

RICHARD L. RUBENSTEIN AND THE DEATH OF “GHETTO JUDAISM”

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ABSTRACT

Richard L. Rubenstein, who initiated the American debate about theological consequences of the Holocaust with the publication of *After Auschwitz* in 1966, is best known for his claim that God was dead. This proclamation of God’s demise is usually understood as a result of reasoning that includes the occurrence of the Holocaust among its premises. In the article, the author presents an alternative interpretation. Analyzing Rubenstein’s early essays, the author argues that his rejection of theodicy as traditionally construed and of the notion of God as the Lord of History should rather be read as a part of Rubenstein’s critique of “ghetto Judaism”—Judaism born in tragic and anomalous circumstances of exile, containing intrinsically problematic ideas of God, divine providence, and divine election. Heavily influenced by existentialism in general and by Paul Tillich’s rejection of traditional theism in particular, Rubenstein believed that traditional Judaism had outlived its purpose. In Rubenstein’s thought, Auschwitz—and those interpretations of the Holocaust that attempted to place it within the parameters of traditional vocabulary and the covenantal framework—the author submits, serves primarily as the most glaring example of the bankruptcy of “ghetto Judaism” and its God. It is not, however, the reason for this God’s death and Rubenstein’s argument is logically independent of the fact of the Holocaust.

Richard L. Rubenstein initiated the dispute about theological consequences of the Holocaust with the publication of *After Auschwitz* in 1966. Initially, the book sparked not so much a serious discussion among Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers interested in the issues but rather an outrage; and as a result, a thorough, critical reflection over Rubenstein’s work was muted by a tidal wave of personal attacks. Today the air of scandal is long gone and Rubenstein’s essays fare significantly better. It is rather difficult to imagine a discussion of theological responses to the Holocaust that would not at least briefly refer to him. However, while Rubenstein’s position in post-Holocaust theological discourse is unquestionable today, it appears that recognition of his thought’s import came at a price of reading it exclusively in the post-Holocaust context. To put it differently, Rubenstein’s views expressed in *After Auschwitz* are always read as a response to the Holocaust. Rubenstein’s

most known opinion, according to which God of Jewish monotheism is dead, is invariably understood as a consequence of his confrontation with the Holocaust. In this interpretation, it is the enormity of the destruction of European Jewry that led Rubenstein to pronounce God as dead.

The goal of this essay is to present an alternative reading of Rubenstein's early writings. I submit that for Rubenstein the death of God was not primarily a consequence of the Holocaust. According to Zachary Braiterman, Rubenstein "was less a revolutionary than a revisionist who began the inevitably awkward process of remolding Jewish theological and textual traditions in light of the Holocaust."¹ An earlier commentator wrote: "From the unutterable evil of the Holocaust Rubenstein draws the conclusion that the traditional conception of the God of history is no longer tenable."² My interpretation of Rubenstein's thought differs from this, rather conventional, reading in that it argues that although Rubenstein was indeed convinced that this conception of God was untenable it was not the case because of the Holocaust. Rather, as the realization of the Holocaust's potential theological significance coalesced in Rubenstein's thinking with his earlier ideas shaped by psychoanalysis, a social-psychological understanding of religion, naturalism, and existentialism provided him with an opportunity to formulate his position in particularly strong terms. Auschwitz, more prominently than other historical or social event, indicated the need for a revision of traditional Jewish theology. It was not, however, a primary cause of such revision. Nor was it necessary for it.³ As Rubenstein himself put it in an autobiographical essay "Making of the Rabbi," "The death camps helped me to understand the religious meaning of our era."⁴ I take these words to mean that, cast against the backdrop of the Holocaust, certain aspects of the religious landscape of the twentieth century became prominent. In particular, the shortcomings of certain forms of Judaism became evident for Rubenstein. It does not mean, however, that these limitations appeared only after and only because the Holocaust had shaken Jewish life in Europe and beyond.

In 1966 Richard Rubenstein wrote:

I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps. . . . How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. . . . To see

any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God’s purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept.⁵

This fragment comes from Richard Rubenstein’s contribution to the Symposium on Jewish Belief organized by the journal *Commentary* in 1966. The essay he wrote for that occasion contains the most succinct and powerful expression of what later came to be known as his post-Holocaust theology. This particular passage highlights several important elements of his position. In it Rubenstein identifies the Holocaust as the source of the most important challenge to Judaism, a challenge encapsulated in one seemingly simple question: How can Jews believe in an omnipotent and beneficent God after the tragedy of the destruction of European Jewry? Next, he presents his understanding of the traditional image of God as the ultimate agent in history and then a corollary of this interpretation, that is, God’s implication in the Holocaust. If we accept the antecedent, we are bound to accept the conclusion. If God is the ultimate agent in history, he must have been in some way involved in the slaughter of the Jews. Traditional theodicy suggests that catastrophes in Jewish history come as punishments for Israel’s sinfulness. Hence, the Jews killed under the Nazi occupation should not be seen as innocent victims but rather as sinners rightfully punished by God. The Holocaust, then, was a part of a divine plan. Such an idea, declares Rubenstein, is obscene. If we reject the assumption that Hitler indeed served as an instrument of God’s will, there is only one alternative left—we must claim that God is dead.

It is tempting to read Rubenstein in this way, as presenting a variant of the classical problem of theodicy and solving it by denying one of its premises. This is how Rubenstein’s position is summarized by Steven T. Katz:

Rubenstein’s position can be summed up in three words: “God is Dead.” The logic that has driven him to utter these three extraordinarily powerful words can be put in the following syllogism: (1) God, as He is conceived of in the Jewish tradition, could not have allowed the Holocaust to happen; (2) the Holocaust did happen. Therefore, (3) God, as He is conceived of in the Jewish tradition, does not exist.⁶

In Katz’s reading the Holocaust for Rubenstein is an empirical event that disconfirms God’s existence or, as he puts it: “the empirical test case for the existence or nonexistence of God.”⁷ There are, indeed, statements

in Rubenstein's writings that invite such an interpretation. To cite only one of them: "We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?"⁸

In this passage it certainly seems that according to Rubenstein God is dead and that his demise was in some unspecified way related to the Holocaust. I suggest, however, that we read Rubenstein differently, indeed, possibly against the author's own intentions and self-understanding which, at least according to some, are not in any way privileged and can obscure more than they reveal. As I will show, in his early essays Rubenstein quite clearly pointed out the reasons for the timely demise of traditional Judaism.

In 1955 Rubenstein presented a paper on a conference devoted to "The Symbolic Content of Religion." The essay, with some revisions, was published four years later in the journal *Reconstructionist* under the title "The Symbols of Judaism and Religious Existentialism" and later still was included in the first edition of *After Auschwitz*.⁹ By Rubenstein's own admission, this essay is his earliest theological statement. In it the author addressed what he thought to be the problem located in the background of the general decline of Jewish religious commitment evident in postwar American life and pointed out two issues that presented insurmountable difficulty for traditional Judaism: "Though many still believe in that God [that is, the transcendent God of Jewish monotheism], they do so ignoring the questions of God and human freedom and God and human evil. For those who face these issues, the Father-God is a dead God. Even the existentialist leap of faith cannot resurrect this dead God after Auschwitz."¹⁰

In this essay Rubenstein does not explain in what ways the problems of human freedom and evil contributed to the decline of traditional Judaism. A confrontation with them shows, in Rubenstein's mind, that the traditional idea of God is not tenable. Reading the passage charitably, one can assume that Auschwitz is mentioned here because it is connected to the problem of human evil and perhaps to the issue of human freedom as well. The link, however, remains unexplored and unexplained. Nor does Rubenstein say why Auschwitz in particular—as different from other instances of human evil—is so important.

Rubenstein returned to the questions of human evil and freedom and their relation to the traditional idea of God four years later, in an essay published in the *Reconstructionist* under the title "Religious Naturalism and Human Evil,"¹¹ where he succinctly stated that the "real objections against a personal or theistic God come from the irreconcilability of the claim of

God's perfection with the hideous human evil tolerated by such a God."¹² Not surprisingly, in this context Rubenstein referred to Dostoyevski's Ivan Karamazow and his famous rejection of theodicy, according to which all the horrible suffering and pain human beings undergo in this world will be justified in the final divine harmony at the end of times:

I understand, of course, what an upheaval of the universe it will be when everything in heaven and earth blends in one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: "Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed." When the mother embraces the fiend who threw her child to the dogs, and all three cry aloud with tears, "Thou art just, O Lord!" then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear. But what pulls me up here is that I can't accept that harmony. . . . I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to "dear, kind God!"¹³

A deity who constructed the world in such a way that the future harmony requires or allows for the suffering of the innocent children is neither dear nor kind. "A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent," adds Rubenstein.¹⁴

Interestingly enough, in this context Rubenstein does not mention the Holocaust. In fact, there is no single reference to it in this short essay. Instead, Rubenstein approvingly quotes Ivan Karamazov's words and rejects not only any theodicy that would describe suffering as meaningful through its connection to the ultimate reconciliation of all things in divine harmony but also states that a case of one innocent suffering is—or should be—enough for us to realize that a God who would allow it to happen must be at worst cruel and at best indifferent. Rubenstein does not present an argument here. He does not explain in what way "the suffering of even one innocent child" leads to invalidation of the traditional image of God as benevolent and caring. Nor does he try to seriously engage any of the available theodic arguments that might at least suggest that his conclusion is not at all obvious. The quoted sentence is more a hyperbolic outcry of moral indignation than a conclusion of a precise line of reasoning.

Later in the essay Rubenstein refers, as if in passing, to one traditional response to the problem of evil, by saying: "Our ancestors attempted to solve this problem by projecting the existence of another world wherein this world's cruelties would be rectified. We cannot accept such a solution."¹⁵

The obvious question to ask at this point is this: why cannot such a solution be accepted if indeed it cannot? Before addressing this question and offering an explanation missing from Rubenstein's own essay, I will discuss the second problem Rubenstein identified in his 1955 essay as one which leads to the conclusion that the old Father-God is dead—the problem of human freedom.

Here Rubenstein repeats in a much abbreviated form a view that Paul Tillich expressed in his *The Courage To Be* and combines it with Erich Fromm's insight regarding the authoritarian personality:

Tillich . . . claims that a God who stands above all human activity and who controls the cosmos is ultimately the enemy of human self-fulfillment. As Job discovered, we must be in the wrong before such a God. . . . Tillich claims the theistic God is dead and deserved to die because He opposes human freedom. When Tillich's contention that a personal God is the enemy of freedom is compared with Erich Fromm's analysis of the types of human personality in which an authoritarian conception of the deity is either reflected or engendered, it becomes apparent that human moral autonomy is incompatible with the traditional conception of a personal God.¹⁶

Unlike some Protestant theologians who in the death of God saw first and foremost an opportunity for human freedom and potential to become truly realized, Rubenstein remains markedly pessimistic. Traditional conceptions of God may be incompatible with human freedom and dignity, but the removal of them is no reason for a joyous celebration. Rubenstein appreciates many ideas of Reconstructionism and of its founder, Mordechai Kaplan, and admits their influence on his own thinking; nevertheless, he categorically rejects Reconstructionism's "optimistic philosophy of man."¹⁷ While Rubenstein's pessimistic outlook does not come to the fore in this short essay, it is conveyed clearly enough in his appreciative remarks about Freud or in his description of man as "essentially a tragic, ironic figure of extremely limited possibilities."¹⁸

In his early thinking Rubenstein was heavily influenced by the thought of Paul Tillich, whose courses he attended as a graduate student at Harvard. "Even before coming to Harvard," Rubenstein wrote in his autobiography, "I was deeply impressed by Paul Johannes Tillich."¹⁹ Tillich's lectures brought him "the profound sense of both shock and illumination."²⁰ Rubenstein was not alone in his deep appreciation of Tillich. Many of Tillich's students recalled him later as one of the most creative and influential teachers they ever encountered. Admired as well as criticized by many, Tillich was among

the most important and influential theologians of the twentieth century. In Rubenstein's words, "An important part of Tillich's greatness was his ability to endow with theological meaning the universal dissolution in two world wars of the old certainties of European civilization. Tillich had known the stability which preceded the breakdown. He had the courage to confront the breakdown and discern within it possibilities of theological renewal."²¹

One of many ways of reading Tillich's rich and multifaceted oeuvre is to interpret it as an attempt to show what kind of religious faith survived that universal dissolution brought about by two wars that ravaged Europe and forever changed its face. Reading Tillich in this context, one is not surprised to discover that among thinkers he engages in his writings, Friedrich Nietzsche occupies a prominent position. As Robert Schacht suggested, one could say that Tillich strived to demonstrate what kind of God could still be alive after the death of God announced by Nietzsche.²²

However, for my purposes here, more important than this issue is the question of whether or not Tillich agreed with Nietzsche. In one of his sermons Tillich recalls Nietzsche's the Ugliest Man, whom Zarathustra recognized as the murderer of God. "The God who sees everything," declares Tillich, "is the God who has to die."²³ While in this short sermon Tillich goes on to say that the Ugliest Man has, in fact, failed in his attempt at decide, there is an important sense in which he did agree with Nietzsche. There was a God that had to be killed—it was the God of, as Tillich called it, "traditional theism." Apart from numerous insights regarding the classics of German philosophy that Rubenstein gained from Tillich's lectures and published works, it was Tillich's critique of the traditional theistic idea of God that he found most appealing. A detailed description of this critique lies beyond the scope of this essay. However, certain aspects of Tillich's rejection of the idea of God conceived of as a being among other beings need to be considered here.

"Ordinary theism," Tillich wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, "has made God a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind. The protest of atheism against such a highest person is correct. There is no evidence for his existence, nor is he a matter of ultimate concern."²⁴ According to Tillich, "the being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside other beings. If God is *a* being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance."²⁵ A God who is a being constitutes a part of the ontological structure of reality and as such is determined by it instead of transcending it. Such a God, argued Tillich in *The Courage To Be*,

is bound to the subject-object structure of reality, he is an object for us as subjects. At the same time we are objects to him as a subject. And this is decisive for the necessity of transcending theological theism. For God as subject makes me into an object which is nothing more than an object. He deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing. I revolt and try to make *him* into an object, but the revolt fails and becomes desperate. God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity. . . . This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control.²⁶

Such a God “becomes the model of everything against which existentialism revolted,” Tillich continued.²⁷ Nietzsche was right. This God was dead because he was not believable. For Rubenstein, the traditional Jewish understanding of God as the lord of history constituted one of the examples of theological theism rejected by Tillich. Rubenstein revolted against it as the existentialists and Nietzsche did before him.

When in his contribution to the *Commentary* symposium in 1966 Rubenstein identified himself as a “religious existentialist after Nietzsche and after Auschwitz,”²⁸ he was pointing out two equally important rationales behind his theological position. For him “there [was] no way around Nietzsche.”²⁹ It was in Nietzsche and Tillich, I submit, that Rubenstein first discovered reasons for his rejection of the traditional Jewish understanding of God who within history administers punishments for the misdeeds committed by his covenantal partner.

At this point in Rubenstein’s thinking Auschwitz appears as if somewhere in the background. It is mentioned, but the exact connection between the destruction of European Jewry and the death of God is neither explained nor explored. Indeed, if a single instance of innocent suffering is enough to question the traditional image of God, why refer to Auschwitz at all? The argument according to which the existence of evil in the world contradicts the description of God as caring and omnipotent could have been made, and indeed was made, centuries before the Holocaust. What then accounts for Auschwitz’s special position in Rubenstein’s thought? This question was raised by Steven T. Katz who answered it thus: “The answer to our question is at once obvious and unsatisfying. It is: the existential impact of the Holocaust on Rubenstein, who was alive to witness it.”³⁰ It is obviously impossible to deny that the Holocaust had a profound existential and psychological impact on Rubenstein and I will explore this matter later.

However, as Zachary Braiterman noted, referring to Peter Berger's notion of plausibility structure,³¹ the death or suffering of a single individual does not render any symbolic framework implausible. Although from a strictly logical point of view Katz's objection is certainly correct, theodicy does not function in a vacuum ruled exclusively by the laws of logical reasoning, but rather it constitutes a part of a larger—both theological and sociological—structure. For this reason, the Holocaust as an assault on the entire community that considered this particular symbolic system as an important part of its makeup did present a crisis of different proportions.

The impossibility of squaring the existence of evil with the idea of benevolent, omnipotent, and caring deity as well as the thorny question of securing human freedom and agency in a universe dominated by all-powerful God should, in Rubenstein mind, be seen as sufficient reasons for discarding the traditional idea of God. In "The Symbols of Judaism and Religious Existentialism," however, Rubenstein begins his diagnosis of the contemporary crisis of religious commitment by pointing out another theological difficulty that faces traditional Judaism alongside these two issues. In the opening section of the essay Rubenstein writes:

The postwar decline in religious commitment has been very much in evidence in the prospering synagogues of America. While the decline in belief is largely a cultural phenomenon, it does reflect a theological problem which has been covertly understood in religious circles for several decades. The rise of scientific scholarship in the field of religion has been especially threatening to the believing Jews. As a result of the new insights, it has been impossible to accept at face value the myths concerning the authority of traditional Jewish belief and practice. Religious Jews have been compelled either to retreat to a fideistic dogmatism which ignores modern scholarship, or to seek a new rationale for their theological commitments.³²

The primary reason for the decline is to be found then, according to Rubenstein, in the crisis of authority. Tradition does not carry unquestionable weight any longer. As he puts it a little later in the essay: "The traditional believer did not have to face the problem of why he ought to fulfill religious commandments of doubtful origin and authority. We do. The traditional believer was convinced that in obeying the Torah he was fulfilling God's will. We no longer possess that assurance."³³ For a traditional believer, neither the origin nor the authority of religious commandments was doubtful. As stated in the Talmudic tractate Pirkei Avot: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders."³⁴

A seemingly unbroken chain of tradition established by the rabbinical authority connected religious Jews not only to the revelation itself but also to the broader framework of Jewish belief and practice. The Torah came from God and, if properly interpreted, was a source of knowledge about his will. It was perceived as containing eternally valid keys to both understanding the world and leading a morally proper life; keys of unique authority due to their divine provenance.

This situation, however, had changed, Rubenstein argues, primarily due to the impact of modern scientific biblical scholarship. Traditional Judaism, in his words, “depended upon the belief in the historical authenticity and the literary unity of the Torah.”³⁵ The Bible as presented by the modern scholars, however, differed greatly from its traditionally accepted image. No longer was it a unitary work faithfully describing God’s interactions with Israel but rather a collection of materials coming from various sources, influenced by their environment and shaped by a variety of interest of authors and redactors. Confronted with this new knowledge, “one is forced either to reject Jewish religious practice or to find a new rationale for continuing to fulfill that sector which remains meaningful.”³⁶ Traditional “validations have become altogether transparent,” declares Rubenstein, and thus “no man can seriously pretend that the literal meanings given to our tradition before our time retain much authority today.”³⁷

In Rubenstein’s view, then, traditional Judaism crumbled under the impact of modern, critical scholarship. The Torah, that is both the Bible and the body of rabbinical teachings, could no longer be perceived as it was before its rise. The main argument of Rubenstein’s 1955 essay is that in the light of that momentous change a new rationale, a new justification for Judaism is required.

Rubenstein returned to the topic of the impact of modern biblical scholarship in his essay “The Meaning of Torah” published in the *Reconstructionist* in 1963,³⁸ where again he underscored that the new approach to the Bible refuted its image as a unitary document faithfully recording the will of the divine. I would like to point out another consequence of this development, one not mentioned by Rubenstein himself, but in my opinion crucial to understanding his rejection of traditional theodicy. Biblical criticism undermined the status of the Bible and the rabbinical corpus as a repository of eternally valid hermeneutical keys that allowed for seeing historical events as parts of the covenantal history. In fact, the very notion of covenantal history, that is, of the history of Jewish people as shaped by the dynamics of the covenantal relationship between Israel and God, became at best problematic.

When Rubenstein declared, "we are children of the secular city,"³⁹ he was echoing his own earlier assertion that God was radically absent from the experience of modern man. The death of God claim is not an ontological statement, but a diagnosis of a deeply secularized reality. It does not say much about God but a lot about human beings. As Rubenstein put it, "the statement 'God is dead' is only significant in what it reveals about its maker. It imparts information concerning what he believes about God. It reveals nothing about God."⁴⁰ It reveals that, for a modern Jew and man in general, "God is totally unavailable as a source of meaning and value."⁴¹ For the children of the secular city God is no longer available as a source of meaning—or of meaning in history.

In 1942 Shlomo Zalman Unsrdorfer, a Slovakian Orthodox rabbi and one of the leaders of the Jewish community of Bratislava, addressed the following words to his congregation struggling for survival under the Slovakian pro-Nazi regime: "In the future the joy will increase and we will forget all the days of trouble. But for now we are in a time of terrible trials. Heaven forbid that we should forget that everything is under the supervision of divine providence from heaven."⁴² God's strict providence over history was a given of Unsrdorfer's thinking and he expressed this conviction numerous times in his wartime sermons and always with unflinching certitude. For Unsrdorfer and many likeminded Jews, God's continuous presence in history was unquestionable. From this perspective, the history of the people of Israel was not unfolding according to an internal logic of causation but rather was governed by the rules of the covenantal pact between Israel and God.

Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich of Transylvania, speaking to his congregation in 1943, quoted the Talmudic statement, "There is no star for Israel" and explained: "for this reason [Israel] does not behave according to the stars or nature but only in accordance with [the will of] the Holy One, blessed be He."⁴³ The fate of the Jews lies exclusively in the hands of God who shapes events through earthly instruments.

This way of thinking was not available for children of the secular city. Biblical criticism on the one hand and historicism on the other made recourse to supernatural causation at least highly problematic if not simply completely unacceptable. Historical events were to be explained by reference to other events in the realm of human activity and not by pointing to their alleged supernatural causes. Confronted with the rise of modern awareness of historical situatedness, the traditional mode of interpreting historical events as manifestations of the divine will receded into the past and ceased to be able to bestow meaning upon historical occurrences. In

“The Meaning of Torah” Rubenstein noted that “the theological foundations of normative Judaism were most keenly disrupted in a period when Jews were entering the secular society of contract and commerce which developed in the Western World following the French Revolution.” This is where, I submit, one needs to look in order to discover the reasons behind Rubenstein’s rejection of the traditional understanding of the relation between God and Israel with its theodic explanations of evil and suffering.

For many already before the Holocaust God’s presence in history, if existing at all, could not have been discerned by looking at Jewish history from the encompassing perspective of the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel. Historicism, with its exclusion of extrahistorical determinants of historical events, rendered the traditional explanations implausible. For the children of secular city history was not a theophany; it was not a scene upon which the covenantal relationship was unfolding. The erosion of the authority of the Torah which Rubenstein describes as an evident fact is a crucial reason behind Rubenstein’s rejection of theodicy as traditionally constructed. If God no longer endows history with meaning, a reference to him cannot serve as an answer to the question of evil and suffering that occurs in history.

The authority of the theological claims of traditional Judaism has been irreparably crippled by the development of historical criticism. Additionally, according to Rubenstein, the content of these claims became deeply dysfunctional, that is, it could no longer serve the needs of the believing community and on occasion it proved even harmful. Zachary Braiterman notes that Rubenstein “has rejected what he perceives to have been a traditional Jewish doctrine on the basis of how Christians wield it against Jews.”⁴⁴ This is evident in Rubenstein’s treatment of the idea of chosenness and his vehement protest against what he describes as Christian *Heilsgeschichte* so prominently present in the opinions of Dean Gruber, whom Rubenstein encountered in Berlin in 1961. In an essay written after this meeting Rubenstein asked:

Can we really blame the Christian community for viewing us through the prism of a mythology of history when we were first to assert this history of ourselves? As long as we continue to hold to the doctrine of the election of Israel, we will leave ourselves open to the theology expressed by Dean Gruber, that because the Jews are God’s Chosen People, God wanted Hitler to punish them.⁴⁵

In this essay Rubenstein’s argues for the rejection of the idea of election on the pragmatic grounds echoing the view of Mordechai Kaplan, who

in *The Future of the American Jew* argued that this doctrine had to be abandoned as an anachronism and a hindrance in future development.⁴⁶ It is the pragmatism of Rubenstein's theological thinking that makes him evaluate ideas primarily according to their function, according to the ways in which they benefit or are detrimental to the community that accepts them.⁴⁷ This approach is evident in Rubenstein's psychological and sociological justification for religion and religious ritual presented already in his 1955 essay. There he argues that the "fact that myth and religious symbol no longer are regarded as true at the manifest level is entirely irrelevant to their central function, which is to give profound expression to our feelings at the decisive times and crises in life" and that modern Jews need synagogues because they "possess no better instruments for sharing the decisive events in the timetable of life."⁴⁸

This approach is prominent in Rubenstein's 1959 essay, "The Vocation of the Modern Rabbi,"⁴⁹ where he presents his evaluation of the "ghetto Judaism."⁵⁰ In this essay Rubenstein offers the following description of what he sees as "the core myth of traditional rabbinic Judaism"⁵¹: "that once upon a time God gave His people laws and commandments, but that they sinfully rejected them and were subjected to hideous retaliatory punishment of exile and disaster."⁵² Rabbinic Judaism, Rubenstein argues, was born in the anomalous tragedy of exile and its theological fundamentals were shaped by the social, political, and psychological dynamics of the precarious condition of the Jewish people. This "ghetto Judaism" was "necessary for an alienated community living as a helpless pariah-minority among peoples possessed of and by the meta-historical myth of Jewish wickedness."⁵³ Its time, however, is over as it "is clearly insupportable as a living faith for the modern Jew."⁵⁴ In this essay Rubenstein evaluates Judaism exclusively in terms of its role in the life of the Jewish community. He does not make any argument regarding its truth or falsity but instead focuses on the psychological and social needs it fulfilled. According to Rubenstein, the most important problems plaguing the modern Jew are connected to his "search for rootedness, self-determination, and ultimate integration with the powers of being and the divinities which nurture his person."⁵⁵ These words are admittedly vague, but the point Rubenstein is trying to make remains clear: traditional or ghetto Judaism is irrelevant now because it answers to different needs than those of the Jew of today.⁵⁶

In Rubenstein's understanding, "lacking power of their own, the Jews compensated by magically claiming a preeminent portion of divine concern."⁵⁷ This idea came to haunt them as Rubenstein realized during

his fateful meeting with Dean Gruber, who said: “For some reason, it was part of God’s plan that the Jews died” during the Holocaust.⁵⁸ Later Rubenstein recalled:

After recovering from my initial shock, I recognized that there was nothing new or surprising in this argument, that it had been asserted by the Prophets of Israel, by the Rabbis, and by the Fathers of the Church alike. . . . Given the Judeo-Christian conception, so strong in Scripture, that God is the ultimate actor in the historical drama, no other theological interpretation of the death of the six million Jews is tenable.⁵⁹

No other interpretation is tenable, but the only tenable one is unacceptable or in Rubenstein’s own words: “The logic of rabbinic theology is as inescapable as it is unacceptable”⁶⁰—this is the conundrum Rubenstein aims to resolve. He attempts to do so by showing that the entire framework upon which this interpretation of the Holocaust rests—a framework that includes the idea of God as a being that exercises providential control over history—belongs to the past.

Based on his own descriptions of the encounter with Dean Gruber there can be little doubt that this meeting had a tremendous psychological impact on Rubenstein. It would be hasty and confusing, however, to use it as an explanation for the content of Rubenstein’s argument. The conversation with Dean Gruber provided Rubenstein with an opportunity to see how the problems that interested him most could be brought together. As Rubenstein recognized, Dean Gruber’s views were not new. They were part and parcel of what Rubenstein described in 1959 as “ghetto Judaism”: a religious tradition born in the tragic circumstances of exile, a way of thinking that sustained a persecuted minority and which today, in Rubenstein’s view, is not only deeply dysfunctional but also no longer relevant for modern Jews.

Rubenstein’s description of contemporary culture as the time of the death of God was not a radical attempt to solve the traditional question of theodicy by removing some of its premises. Rather, it was a diagnosis underscoring the existential, psychological, and intellectual condition of modern man, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, the “radical secularity of contemporary culture.”⁶¹ Traditional or rabbinic Judaism, as Rubenstein understood it,⁶² had been crippled by various developments of modernity to the point where Rubenstein thought it justified to assert that all of American Jewry “[are] Reconstructionists, in fact, if not in name.”⁶³ God understood and worshipped as the Lord of History is dead but the Holocaust

was not the reason for his demise. Auschwitz, rather, is a factor that forces the realization that "ghetto Judaism" is bankrupt. Or to put in differently: it serves as the last nail to God's casket. For Rubenstein, Auschwitz provided an opportunity to express his stance in particularly strong terms. It enabled him to show the morally outrageous consequences of applying the traditional vocabulary to the Holocaust and thereby to make it evident that "ghetto Judaism" with its conception of God and understanding of theodicy has outlived its purpose. The fundamental elements of Rubenstein's position, however, and the reasons behind his main argument, according to which Judaism stands in need of a radical revision, I submit, remain logically independent of the tragedy of European Jewry and could have been expressed without referring to it. As Michael Morgan remarked, for Rubenstein, "Auschwitz is an especially powerful indicator of how modern life and institutions have deteriorated and how confidence in science, government, family, religions, and Western culture has crumbled."⁶⁴ Confidence in religion, however, specifically confidence in traditional Jewish understanding of such concepts as God's providential presence in history, had crumbled well before the Holocaust happened. The Jewish God of history, in other words, was dead before Auschwitz.

Tillich, Nietzsche, and existentialism provided Rubenstein with reasons for a rejection of the idea of God as an active and ultimate agent in history. Modern biblical criticism undermined traditional theological commitments and the processes of secularization rendered them even less credible. In addition, many theological claims of traditional Judaism were no longer capable of performing any positive function in the lives of the Jewish community. On the contrary, they proved harmful, which the history of Jewish persecutions made evident. The attempts to interpret the Holocaust within the traditional framework constituted for Rubenstein the final proof of the bankruptcy of the "ghetto Judaism."

NOTES

1. Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz. Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 88.

2. William Kaufman, *Contemporary Jewish Philosophies* (New York: Reconstructionist Press and Behrman House, 1976), 78. Kaufman's is one of the few early responses to Rubenstein free of personal attacks against him.

3. Here I agree with Michael Morgan, according to whom in Rubenstein's thought Auschwitz "reveals itself as an occasion—a stimulus—for interpretive revisions, and while not a necessary object of examination, it becomes an especially

valuable object that can change our way of coping with the crises of our lives. . . . The Holocaust, then, does not demand anything; nor does it merely psychologically motivate response. Rather, it can play a central role in the interpretive revision that will enable us to deal most effectively with our historical situation.” Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz. Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107.

4. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 224.

5. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 153.

6. Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 174. The chapter devoted to Rubenstein was reprinted more recently in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God. Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 582-94.

7. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 180.

8. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 152.

9. Richard L. Rubenstein, “The Symbols of Judaism and Religious Existentialism,” *Reconstructionist* 25, no. 6 (1959): 13-19. Included in *After Auschwitz* under the title “The Symbols of Judaism and the Death of God,” 227-41.

10. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 238.

11. Richard L. Rubenstein, “Religious Naturalism and Human Evil,” *Reconstructionist* 24, no. 19 (January 1959): 5-10. Later included in *After Auschwitz* under the title “Reconstructionism and the Problem of Evil.”

12. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 86.

13. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Norton, 1976), 226.

14. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 87.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 89. For more about the death of God theology see Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); Bernard Murchland, *The Meaning of the Death of God. Protestant, Jewish and Catholic Scholars Explore Atheistic Theology* (New York: Random House, 1967); Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Thinking Through the Death of God. A Critical Companion to Thomas J. J. Altizer* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004). While Rubenstein was occasionally described as a member of this movement he was very careful to distinguish himself from its exponents and presented a critique of their views in the essay, “Death of God Theology and Judaism,” included in *After Auschwitz*. See also Rubenstein’s essay “Thomas Altizer’s Apocalypse,” in *The Theology of Thomas Altizer: Critique and Response*, ed. John Cobb (Philadelphia, 1970), <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1105&C=1159>.

18. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 90.

19. Richard L. Rubenstein, *Power Struggle: An Autobiographical Confession* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 154.

20. Rubenstein, *Power Struggle*, 158.
21. Rubenstein, *Power Struggle*, 162.
22. Richard Schacht, "After the 'Death of God': Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Tillich," Tillich Lecture delivered at Harvard University, May 9, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj3AntBLBQY>.
23. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 43.
24. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1: 245. The most comprehensive presentation of Tillich's views about God is to be found in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, especially 211-92. See also Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 99-113; and Martin Leiner, "Tillich on God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russel Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 37-55.
25. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 235.
26. Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 185.
27. Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, 185.
28. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 152.
29. Ibid. Describing the similarities and differences between his own position and that of the death-of-God theologians, Rubenstein again referred to this influence on his thought: "We share the same cultural universe as contemporary Christian thinker; we experience the radical secularity of our times as do they. We have been deeply influenced by Freud, Sartre, Hegel, Dostoevski, Melville, and Kierkegaard. Above all, we have been moved by Nietzsche." *After Auschwitz*, 245.
30. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues*, 184.
31. Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 91. See also Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1969), 46.
32. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 227.
33. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 228.
34. BT Pirkei Avot 1:1.
35. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 228.
36. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 229.
37. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 229, 241. On the process of the secularization of the Bible see David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 59-91.
38. Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Meaning of Torah," *Reconstructionist* 29, no. 12 (1963): 6-16; reprinted in *After Auschwitz* as "The Meaning of Torah in Contemporary Jewish Theology, An Existentialist Philosophy of Judaism." In this essay Rubenstein writes: "Biblical scholarship has had an especially important impact on modern Jewish thought. At least one result of this scholarship seems beyond refutation: the Torah is not, as normative Jewish tradition had claimed, a unitary work communicated by God directly to Moses, save for a few verses at the end of Deuteronomy. As long as this view had been convincingly maintained, it had enormous consequences in the life of the individual Jew. If the Torah was the perfect revelation of God's will, when properly interpreted, then none of its injunctions, no matter how opaque to the lucidities of common sense, could be ignored. To

have ignored them would have been to rebel against the will of the Creator. The modern Jew lacks the security of knowing that his religious acts are meaningfully related to God's will." *After Auschwitz*, 114.

39. Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Jewish Theology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1968), 182.

40. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 246.

41. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 205.

42. Shlomo Zalman Unsendorfer, *Siftei Shlomo* (Brooklyn, NY: 1972), 84.

43. Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, *Derashot Lehem Shlomo* (Brooklyn, NY: 1976), 250. For more about Ehrenreich and his wartime theology see Barbara Krawcovicz, "Paradigmatic Thinking and Holocaust Theology," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22 (2014): 164-89 where I argue that such an interpretative approach to historical events which, following Jacob Neusner, I call paradigmatic thinking, made it possible for Ehrenreich and other similarly minded thinkers to uphold the tenets of theodicy as traditionally constructed during the Holocaust.

44. Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz*, 92.

45. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 58. For an interesting analysis of the ways Jews as the chosen people functioned in the Christian religious imagination see Stephen R. Haynes, *Jews and the Christian Imagination. Reluctant Witnesses* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

46. Mordechai Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 211-30, where Kaplan wrote: "Far from being a factor for Jewish survival, the doctrine of Israel's election is henceforth bound to be, ideologically, a definite hindrance. In its traditional form, that doctrine belongs to the same universe as the one in which God was conceived as a magnified human being, sitting on a great throne . . . It belongs to the universe of discourse in which the supernatural miracles, believed to have taken place in the past, were a guarantee of like miracles in the future. . . . To get back to this pre-modern universe of discourse is possible for the modern-minded man only in the same sense as it is possible to revisit the scene of one's childhood" (225). See also "Towards Jewish Religious Unity," *Judaism* 15, no. 2 (1966): 156, where Kaplan argues that the idea of election should be abandoned because Auschwitz showed to what uses it can be put. See also David Novak, "Mordechai Kaplan's Rejection of Election," *Modern Judaism* 15, no. 1 (1995): 1-20.

47. According to Zachary Braiterman, for Rubenstein "traditional assertions about God, covenant, and suffering are not intrinsically problematic. They become problematic only insofar as they engender crippling feelings of collective guilt. In particular, they trouble Rubenstein when Christians exploit them in order to fault the Jewish people" (*(God) After Auschwitz*, 91). Contra Braiterman I argue that for Rubenstein traditional theological assertions are problematic in themselves as well as because of the attitudes they may engender.

48. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 233, 237.

49. Richard L. Rubenstein, "The Vocation of the Modern Rabbi." *Reconstructionist* 25, no. 15 (1959): 9-15.

50. It is also a very important aspect of Rubenstein's analysis of the Aggadah in the light of psychoanalysis in his doctoral dissertation, revised and published in 1968 as *The Religious Imagination*. Nearing the conclusion of this study Rubenstein writes: "In a sense, I have written an obituary of the world of the Aggadah. Every word of appreciation I offer in its praise is veritably a further nail in its coffin. I can appreciate the Aggadah only functionally—that is, in terms of what it did for those who lived within the framework of its myths and symbols" (*The Religious Imagination*, 172).

51. Rubenstein, "The Vocation," 9.

52. Ibid.

53. Rubenstein, "The Vocation," 11.

54. Rubenstein, "The Vocation," 9.

55. Rubenstein, "The Vocation," 11.

56. One of the factors that rendered the "ghetto Judaism" irrelevant in Rubenstein's mind was the establishment of the State of Israel, which he then perceived as the end of Jewish history of alienation and the dawn of a totally new understanding of Jewish religion. In "The Vocation of the Modern Rabbi" Rubenstein argued that the creation of the State "makes of the ghetto period and ghetto Judaism an episode in Jewish life" (15), an episode once and for all relegated to the past. The role of the State of Israel in Rubenstein's thinking has been exhaustively described by Zachary Braiterman and Michael Morgan.

57. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 6.

58. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 54.

59. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 65.

60. Rubenstein, "The Vocation," 9.

61. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 247.

62. Numerous objections can be and were made against Rubenstein's description of Rabbinic Judaism. According to Zachary Braiterman, Rubenstein "repeatedly obfuscates the heterogeneity of opinion found in traditional Jewish thought" and "has . . . effectively marginalized any antitheodic counter-tradition that might have qualified his own reading of the Bible" (*(God) After Auschwitz*, 103, 104). This critique is doubtlessly accurate. Further, Braiterman offers a very interesting argument according to which this misreading "constituted the very motor of Rubenstein's project" and shows him to criticize and reject not so much traditional Judaism but rather a nineteenth century reading of it (109-10).

63. Richard L. Rubenstein, "Franz Rosenzweig on Jewish Education and Jewish Law," *Reconstructionist* 22, no. 13: 30.

64. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz*, 93.

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