concept of divine honor to justify religious violence and the collapse of ethical restraint in contemporary Israel, while Kook and Levinas have, in somewhat different but related ways, developed strong critiques of this eventuality. By focusing narrowly on just one crucial text or set of texts from each of these writers, my goal is to lay the ground for a phenomenology of divine honor that can be extended to other intellectual figures, and, indeed, to other intellectual and social contexts where this may be relevant. In Jerusalem, where I began this project, the walls of the ivory tower are exceedingly thin.

RABBI YITZHAK GINSBURG-TERROR AS A MYSTICAL TECHNIQUE

Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg’s *Barukh Ha-Gever* is a thirty-eight page mystico-political tract devoted to the proposition that the massacre perpetrated by Barukh Goldstein at the Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994 was a tool for the attainment and expression of divine intimacy—terror as a

mystical technique.¹ This is an audacious claim that requires deconstruction on many levels (political, ethnographic, and theological as well as *halakhic*), but here I want to focus narrowly on the conception of divine honor (*kavod shamayim*) that underpins this conception and gives it life. That is because the first and most fundamental claim of *Barukh Ha-Gever* is that the act of mass killing perpetrated by Barukh Goldstein can be construed as an act of sanctification of—or giving honor to—the name of God:

The crown that sits atop The Deed [*ha-ma'aseh*, i.e., the killings in Hebron] is, of course, the sanctification of the divine Name that it entails.² The sanctification of the divine Name that was inherent to that Deed must be judged from several perspectives—from the perspective of The Deed itself and the manner of its perpetration, from the perspective of the impression that it made upon Jews, and from the perspective of the impression that it made upon the Gentiles. From the perspective of The Deed, someone who performs a commandment through personal sacrifice, and who diminishes his own honor [*kavod*] in order to magnify the honor of heaven [*kavod shamayim*], has certainly sanctified the divine Name through this. (Ginsburg 1994: 4)

That the name of God can be sanctified (which really means “set apart” or distinguished from banal reality) through an adept’s willingness to subordinate the human will to the divine will despite great personal sacrifice is a commonplace in Jewish mystical writing. Obedience to the divine command is in fact central to the idea of sanctifying the divine name in classical Jewish literature and would be unexceptional here if it were not for the murderous context of the case. *Barukh Ha-Gever* departs from classical models in its radical decoupling of the demand for honoring the divine from its traditional locus in obedience to the divine *law* and its

¹ The title *Barukh Ha-Gever* is taken from the biblical verse “Blessed be the man [*gever*] who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord alone” (Jeremiah 17:7). “Blessed be the man” can also, however, be translated as “Barukh the man,” or “Barukh the hero,” a reference to Dr. Goldstein. The earliest version of the text was circulated in pamphlet form as a *kuntres*, or occasional essay in the Hasidic style, attributed to a lecture by Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg (1994), and edited by Israel Ariel shortly after the massacre. Ginsburg himself was detained and investigated but later released, and the text was republished (Ginsburg 1995) with revisions in a volume of hagiographic essays devoted to Barukh Goldstein.

² “The Deed” in my translation corresponds to the Hebrew *ha-ma'aseh*, which I have capitalized to emphasize both the circumlocution for murder used throughout this text as well as the fetishistic quality that it attributes to action—“The Deed”—above reflection or moral scruple. In this, *Barukh Ha-Gever* draws both on the “apotheosis of action” in Habad theology (Loewenthal 1987) and the political “decisionism” that characterizes certain forms of twentieth-century nationalism and philosophy (Safrański 1998: 225–247; Haivry 1996). Part of Ginsburg’s power lies in his identification of decisionist political thought with an elaborate and preexisting mystical cosmology.

replacement by a set of idiosyncratic standards for the personal perception and fulfillment of divine *will*. While rigidly and self-consciously Orthodox in its sociology and self-presentation, therefore, the theology of *Barukh Ha-Gever* would be inconceivable without the romantic privileging of personal experience and subjective authenticity that characterize a variety of modern and postmodern projects including liberal religion, and we must resist the temptation to attribute texts like *Barukh Ha-Gever* to the eruption of premodern sentiment.³

Barukh Ha-Gever draws strongly on the language of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto's classical eighteenth-century ethical tract, *Mesilat Yesharim*, whose nineteenth chapter describes the importance of zealotry for the sake of the divine Name. Luzzatto had argued—in language that Ginsburg (see above) would later adopt—that saintliness (*hasidut*) must be judged from three different perspectives: “The first refers to the deed itself, the second to the manner of its perpetration, and the third, to the intention [behind it].” The subsequent chapter of *Mesilat Yesharim* is dedicated to the whole question of divine honor and zealotry “for His holy Name, to hate those who hate Him and to strive to subdue them to the extent possible, so that His blessed service should be accomplished and his honor increased . . .” The theme of undertaking action for the sake of divine honor with no thought to personal pleasure is emphasized in this chapter, as is the diminution of divine honor brought about by the historical humiliation of the Jewish people: “This saint then, in addition to the service that he performs through the performance of His commandments with this intention, also must constantly feel real pain because of the exile [of the Jews] and the destruction [of the Temple] because of the diminution, as it were, of His blessed honor, and he should yearn for redemption, because this entails an elevation of the honor of blessed God” (Luzzatto 1999: 294–295).

Nevertheless, there are important divergences between this and Ginsburg's later account. For one thing, the third of Luzzatto's categories of saintliness is the intention behind any action that is taken for the sake of God's honor, whereas Ginsburg (1994: 4) substitutes “the impression

³ I am not of course arguing that *Barukh Ha-Gever* grew out of a liberal Jewish milieu. Rather, I am arguing that this text and the violence it advocates must be viewed in light of the same romantic reconfiguration of religious life around issues of personal autonomy that makes liberal Judaism as well as certain forms of contemporary Orthodoxy possible and that this requires a far broader intellectual perspective than the model of recidivist, antimodern violence would seem to indicate. The “crux of liberal Judaism” is after all, “personal autonomy” (Borowitz 1983). Also see Cohen and Eisen's (2000) account of “the sovereign self” among moderately affiliated American Jews. These are not, of course, developments unique to contemporary Jewry, and I should note that my thinking about *Barukh Ha-Gever* in these terms has been influenced by both Trilling (1971) and Taylor (1991: 25–31).

that it [i.e., ‘the Deed’] made upon the Gentiles.” Already here, in other words, Ginsburg has exchanged an essentially normative, intrinsic criteria of intent (i.e., action performed “for the sake of Heaven”) with a contingent and outer-directed, experiential quality—the “impression” that the Deed will make upon witnesses in a public context, all of which bears witness to his ecstatic (and ultimately, I will argue, antinomian) conception of divine honor.

It goes without saying that Luzzatto never imagined the contexts of power and responsibility occasioned by the creation of the State of Israel or its subsequent history and that nothing in his eighteenth-century corpus can serve as an effective rationale for the indiscriminate murder of civilians at the end of the twentieth. A more *theologically* salient feature of this comparison is, however, that Luzzatto reflexively identifies divine honor not just with the welfare and redemption of the Jewish people but also with the fulfillment of all the obligations imposed by Jewish ethics and law, and that he never portrays these sources of divine honor as being potentially in conflict. Indeed, while honoring or sanctification of the divine might sometimes require the *transcendence* of the letter of the law in classical Jewish formulations, it never admits to a decisive *breaking* of the law, since honor is still identified here with public moral repute. In chapter eleven, Luzzatto writes

The possible manifestations of a desecration of the Name [of God] are great and many, for a person needs to be concerned about his Master’s honor, and to subject every act to great scrutiny and evaluation, so that it not give rise to any desecration of heaven’s honor, God forbid. . . . The sages have taught, “How is the name of heaven desecrated? Rav said, ‘It is when a person such as myself weighs out meat for purchase but does not pay immediately.’ Rabbi Yochanan taught, “It is when a person such as myself walks four cubits without a Torah scroll or without phylacteries” [Yoma 86a]. The point is that every individual must, according to his stature and how he is evaluated by the people of that generation, consider how to avoid doing something improper for a person of that stature. . . . For the honor of the Torah is that someone who exceeds in its study should also exceed in uprightness and ethical traits, since someone who lacks these but who exceeds in study will bring disrepute upon the act of study itself. . . . (1999: 252)

There is nothing extraordinary in this formulation, which closely follows Talmudic and medieval legal precedents. Yet what is unique about *Barukh Ha-Gever*—and alien to Luzzatto’s account—is that although Ginsburg devotes some discussion to the proposition that the Hebron massacre might be interpreted as a fulfillment of Jewish legal categories—

invoking categories like “war,” “saving lives,” and so forth—it is clear upon examination that this is not where the real weight or depth of his argument lies. In the section on “sanctification,” he writes that “the sanctification of the divine Name does not focus on the relationship between a person and his Creator, but quite the contrary, *its essential goal is to arouse an ecstasy of holiness [hitpa’alut kodesh] in Israelite hearts*” (Ginsburg 1994: 4) through the public spectacle of violence. This subtle transformation, from objective and socially defined to subjective and introspective criteria (i.e., “an ecstasy of holiness”) means that sanctification and honoring God no longer rely on the fulfillment of Jewish legal or ethical demands but may actually be aided by the disjuncture between quotidian religious or ethical obligations and the ecstatic perception of divinity that lifts a person ecstatically beyond normative boundaries.

The “ecstasy of holiness” is itself a technical term drawn from the lexicon of Habad mysticism, whose implications will require more extended treatment elsewhere. For Rabbi Dov Baer of Lubavitch, the author of an early nineteenth-century “Tract on Ecstasy” (D. B. Schneersohn 1991; Jacobs 1963) whose terminology Ginsburg appropriates, “divine ecstasy” (*hitpa’alut ‘elohut*) was a term deployed in contradistinction to the “bodily” ecstasy occasioned by mere “excitement of the blood,” or the quest for ecstatic experience. As the son of the founder of the Habad movement, Dohb Baer was eager to distinguish “true” ecstasy that resulted from contemplation of the divine immanence and transcendence from any untutored emotionalism or, even worse from his point of view, from the desire to manifest ecstasy for its own sake.⁴ Yet here too it is important to note that for Ginsburg, it is precisely the “spontaneity” of emotional arousal that sanctifies God’s name through violence. When Ginsburg asks rhetorically, “Was ‘The Deed’ in question just such a sanctification of the divine Name, or was it, God forbid, the opposite?” he is really calling attention to a foregone conclusion that had apparently been ignored by the many religious and communal leaders who condemned Goldstein’s act. “When we come to examine this question truly,” Ginsburg writes, “we understand that sanctification of the divine Name is a matter of extreme innerness, an agitation of the deepest ‘place’ in the Jewish soul,” and that “just as the one who performs this agitation acts from his most hidden depths, from his ability to go beyond his boundaries” (Ginsburg

⁴ Elsewhere, Rabbi Dohb Baer actually identifies the quest for ecstasy in its own right, outside of an appropriate contemplative context, with the quest for an experience of vitality through sin or addiction. See his essay “Greater is One Hour” (*Ma’amar Yafeh Sha’ah Ahat*) in Schneersohn (1991: 241–259).

1994: 4), so too the interpretive mode to be employed in its aftermath must seek to eschew normative boundaries and understandings. The defense of Goldstein's act against Orthodox religious critics is, in fact, the engine that drives Ginsburg's entire essay forward, as a note in the unpaginated introduction to the original pamphlet version (Ginsburg 1994), discounting the possibility of convincing secularists, makes clear.

There had always been an element of spectacle to the rabbinic notion of "sanctifying the divine Name" through martyrdom, which really meant allowing oneself to be killed rather than violating central tenets of the Jewish faith. But the moral worthiness of such acts was typically meant to be clear, at least to other Jews or to the community of scholars who determine legal norms. Here, by contrast, sanctification is defined not by the moral evaluation of particular acts but by the amoral "ecstasy of holiness" which works to decouple sanctification from the public admiration and moral appreciation that traditionally accompany this term. More amazing still—and as far as I know, unique to Ginsburg's tract—is that even negative affect and moral revulsion on the part of witnesses are assimilated by *Barukh Ha-Gever* into a paradoxical affirmation that sanctification of the divine Name has indeed occurred:

That same ecstasy of holiness beats primarily in the heart, while the intellect, which feels constricted by exceptional occurrences and by surprises, stands guard upon the existing boundaries (including those of morality and justice), and is certainly liable to turn this emotional excitement on its head, from ecstasy to an agitation of terror. It is therefore correct to investigate what was the *spontaneous* [*sic*] response of the "simple Jew" that is in each individual; and even though it is known that not all [observers] took part in this ecstasy, still within most fluttered strongly the memory that the name "Israel" is something wondrous. . . . (Ginsburg 1994: 4–5)

Here, the normative limits that are associated with intellect and reason (i.e., law) are portrayed as obstructions to the proper appreciation of Goldstein's Deed, twisting the "spontaneous" experience of ecstasy into an experience of terror or revulsion instead. Yet even the "agitation of terror" that Ginsburg dismissively attributes to the constraining power of intellect bears witness, in his account, to the powerful disruptive possibilities that make "the name Israel" into "something wondrous." This is quite an accomplishment, because visceral revulsion backed up by normative disapproval would normally constitute the very definition of an act of desecration.

"Spontaneity" is a key term in the language of personal authenticity upon which this religious imagery draws, and it is not surprising that the English word continuously resurfaces in Ginsburg's writing, because

there is no exact parallel in classical Hebrew terminology. It is important to note that the apparently spontaneous experience of outrage over perceived slights to the divine honor is more than just a justification for acts of violence like the one that *Barukh Ha-Gever* celebrates; it is also a desired *outcome* of such acts, which help to sensitize witnesses to spiritual phenomena that they have otherwise neglected. In the classic practice of *hitpa'alut* ecstasy described by R. Dobh Baer, the adept was to contemplate the presence of divinity that "fills all worlds and surrounds all worlds," but here the subject of contemplation is, as it were, the violent political act, shorn of ritual appurtenances. The language of *hitpa'alut* as a response to the witnessing of political activity (including but not necessarily limited to violence) has even crept into the everyday speech of Ginsburg followers who have been interviewed in Israeli newspapers or with whom I have spoken. Indeed, since Ginsburg is able to assimilate even terror or moral revulsion to the "ecstasy of holiness" that he describes, it should be clear that the primary object of the religious terror he describes is not, as has often been assumed, the terrorized external enemy but rather the horrified potential ally or ambivalent witness in one's own community, who can be swayed or at least aroused through the spectacle of bloodshed, magnified many times through the power of mass media. The Palestinian victims of Goldstein's onslaught are reviled in *Barukh Ha-Gever* as murderers and potential murderers, but ultimately they are for Ginsburg merely the field upon which the spectacle of blood and horror can play itself out for the sake of its real intended audience, the Jews who can still be called to "remembrance" of what divine and national honor are. It has been said (although I cannot verify this) that the assassin Yigal Amir read *Barukh Ha-Gever* prior to his lethal attack on Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Although not entirely distinguishable, national and divine honor are the two poles between which the rhetoric of *Barukh Ha-Gever* relentlessly swings. Although the tract contains little in the way of explicit historical or political context, Rabbi Ginsburg takes the time to specifically mock former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, the widely acknowledged architect of the Oslo peace accords, for his frequent suggestion in Ginsburg's words, that "the Palestinians desire honor, while we [Israelis] want security" (Ginsburg 1994: 5).⁵ For Ginsburg and his audience, this view is

⁵ This was, in fact, a reasonable paraphrase of an idea that Peres popularized in several speeches during the 1990s. In his taped lecture N-1096, "Zionism: Past, Present and Future," which was apparently recorded shortly after his release from nineteen days of administrative detention, Rabbi Ginsburg implies that Peres was personally responsible for his arrest because of *Barukh Ha-Gever*, but makes no mention of it or of its potential for incitement to violence.

an affront not because it implicitly denies that Palestinians *also* have rational and pragmatic aspirations that need to be addressed in the context of a final settlement, but because it denies that Israelis have intangible, “sacred” ones such as honor that are worth fighting and killing for. “Non-rational values like honor are not important to us,” he taunts, “and with ease we distribute them to others who *still* can be emotionally agitated by such things” (Ginsburg 1994: 5). Shorn of Ginsburg’s elaborate cosmology and radicalism, this was an argument with much broader appeal than many politicians or political scientists of the left cared to admit during the 1990s, because it was based in part on an accurate assessment of the fact that Peres and others did regularly portray themselves as juxtaposing Israeli pragmatic interests with Palestinian emotional needs, a rhetorical pattern that can still be discerned at the highest levels of political discourse whenever “peace in the Middle East” is discussed.

The view that while Palestinians may have honor, Israelis have interests, is a reverberation of widespread assumptions that have made their way into social scientific and philosophical as well as popular accounts of the modern condition. Sociologist Peter Berger argued as early as the 1970s that the “obsolescence of the concept of honor” was fundamental to modern consciousness and that honor had been almost wholly replaced by the more egalitarian concept of “dignity” that is among “the principle achievements of modern man” (Berger 1973: 96). Of course in Hebrew the same word (*kavod*) describes both ideas, and this merely calls attention to the fact that Berger’s analysis did not go deep enough. Honor cannot be restricted to a set of narrow social institutions, like dueling or blood feuds and the sentiments that sustain them, but must be viewed in the broad phenomenological context described by a recent ethnographer: “Thus, the connotations of *mana* in Apolynesian, *dewa* in Sumba, *miran* in Kuranko and honor in circum-Mediterranean societies suggest that, despite cultural variations, similarly embodied sensations of amplitude . . . everywhere constitute our sense of existence and autonomy” (Jackson 1998: 13). “Amplitude, existence and autonomy” are precisely the values that Rabbi Ginsburg asserts in his radical attempt to undermine normative ethical and theological conceptions in the writing of *Barukh Ha-Gever*.

Consider Ginsburg’s call to “vengeance” in these terms: “Vengeance [Heb. *Nekamah*] is not taken essentially with respect to considerations of pragmatic benefit . . . but above and beyond all intellectual calculation. In this, vengeance is similar to the sanctification of God’s name we discussed in the first chapter. But unlike [sanctification], vengeance does not need to call upon the name of God (and so it is not unique to Israel). Vengeance is a natural, spontaneous [*sic*] reaction, which activates the feeling that

until there is strength in me to harm the one who harmed me, I can have no standing [Heb. *tekumah*]” (1994: 16).⁶

It should be noted that the Hebrew *tekumah* can refer either to “standing” or to existence more broadly, and that its common echo in modern Hebrew is the teleological phrase *me-Shoah le-Tekumah* or “from the Holocaust to the establishment of the State.” The idea of social standing or reputation is drawn by Ginsburg into the notion of “standing” or existing in a more metaphysical context, which is associated in turn with the will to defend that standing:

Being and the will to being are the foundation of natural life in the world . . . and vengeance is therefore a kind of natural law. One who takes vengeance thereby joins the “ecological streams” of being; his true being and that of the world meet . . . When we deprive a person or a nation of the stable basis of standing strong and firm on what is theirs, if there is no vengeance, life begins to sink into sadness and lack of faith in one’s own powers . . . That is certainly how it felt in the years before the Holocaust, when all of the accusations that the anti-Semites poured upon us . . . were internalized by many Jews who began to see them as a blemish or a shame . . . Similarly in these crazy times [i.e., the 1990s], we are witness to a similar process of agreement with all our enemies’ criticisms of us, and an attempt to help them in obscuring the name of Israel more and more. (Ginsburg 1995: 31; Ginsburg 1994: 17–18)

Linkage of the Holocaust to contemporary violence against Jews or Israel is hardly surprising in this context, although Ginsburg’s insistent further linkage of these themes to honor and revenge, to the shame of alleged Jewish self-hatred and to the very laws of nature exceed the power and sophistication of most extremists’ writing, including that of the assassinated rabbi and politician Meir Kahane, an intellectual precursor whose blunt polemics tended to lack the elaborate theological and psychological argumentation that characterize *Barukh Ha-Gever*.

Ginsburg’s preoccupation with the obscuring of names (the name of God, the name of Israel) and with dishonor more broadly is here revealed as a fundamental anxiety of being, like the one that Levinas, as we shall see, explicitly decries. It is a concern with the solidity of one’s own existence so profound that it completely masks the erasure of the ethical prohibition of

⁶ It is difficult to resist comparing this passage with Doh Baer’s subtle essay “Greater is One Hour” (D. B. Schneersohn 1991: 241–259), where the “ecstasy of anger” is described in phenomenological terms as a kind of addiction to the experience of vitality that a person might otherwise lack. For R. Doh Baer, this is a kind of spiritual pathology that can only be addressed through a process of repentance and renewed connection with God.

wounding or murdering another person: “I heard about a man,” writes Ginsburg, “who, when he was a young student at the university, was publicly slapped by an Arab, and this incident has already pursued him every day for the past twenty years and turned his life into a nightmare. Everyone knows—including him—that the only true (or at least fundamental) cure for this wound is to wound the Arab in return . . . These examples are minor, but perhaps there is enough in them to demonstrate how the necessity of vengeance succeeds in piercing through all of the modern shame in vengeance” (1994: 16). Ginsburg’s use of therapeutic metaphors in violent political contexts (and, in fact, his promotion of various “kabbalistic” healing techniques which are also related to his political agenda) deserves separate treatment, but it is crucial here to note that the therapeutic self-assertion of violence ultimately forces Ginsburg not just toward a devaluation of human life but into an unacknowledged devaluation of Jewish legal authority as well.

“It is a matter of established Jewish law” writes Rabbi Ginsburg, “that ‘in a situation where the divine Name is being desecrated, one does not accord honor to a sage’ [i.e., rabbi or scholar], and that ‘the honor of heaven takes precedence over the honor to one’s teacher’ “ (1994: 7). In its traditional legal context, which extends directly from the Talmud down through the medieval and modern codes of law, this ruling has meant quite simply that the law is no respecter of persons and that one must therefore rebuke even one’s teacher or rabbi if they desecrate the divine Name through prohibited or unethical conduct (Talmud *Berakhot* 19b). Yet here too, Ginsburg manages to find support for a reading that radically decouples the study and practice of the commandments from any recognition of divine honor: “Just as the honor of the Torah is not identical with the study of Torah, and it is conceivable that someone who has studied less will honor the Torah more, so too the sensitivity to the honor of Heaven and to the honor of Israel upon whom the name of God has been called, is not necessarily dependent on the question of how filled a person is with Torah and commandments. And that is why it is possible for someone to be more sensitive than his teacher in this matter” (Ginsburg 1994: 7).

Once more, Ginsburg justifies this relatively radical claim by recourse to the mystical psychology of Habad Hasidism, with its strong—but not uncontested—emphasis on *bittul* or self-annihilation before God’s glory (Seeman 2003).⁷ Study and honor are not only unrelated according to

⁷ For a radical but not atypical statement on the importance of *bittul* that is “above reason and understanding,” see Rabbi Dobh Baer’s circa 1814 essay on “Circles and Straight Lines,” *Kuntres Tnyan Igulim Va-Yosher*, published in D. B. Schneersohn (1991: 423–466).

this assertion but actually contradictory, since honoring the Torah and knowing the Torah involve “movement in two different spiritual directions which may even be opposed”: “Honor is directed towards the Other, since the one who gives honor does homage from afar and annihilates his own existence, while learning is an internalization that enriches and fills the learner, and is liable because of this to strengthen and to fortify his bounded self” (Ginsburg 1994: 7).⁸ This is more radical than Ginsburg’s earlier claim that honor and knowledge might be unrelated, because it avers, in direct opposition to the standard argument of Jewish mystics as well as Talmudists, that deep knowledge of the law and concern for its fulfillment is the very essence of piety and honoring God, as Luzzatto emphasizes repeatedly in his discussion on zealotry for the sanctification of the divine Name since, as he writes, “an ignoramus cannot be saintly [*hasid*]” (Luzzatto 1999: 278).⁹

In the context of *Barukh Ha-Gever*, of course, the real stake of Ginsburg’s radical position on divine honor is to eliminate the authority and influence of the community of scholars who would tend to prohibit acts of zealotry like Goldstein’s on both ethical and frankly pragmatic grounds. In what seems at first like a startling admission at the end of the revised version of *Barukh Ha-Gever* published in 1995, Ginsburg writes

After all that has been written in this essay . . . these things do not all add up to a definitive legal ruling [on the permissibility of Goldstein’s Deed], and if we consider the matter further, we realize that they do not even tend in this direction. There is something “fluid” in the possibility of deriving a definitive legal ruling from the whole pattern of commandments that is laid out here, and if someone insists, they can even present this pattern in a contrary manner, and derive from these commandments that The Deed was something disgraceful. Against the perspective that finds here a sanctification of the divine Name, it is possible to claim that there was a desecration of God’s Name, especially since to many

⁸ Although I am not aware of earlier Habad writers who understood this principle in such an explicitly antinomian context, there is ample precedent in Habad literature for the principle of equality between learned and unlearned Jews in some forms of divine service. “This is why we observe that the divine soul of every Israelite becomes attached and attracted, involuntarily and of its own accord, when he hears an exposition of a divine subject, even if he does not understand it at all . . . This is higher than reason and therefore in this matter the learned and ignorant are truly equal” (Jacobs 1963: 140). Ginsburg extends this principle by relating it to the witnessing of divinity in political violence.

⁹ From the eighteenth chapter of *Messilat Yesharim*, citing *’Avot* 2:5. In chapters 22–23 Luzzatto adds that while wisdom is a primary cause of arrogance among scholars, nevertheless ignorance is worse, since “a sign of pride is poverty of Torah” (Sanhedrin 24a).

Jews who are estranged from Judaism, it may seem as if we place no importance upon the lives of non-Jews. (1995: 45)

Ginsburg, however, quickly returns to his basic antinomian position that “only when there is self-annihilation in the face of divine justice and liberation from the strangling bonds of ‘many considerations’ which threaten to gain control . . . is it possible to listen attentively to which side the heart of Israel beats upon.” This is an elaborate circumlocution for the freeing of “Deeds” from the powerful constraints of pragmatism, traditional norms, and Jewish legal authority. Neither learned arguments in halakhah nor the moral authority of sages can hope to stand against the self-annihilating zeal of a Barukh Goldstein, whose subjectivity has been—as we are told—overwhelmed by the experience of jealous rage for heaven’s honor.

RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK—THE DIALECTIC OF DIVINE HONOR AND HUMAN DIGNITY

If Yitzhak Ginsburg conceives the honor of the divine as a force that overwhelms consciousness and humanity, Abraham Isaac Kook (1864–1935) conceived it as a force that shores humanity up, and so even though he died before the establishment of the State of Israel and its complications, there are passages in his voluminous corpus that read like prescient refutations of the whole *Barukh Ha-Gever* manifesto. Rabbi Kook’s views on divine honor are significant in their own right, however, because they constitute an infrequently recognized foundation of his more celebrated positions on the relationship between tradition and modernity, between Jewish and universal ethics, and between Zionism and traditional religiosity. He ascended to the Holy Land from Lithuania in 1904 to become chief rabbi of the Jewish community in “Jaffa and its surrounding settlements” (the best known of which being the nascent “Hebrew city” of Tel-Aviv), and later rose to prominence as the chief Ashkenazi rabbi of mandatory Palestine, in which capacity he served until his death from cancer in 1935. Although his institutional achievements were many, it is arguable that his most significant ongoing contribution is to the world of ideas, and particularly to his insistent attempts to probe the complex nature of reality in a way that brought apparent opposites together. This is the context in which his writing on divine honor should be understood.

For Rabbi Kook, the question of divine honor is linked inevitably to the problem of anthropomorphism that has preoccupied Jewish philosophers and mystics over the millennia. This is indeed not surprising, given the biblical use of *kavod* (honor or glory) to signify the presence or palpable

appearance of divinity that typically accompanies revelation (Exodus 24: 16–17, 40: 34–35; Leviticus 9: 6 etc.). The word itself signifies weightiness or gravitas in both a metaphoric and a literal sense, and this is the context in which medieval philosophers and kabbalists debated whether the divine *kavod* described in the Torah should be thought of as a created entity or as an actual manifestation of the divine (Michaelson 1994). Rabbi Kook builds on this conversation but links the essentially metaphysical problem of divine honor to a set of ethical problems that are grounded in the phenomenology of religious experience:

When the honor of heaven [*kavod shamayim*] is lucidly conceptualized, it raises the worth of humanity and of all creatures, and fills them with a consciousness of spiritual grandeur that is joined to pure humility. The honor of heaven that is embodied [however] tends towards idolatry and debases the dignity [*kavod*] of human beings and of all creatures. Thus, “Great is the dignity of created beings [*kavod ha-briyot*], which trumps [even] a biblical prohibition [*Berakhot* 19b],” to instruct us with respect to the lucid form of God’s honor, which magnifies in its beneficence the fundamental principle of the dignity of created beings. (Kook 1985: 81).

This is a complex passage, to which we will have occasion to return, as it contains the essential message of Rabbi Kook’s teaching on divine honor in an unambiguous and highly compressed form. The fundamental distinction he asserts is between two different modes in which “the honor of heaven” may be perceived by human beings, the first of which is described as “lucidly conceptual” while the second is fundamentally corporeal—and potentially idolatrous—in nature. Gershom Scholem (1941: 18, 354) once referred to Rabbi Kook’s corpus as “the last example of productive Kabbalistic thought of which I know,” and to Kook himself as “a splendid type of Jewish mystic,” but it has been insufficiently appreciated how deeply and self-consciously Rabbi Kook was also indebted to certain aspects of Maimonides’ philosophical project, and in particular to the purification of religious imagination from gross anthropomorphism (Kook 1984: 105–133; 1967: 142–156; Kaplan 1995). When he writes that the honor of heaven can be “lucidly conceptualized” (*ha-mosag hasagah behirah*), he means first of all that the metaphoric nature of honor-language that is applied to God must be recognized as such. Like divine “hands” or “feet,” anthropomorphic language is only useful to the extent that it serves as a springboard for the conceptualization of divine moral attributes to which human beings are commanded to cling (Kook 1985: 71) and through which they can overcome the “childish” belief that the divine is an essence or object to be grasped and comprehended (Ben-Shlomo 1988).

This “conceptualization” of divine attributes like honor bears an ethical as well as a metaphysical significance, because it frees the demand for *imitatio dei*, which is so central to classical undertakings of Jewish philosophy as well as mysticism, from any thrall to limited human conceptions of the divine: “The perfect knowledge of recognition of the divine raises man from his lowliness and supports him to be desirous of resembling his Creator in all the positive attributes, in wisdom and in kindness . . . But if anything outside of the perfection of that which is truly perfect, may He be blessed, is attributed to divinity, the most perfect longing to resemble [the Creator] will already be destroyed; there is no limit to the weakness and negation of life that will make themselves felt because of this, across the whole breadth of life” (Kook 2004: 5).

Here the attribution of limited and limiting characteristics to divinity through “childish” anthropomorphism gives rise to an ethical failure, because it corrupts the process of *imitatio dei* by setting standards for humanity too low. Rabbi Kook criticizes those who refuse to utilize anthropomorphic imagery out of a sense of misplaced religious purism (Kook 1967: 142), but he is also adamant that such imagery must be bracketed by clear conceptual thinking lest it come to be identified too solidly with the divine life: “Idolatry degrades the conception of divinity to the lowliness of what is human, and this is the worst destruction. Its result, which is the making of a material icon, even for the sake of heaven, is that it degrades the image of the exaltation of divine light that is in the human soul, from which all the moral attributes are drawn” (Kook 2004: 15). This is what Rabbi Kook means when he writes that “The honor of heaven that is embodied tends towards idolatry and debases the dignity (*kavod*) of human beings . . .” (1985: 81). As a mere being among other beings, no matter how powerful or exalted, the divine cannot serve as an appropriate model for the infinitude of human possibility.

This is close to the view of divine honor as “otherwise than being” championed by Levinas, but Rabbi Kook’s formulation is both enriched and constrained by the traditional religious idiom in which he writes. Unlike Levinas, who is free to elaborate his views in an extreme and relatively abstract way as part of his broad critique of modern philosophy’s fascination with being, Rabbi Kook seeks as a communal leader to balance his critique with a sense of the dialectical importance of “honor” as a practical religious and human value. “Under this concept [of God’s honor],” he writes, “lie both strength and weakness,” and these are directly related to the integration of the different conceptual and experiential dimensions of honor in Jewish spirituality: “The tendency to give honor to the name

of God engenders human courage, the recognition that the highest good is sovereign in the world, and that this [good] spreads forth and increases to the same extent that the knowledge of God in its higher aspect, which draws after it the most exalted feelings of honor, gains strength in the world” (Kook 1985: 81).¹⁰

Human courage—which is an extremely significant value for Rabbi Kook—derives from the inclination to give honor to the *name* of God, which is a typical Jewish circumlocution to register discomfort with any overly anthropomorphic assertion regarding divinity. Taken in its proper context, the instinct to “give honor to the name of God” finds its expression in the idealistic “recognition that the highest good is sovereign in the world,” and this means in turn that human beings are called to fealty towards a set of idealistic and ethical norms rather than to the arbitrary will of any essentially corporeal sovereign. “The service of some exalted being, without reference to any ideals” he writes in 1906, “. . . is a service whose root is shuddering and horror—not the awe of glory [*kavod*] and majesty, which enlarges the soul” (Kook 1967: 147). The true quest to honor the divine does not lead through “shuddering and horror,” according to Rabbi Kook, and cannot essentially contradict Jewish ethical norms, because the early rabbis have already taught that “It is impossible to cleave [directly] to the divine presence [*Shechinah*]—rather, cling to His ways: just as He is merciful and gracious, so you should be merciful and gracious. Just as He is a doer of kindnesses, so you should be a doer of kindnesses (*Ketubot* 111b).” Following in the footsteps of Lithuanian kabbalists before him (Ross 1982), Rabbi Kook notes that no one can hope “to escape the stain of idolatry” who clings to the divine without benefit of this understanding (1985: 71).

It is difficult to know what precise relationship Rabbi Kook’s spiritual and theological reflections bore to any of the specific social and religious controversies of his day. Yet real frustration is palpable in his description of religious personalities who misuse or who falsely reify the notion of divine honor. Because they conceive the divine in essentially corporeal terms (although they would never admit to this), their notion of divine sovereignty is reduced to the demand for unthinking and arbitrary obedience to dictatorial decrees, in the manner of human sovereigns whose honor is achieved through the more or less brutal effacement of their subordinates. This is a monstrous development, whose genesis can be traced to the fear of thinking conceptually about the divine:

¹⁰ Divine honor is associated with both the higher and the lower reaches of the divine emanation. See the extended essay on Numbers 14:21 by R. Menahem Mendl Schneersohn (M. Schneersohn 1991: 178–82), who was “Rebbe” to Rabbi Kook’s maternal grandfather (Zuriff 1961: 12).

Yet those who are cowardly and excitable, and who fail because of their cowardice to pay attention, or who do not dare to investigate the divine conception and its glory [*kavod*], for them the conception itself becomes a stumbling block. The obligation to honor God is instantiated among them as a cruel demand from a physical being that longs for honor without limit, thus degrading every good and refined sentiment among them. It transforms them into sad and cruel slaves who hate one another and who hate God in their innermost hearts even though they constantly speak words of love and honor when they mention God's name. "With their mouths and with their lips they honor Him, yet their hearts are distant from Him" [Isaiah 29:13]. (Kook 1985: 81)

In a related passage that was published in 1906, Rabbi Kook relates the intellectual cowardice of contemporary religious leaders to the disaffection from religion of the younger generation of Jewish pioneers: "They [the younger generation] believe that they have found nothing but aspects of darkness [among the representatives of religion]; of emotion without intellect, of cowardice and timidity without courage of heart and strength of vitality, and their hearts have closed up within them . . . [T]hey have turned to mocking and negation . . ." (Kook 1967: 110). The unsophisticated image of God's honor associated by some with tradition becomes a stumbling block for teachers as well as students, because the God that they imagine is like the mafia boss who "longs for honor without limits," requiring endless human debasement. Can murder for the sake of heaven's honor lie more than one conceptual step from this construct?

It is, of course, telling that Rabbi Kook's critique relies on some of the same classical texts that will later be marshaled by Yitzhak Ginsburg, including the Talmudic juxtaposition of divine and human honor in *Berakhot* 19b, which we have already had occasion to mention. Essential to Rabbi Kook's reading is that these are presented as potentially contradictory values, whose expression must be mediated by Jewish law: "Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav: If one finds a [prohibited] mixture of wool and linen in his garment, he takes it off even in the marketplace. What is the reason? 'There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord' (Proverbs 21:30): where the name of God is desecrated, no honor is accorded [even] to a sage." The law is no respecter of persons. But the continuation of this passage, which seems to challenge this principle, is central to the citation from Rabbi Kook's discussion of divine honor with which we began:

Come and hear. "Great is the dignity of created beings [*kavod ha-briyot*], since it overrides [even] a biblical prohibition." Why should it? Let us apply the rule "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor

counsel against the Lord”! Rav bar Shaba explained in the presence of Rav Kahana that this principle [i.e., “Great is human dignity” etc.] refers to the negative precept of “thou shalt not turn aside” [i.e., from the words of the Sages] (Deuteronomy 17:11). They laughed at him. The negative precept of “thou shalt not turn aside” [from the words of the Sages] is also from the Torah! Said Rav Kahana, if a great man makes a statement, you should not laugh at him. All the ordinances of the Rabbis were authorized by them on the basis of the prohibition “thou shalt not turn aside,” but where the question of [human] dignity is concerned the Rabbis allowed the act [i.e., voided their own prohibition]. (*Berakhot* 19b)

The dictum “Great is the dignity of created beings” stands here in explicit contrast to the principle “There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord,” and this is the tension that drives the subsequent legal discussion forward, as Talmudic and later rabbis argue the delimitations of each authoritative principle.

While the legal intricacies of this discussion exceed the scope of this article, it is important to recognize that most readers interpret this Talmudic passage as a *limitation* on the power of human dignity to trump religious prohibitions, since it seems to restrict this principle to precepts that are rabbinic rather than truly biblical in origin (Rakover 1998). Yet Rabbi Kook cites this passage as if it were an unambiguous certification of the importance of human dignity, when he writes without qualification that “Great is the dignity of created beings which trumps [even] a biblical prohibition, to instruct us with respect to the lucid form of God’s honor” (1985: 81). This is not a counter-normative reading with respect to the practical legal issues involved but rather a more subtle and far-reaching argument, which is that we learn something from the form of this Talmudic discussion that we do not learn from its specific content. The fact that human dignity and divine honor can be juxtaposed as competing values requiring adjudication is what “instructs us with respect to the lucid form of God’s honor,” because no matter what the outcome of the practical legal issue at hand, it indicates that divine honor is not what naïve or totalitarian religious perspectives always tend to insist upon. The requirement for legal adjudication is a fact of greater theological and ethical significance than any particular ruling in the case could be, because it establishes that the honor due to the divine Name is *not* in principle absolute.

Rabbi Kook’s contemporary, the Lithuanian Talmudist and ethicist Rabbi Yeruham Halevy of Mir (d. 1936) advances a similar reading in more explicit terms. Commenting on the same Talmudic passage as Rabbi Kook, he writes that

We derive from these words of the Talmud a great and fundamental principle, which is that the obligations of the Torah reach no further than the dignity of created beings. The dignity of created beings is the highest point, and when there is any injury done to human dignity, the Torah is pushed aside because of it, because at that point the Torah no longer obligates, since there is nothing higher than the dignity of created beings. Except that our Sages of blessed memory adduced a scriptural verse, "There is no wisdom, nor counsel nor understanding against the Lord," which means that in the final analysis, the honor of heaven is higher than the dignity of created beings. (Leibowitz 2000: 33)¹¹

In this lecture, which was first delivered to his *yeshivah* in the winter of 1926, Rabbi Leibowitz argues that the overall "pattern" of the Torah is that the dignity of created beings trumps other mandates and would have trumped here as well had the rabbis not adduced a special scriptural exception. Although the law is that divine prohibitions often take precedence over human dignity, one needs to be sensitive to the exceptional way in which the rabbis justified this ruling, appealing to a specific biblical verse in a way that calls attention to the extraordinary character of this *counter-intuitive* decision. Once again, the form of the discussion reveals something about the ethos of Jewish law that the specific ruling could not, for as Rabbi Leibowitz notes, "how can we correctly apply all of the specific laws and teachings on interpersonal relations" if we lack a sense for "the pattern and essence of the entire Torah, which is the honor due to the image of God [i.e., to human beings]?" "This is terrifying," he writes, "to one who considers it!" (Leibowitz 2000: 36). And in a later essay he argues repeatedly that the honor of created beings "is equated with the honor of God." This is very close to Rabbi Kook's "lucid form of God's honor," which "magnifies in its beneficence the fundamental principle of the dignity of created beings" (Kook 1985: 81).

While Rabbi Leibowitz remains close to the idioms of conventional Talmudic and *mussar* scholarship, however, Rabbi Kook's language betrays his deep engagement with Jewish philosophical as well as mystical literature, including the twin problems of anthropomorphism and of unmediated "cleaving" to the divine essence without ethical mediation. The "embodied" and "lucidly conceptualized" forms of divine honor he describes are themselves related at least loosely to the "lower" and "higher" manifestations of divine *kavod* described in some Jewish mystical writing. The lower *kavod*, which is associated with the lower reaches of divine emanation

¹¹ From a chapter titled "Great is the Dignity of Created Beings," which constitutes a student's recollection of a lecture first delivered in 1926.

tion, is also related to the mechanical obedience to the practical divine commandments and with subservience to the divine will, whereas the higher *kavod* may be associated with conceptual human understanding and with creativity (D. B. Scheersohn 1988: 1–14; M. Schneersohn 1991: 178–182). It is the tension and movement between these two ideals, similarly, that give to Rabbi Kook's writing on the subject its characteristically dialectical frame. The tension between competing values is, of course, absent almost by definition from essays like *Barukh Ha-Gever*, whose ethos is that of the single value (in this case, God's honor) taken to an absurd extreme. Paradoxically, this elevation of any one value to the exclusion of all others constitutes a limited and therefore finite, "corporeal" understanding of divinity, to which Rabbi Kook objects.

Rabbi Kook's legacy has been subject to increasingly shrill debates in contemporary Israel, both among his ostensible disciples and among the broader public who must come to terms with the social and religious projects that are associated with his name. Disciples of the third and fourth generation debate just how open their schools should be to secular learning, or how they should respond to the shifting sands of war and peace with the Palestinians, while both right-leaning religious political parties and left-leaning religious academics all invoke the name of Abraham Isaac Kook (see Singer 1996; Ross 1995). More than any other contemporary political group, Rabbi Kook's name has been associated with the Gush Emunim Jewish settlement movement that took form under his son's tutelage in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when the elder Kook had been dead for over thirty years. But the hard edge of Jewish religious radicalism has already passed from the hands of organized Zionist groups like Gush Emunim, who revere Rabbi Kook's image, into the hands of a less organized but even more radical group of hyper-nationalists, for whom the ideological connections that bound the old Gush Emunim to classical political Zionism no longer hold. Both Barukh Goldstein and Yitzhak Ginsburg exemplify this new guard, who have been influenced by a heady mixture of Kahanist political rhetoric and Habad mystical cosmology made even more volatile by the vacuum left when Habad leader Menahem Mendl Schneersohn died without a successor amidst intense messianic speculation in 1994 (Ravitzky 1995: 181–207).

It would be foolish to downplay connections of various kinds between the extreme wing of Gush Emunim and these new radicals, yet it is telling that neither Abraham Isaac Kook nor his politically radical son Tzvi Yehudah Kook figure at all prominently in the content of the hagiographical essays published alongside *Barukh Ha-Gever* in 1995. Ginsburg himself attributes Barukh Goldstein's ability to carry out the massacre in Hebron to a variety of factors, including the assertion of a genealogical relationship to

the founding rabbis of Habad and to the Jewish victims of the 1929 massacre perpetrated by Palestinians against Jews in Hebron, to his having been a student of Meir Kahane, and to his identity as an American, which “gave him the freedom and courage of heart as well as the inner resistance to ongoing capitulation” which together made the massacre possible (Ginsburg 1994: 34). While Ginsburg and those who share his ideology are willing to utilize the state apparatus (and especially its military force) to achieve their ideological ends, they lack the profound and constraining reverence for the state and its institutions that characterized many of those who most consistently invoked the legacy of Rabbi Kook (Aran 1986: 226–232). At the same time, social scientists have tended to underestimate the moderating impact of the elder Rabbi Kook’s own theological formulations, which include the important dialectic between divine and human honor. Rabbi Kook’s thought was rich enough to assert the authority of divine law alongside the validity of independent human initiative, and the existence of universal moral norms to which those who wish to honor God must necessarily pay heed (Ish-Shalom 1995; Amital 1985; Bin-Nun 1985).

More than any other traditional Jewish thinker in modern times, Rabbi Kook calls attention to the dangers that attend even to religiously central and necessary values like heaven’s honor, which require social and political as well as theological vigilance on the part of religious leaders. It is because the theological and ethical implications of ideas are so tightly interwoven that he calls attention repeatedly to the danger that is inherent on a theological as well as an ethical level in the attempt to honor God through human suppression. The attempt to achieve an experience of the divine shorn of ethical content betrays an idolatrous sensibility. “There are various impurities that must be removed from the idea of heaven’s honor,” Rabbi Kook writes, “before it can be understood in such purity that it casts aside all dross and counterfeit influence” (1985: 81). And then startlingly, “All that the world suffers can be attributed to this principle of purifying heaven’s honor from . . . its dross and alloy.”¹²

EMMANUEL LEVINAS—HONORING THE OTHER

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is known primarily as an academic philosopher, but his influence on the course of modern Jewish thought

¹² This statement, which undoubtedly refers to the vast upheavals and tribulations of the early twentieth century, is also an elaboration of a theme raised by Yehudah Halevi in his twelfth century *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* II:44, in which the theme of divine honor plays a role. As Lobel notes with respect to this passage, “Ha-Levi sees Jewish suffering as serving a larger extra-mural purpose of purifying the nation in order to enable the world as a whole to connect to the Divine” (2000: 20).

beyond the academy has been increasing. Born to an observant and fairly cosmopolitan Jewish family in Lithuania, he testifies that he was influenced at an early age by Dostoevsky as well as the Bible, and that he left home for Strasbourg at the age of seventeen to study philosophy. While much of his family was murdered during the Holocaust, Levinas himself spent the war imprisoned by the Germans as a French officer, and when the war was over, he studied for a period of years with the mysterious Talmudic sage Monsieur Shoshani, who also tutored the young Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel (Robbins 2000). A student first of Husserl and later of Heidegger, Levinas's deep disillusionment with Heidegger's enthusiastic participation in the intellectual program of the Third Reich helped to sustain a lifelong critique of Heidegger's philosophical project, in which he believed that certain western traditions of thinking had reached their logical apogee (Robbins 2000: 130–139).

This was a tradition, according to Levinas, in which ontology had been privileged over ethics, in which the question of Being took precedence over the fates of particular beings, and in which the anxiety of death was more significant than the anxiety surrounding murder. This was more than a moralistic stance, because Levinas devoted himself to showing that philosophy could be reconceived through the prism of an ethics that takes irreducible multiplicity and the existence of multiple beings as its starting point, resisting collapse into the metaphysical tradition that runs “from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel” and that always endeavors, in his words, “to suppress separation, to unite,” and to attribute all separation to an “illusion or a fault in the absolute” (Levinas 1969: 104). It is this central theme of Levinas's thought that finds a surprising and explicit echo in the theological discussion of God's honor, and particularly in the thought of that other Lithuanian Jew, Rabbi Kook. From different starting points, both men were concerned with the ethical implications of the intellectual focus on divine being, although Levinas pushed past Rabbi Kook's concern with specifically Jewish thought towards a radical reconfiguration of western philosophy and theology as a whole.

In the academic year 1975–1976, the last year of his teaching at the Sorbonne, Levinas offered a course called “God and Onto-Theology” whose premise was the question, “can we think of God outside of onto-theology, outside of God's reference to being?” (Levinas 2000: 149).¹³ Once again, it was Heidegger against whom this question was most clearly directed: “For Heidegger, the comprehension of being in its truth was

¹³ From the lecture “The Question of Subjectivity,” 9 January 1976.

immediately covered over by its function as the universal foundation of beings, by a supreme being, a founder, by God. The thinking of being, being in its truth, becomes knowledge [*savoir*] or comprehension of God: theo-logy. The European philosophy of being becomes theology” (Levinas 2000: 123).¹⁴ In light of Rabbi Kook’s critique of those who wish to honor God as a mere being among beings, Levinas’s strictures against the “thinking of being” in western theology are especially redolent. While we cannot replicate his philosophical argument here, it is sufficient to show that Levinas wants to establish a way of talking about God that is not grounded in the question of being but, as he says, “in a certain ethical relationship” (2000: 123) and that this relational way of thinking leads him directly into a discussion of God’s honor. This is part of what Levinas means when he writes, “The Infinite has glory [i.e., honor] only through the approach of the other, through my substitution of the other, or through my expiation for another” (2000: 200).¹⁵ This is *kavod shamayim* in an ethical register.

The term “glory” (*la gloire*) which runs through these lectures, almost always in association with the term “Infinity” or “the Infinite,” is closely related for Levinas to the ethical gesture of self-limitation on behalf of another. Although he writes in French, I believe it can be shown that when Levinas says “glory” he has in mind the Hebrew genealogy of *kavod*, which can itself be translated as either “glory” or “honor” depending on context. Theologians and Bible scholars have tended to translate *kavod* as “glory” for reasons internal to those disciplines, whereas social scientists typically prefer “honor,” but it is important to transcend these disciplinary divisions. The term *kavod* is multivalent enough to include honor, dignity, glory and even gravitas or weightiness without difficulty, and it would be a mistake to insist on any single narrow translation.

The biblical context of Levinas’s reference to “glory” is in any case quite explicit: “This glory is glorified by the subject’s stepping out of the dark corners of his reserve [*quanta-soi*], which resembles the thickets of Paradise where Adam hid upon hearing the voice of the eternal. The glory of the Infinite is anarchy in the subject driven out of hiding, with no possible escape. It is expressed in the sincerity making a sign for the other before whom I am responsible. This manner of being driven from hiding—this *here I am*—is a Saying whose Said consists in saying ‘Here I am!’—this is a witnessing of that glory” (2000: 196). The biblical story of Adam to which Levinas alludes is the first biblical episode in which

¹⁴ From the lecture “Beginning with Heidegger,” 7 November 1975.

¹⁵ From the lecture “Witnessing and Ethics,” 23 April 1976. This is a theme that Levinas develops elsewhere as well, particularly in *Otherwise Than Being*. See de Boer.

shame (the concomitant of honor) is thematized, but there are other biblical allusions here as well. The phrase “Here I am” (*hineni*) which occurs no less than three times in this passage is, for Jewishly literate readers of the Bible, an iconic assertion of “zealotry and humility” (to cite the medieval commentator Rashi) in the face of God’s limitless command. Abraham and Moses both say *hineni* (Genesis 22:1; Exodus 3:4) when confronted by divine speech (see Chalier 1995; Wyschogrod 2001: xvi–xvii).

“Here I am” is a witnessing of glory for Levinas precisely because it is an act of responsibility toward the Other before whom no hiding is possible (this can, incidentally, refer either to God as Other or to the human neighbor), and this puts him in strongest possible contrast to anyone who believes that God’s glory or honor can be witnessed through an amoral “ecstasy of holiness,” in which mere experience is key. “Bearing witness does not come to be added on, like an expression, or some information, or a symptom,” writes Levinas, “and *it does not refer to an experience . . . of the Infinite . . .* There is no *experience* of the Infinite . . . But there can be a *relationship* with God, in which the neighbor is an indispensable moment. We know this much from the Bible: to know God is to do justice to the neighbor . . .” (2000: 199).¹⁶ Just as Rabbi Kook insisted that divine honor must be grasped in its conceptual-ethical rather than “embodied” register, Levinas asserts that divine glory must be understood not as the appearance or manifestation of divine being but rather as a demand for ethical service and encounter. The glory is relational rather than essential and cannot therefore be witnessed except by the granting of dignity in otherness to the manifold separate others whom I meet. This is to change the theological/philosophical conversation from a quest for being, or even for the ground of all being, into a search for appropriate metaphors to describe a particular kind of ethical relation.

A slightly different, more homiletic version of this same teaching appears in Levinas’s Talmudic essay, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition.” He cites a rabbinic elaboration on Exodus 33, in which Moses beseeches God, “Show me, I pray thee, Thy glory [*kavod*],” to which God responds that Moses may only look upon His “back,” but that “man may not see Me and live.” The rabbis respond that when Moses saw God’s back, as it were, he was shown the specific knot identified by tradition as the way that *tefillin* or phylacteries should be tied. For Levinas, this is a teaching about the nature of glory:

¹⁶ From the lecture, “Witnessing and Ethics,” 23 April 1976 (emphasis added).

In order to understand the very spirit of Judaism, it is perhaps of some interest to mention the way in which rabbinical scholars interpret this text on the Epiphany: the “back” that Moses saw from the cleft of the rock from which he followed the passing of divine Glory was nothing other than the knot formed by the straps of the phylacteries on the back of God’s neck! A prescriptive teaching even here! Which demonstrates how thoroughly the entire Revelation is bound up around daily ritual conduct. This ritualism suspends the immediacy of the relations with Nature’s given and determines, against the blinding spontaneity of Desires, the ethical relation with the other man. To the extent that this ritualism does this, it confirms the conception of God in which He is welcomed in the face-to-face with the other and in the obligation towards the other. (1994a: 144)

The “glory” that Moses saw was, in effect, a ritual prescription rather than an eruption of divine being or an occasion for ecstasy: the revelation of God is a revelation of law. In fact, Levinas could have made this point even more easily, since the biblical text continues: “The Lord passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, The Lord! . . .’ a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness to the thousandth generation” (Exodus 33: 6–7), which is adopted by later interpreters—philosophers like Maimonides as well as kabbalists like Moses Cordovero—to represent a strong teaching of *imitatio dei*: “Just as He is compassionate, so you should be compassionate, just as He is gracious, so you should be gracious,” and so on. (*Sifri’Ekev* 49). These are the divine “attributes” about which Rabbi Kook has written (1985: 71) that one who tries to cling to the divine directly and without their intermediary cannot help but become stained by the stain of idolatry—which is the tendency to conceive God in essential rather than conceptual and ethical terms.

Many readers have wondered at Levinas’s identification of the ritual law with an ethical demand; the religious genealogy of much Western thinking has conspired to teach us that the opposite should be true (Seeman 2004; Asad 1993)—but Levinas’s understanding of the divine glory once more holds a key. The “Infinite” which cannot be experienced but to which I can stand in relation is characterized by Levinas as that which stands outside of the circle of my own “totality”—the closed circle within which I reduce all otherness to “the same.” In his philosophical work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that “Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of totality, in a contraction that leaves a space for the separated being . . . Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society . . . [T]he idea of creation *ex nihilo* expresses a multiplicity not united into a totality” (1969: 104). Creation *ex nihilo* is not a theological

postulate for Levinas so much as it is a metaphor for a relation that can escape totality's endless and insomniacal self-involvement—it is the positing of a beyond that cannot be described as just another place within being's regime. Yet note how a second metaphor—the “contraction that leaves a space for a separated being” is embedded within this discussion. As I have argued elsewhere (Seeman 2004), this constitutes more than just a nod toward the language of Lurianic mysticism, which has, in different ways, been crucial to each of the authors whose views we have examined here.

Levinas can be described as a kind of disenchanting kabbalist, because while he clearly rejects many of the cosmological presuppositions of the traditional kabbalistic universe (and loudly protests his own lack of interest in mysticism), he also works hard, in his own words, to find ways to avoid “effacing the inimitable resources of this language” as a resource for thinking (1994b: 155). The myth of *zimzum*, or divine contraction that makes room for the existence of independent creations, becomes a ritual model for traditional kabbalistic writers like Levinas's eighteenth-century cultural hero, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. Self abnegation through obedience to the commandments makes room, through a logic of parallelism, for the reflux of the divine that has already appeared to absent itself for the sake of creation, and thus the human models the divine precisely by making room for the presence of the other. In his essay on Rabbi Hayyim, Levinas writes, “there is here an ethical significance to the religious [i.e., ritual] commandments: they amount to letting those who are other than self live or, in the case of transgression, die. Does not the being of man amount to being-for-the-other (1994b: 155)?” Elsewhere he notes that the fear of God is—should be—the fear for one's neighbor (Levinas 1994c). Levinas does not invoke the term “ethics” in its everyday sense of “right conduct, a system of moral precepts, or any particular morality,” notes Robbins, but rather as a designation for a particular kind of relation: “ceding one's place to the other is paradigmatic of the kind of gesture that Levinas terms ‘ethical’” (2000: 1).

One of the consequences of this profound metaphor is that because the ethical act—the act of creation *ex nihilo*—is also paradoxically an act of self-withdrawal, so the glory or honor of the divine that is revealed in creation is revealed through an absence, which might also be described as an excess that cannot be contained, but is emphatically *not* through the appearance or manifestation of a particular being, no matter how powerful or exalted. “Responsibility,” Levinas writes, “cannot be stated in terms of presence. Responsibility for the other in me is an exigency that increases as one responds to it; it is an impossibility of acquitting the debt . . . an

excess over the present. This excess is glory" (2000: 195).¹⁷ The divine glory cannot be manifest through the assertion of divine presence, Levinas insists, but only through the self-effacing responsibility in which creation *ex nihilo* occurs. Levinas has been criticized (1995; Sikka 1998) for failing to comprehend the holiness of "pagan" or "iconic" spirituality that resides in things and people, but it seems fair to respond that Levinas's critique is more concerned with the idolatrous potential at the heart of monotheism and certain forms of western philosophy than it is with the phenomena of comparative religions. The immediate context is Heidegger, and by extension, Yitzhak Ginsburg—it is not India.

In concluding, we return to the biblical exclamation "Here I am!" with which our discussion of Levinas began: "In the *here I am*, that is, in the first phrase in which God is attested, [the word] 'God' is not uttered. Here, one could not even say, 'I believe in God.' [To bear witness to God is not to utter that word, as though glory could be posited as a theme or a thesis, or as the essence of being" (Levinas 2000: 200).¹⁸ And again, a week later, "Bearing witness [to the glory] can and must be understood as a manifestation that does not refer to disclosure, a manifestation that is not presence or the representation of presence . . . For every experience is comprehension, and if bearing witness is understood as a relationship of the infinite with the finite, then we may speak here of *bursting of experience in witnessing*" (2000: 202).¹⁹ The *here I am* of what Levinas calls "bearing witness" constitutes glory or honor in a paradoxical sense. Not as we may naively have thought, because it adds to the public repute or renown of the divine (although it may well do that), but because it makes room for the upsurge of that which is "wholly other" in an ethical rather than an ontological sense. The phrase *here I am* uttered by an Abraham or a Moses never means "I believe in You" or "I witness Your existence," still less "I experience the self-authenticating ecstasy of Your presence," but always in the ethical register, "Here I stand, ready for Your command."

CONCLUSION: ON THE UNBEARABLE WEIGHTINESS OF BEING

The three writers whose views have been highlighted in this article are in many ways incommensurate, yet together they testify to the ongoing and overwhelming significance of the concept of divine honor to con-

¹⁷ From the lecture, "Glory of the Infinite and Witnessing," 9 April 1976.

¹⁸ From the lecture, "Witnessing and Ethics," 23 April 1976.

¹⁹ From the lecture, "From Consciousness to Prophetism," 30 April 1976.

temporary Jewish thought and politics. For Yitzhak Ginsburg, who stands today behind a successful, transnational Jewish outreach campaign, honoring the divine is a call to the authenticity of personal experience that may, under the right circumstances, be expressed even through the terror and revulsion occasioned by the commission of religiously sanctioned atrocity. In its most fundamental phenomenology, the honor of the divine in this account is a kind of absolute weight or *koved*—an unbearable weightiness that breaks apart the authority of Jewish law and ethics through its inexorable demand for obedience to its own idiosyncratic dictates. In the language of Jewish mysticism, we might say that absolute and unmediated divine *kavod* requires a similarly limitless and unmediated self-annihilation (*bittul*) on the part of human beings. The divine simply takes up too much “space,” in the logic of terror as a mystical technique, for the merely human to hold its ground.

By contrast, Abraham Isaac Kook and Emmanuel Levinas have been the most insistent of modern witnesses to the theological and ethical dangers posed by divine honor that has been, from their point of view, improperly conceived. For Rabbi Kook, the essential vitality of the divine Infinite must be approached asymptotically, through the “ideals” or paths of ethical comportment that were revealed as God’s only response to Moses’ demand, “Show me please, Your glory (*kavod*)!” Levinas is more radical than Rabbi Kook with respect to traditional Jewish writing, because he seeks a God wholly “uncontaminated by being,” a divine encounter that takes place in the ethical register only and which cannot therefore be termed an experience or manifestation of divine being at all. Yet central to the thought of both men, with their different starting points and audiences, is the profound insistence that *kavod shamayim*, the glory of heaven, not be conceived in a way that supplants or pulverizes the dignity of created beings. Indeed, each man takes this argument a step further, to argue in the terms of his own specialized vocabulary, that the honor of heaven and the honor of created beings cannot be separated. Little wonder that both men focus such explicit attention on the need for an “adult” relationship with the divine, grounded in the responsibility of the ethical demand and that alongside their commitment to the regularities of traditional Jewish law and practice, they both decry the tendency to view the ideal religious personality as a “childish,” servile one (Levinas 1990; Kook 1967: 142–156; 1985: 81; Ben-Shlomo 1988).

Divine honor has not been rendered less significant to contemporary religion and politics by its relegation to the margins of academic and scholarly discourse. Possibly just the contrary, since it now bears the force that we associate with a return of the repressed. Despite its centrality to so much of historical Jewish thought, honoring the divine has

received little explicit attention, even among students of Levinas and Kook, for whom it was, as I have shown, a live concern. There is also an even more important reason to take their writing on this subject seriously. The task of critical self-reflection during a time of war and terror with their many losses can never be an easy or a pleasant task. Yet the teaching of these men, in an age of atrocity, would seem to indicate that this precisely is what divine honor requires.

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