

NOLI ME TANGERE

The Shoah and the monotheistic ban on images¹

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“Noli me tangere.” “Do not hold on to me”, “Do not cling to me”, “Do not thou touch me”, “Touch Me not”, “Do not touch me.”²

The interpretations of what Jesus orders Mary Magdalena the morning of his resurrection, are much more numerous than the variety of translations. Yet the general meaning of that sentence in John 20:17 is not that unclear. Jesus no longer addresses himself to Mary as a human mortal, but as God’s Son, or, which in this case amounts to the same thing, as God himself. You should not touch me, the godhead says, for I am beyond touch, I belong to what is beyond the touchable realm of the empirical world. Do not hold on to *me*, to the one you recognize as the friend you had when I was among the mortals. I am immortal now and do belong to the divine. You can no longer touch me, lay your hand upon me, grasp me, and appropriate me. I am no longer what you think I am, I am not even what you are able to think or to imagine I am. For I am God, and, as you know from the Thora, the Profets and the other Holy Writings, only God is God.

‘Nothing of what you think or imagine as being God is God, for only God is God.’ It is the core of monotheism, present here in the heart of the Christian text. We are full of thoughts and imaginations about God and the divine, we are inclined to hold on to it, to lay in it our entire hope and trust, but we should be careful, for not whom we imagine as being trustful is our trustful God, for only God is God. We wish our hope and trust to be founded in God, but we cannot but *wish* that, while in the meantime we are bound to critically screen all our imaginations and thoughts about that God in order not to reduce Him to an idol. We should not touch Him in order to let Him be the Untouchable He is. We should not make an image of Him, in order to respect him as the Unimaginable He is. The monotheistic insight that only God is God originally matches with the as much monotheistic ban on images.

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² Translation, respectively, King James Bible, New King James Version, Wicliffe New Testament, 21st Century King James Version, New International Version (<http://www.biblegateway.com/>)

1. To touch or not to touch is not the question

But are we able to obey that ban? Are we able not to have any imagination about the unimaginable God? Are we able at all not to touch the Untouchable. Has that order itself, that order mentioning the Untouchable, not always already touched it? Is the idea of something ‘unimaginable’ itself not the product of imagination?

The ban on images, characteristic for monotheism, is in fact always immediately transgressed, if only because of the fact that this ban is inevitably part of a story telling us about – and thus imagining – the Unimaginable. ‘Do not touch me’, Jesus says to Mary Magdalena, and a few lines further, he invites James to lay his hand into his wound (John 20:27).³ Which, in the logic of the text, is not really a contradiction. Thomas’s touch, too, is a way to acknowledge the untouchable status of the touched body. Just like the stories full of imagination try to make clear how untouchable the Untouchable God is. How even his birth as a mortal does not change that status, neither the virginal status of the woman who gave him birth. Remember that spectacular story, in the *Protevangelion of James*: the story of Salome, the friend of the “Hebrew midwife” who did not believe that a virgin has given birth to a child and, in order to verify it, brought literally her hand into Mary’s womb. Her hand caught fire and burned off. Shown remorse, Gods angel healed her hand.⁴

³ “But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said unto them, “Unless I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe.” And after eight days the disciples were again within, and Thomas was with them. Then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace be unto you.” Then said He to Thomas, “Reach hither thy finger and behold My hands, and reach hither thy hand and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing.” And Thomas answered and said unto Him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said unto him, “Thomas, because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed. Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.”” (John 20: 24-29, 21st Century King James Bible)

⁴ “Then the midwife cried out and said, how glorious a day in this, wherein my eyes have seen this extraordinary sight! And the midwife went out from the cave, and Salome met her. And the midwife said to her, Salome, Salome, I will tell you a most surprising thing which I saw, a virgin has brought forth, which is a thing contrary to nature. As the Lord my God lives, unless I receive particular proof of this matter, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth’. Then [so the text continues] Salome went in, and the midwife said, ‘Mary, show yourself, for a great controversy is risen concerning you’. And Salome received satisfaction. But her hand was withered, and she groaned bitterly. And said, ‘Woe to me, because of my iniquity; for I have tempted the living God, and my hand is ready to drop off’. Then Salome made her supplication to the Lord, and said, O God of my fathers, remember me, for I am of the seed of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. Make me not a reproach among the children of Israel, but restore me sound to my parents. For you well know, O Lord, that I have performed many offices of charity in your name, and have received my reward from you. Upon this an angel of the Lord stood by Salome, and said, The Lord God has heard your prayer; reach forth your hand to the child and carry him, and by that means you will be restored. Salome, filled with exceeding joy, went to the child, and said, I will touch him: And she purposed to worship him, for she said, This is a great king which is born in Israel.”
Protevangelion of James, 13:13-27 (<http://ministries.tliquest.net/theology/apocryphas/nt/protevan.htm>).

This, however, is not to say, that the imagination involved here is freed from its problematic nature. Of course, the ban on images is always already transgressed and imagination is always at play. But these things are at play in order to warn against imagination, to keep the power of the imaginary under control and to avoid people falling into the worship of false gods, of idols. It is not a coincidence that the last reference, the one to the Protevangelion of James, is from the apocryphal writings, the ones not accepted in the official list of Bible books. The intention of their authors might have been pious and have inspired highly orthodox Christians (just like Robert Campin and so many late medieval and renaissance painters in whose eyes the *Legenda Aurea* was as sacred as the Bible itself), they lack the criticism necessary for any genuine monotheistic text.

For monotheism is a critical religion and, even, a religion critical religion. What we like to believe to be God or godlike, is most of the time a matter of false gods and misleading divinity, of magic ascribed to idols with whom we can deal ‘economically’, whom we can seduce and ‘touch’ with sacrifices and other religious practices in order to obtain favours from them. The monotheistic God is beyond economy. You cannot touch him. And even if you do – and, in a way, you cannot but do it – it is to reinstall the ban on touch. Similarly, you cannot but use your imagination to stress the Unimaginable He is, and although this surely contaminates his unimaginability, it again and again reaffirms the ban on images. ‘*Noli me tangere*’ supposes the God always already being touched, but with a touch acknowledging that very ban. ‘*Noli me imaginare*’ supposes imagination, be it used to reinstall again and again the ban on images.

What is at stake here? Isn’t it just a matter of hairsplitting pettifoggery or cavil? What are these kinds of intellectual subtlety about?

All this concerns nothing less than the core of monotheistic religion. That religion is a critical one, and even, as already mentioned, a religion critical religion. Spontaneous religiosity is defined as false. It mistakenly imagines its own suppositions – its imaginations – to be real and true. The monotheistic God cannot be but the result of an incessant investigation that critically screens our inclination to hold our wishes for reality, our images for truth. As Jan Assmann has shown, the monotheism founding today’s dominant global religious traditions of that name, is a truth religion, religion ruled by the “mosaic criterion”. That criterion declares, firstly, all gods to be false idols except the One True God and, secondly emphasizes that worshipping God means particularly installing a moral and just

society among the mortals where justice is done to the “widows and the orphans”.⁵ It is a difficult and even ‘aporetic’ religion, if only because it distrusts religion *as such*, religion as rooted in the anthropological condition of men, in his hunger for certainty and ‘sense’ for instance. While at the same time it keeps defining itself as religion. It is an entire culture of rituals, symbols and all kind of imaginary stuff, but in its core it is an incessant criticism against the imaginary, against people’s inclination to trust his imagination.

2. To touch or not to touch the Shoah

To understand what is at stake in that religion, to comprehend its complex relation vis-à-vis its own typically religious/imaginary side which is always under the pressure of its own critical imperative, it might be clarifying to compare it with a similar ban at work in a radically different field: the memory of the Shoah.

How to relate to the Shoah, to the unimaginable, unconceivable horror of the Nazi genocide on the Jewish population in Europe during the Second World War? Can we grasp that cruelty? Can we conceive the implications it had – and still has – on our entire modern civilization? Can we imagine the atrocity of what was cynically called the ‘final solution’? Or is imagination a misleading factor here, giving us erroneously the impression of grasping what it is and understanding what happened there, while in fact we deny the unimaginable character of that holocaust? Auschwitz, many say, is beyond images, beyond representation and imagination. In order to respect it, we should not touch it, not make images of it. “Do not touch me”: it can easily be read as the imperative adequately expressing what Auschwitz means to us, the imperative guiding the whole culture of its memory.

Claude Lanzmann, the author of the movie called ‘Shoah’, would entirely agree with that. That catastrophe is not to be touched, not even by imagination. He especially links this prohibition to the ban on images. The life in the camps is rarely filmed or photographed, but the material left is nonetheless quite impressive. Yet, none of it is used in Lanzman’s nine and a half hour movie. Not one single image from the ‘Auschwitz archive’, not one cinematographic picture of the ‘life’ in the camps, of what happened there.

What is wrong with images for Lanzmann? Why should they be banned from the way we remember the Shoah? Because this kind of representations too easily make us feel ‘present’ with what we see. Too easily, they allow our imagination to feel and to grasp the

⁵ Jan Assmann (2009), *The price of monotheism*, translation Robert Savage, Standford: Standford University Press.

shown atrocity. This is the power of their imaginary ‘*Gestalt*’ characteristic for pictures. They immediately offer a totality to see, a totality according to which the viewer is in the position of someone who oversees and thus masters the entire scene. What is more, images allow at the same time an instant identification. They make us feel identical with the ones shown in the picture, an identification that completes our supposed understanding of – and thus our mastery over – the shown atrocity. The power of images is due to a structural denial which is inherent to the way they function. They immediately deny their representational dimension. They do not show *that* they show. They do not show that they are *but* images. And so, they deny that real reality is beyond the image - that the real is *unimaginable*. Concerning Auschwitz, this insight is of great importance. Certainly in case of the Shoah and its remembrance, one must avoid the imaginary effect of images. Every image must, while showing what it shows, make clear that it cannot fulfil its promises. The image itself must reveal that it is but an image. It must show the difference between itself (i.e. its lack of self) and what it pretend to show.

This is why Lanzmann, in his *Shoah*, shows the camps as what is left over of them *now*, the camps different from the camps they once were. He explicitly wants to stage a difference and, thus, evoke the unimaginable character of what his images are about. And this is why, in fact, his movie shoots ‘words’, people speaking, men and women baring witness of what happened. He shows a discourse, which is something that *at any time* shows its difference with what it (*says* it) shows. A discourse doesn’t totalize what it has to say, if only because it again and again has to add new words in order to say what it has to say, and to finally observe that it will never stop adding words because the totality and the real (essence) of what is to be said is out of reach. Out of touch. ‘Do not touch me’ is the hidden imperative ordered by the real that is expressed in any discourse, a fortiori a discourse evoking the unspeakable cruelty of the Shoah. So, it is the ‘ban on images’ that guides Lanzmann’s highly discursive movie. Not one single moment it does allow the spectator to feel himself *inside* the camps, inside the death factories, let alone the gaz chambers.

An image bringing us (imaginarily) in the inside of a gas chamber on the moment of people’s dying in there: would this be not a mere blasphemy, a sacrilege? Is an artwork that lets one’s imagination entering the gas chamber not a denial of the unimaginable character of the Shoah? For the movie maker Claude Lanzmann, it certainly is. The movie *Shoah* is his way to accuse that tendency in current filmmaking. For the Israeli novelist David Grossmann, however, it is not. And Grossman goes very far in that opposite direction. Remember his first,

worldwide highly appreciated novel, *See under: Love*, where one of the characters sees, in the inside of a gas chamber, his friend dying – and, even, dying while laughing!

This requires some explanation. The main character of this novel is Momik, the son and grandson of a Jewish Holocaust survivor. He is an Israeli writer who, in the eighties, goes through a deep existential crisis after having been confronted with the traumatic past of his relatives and his people. Momik tries to overcome his crisis by writing a novel about (among others) his ‘grandpa’ Anshel Wassermann, who in the twenties had a certain reputation as writer of child stories. In the war, he survived Auschwitz, but not without a definitely damaged mind. Momik wants to do justice to the story of his ‘grandpa’: to the stories he wrote, to the story of his life, both his life in the *shtetl* and his ‘non-life’ in the Shoah.

The story of Anshel Wassermann, such as Momik creatively imagines it, goes that, once locked up in the gas chamber together with the others from his deportation train, he didn’t die. Like the Hunter Gracchus in Kafka’s story of the same name⁶, Wassermann had lost the capacity of dying, even when, afterwards, he several times got shot by gunfire. This is why he is brought to the camp director. Uncannily sitting in front of his Nazi executioner, so a passage in chapter three tells, he must think of his friend whom he just saw dying in the gas chamber: Shimon Zalmanson, the editor of the magazine in which he once published his child stories. The passage describing the moment in the gas chamber is striking:

Nu, they were writhing and groaning [...] and only I, Anshel Wassermann was left standing like a lulav, and Zalmanson started laughing then, would that I had never heard him, snorting and weeping, such a laugh, till suddenly he died. He was the first to die! And it is important you should know this, Shleimeleh⁷: Shimon Zalmanson, the Jew, my only friend, editor of *Little Lights*, the children’s magazine, died laughing in the gas chamber, a fitting death for a man like him, who believed that God reveals Himself through humor.” (190)

Despite its subject, Grossman’s novel is in fact one long chain of hilarious situations, scenes, and characters.⁸ It is probably only due to the writer’s unquestionable literary genius that the

6

⁷ Diminutive of Schlomo, the other name of Momik, who, so Momik writes, is useable present in the room where the story takes place.

⁸ A boy (Momik as kid) wants to catch the ‘Nazi-beast’ of whom he ‘heard’ his parents and others in his neighbourhood keep silence, picks up that it can come out of every beast, therefore breeds animals at home in the basement; and as the Nazi-beast still refuses to come out, he gathers all traumatized fools (Shoah survivors) of his neighbourhood, including ‘grandpa’ Wassermann, hoping this will tempt the beast to show up. It goes without saying that the entire plan runs into a hilarious fiasco. So far Part 1 of the novel. Part 2, which is an ode to the Jewish-Polish writer Bruno Schulz, might be a tougher part to read, the subject is not less hilarious. A Jew, anno 1943 at an art gallery in Dantzig/Gdansk, kisses Edward Munch’s *Scream* (90) and escapes his pursuers choosing the open sea and becoming a salmon in a school of salmon. The conflict he has, there, with his rescuers, both the sea and the salmon school, brings about highly comic and funny scenes. Certainly if that story is interlarded with

critics haven't run the novel into the ground, accusing it of sheer blasphemy. When Georges Didi-Huberman once began an essay on 'Shoah and visual culture' saying "*Il faut s'imaginer Auschwitz*", he was reprimanded immediately.⁹ Grossman's novel is one big ode addressed to that imperative. He constantly violates the 'ban on images' that dominates the Shoah memorial culture. The critics, who explicitly referred to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, reproached Didi-Huberman to feed the illusion that photographs taken in Auschwitz bring us into the heart of the Shoah, the gas chamber and, thus, violates or denies its unimaginable, untouchable status. With Grossman, we enter all the ventricles of the Shoah's heart, the one of the executioners and the one of the victims. He carries us along to the gas chamber's very inside and let us witness there how a Jew dies from laughing. More blasphemous is almost impossible.

This is all the more true if one considers that the Jew's laughter answers the blasphemous laughter of the Nazi. The passageway leading the naked Shimon Zalmanson and Anshel Wassermann to the gas chamber was decorated in a way that could not be misunderstood. Somewhere, Wassermann cites Zalmanson's words uttered just before they were collectively killed:

'No doubt you remember, Anshel, the sight that greeted us at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, the little gas chamber?' Wassermann remembered very well: the Germans had brought the ark curtain from a synagogue in Warsaw and hung it at the entrance to the gas chambers. Embroidered on the curtain were the words "This is the gate of the Lord. The righteous shall enter" and here Zalmanson began to laugh, and died laughing with the realization that even someone like fusty old Wassermann has his funny points.¹⁰ Laughter itself was the spontaneous ritual of his religion. 'Every time I laugh' he explained, 'my deity, who doesn't exist, of course, knows I cleave to Him, knows I have understood Him profoundly, if only for an instant. Because, my little Wassermann, the good Lord created the world out of

another one about a writer in crisis supposing to have contact with "Bruno" by speaking directly to the sea and, at times, by disappearing in it like once Bruno did. In part 3, a Jew fails in the only test he is invited for in 'Auschwitz', dying. That this guarantees a set of unseen comic situations is already illustrated above in the few things revealed from Wassermann's story. The fourth and last part is, if possible, still more comical. It tells the story of a baby, Kazik, who in 22 months lives the 72 years of a normal man. Kazik is the central preoccupation of a group of aged fools in the destroyed zoo of Warsaw in the same year 1943. The group is gattered by Otto Brig, a Christian Polish man who supposes his collective of 'artists' to be the true response to the dominating Nazi terror. One of them is a real 'elephantiasis man' who counts carefully the number of his 'non-ejaculation', convinced as he is that once, such saved and accumulated sexual energy will enable him to escape from the hell he is living in.

⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman (2003), *Images malgré tout*, Paris : Les éditions de Minuit, p. 11. Voor de kritiek zie : Gérard Wajcman (2001), "De la croyance photographique", in: *Les Temps Modernes*, LVI, 2001, n° 613, p. 47-83; Elisabeth Pagnoux (2001), "Reporter photographe à Auschwitz", *ibid.* p. 84-108.. Voor een commentaar op die discussie, zie Marc De Kesel (2008), "Vanuit een donkere kamer. Over Shoah en beeldverbod", in: *De Witte Raaf* nr. 136 (jaargang 23, november 2008), p. 1-6.

¹⁰ Klopt de vertaling hier. Eens vergelijken met de Engelse vertaling.

nothingness, out of chaos, and He took His blueprint and building materials from that chaos ... nu, what do you say to that? (330)

Zalmanson's laugh responds in the first place at the sarcastic joke of the nazi's letting the Jews advance their certain death as if they were entering the space where, in a synagogue, the Bible rolls were stored and which, since the second destruction of the Temple (70 AD) functioned as the 'Holy of Holies'. Nazi-sarcasm cannot be more thorough, more '*grundlich*'. Neither can it be a greater blasphemy. And what does Shimon Zalmanson do? Instead of protecting himself against the humiliation, and, out of vicarious shame, looking away from such tasteless cynicism, he does fully affirm it. He simply does what each joke expects one to do: laughing. What is more, he does what each *sarcastic* joke expects one to do: laughing without laughing away the cruel thing almost every joke is about. For this is the nazi's intention: the curtain hanging before what the Jews consider to be the Holy of Holies, hangs there for nothing, because it hangs hiding nothing. It hangs there hiding the nothing the Jews are as biological and cultural identity, hiding the noting they are now and, thanks to the biopolitically 'correct' nazi-ideology, they will be in a few moments. It hangs there hiding their grave, telling that in that grave lies nothing and that their death doesn't count, that the one dying there, never was really living, never was real life and that, therefore, just like that embroidered curtain, was mere fiction and fantasy. In case of the Jew a bad, biologically and racially wrong fantasy.

Indeed, Shimon Zalmanson understood the joke of his killers perfectly. He didn't miss the point and, thus, laughs. Dies laughing. Literally. So the 'immortal' Wasserman was able to witness. But his lethal laughing not only fully acknowledges that which the Nazi's laugh with, he acknowledges at the same time his own religion. This is why he does not laugh because the Nazi's are right in his eyes. He laughs with the Nazi-joke because even in that he recognizes a sign of God. Because it is God himself who, in the most terrible moment of their history, has given the Jews that joke. When Zalmanson laughs, it is in gratitude for this divine present. The lines above the just cited passage cannot be misunderstood:

Zalmanson (who was, incidentally, the errant son of a great rabbi) said humor was the sole means to understand God and His Creation in all its mystery, and to go on worshipping Him in gladness. Zalmanson's God went around showering mankind with little flavors of divine will. 'No doubt you remember, Anshel, the sight that greeted us at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, the little gas chamber?' (330)

One of the “little flavors of divine will”: thus Zalmanson qualifies the cynical, sadistic joke the Nazi’s play on the Jews just before they lynch them. Similarly, he has no fear to name the “little gas chamber” “the Holy of Holies”.

Against the use of the word ‘holocaust’ as term to indicate the Nazi-genocide of the Jews, there is a widespread critical reserve. A cruelty and suffering of that proportion cannot be done justice with a religious, more precisely sacrificial term: ‘holocaust’ is the word for a sacrifice that “burns all”, i.e. a sacrifice that does not let any rest to eat for the participants. One cannot appropriate the unimaginable cruelty of the Shoah, not even religiously. On Zalmanson, this kind of critical reserve is definitely wasted. According to him, even inferno’s such as Auschwitz are barrels full of “little flavors of divine will”. And with full religious assent, he takes them to heart. Laughing, laughing to God, even in the most godforsaken instant of his dying. As a restlessly consumable sacrifice – i.e. as a ‘holocaust’ – he offers himself laughing to his God. An apotheosis of gratitude for the humor offered to him by God even in the most infernal of his Creation’s “mysteries”.

3. The touch *of* the Untouchable

Is Grossman’s novel a blasphemy, both with respect to the Shoah and to the Jewish religion? Has he violated the ban on images and touched the Untouchable. Has he surpassed the limits of monotheist religion? Appearances are deceiving here. For Zalmanson’s laugh is to be read as Grossman’s grotesque, literary blow up of the kind of reactions that historically can be ascribed to Hasidic Judaism.¹¹ Referring to elements from the Cabbala (but without the sophisticated intellectualism in which it often was practiced¹²), Hasidism believed in a far reaching interaction between the divine and the earthly reality, so that even the most ‘earthly’

¹¹ Hasidic Jews were largely represented among the Holocaust victims, if only because their kind of Judaism was dominant in the religious and cultural life of the East-European *shtetls*. It was thanks to the the Hasidic reformation movement that, during the 18th century, Ashkenazi Judaism conquered a proper place both within the Jewish world and the broader modern European culture. Paul Kriwaczek (2007), *Jiddische wereld. Opkomst en ondergang van een vergeten volk*, ***: Uitgeverij Atlas,

¹² De chassidim was in de grond een anti-intellectualistische beweging tegen de dominantie van de vaak zeer intellectualistische rabbijnse interpretatie die tot dan het religieuze en culturele leven van het jodendom domineerde. Ze sluiten in die zin aan bij de piëtistische bewegingen die men in dezelfde tijd ook de christelijke religieuze cultuur kende. Ze gaan terug op de kabbala, maar dan niet op zijn speculatieve variant, de *Kabbala Ijjunit*, maar op de toegepaste kabbala, de *Kabbala Ma’asit*. (Kriwaczek 2007: 267 en noot 20 en 21). Kriwaczek citeert Gershom Sholem die de chassidische beweging omschreef als “een conglomeraat van alle magische praktijken die in het Jodendom tot ontwikkeling gekomen waren vanaf de Talmoedische tijd tot de Middeleeuwen”. En hij laat daar zelf een rake omschrijving van die “armeluis-kabbalisten” op volgen: “Zulke ‘oefenaars’ [Chassidische meesters] trokken het hele land door, beweerden soms dat ze zich op magische wijze verplaatsten, verdreven demonen en boze geesten, en behandelden lichamelijke kwalen en geestesziekten met remedies die mede de juiste toepassing van de Heilige Naam inhielden.” (Kriwaczek 2007: 267). Het is een typering die zonder veel moeite ook op de personages uit Grossmans roman van toepassing is.

and ‘evil’ things were considered to be hiding signs of God. Earthly reality was full of divine ‘touches’. Among other prominent Hasidic rabbi’s, Grossman mentions a few times Nahman of Breslow (1772-1811)¹³, according to whom happiness and joy are a sign of God’s blessing, which made him inciting his disciples to be always happy and joyful.¹⁴ It is a fact that in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, many Hasidic Jews did what they could to obey that commandment.¹⁵ In his way, also Shimon Zalmanson does so in Grossman’s novel.

In the beginning, before Creation, there was only God. In other words, the infinite space was filled with Divine Light. Thus the Jewish myth inspired by Luria’s Cabbala-interpretation.¹⁶ In order to create heaven and earth, God decided to ‘shrink’, to ‘contract’ himself. In a gesture of ‘contraction’ – in the Hebrew of the Cabbala called ‘*tsimtsum*’,¹⁷ the Light God schrank. This way, an immense space was set free. Deprived of Divine Light and Goodness, that space was dark and empty, and allowed evil to come into being. Even when the dark immediately was traversed by light, evil and godforsakenness stuck to the Creation that was made in that space. But also sparks of the original Light remained present in every single corner of the created universe. Also in those corners dominated by evil. This is why evil, badness, calamity and disaster are to be conceived as possible bearers of Redemption.¹⁸ The ‘raison d’être’ of the Jewish people consists in gathering all over the universe, including its most evil corners, the sparks of light that could bring mankind back to God. It is the Chosen People’s task to bring Redemption to the created universe. This kind of Hasidic world picture, based upon the Lurian Cabbala, constitutes the background of all ‘positive’ characters in Grossman’s novel. In what seems to be the worse, they are able to recognize the sparks of Redemption, as for instance the laughing Zalmonson recognized it in the corridor leading to the gas chamber.

¹³ Dan Cohn-Sherlok (1997), *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers*, London & New York: Routledge, p. 97-100. Martin Buber (1968), *De Chassidische boodschap*, vertaling R. Boeke, Wassenaar: N.V. Servire, p. 227-261.

¹⁴ Yts’hak Besançon (réd.) (1986), *Rabbi Na’hman de Breslev: sa vie, son oeuvre et sa pensée*, Jerusalem: The Breslov Research Institute, p. 432-439.

¹⁵ Pesach Schindler (1990), *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in Light of the Hasidic Thought*, Hoboken: ***; Zev Gabner, “Practice of Judaism during the Holocaust”, in: Jacob Neusner, Alan J Avery-Peck and William Scott Green (2005), *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, Second Edition, Volume II, F-K, Leiden/Boston: Brill, p. 1034-1048.

¹⁶ Isaak Luria (1534-1572) is bekend geworden voor de doorgedreven interpretatie van de Kabbala. Zie onder meer Karen Armstrong (2000 [1995]), *Een geschiedenis van God. Vierduizend jaar jodendom, christendom en islam*, Amsterdam: Ambo/Anthos, p. 298-303

¹⁷ Gershom Sholem (***), *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, ***: ***, p ***; Armstrong 2000: 299-300; Jan Oegema (2003), *Een vreemd geluk. De publieke religie rond Auschwitz*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, p. 165-170.

¹⁸ For the hassidic idea that one can experience God *within* the mundane (*Avodah Begashmiut*), see Schindler 1990: 12-13.

The Untouchable has touched reality. This is why touching the most earthly thing can happen to be a celebration of the Untouchable. But who or what is the Untouchable? Is it God? Is it Auschwitz? Which bring us to the question: Where was God in Auschwitz? Where was the God when his chosen people, the people of his Covenant, became the victim of the greatest genocide in history? What is the sense of the Law – the Torah – promising prosperity and justice for “the widow and the orphan”, when the people observing that Law have been persecuted for centuries by evil pogroms to be finally lead to death *en masse* in the Nazi gas chambers? It is an abysmal question which is repeated in countless variations by 20th century’s thinkers and writers and to which the Jewish religion had – and still has – no answer.

Yet, Judaic religion has survived the Shoah. During the decennia after the Second World War, it has even seen a genuine revival. Why, then, the question ‘where God was in Auschwitz’ has not had the contrary effect on the history of that religion? Is it because the Jewish people had found again their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? But how then did they rediscover it, if Auschwitz shows God’s terrible absence and, even, the failure of the Jewish religion’s basic dogma, i.e. the idea that the Law is the way to happiness and prosperity? Is there not some other ground for Judaism’s revival after the Shoah?

What if the untouchable God and the untouchable Shoah in a way coincide? What if the Shoah repeats – be it in a horrible way – the very essence of Judaic monotheism, an essence which is not to be defined as faith or belief, but as a question, a hard and critical question? Indeed, the Shoah calls the very core of Judaic religion into question and suggests the possibility that it may be built on mere illusion. But is that question not the very core of Judaic monotheism? Was this question not central in the very origin of monotheism, when, ‘weeping by the rivers of Babylon’, the remnant tribes of Israel faced the possibility of their definite destruction? And is this not the same question, be it more abstract, as the one raised in the book of Job? What if the essence of monotheism is untouchable, not because it is a holy answer to human questions, but because it is a question, a unanswerable question that always already has touched any answer, turning it again and again back into a question?

This is perhaps the core of Judaic monotheism: rather than trust, faith or belief in the One God (which in a way, it certainly is), it is a culture of non-trust, a culture of questioning the divine gods or God we are inclined to put our trust in. Judaic monotheism is the culture, not so much of our faith in God, but of questioning God. The culture of Mary Magdalena’s demand to touch God and the one of Thomas’s enquiry when, a few lines further in the gospel of John, he is touching the wound of the same God, that culture is centred around a question.

What they touch or do not touch is the untouchable, unanswerable *question* that inhabits the core of human existence. God is in the centre of monotheistic religion, but not so much as an answer but as a question. From a Judaic monotheistic perspective, God is not the one whom we can establish a (religious) economic relation with; He is beyond any religious/economic relation, which means we should distrust any proclaimed God and switch, in the name of God, our attention to the justice among mortal humans. Or, to put in a different way: to do justice to our mortal fellows, we should constantly question the dreams about the god(s) we cannot but cherish.

This is why, in Auschwitz, God's absence was not a final argument against Jewish monotheism. That absence is remembered in the shape of an abysmal question, containing an unscrupulous accusation of God (i.e. of the idea we have of God), an arguing¹⁹ question which the very tradition of that religion is rooted in. And in that quality, it was a question attacking also the gods/idols Nazi-Europe had faith in.

In one of his novels, Elie Wiesel tells the story about some rabbis in Auschwitz who, one day, took the matter of their God into court. They accused God of having neglected the Covenant he had established with his Chosen People, and organised a trial figuring a judge, a public persecutor, attorneys, witnesses for the prosecution and witnesses for the defence. All parties were given ample time and at the end judgment was given. God was found guilty of mass murder and sentenced to death.²⁰ Yet, once the judgement passed, the head of the court did as if he looked at his watch and said to the gathered prisoners around him something like: 'so, well done; and now it is time for evening prayer'.

The last remark is crucial. Even if God is found guilty of violating his own Covenant, the religion around that God goes on. God is not so much the centre of hope, as the centre of critical questioning, including questioning God and his existence. We certainly have not fully understood what it means to have religion critique in the very heart of a religion. It is similar to another situation just as little understood, namely that, nowadays, we have to criticize ideology and its idols being at the same time aware there is no outside of ideology, of its realm of idols. Within a universe where ideology dominates and certainly will keep on dominating (for instance in the form of the well spread idea that all ideologies are dead), we

¹⁹ Anson Laytner (1990), *Arguing against God. A Jewish Tradition*, Northvale, New Jersey / London: Jason Aronson Inc.

²⁰ Wiesel elaborated the idea of a 'trial of God' in a theatre play which, however, was not situated in Auschwitz but in a 17th century Polish village, a few years after a pogrom: Elie Wiesel (1995), *The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649 in Shamgorod)*, translated by Marion Wiesel, Introduction by R. McAfee Brown, Afterword by M. Fox, New York: Schocken Books; original edition: (1979), *Le procès de Shamgorod tel qu'il se déroula le 25 février 1649*, Pièce en trois actes, Paris: Editions du Seuil.

have to keep on criticizing it. Mirroring the situation of our ideology critique into the critique which constitutes the heart of monotheism, we perhaps may learn a lot.