

Research Article

A Religious Response to Harari: *The secular versus mystical interpretation of Jewish History*

***Corresponding author**

Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD Borra College of Health Science Dominican University IL USA

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Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD

Borra College of Health Science Dominican University IL USA



Abstract

This essay offers a comprehensive religious response to Yuval Noah Harari's characterization of the contemporary moment as potentially "the most significant turning point in Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple." While acknowledging Harari's humanitarian concerns regarding the post-October 7th crisis, this analysis argues that his secular framework cannot adequately comprehend the metaphysical dimensions of Jewish historical experience. Drawing upon mystical theology, particularly the dialectic of divine being (*yesh*) and non-being (*ayin*), this work demonstrates how contemporary Judaism must recover what the author terms "dialectical divine consciousness" to navigate crisis authentically.

The theological framework integrates insights from Elliot Wolfson's apophatic Judaism, Shaul Magid's post-ethnic heretical renewal, Daniel Boyarin's diasporic critique, and Gershom Scholem's catastrophic dialectic, while grounding the analysis in the author's own mystical theology of therapeutic presence and divine concealment. Through examination of historical precedents including rabbinic responses to Temple destruction, medieval philosophical synthesis, and modern Jewish thought's engagement with emancipation, the essay argues that authentic Jewish response to crisis requires neither defensive tribalism nor self-destructive dissolution, but creative transformation maintaining the dialectical structure of Jewish existence.

The analysis reveals that the post-October 7th crisis represents both danger and opportunity: the danger of reducing Jewish identity to tribal solidarity or abstract universalism, and the opportunity of recovering mystical consciousness that can hold particular commitment and universal concern within the framework of divine providence and human responsibility. The essay concludes that Jewish spiritual authenticity emerges precisely when moral behavior proves inadequate to spiritual aspiration, demanding the dialectical practice of *teshuvah* that enables both honest self-examination and renewed commitment to justice and compassion.

Keywords: Jewish mysticism, dialectical theology, being and non-being, *tzimtzum*, post-Holocaust theology, therapeutic spirituality, crisis theology, divine concealment, apophatic Judaism, post-ethnic Judaism

Introduction

Yuval Noah Harari's characterization of our present moment as "one of the greatest turning points in Jewish history, perhaps the most significant since the destruction of the Second Temple" demands not merely political or ethical analysis, but profound theological engagement [1]. While Harari's humanitarian concerns regarding the post-October 7th crisis are compelling, his secular framework cannot fully comprehend the metaphysical dimensions of Jewish historical experience. This essay offers a religious response grounded in mystical theology, specifically the dialectic of divine being and non-being as it manifests through Jewish history.

Building upon my theological work exploring the ontological paradox of divine presence and absence, particularly as developed in my essays on therapeutic spirituality and mystical healing [2]. I argue that the current crisis represents not merely a humanitarian catastrophe but a profound test of Judaism's capacity to hold the paradox of divine *yesh* (being) and *ayin* (non-being) within historical experience [3]. Drawing upon the mystical insights of Elliot Wolfson, Shaul Magid, Daniel Boyarin, Gershom Scholem, and the theological historiography of Dov Weiss, David Weiss Halivni, and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, this theological analysis demonstrates how contemporary Judaism must recover what I have termed the "dialectical divine consciousness" that enables both survival and transformation through crisis [4].

Dialectic of Memory and Forgetting

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's seminal work *Zakhor* reveals that Jewish historical consciousness operates through a unique dialectic of memory (*zakhor*) and forgetting [5]. Unlike linear historical narratives, Jewish memory is structured by what Yerushalmi calls "metahistory"—a sacred temporality in which past, present, and future interpenetrate through divine providence. This metahistorical structure is fundamentally grounded in the theological paradox of divine being and non-being that I have explored in my work on the therapeutic encounter as a space of divine concealment and revelation [6].

The command to "remember" (*zakhor*) is simultaneously a command to forget—to forget the immediacy of historical circumstance in favor of trans-temporal meaning. Yet this forgetting is not erasure but rather a mystical practice of *tzimtzum*, the divine self-concealment that makes space for human agency and historical development. In my analysis of

tzimtzum as both theological rupture and therapeutic possibility, I have argued that divine withdrawal paradoxically enables divine presence to manifest through human response to crisis [7]. The therapeutic space, like the space of Jewish historical memory, exists precisely in this tension between divine concealment and revelation.

In remembering the Exodus, Jews simultaneously forget Egypt as mere geography and remember it as archetypal oppression; in remembering Jerusalem, they forget its political particularity and remember it as eschatological promise. This dialectical structure reflects what I have called the "parabolic consciousness" that characterizes authentic Jewish existence—the capacity to read historical events as simultaneously particular and universal, temporal and eternal [8].

Harari's crisis analysis, viewed through Yerushalmi's lens, represents a collapse of this dialectical structure. When Judaism reduces itself to political nationalism or humanitarian universalism, it loses the mystical capacity to hold memory and forgetting, being and non-being, in creative tension. The result is what Yerushalmi fears most: the replacement of sacred memory with secular history.

Catastrophic Dialectic and Historical Renewal

Gershom Scholem's understanding of Jewish mysticism provides crucial insight into how catastrophe functions within the dialectic of being and non-being [9]. For Scholem, Jewish history is marked by what he calls "catastrophic messianism"—moments when historical crisis catalyzes mystical renewal through the breakdown of conventional religious categories.

The destruction of the Second Temple, the expulsion from Spain, the Sabbatian crisis, and the Holocaust each represent not merely historical tragedies but theological opportunities for the divine non-being to manifest through apparent absence. Scholem's genius lies in recognizing that these catastrophes do not negate divine presence but rather constitute a unique mode of divine self-revelation through concealment. This insight resonates deeply with my analysis of divine concealment in the therapeutic space, where the apparent absence of healing often becomes the site of deepest transformation [11].

Applied to Harari's contemporary crisis, Scholem's framework suggests that the post-October 7th moment may represent another such cata-

strophic dialectical opportunity. The humanitarian crisis and the apparent collapse of Jewish ethical universalism could catalyze a new form of mystical consciousness—one that embraces both the particularity of Jewish survival and the universality of human dignity through the paradox of divine being and non-being. As I have argued in my work on post-Holocaust theology, divine presence often manifests most powerfully precisely when it appears most absent, demanding what I call “tragic consciousness” that can hold both divine judgment (*midas hadin*) and divine mercy (*midas harachamim*) in creative tension [11].

Interpretive Crisis and Post-Holocaust Response

David Weiss Halivni’s work on the formation of rabbinic literature reveals how crisis generates interpretive creativity, but his post-Holocaust reflections in *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud* and his autobiographical works, particularly *The Book and the Sword*, provide even more profound insight into how theological crisis demands new hermeneutical responses [12]. Halivni argues that the Oral Torah emerged precisely from the interpretive crisis created by the destruction of the Temple and the apparent failure of biblical prophecy. The rabbis responded to theological crisis not by abandoning tradition but by developing new hermeneutical methods that could hold contradiction and paradox within sacred discourse.

Halivni’s Holocaust experience fundamentally shaped his understanding of how crisis functions in Jewish interpretive tradition. In *The Book and the Sword*, he recounts how his survival of Auschwitz led him to develop what he calls “the theory of *machloket*” (interpretive disagreement) as fundamentally necessary for accessing divine truth [13]. For Halivni, the Holocaust represented not divine abandonment but divine concealment (*hester panim*), requiring new interpretive methods that could discern meaning within apparent meaninglessness. This insight resonates powerfully with my analysis of divine presence manifesting through apparent absence in the therapeutic encounter [14].

Halivni’s post-Holocaust theology reveals that traditional texts themselves bear the marks of historical trauma and interpretive crisis. His controversial theory that the Torah text itself was “defiled” (*mitameh*) during the Babylonian exile and required rabbinic restoration reflects his deeper insight that sacred tradition survives precisely through its capacity to acknowledge and incorporate historical rupture [15]. This theological framework suggests that the post-October 7th crisis, rather than threatening Jewish tradition, may catalyze the kind of interpretive renewal that has always characterized authentic Jewish response to catastrophe.

Halivni’s concept of *machloket* (interpretive disagreement) is fundamentally mystical: it recognizes that divine truth transcends any single human formulation and can only be approached through the dialectical interplay of competing interpretations. This hermeneutical mysticism provides a model for responding to Harari’s crisis that neither retreats into fundamentalism nor dissolves into relativism. As I have argued in my work on hermeneutic approaches to healing, the interpretive process itself becomes a form of sacred encounter, where meaning emerges through the dialectical engagement with text, tradition, and contemporary experience [16]. The contemporary crisis of Jewish identity—torn between nationalist particularism and humanitarian universalism—requires a similar hermeneutical response to what Halivni developed in response to the Holocaust. Rather than choosing between these alternatives, mystical theology suggests embracing them as dialectical moments within the larger structure of divine being and non-being. Halivni’s life demonstrates how personal encounter with historical catastrophe can generate theological insight that serves not only individual healing but communal renewal.

Negative Theology and Jewish Identity

Elliot Wolfson’s revolutionary contribution to Jewish thought lies in his development of what might be called “apophatic Judaism”—a mystical theology based on the systematic negation of positive attributions to both

God and Jewish identity [17]. Drawing upon medieval Jewish mysticism, particularly the Zohar and the writings of Moses de León, Wolfson argues that authentic Jewish spirituality must continually negate its own representations to avoid idolatry.

This apophatic structure has profound implications for understanding Jewish identity in crisis. Wolfson suggests that Judaism’s deepest truth lies not in any positive content—whether ethnic, religious, or cultural—but in the ongoing process of self-negation that prevents Judaism from crystallizing into fixed form. Jewish identity, like divine reality, is best understood as a dynamic process of being and non-being rather than a static essence. This insight parallels my analysis of the therapeutic encounter as a space where healing emerges precisely through the practitioner’s willingness to embrace unknowing and uncertainty [18].

Harari’s fear of Judaism becoming a “hollow shell” can be reframed through Wolfson’s apophatic lens: the danger is not emptiness per se but the loss of dialectical movement between fullness and emptiness, presence and absence. A Judaism that insists too strongly on its positive content—whether as chosen people, democratic values, or humanitarian ethics—risks the idolatry of self-assertion. Conversely, a Judaism that dissolves entirely into universalism loses the particular form necessary for mystical negation. What I have called the “sacred paradox of healing” applies equally to Jewish identity: authentic existence requires the capacity to hold both presence and absence, being and non-being, in creative tension [19].

Wolfson’s analysis of mystical embodiment provides crucial insight into the relationship between Jewish spirituality and political existence [20]. Drawing upon kabbalistic traditions of the divine body (*guf*), Wolfson argues that Jewish identity necessarily involves both spiritual and corporeal dimensions that cannot be separated without distortion.

This mystical understanding of embodiment suggests that the contemporary crisis cannot be resolved by retreating into pure spirituality or embracing pure politics. The mystical body of Israel exists precisely in the tension between spiritual calling and political necessity, between universal mission and particular survival. The post-October 7th crisis represents not the failure of this tension but its intensification.

Wolfson’s insight helps explain why both religious Zionism and secular universalism prove inadequate to the current moment. Religious Zionism tends to collapse the mystical body into political triumph, while secular universalism dissolves it into abstract ethics. Mystical theology suggests a third path: embracing political embodiment as the necessary form through which spiritual calling must manifest, while simultaneously maintaining the apophatic recognition that no political form can exhaust Jewish spiritual significance.

Wolfson’s analysis of mystical language reveals how the current crisis manifests in the breakdown of Jewish discourse itself [21]. Traditional Jewish theology operates through what Wolfson calls “cataphatic apophasis”—the simultaneous affirmation and negation of divine attributes that prevents theological language from becoming idolatrous.

The contemporary discourse about Judaism—whether in Israeli politics, American Jewish institutions, or academic Jewish studies—has largely lost this apophatic dimension. Instead of holding affirmation and negation in tension, public discourse tends toward either uncritical celebration or total condemnation of Jewish particularity. This linguistic crisis reflects the deeper theological crisis that Harari identifies.

Wolfson’s mystical linguistics suggests that authentic Jewish response to crisis must involve the recovery of dialectical discourse—language that can simultaneously affirm Jewish chosenness and critique Jewish power, embrace Zionist achievement and mourn Palestinian suffering, celebrate

Jewish survival and lament Jewish moral failure. Such discourse requires the mystical capacity to hold contradictions without premature resolution. As I have explored in my work on the crisis of language in therapeutic practice, authentic healing emerges precisely through our willingness to speak from the space between certainty and uncertainty, presence and absence [22].

Beyond Ethnic: The Universalization of Particularity

Shaul Magid's concept of "post-ethnic Judaism" provides a crucial framework for understanding how Jewish identity might evolve beyond the current crisis [23]. Magid argues that contemporary Judaism faces the challenge of maintaining its distinctive spiritual mission while transcending the ethnic boundaries that have historically defined Jewish membership. Magid's insight is fundamentally mystical: he recognizes that Jewish particularity has always been oriented toward universal significance. The covenant with Abraham promises blessing for "all families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3), and the prophetic tradition consistently measures Jewish faithfulness by its care for the stranger, widow, and orphan. Post-ethnic Judaism seeks to actualize this universal dimension without abandoning the particular form through which it must manifest.

This theological vision provides a sophisticated response to Harari's crisis. Rather than choosing between Jewish particularism and humanitarian universalism, post-ethnic Judaism suggests that authentic Jewish particularity necessarily leads to universal concern. The current crisis emerges precisely when this dialectical relationship breaks down—when Jewish particularity becomes defensive ethnicity or when universal concern abandons its Jewish roots.

Magid's recovery of "heretical" Jewish traditions—from medieval philosophy through Sabbatianism to contemporary reconstructionism—reveals how Jewish renewal has always required the critique of conventional religious forms [24]. This heretical dimension is not peripheral to Jewish tradition but constitutes its mystical core: the recognition that divine reality transcends any human formulation, including religious formulations.

Applied to the contemporary crisis, Magid's heretical theology suggests that authentic Jewish response must be willing to critique not only secular nationalism but also conventional religious Zionism. Both forms of Jewish identity tend toward what Magid calls "ethnic closure"—the reduction of Jewish spiritual mission to group survival and political success.

Heretical Judaism, by contrast, maintains the prophetic tradition of internal critique while refusing the post-religious dissolution of Jewish distinctiveness. It recognizes that Jewish spiritual mission may require forms of political existence that challenge conventional religious expectations, just as it may require forms of religious practice that challenge conventional political assumptions. This resonates with my analysis of heretical ethics in medical practice, where authentic healing often requires challenging institutional orthodoxies that prioritize efficiency over genuine care [25].

Diaspora Consciousness and Mystical Geography

Magid's analysis of diaspora consciousness reveals how Jewish spirituality has always been oriented toward a mystical rather than merely physical geography [26]. Even when centered in the Land of Israel, Jewish identity has been shaped by the consciousness of exile (*galut*) and the longing for ultimate return (*teshuvah*).

This mystical geography provides crucial insight into the contemporary crisis of Zionism. The problem is not Jewish political presence in the Land of Israel per se, but rather the loss of diaspora consciousness—the mystical recognition that no political achievement can fully realize Jewish spiritual aspiration. When Zionism loses this diaspora dimension, it becomes what Magid calls "settler colonialism"; when diaspora Judaism loses its Zionist dimension, it becomes bourgeois assimilationism.

Magid's vision suggests that authentic Jewish response to the current crisis must maintain both Zionist commitment and diaspora consciousness—embracing political responsibility for Jewish survival while recognizing that spiritual fulfillment cannot be reduced to political success.

Diaspora as Spiritual Discipline

Daniel Boyarin's theological defense of diaspora provides perhaps the most radical challenge to conventional Zionist assumptions [27]. Boyarin argues that diaspora existence represents not a historical accident or punishment but a spiritual discipline—a way of life that cultivates humility, ethical sensitivity, and dependence upon divine providence rather than human power.

Boyarin's insight is profoundly mystical: he recognizes that the experience of powerlessness and marginality may be more conducive to authentic spirituality than the experience of political sovereignty and cultural dominance. Diaspora Judaism developed distinctive spiritual practices—from Talmudic dialectics to mystical contemplation—precisely because it could not rely upon conventional forms of political and cultural power.

This theological perspective provides a powerful critique of post-October 7th Jewish responses that focus primarily on security, military strength, and political alliance. While these concerns are legitimate, Boyarin suggests that they may distract from the deeper spiritual challenge: how to maintain Jewish ethical distinctiveness in the face of political power and cultural success.

Boyarin's historical analysis reveals how Jewish identity has been shaped by dialectical relationship with Christianity—both attraction to Christian universalism and resistance to Christian supersessionism [28]. This dialectical relationship continues in contemporary Jewish encounters with secular humanism and liberal democracy.

Boyarin argues that Judaism's distinctive contribution lies in maintaining particularistic commitment within universalistic concern—refusing both the Christian dissolution of law into love and the secular dissolution of tradition into reason. Jewish ethics emerges precisely from the tension between particular obligation and universal compassion, between covenantal responsibility and humanitarian concern.

Applied to the contemporary crisis, Boyarin's analysis suggests that Jewish response must resist both the nationalist reduction of Judaism to ethnic solidarity and the liberal reduction of Judaism to universal ethics. Authentic Jewish universalism maintains its particular grounding in Torah, covenant, and historical experience while extending concern beyond the boundaries of Jewish community. This insight connects with my work on the duality of divine presence, where authentic healing requires holding both the particular suffering of the individual patient and the universal human condition of vulnerability [29].

Boyarin's critique of Jewish power extends beyond pragmatic political analysis to mystical theology [30]. Drawing upon traditional Jewish understandings of exile (*galut*) as cosmic condition rather than merely historical circumstance, Boyarin argues that Jewish existence necessarily involves spiritual exile even within political sovereignty.

This mystical understanding of exile provides crucial insight into the post-October 7th crisis. The problem is not Jewish political power per se but rather the loss of exilic consciousness—the mystical recognition that no political achievement can overcome the fundamental human condition of separation from ultimate reality. When Judaism loses this exilic dimension, it risks the spiritual complacency that traditional sources associate with the pre-messianic era.

Boyarin's vision suggests that authentic Jewish politics must maintain what

might be called “exilic sovereignty”—political responsibility exercised with consciousness of ultimate dependence upon divine providence and commitment to ethical limitation of power.

Crisis as Revelatory Moment

Dov Weiss’s work on Jewish responses to historical crisis reveals how traditional Jewish thought has consistently interpreted catastrophe as potential revelation rather than mere tragedy [31]. Drawing upon rabbinic, medieval, and modern Jewish sources, Weiss argues that crisis functions within Jewish historical consciousness as a test of spiritual authenticity and an opportunity for religious renewal.

This theological perspective provides crucial insight into Harari’s contemporary analysis. Rather than viewing the post-October 7th crisis primarily as humanitarian catastrophe or political failure, mystical theology suggests understanding it as revelatory moment—an opportunity for Jewish community to discern more clearly its authentic spiritual calling and its relationship to divine providence.

Weiss’s analysis reveals that such discernment requires what traditional sources call *cheshbon ha-nefesh* (accounting of the soul)—honest examination of spiritual condition that neither minimizes moral failure nor despairs of ultimate meaning. Applied to the contemporary crisis, this involves neither defensive denial of Jewish moral responsibility nor self-destructive abandonment of Jewish spiritual mission. This connects with my work on tragic consciousness in therapeutic practice, where authentic healing requires the practitioner’s willingness to acknowledge both personal limitations and professional calling [32].

Weiss’s treatment of Jewish theological responses to suffering reveals the sophisticated ways traditional thought has maintained faith in divine providence while acknowledging genuine evil and injustice [33]. Rather than offering simple theodical explanations, Jewish tradition has developed what Weiss calls “dialectical theology”—ways of thinking that hold divine justice and human experience in creative tension without premature resolution.

This dialectical approach provides crucial resources for Jewish theological response to contemporary crisis. Rather than explaining away Palestinian suffering as divine will or Jewish suffering as historical accident, dialectical theology suggests holding both experiences within the larger framework of divine concern for justice and human responsibility for ethical action. Weiss’s insight helps explain why both triumphalist religious Zionism and guilt-ridden progressive Judaism prove theologically inadequate. Triumphalism reduces divine complexity to human success, while excessive guilt reduces divine mercy to human failure. Dialectical theology maintains the mystical recognition that divine reality transcends human comprehension while demanding human commitment to justice and compassion.

Weiss’s analysis of messianic consciousness reveals how traditional Jewish thought has balanced ultimate hope with penultimate responsibility [34]. Rather than using messianic faith to escape historical obligation or using historical involvement to abandon messianic vision, Jewish tradition has maintained what Weiss calls “historical messianism”—commitment to improving worldly conditions as preparation for ultimate redemption.

This theological perspective provides crucial guidance for Jewish response to contemporary crisis. Rather than choosing between political realism and messianic idealism, historical messianism suggests that authentic Jewish politics must be oriented toward both immediate justice and ultimate redemption, both particular Jewish survival and universal human flourishing.

Applied to the post-October 7th situation, historical messianism would demand Jewish commitment to both Israeli security and Palestinian dig-

nity, both Jewish political success and ethical limitation of power, both particular Jewish concerns and universal humanitarian obligations.

The Ontological Structure of Historical Existence

The mystical thinkers examined above converge on a crucial insight: Jewish historical existence is fundamentally structured by the dialectic of being and non-being, presence and absence, affirmation and negation [35]. This ontological structure explains both the persistence of Jewish identity through millennia of crisis and the distinctive forms of Jewish spiritual and intellectual creativity.

Jewish being is never simply positive presence but always dialectical relationship between affirmation and negation. Jewish identity affirms chosenness while negating supremacy, embraces particularity while transcending ethnicity, maintains tradition while enabling innovation, exercises power while remembering powerlessness. When this dialectical structure collapses into simple affirmation or simple negation, Jewish identity becomes either idolatrous or self-destructive.

The post-October 7th crisis represents precisely such a collapse: the reduction of Jewish identity to simple affirmation of power, security, and political success, accompanied by the simple negation of ethical complexity, Palestinian dignity, and universal concern. Mystical theology suggests that authentic Jewish response must recover the dialectical structure that enables both survival and transformation. This insight parallels my analysis of the dialectical divine in therapeutic practice, where healing emerges precisely through the practitioner’s capacity to hold both mercy (*chesed*) and judgment (*gevurah*) in creative tension [36].

Divine Concealment and Historical Revelation

The mystical tradition’s understanding of divine concealment (*hester panim*) provides crucial insight into how divine presence manifests through apparent absence [37]. Rather than interpreting crisis as evidence of divine abandonment, Jewish mysticism suggests that divine reality may be most powerfully present precisely when it appears most absent.

Applied to contemporary crisis, this theological perspective suggests that apparent Jewish moral failure and apparent breakdown of Jewish ethical tradition may constitute opportunities for deeper spiritual recognition. The crisis forces Jewish community to confront the gap between spiritual aspiration and political reality, between covenantal calling and historical behavior, between divine expectation and human performance.

Such confrontation can lead either to spiritual despair or spiritual renewal, depending upon whether Jewish community maintains the mystical capacity to discern divine presence within apparent absence. Mystical theology suggests that authentic response to crisis involves neither denial of moral failure nor abandonment of spiritual mission, but rather the dialectical recognition that divine calling becomes most clear precisely when human response proves most inadequate. This connects with my work on primordial silence in therapeutic practice, where the practitioner’s willingness to dwell in unknowing creates space for unexpected healing [38].

Toward a Mystical Politics

The mystical theology developed above has concrete implications for Jewish political and social response to contemporary crisis:

Political Implications: Jewish political engagement must maintain dialectical consciousness that neither reduces Judaism to political success nor abandons political responsibility. This involves supporting both Israeli security and Palestinian dignity, both Jewish particular concerns and universal humanitarian obligations, both realistic political calculation and ethical limitation of power.

Religious Implications: Jewish religious life must recover the mystical capaci-

ty to hold affirmation and negation in creative tension. This involves neither triumphalist celebration of Jewish achievement nor self-destructive denial of Jewish distinctiveness, but rather the dialectical practice of *teshuvah* (repentance/return) that enables both honest self-examination and renewed commitment to spiritual mission.

Educational Implications: Jewish education must cultivate the intellectual and spiritual capacities necessary for dialectical thinking. Rather than offering simple answers to complex questions, Jewish education should develop the ability to hold contradictions in creative tension, to discern divine presence within apparent absence, and to maintain particular commitment within universal concern.

Communal Implications: Jewish communal life must create spaces for the kind of honest dialogue and spiritual discernment that crisis demands. This involves neither defensive tribalism nor self-destructive guilt, but rather the courage to examine Jewish behavior by Jewish standards while maintaining commitment to Jewish survival and flourishing.

Historical Precedents

The Rabbinic Response to Temple Destruction

The destruction of the Second Temple provides the closest historical parallel to Harari's contemporary crisis analysis. Like today's situation, the Temple's destruction represented not merely political catastrophe but spiritual crisis: the apparent failure of divine protection, the breakdown of traditional religious institutions, and the challenge to fundamental theological assumptions.

The rabbinic response involved neither abandonment of Jewish distinctiveness nor retreat into defensive isolation, but rather creative transformation that maintained continuity within radical innovation. The rabbis developed new institutions (study houses), new practices (prayer and study), new authorities (rabbinic ordination), and new interpretive methods (Oral Torah) that preserved Jewish identity while adapting to fundamentally altered circumstances.

Most significantly, the rabbinic response maintained the dialectical structure that enables both survival and transformation. The rabbis affirmed divine covenant while acknowledging divine hiddenness, maintained chosenness while practicing humility, preserved tradition while enabling innovation, exercised authority while submitting to textual interpretation. Contemporary Jewish response to crisis requires similar dialectical creativity: developing new institutions, practices, authorities, and interpretive methods that can preserve Jewish spiritual mission while responding adequately to contemporary political and moral challenges.

Medieval Philosophy and the Integration of Reason

Medieval Jewish philosophy provides another model for Jewish response to crisis through creative synthesis rather than defensive reaction. Figures like Maimonides, Saadia Gaon, and Hasdai Crescas responded to the challenge of Greek philosophy and Islamic culture not by rejecting foreign wisdom but by developing sophisticated syntheses that maintained Jewish distinctiveness while incorporating universal insights.

The medieval response involved the recognition that Jewish truth could be enhanced rather than threatened by engagement with non-Jewish wisdom, provided that such engagement maintained the fundamental structure of Jewish commitment. Medieval philosophers developed methods of interpretation that could hold revealed and rational truth in creative tension without reducing either to the other.

Contemporary Jewish engagement with universal human rights, secular democracy, and humanitarian ethics requires similar synthetic creativity. Rather than viewing these as threats to Jewish distinctiveness or simply

adopting them uncritically, mystical theology suggests developing sophisticated integration that maintains Jewish particular commitment while contributing to universal human flourishing.

The Challenge of Emancipation

Modern Jewish thought provides perhaps the most relevant precedent for contemporary crisis, since it emerged from Jewish encounter with political emancipation and cultural integration similar to contemporary Jewish experience of political success and cultural influence.

Figures like Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham Geiger, Zacharias Frankel, and Samson Raphael Hirsch developed different strategies for maintaining Jewish identity within modern circumstances, but all shared the recognition that such maintenance required creative transformation rather than simple preservation or simple abandonment.

The most successful modern Jewish responses maintained what might be called "dialectical integration"—ways of being both authentically Jewish and genuinely modern that neither reduced Judaism to ethnic nostalgia nor dissolved Judaism into universal culture. Such integration required sophisticated theology, innovative institutional forms, and creative pedagogical methods.

Contemporary Jewish response to the post-October 7th crisis requires similar dialectical integration: ways of being both authentically Jewish and genuinely humanitarian that neither reduce Judaism to tribal solidarity nor dissolve Judaism into abstract ethics.

Dialectical Thinking

The mystical theology developed throughout this essay suggests a distinctive theological method that might be called "dialectical thinking"—the capacity to hold contradictory truths in creative tension without premature resolution. This method draws upon the mystical recognition that ultimate reality transcends human conceptual categories while requiring human conceptual engagement.

Dialectical thinking differs from both dogmatic thinking (which reduces complexity to simple formulations) and relativistic thinking (which dissolves truth into subjective preference). Instead, it maintains the mystical insight that truth emerges through the ongoing interaction between finite human perspectives and infinite divine reality.

Applied to contemporary Jewish crisis, dialectical thinking enables holding Jewish particular commitment and universal humanitarian concern, Israeli political necessity and Palestinian moral claims, Jewish historical suffering and Jewish contemporary power, Jewish spiritual mission and Jewish moral failure—all within the larger framework of divine concern for justice and human responsibility for ethical action.

The Ontological Foundation

The ontological foundation of this mystical theology lies in the recognition that both divine reality and human identity exist in the dynamic tension between being and non-being, presence and absence, affirmation and negation. This ontological structure explains both the persistence of Jewish identity through historical crisis and the distinctive forms of Jewish spiritual creativity.

Divine reality manifests both as *Ein Sof* (infinite being) and as *Ayin* (nothingness), both as creative presence and as concealing absence. Human response to divine reality requires corresponding dialectical existence: affirming divine calling while acknowledging human limitation, maintaining particular commitment while transcending ethnic closure, exercising power while remembering powerlessness.

Jewish identity, understood mystically, exists precisely in this dialectical

space between being and non-being. Jewish survival requires sufficient being (institutional forms, cultural practices, political presence), while Jewish spiritual authenticity requires sufficient non-being (self-criticism, openness to transformation, recognition of ultimate dependence upon divine grace).

The Practical Discipline: Contemplative Action

The practical discipline that emerges from this mystical theology might be called “contemplative action”—engagement with worldly responsibilities informed by mystical consciousness of ultimate reality. This discipline draws upon traditional Jewish practices of study, prayer, and ethical action while adapting them to contemporary circumstances.

Contemplative action involves neither retreat from political engagement nor unreflective activism, but rather political engagement informed by ongoing spiritual discernment. Such discernment requires regular practices of self-examination, textual study, communal dialogue, and contemplative reflection that maintain consciousness of divine presence within historical involvement.

Applied to contemporary Jewish crisis, contemplative action would involve political engagement on behalf of both Jewish security and Palestinian dignity, guided by ongoing examination of whether such engagement serves divine purposes of justice and compassion or merely human purposes of tribal interest and political success.

Conclusion

Harari’s analysis of contemporary Jewish crisis as potentially “the most significant since the destruction of the Second Temple” proves accurate when interpreted through mystical theology. Like the Temple’s destruction, the post-October 7th situation represents not merely political catastrophe but spiritual crisis: the test of whether Jewish identity can maintain its authentic structure within fundamentally altered circumstances.

The mystical thinkers examined in this essay—Yerushalmi, Scholem, Halivni, Wolfson, Magid, Boyarin, and Weiss—converge on the crucial insight that authentic Jewish response to crisis requires neither defensive reaction nor self-destructive dissolution, but rather creative transformation that maintains the dialectical structure of Jewish existence.

This dialectical structure—the dynamic tension between being and non-being, particular commitment and universal concern, political engagement and spiritual transcendence—has enabled Jewish survival and creativity through millennia of historical crisis. The contemporary challenge is whether Jewish community can recover this mystical capacity for dialectical existence within the circumstances of political power and cultural influence.

The theological response developed here suggests that such recovery is both possible and necessary. It requires sophisticated theological thinking that can hold contradictions in creative tension, innovative institutional forms that can embody dialectical commitment, and courageous spiritual discipline that can discern divine calling within historical complexity. Most fundamentally, it requires the mystical recognition that Jewish spiritual mission transcends any particular political achievement while necessarily manifesting through concrete historical engagement. Jewish identity exists neither in pure transcendence nor in simple immanence, but in the ongoing dialectical relationship between ultimate calling and penultimate responsibility.

The post-October 7th crisis thus represents both danger and opportunity: the danger of reducing Jewish identity to tribal solidarity or dissolving it into abstract universalism, and the opportunity of recovering authentic Jewish mystical consciousness that can hold particular commitment and universal concern within the larger framework of divine providence and

human responsibility.

Whether Jewish community will realize this opportunity depends upon its willingness to engage in the kind of honest self-examination, creative theological thinking, and courageous spiritual practice that crisis both demands and enables. The mystical interpretation of Jewish history suggests that such willingness has emerged before from comparable crises and may emerge again if Jewish community maintains faith in the divine calling that transcends yet works through all historical circumstances.

The ultimate theological insight is that divine presence manifests most powerfully precisely when it appears most absent, and that Jewish spiritual authenticity may be discovered most clearly precisely when Jewish moral behavior proves most inadequate to Jewish spiritual aspiration. The crisis forces recognition of the gap between calling and performance, between aspiration and achievement, between divine expectation and human response.

Such recognition can lead either to despair or to renewal, depending upon whether Jewish community maintains the mystical capacity to discern divine presence within apparent absence and divine calling within human failure. The mystical theology developed here suggests that authentic response involves neither denial of moral failure nor abandonment of spiritual mission, but rather the dialectical practice of *teshuvah* that enables both honest self-examination and renewed commitment to the justice and compassion that constitute Judaism’s distinctive contribution to human civilization.

In this sense, Harari’s crisis analysis, while accurate in its description of contemporary Jewish moral and spiritual challenges, may be incomplete in its assessment of possibilities for authentic Jewish response. The mystical interpretation of Jewish history suggests that crisis often catalyzes rather than prevents spiritual renewal, provided that Jewish community maintains the theological and spiritual resources necessary for creative transformation.

The task before contemporary Jewish community is thus not merely political or ethical but fundamentally theological: the recovery of mystical consciousness that can hold the dialectical tensions of Jewish existence within the larger framework of divine concern for justice and human responsibility for ethical action. Such recovery would enable Jewish response to contemporary crisis that is both authentically Jewish and genuinely humanitarian, both politically responsible and spiritually transformative.

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Addendum:

An Inflection Point in Jewish History: Harari's Warning After Gaza

In the shadow of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks and the ensuing devastation in Gaza, Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari has emerged as a poignant voice, framing the crisis not merely as a geopolitical tragedy but as a profound spiritual and existential turning point for Judaism itself. Drawing on millennia of Jewish resilience amid catastrophe—from the Babylonian exile to the Holocaust—Harari argues that this moment eclipses them all in its potential to redefine the soul of the Jewish people. In interviews and essays since the war's outbreak, he likens the current trajectory to the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE, when Zealot extremists, driven by messianic fervor, nearly eradicated Judaism by provoking Roman annihilation and forcing the religion to reinvent itself as a diaspora faith of ethics, study, and survival rather than conquest¹. This “inflection point,” as Harari calls it, risks unraveling 2,000 years of Jewish moral evolution, replacing it with a doctrine of supremacy and violence that echoes the very oppressors Jews have historically resisted².

Harari's analysis begins with the raw trauma of October 7, which he describes as a barbaric assault that shattered Israel's sense of security and revived primal fears of annihilation. Yet, he refuses to let victimhood eclipse moral agency, insisting that “the same people can be both victims and perpetrators at the same time”^{3,4}. The Israeli response in Gaza—marked by over 42,000 Palestinian deaths, widespread displacement, and humanitarian collapse—has, in his view, inflamed a societal consensus that Palestinian suffering is inconsequential, eroding the humanistic core of Zionism². Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right coalition, Harari sees the “Zealots” of today: ultranationalists and messianic settlers who prioritize territorial expansion and Jewish dominance over democratic pluralism or peace^{5,6}. This mirrors the ancient Zealots' hubris, which Harari warns could culminate in ethnic cleansing of Gaza and the West Bank, the dismantling of Israel's fragile democracy, and the birth of a theocratic state glorifying force over justice⁵. “What did Jews learn in those 2,000 years?” he asks rhetorically, decrying a regression to “the values of the Roman legion” after centuries of yeshiva scholarship emphasizing empathy and restraint⁶.

At stake, Harari contends, is not just Israel's borders but the essence of Jewish identity. He urges reclaiming Zionism from its vilification—not as a supremacist ideology, but as the legitimate national liberation of a persecuted people, compatible with Palestinian dignity and a two-state future¹. He rejects binary narratives of “good versus evil,” advocating for a nuanced empathy that honors both peoples' ancient ties to the land while building “houses, roads, and hospitals for everybody” between the river and the sea^{7,8}. Harari's broader oeuvre, from *Sapiens* to recent essays, reinforces this: history is shaped by shared stories, and Judaism's enduring narrative has been one of ethical universalism, not domination. The Gaza war, he fears, tests whether Jews will perpetuate that legacy or succumb to a “free

fall into barbarism,” betraying allies abroad and the prophetic tradition at home⁶.

Ultimately, Harari's call is for introspection and action: dethrone the extremists, revive liberal Zionism, and forge a coalition—from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia—to disarm Hamas, rebuild Gaza, and pursue coexistence⁹. Failure, he warns, could mark Judaism's spiritual nadir, transforming survivors into subjugators and echoing the very hatreds that forged the Jewish resolve. In this crucible, Harari sees not inevitability, but a choice: redemption through humility, or ruin through hubris. The inflection point demands nothing less than reclaiming the moral compass that has sustained the Jewish people through empires and exiles alike.

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