

## **The Concept of Peace in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

# **Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses**



Edited by  
Georges Tamer

In Cooperation with  
Katja Thörner

## **Volume 8**

# **The Concept of Peace in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**



Edited by Georges Tamer

**DE GRUYTER**

ISBN 978-3-11-068193-2  
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-068202-1  
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-068222-9  
ISSN 2513-1117

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2020946097**

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2020 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston  
Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.  
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Preface

The present volume in the book series “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses” (KCID) contains the results of a conference on the concept of peace in Judaism, Christianity and Islam held at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg. The conference, which was organized by the Research Unit “Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourse” with the greatly appreciated support of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), took place in Erlangen on December 14–15, 2017.

The Research Unit KCID offers an innovative approach for studying the development of the three interconnected religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With this aim in mind, KCID analyzes the history of ideas in each of these three religions, always considering the tradition of interreligious exchange and appropriation of these very ideas. In doing so, KCID investigates the foundations of religious thought, thereby establishing an “archaeology of religious knowledge” in order to make manifest certain commonalities and differences between the three religions via dialogic study of their conceptual history. Thus, KCID intends to contribute to an intensive academic engagement with interreligious discourses in order to uncover mutually intelligible theoretical foundations and increase understanding between these different religious communities in the here and now. Moreover, KCID aims to highlight how each religion’s self-understanding can contribute to mutual understanding and peace between the three religious communities in the world.

In order to explore key concepts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, KCID organizes conferences individually dedicated to specific concepts. A renowned set of researchers from various disciplines explore these concepts from the viewpoints of each of the three religions. The results of each conference are published in a volume appearing in the abovementioned book series. Particularly salient selections from each volume are made available online in Arabic, English and German.

In this fashion, the Research Unit KCID fulfills its aspirations not only by reflecting on central religious ideas amongst a small group of academic specialists, but also by disseminating such ideas in a way that will appeal to the broader public. Academic research that puts itself at the service of society is vital in order to counteract powerful contemporary trends towards a form of segregation rooted in ignorance and to strengthen mutual respect and acceptance amongst religions. Such a result is guaranteed due to the methodology deployed by the research unit, namely the dialogic investigation of the history of concepts, as documented in the present volume on the concept of peace.

I wish to thank Dr. Albrecht Döhnert, Dr. Sophie Wagenhofer and their assistants at the publisher house De Gruyter for their competent caretaking of this

volume and the entire book series. I would also like to thank Mr. Ezra Tzfadya for his assistance in preparing the volume.

Georges Tamer  
Erlangen, May 2020

# Contents

**Preface — V**

Alick Isaacs

**The Concept of Peace in Judaism — 1**

Volker Stümke

**The Concept of Peace in Christianity — 45**

Asma Afsaruddin

**The Concept of Peace in Islam — 99**

Georges Tamer, Katja Thörner and Wenzel M. Widenka

**Epilogue — 159**

**List of Contributors and Editors — 169**

**Index of Persons — 171**

**Index of Subjects — 175**



Alick Isaacs

# The Concept of Peace in Judaism

A Vessel That Holds a Blessing

## Prologue

Since 2009, I have been engaged in a project based in Israel called Siach Shalom (Talking Peace).<sup>1</sup> Working on this project has meant embarking on a deep journey into the meaning of the powerful, complex and elusive concept of *shalom* in Jewish thought. Siach Shalom is essentially an effort to discover the secret of peace by turning the conversation about it into a practice which seeks to achieve it. My colleagues and I place the idea of seeking to discover the meaning of peace at the heart of the dialogue groups that we facilitate between religious and secular Israelis; Israelis and Palestinians. I have learned so much from this journey that I cannot dare to write about this topic without first acknowledging the debt that I owe to Siach Shalom and all of the participants in our dialogue groups. Most of all, I must mention my two partners in this work: Prof. Avinoam Rosenak<sup>2</sup> and Ms. Sharon Leshem Zinger,<sup>3</sup> from whom I have learned the most. Writing anything on this topic without accrediting them would be a scholarly crime. In mentioning them by name I hope to fulfill the Talmudic precept captured in the phrase, “Rabbi Elazar said that Rabbi Hanina said: Whoever reports a saying in the name of he who said it brings redemption to the world” (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 15a). If there is

---

**1** Siach Shalom (Talking Peace) is a non-partisan civil society peace project that was co-founded by Prof. Avinoam Rosenak, Ms. Sharon Leshem-Zinger and Dr. Alick Isaacs in 2009. Siach Shalom operates under the aegis of Mishkenot Sha’ananim in Jerusalem. The problem our work aims to address is the mishandling of religion and the deep internal schisms this has created in both political processes and NGO interventions in the regional peace process. In this latter sense, Siach Shalom is also devoted to building cohesion and internal understanding inside Israeli society.

**2** Avinoam Rosenak is a professor of Jewish thought and Jewish Education at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

**3** Sharon Leshem-Zinger is one of Israel’s leading group dynamic facilitators and psychodramatists who in addition to her work in Siach Shalom has taught at many places including Ben Gurion University and Sapir College (where she founded the Collot BaNegev group dynamic facilitation training program).

anything in this paper that agrees with their teachings, I learned it from them. If any of it strays, the responsibility is mine.

## 1 Introduction – Two Meanings of Peace in Jewish Thought

Peace is not an undiscovered subject in modern Jewish scholarship. A great deal has been written about the Jewish ideal of peace and the different ways of attaining it.<sup>4</sup> It seems quite obvious that contemporary interest in this topic is at least in part due to the unfortunate fact that the Jewish State has been embroiled in conflict since the day of its inception. Having survived without a pronounced political identity for thousands of years and after returning to the stage of international politics, the Jewish collective has found the legitimacy and the security of its identity challenged militarily, politically and ethically by a chronic state of political conflict quite unlike anything that Jews have experienced in history. While many have been driven by this reality to look beyond the Jewish tradition, for example to the progressive values of the west, to find their answers; there is indeed a very significant effort to seek peace inside the teachings of Judaism and the number of initiatives, research projects, books and essays that this has yielded is indeed a blessing that has made much of the Torah's teaching about peace readily available to all who seek it.<sup>5</sup>

Given this, I think it is important in this paper to try to present something a little different. Rather than repeating what has already been written, I think it would be more valuable to investigate the religious history of the particular meaning of peace that in my view is most relevant to the contemporary Middle East but which is most overlooked in scholarship. This is a way of thinking

---

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Rabbi Dr. Daniel Roth for his extensive work in this field and for the bibliographical material he has provided me with. See for example Gopin, Marc, *Between Eden and Armageddon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 167–195; Kaminsky, Howard Gary, *Traditional Jewish Perspectives on Peace and Interpersonal Conflict Resolution*, New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 2005; Steinberg, Gerald M., “Jewish Sources on Conflict Management Realism and Human Nature,” in: Michal Roness (ed.), *Conflict and Conflict Management in Jewish Sources*, 10–23, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation, 2008; Roness, *Conflict and Conflict Management in Jewish Sources*, 140–141.

<sup>5</sup> See Kaminsky *ibid.* for a detailed bibliography and summary of the field especially 30–34.

about peace that many associate with the most dissenting religious voices on the Jewish side of the conflict and as such it is often disregarded or even vehemently opposed. Since I don't want to address this topic in sociological or political terms and I certainly don't want to identify my position with that of any particular political group, I think it might be useful to begin by offering a philosophical distinction between two fundamentally different dimensions of peace in Jewish thought. These two are not the only meanings of the word *shalom*, but the use of a binary distinction here serves the purpose of clarity and gives me a point of entry into the analysis that follows.

The first dimension frames the meaning of peace quite conventionally in the religious values and practices that Jews turn to when they seek to resolve situations of conflict. There are indeed many examples in Jewish thought and in Jewish law of peacemaking practices that come to resolve arguments, disagreements and even violent conflicts that erupt between individuals,<sup>6</sup> families, communities, peoples – Jews and non-Jews. The Jewish tradition is very rich in legalism and the idea that a legal system or a judge can be an arbitrator in a situation of conflict is not foreign to the *halakha* (Jewish law) by any means. Similarly, throughout Jewish history we have examples of peacemakers and dispute resolvers who, emulating the great biblical example of Aaron the Priest, sought to resolve differences between conflicting parties without resorting to the judgment of the courts.<sup>7</sup> Bearing in mind some of the more recent terminology developed in the field of conflict resolution, it is possible to find traditional Jewish examples of resolving, managing and transforming conflict as well as practices that we might readily compare with alternative dispute resolution (ADR). This dimension of peace and the classical texts associated with it is the one that has attracted the bulk of scholarly attention in the field and it is not the one that I wish to address in any further detail in this paper.

In counter-distinction to the more conventional examples of peacemaking found in the Jewish tradition, the second dimension of peace refers specifically to the unique conditions that apply to the end of days and the messianic redemption. This peace is the ultimate world peace that the prophets spoke of and which is associated in the Bible with the ingathering of the exiles to the land of Israel, the return of the entire land to the Jewish people and the fulfillment of the biblical covenant. This form of peace, which I have previously

---

<sup>6</sup> Kaminsky, *ibid.* Part IV, 190–218.

<sup>7</sup> Roth, Daniel, *The Tradition of Aaron Pursuer of Peace between People as a Rabbinic Model of Reconciliation*, PhD diss., Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2012.

referred to elsewhere as both “Prophetic” and “Messianic” peace,<sup>8</sup> is often considered an obstacle to the resolution of conflict. The notion that something of messianic proportions is taking place in the ‘here and now’ can easily be used as a foil for resisting the more practical work of negotiation, compromise and agreement that Realpolitik demands. This observation is not without justification. However, since the notion of prophetic peace is the one most concerned with the conditions that many religious Jews in Israel understand as taking place in the world today – i.e. the return of Jewish exiles to the biblical land of Israel – I submit that clarifying the irenic potentiality of this concept is the more relevant and meaningful challenge to tackle at this time.

## 1.1 Prophetic Peace and the Ingathering of the Exiles

Prophetic peace in Jewish thought is a concept that is fundamentally connected to the fulfillment of the Jewish purpose in history. It is a form of peace that is grounded in a theological ideal that includes more than just the cessation of a particular military conflict. It is in fact the resolution of all internal and external conflict in the human soul, in intimate relations, in the family, the community, the Jewish people, international politics, nature and indeed between human beings and God. As it appears in the Bible, this kind of peace brings with it a total transformation of human consciousness and of the conditions of human personal, social and political life as we know them. This is the peace that the prophets speak of, that biblical teachings are geared towards and that the prayers that observant Jews recite every day yearn for. It is a meaning of peace that is more closely connected to the Hebrew word ‘*shalom*’ (from the Hebrew root Shin, Lamed, Mem – meaning wholeness and completion) than the English word ‘Peace’ (from the Latin Pax – meaning pact or agreement).

The objection that holding out for completion runs the risk of obstructing more immediate and practical solutions to present-day problems is valid. The notion that the higher dream prevents people from taking certain steps towards lesser but more realistic achievable goals is one that needs to be taken very seriously. This is especially true if these steps can directly improve a pressing situation or alleviate human suffering. All the same, my suggestion is that widespread belief in prophetic peace is a concept that we cannot ignore. It is also a kind of peace that we can work with as we endeavor to create understanding between

---

<sup>8</sup> Isaacs, Alick, *A Prophetic Peace. Judaism, Religion and Politics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

people and address the complex and painful conflict that has surrounded the State of Israel since its establishment in 1948. This is true both because the vision of prophetic peace is by far the most central principle of peace in Jewish thought and because the vision of prophetic fulfillment is a powerful force in contemporary Israeli religious Jewish identity. This is a vision that is built upon a great deal of ancient wisdom that has much to teach us today. This vision, therefore, is both authentic to the mainstream of classical Jewish thought and relevant to the contemporary situation.

For many “national religious” Jews living in Israel today, the conflict in the Middle East is not an isolated or detached modern experience. Rather, it can be seen as a crucial stage in the very long journey that the Jewish People has been on for thousands of years. This journey begins with the Jewish religious obligation to fulfill its collective covenantal purpose as outlined in the Torah.<sup>9</sup> That purpose is one given in covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; to the tribes of Israel and to the people who emerged from bondage in Egypt and who then stood together to receive it prophetically at Sinai. The purpose of this covenant is to be a holy people united in a holy land where they are to be a blessing, as God says to Abraham in Gen. 12, to all the families of the world. The covenant of Sinai insists that through living the life prescribed by the Torah, the Jewish people united in the land of Israel will disclose the unity of God to the world. Disclosing a consciousness of God’s unity is likened in numerous Jewish sources to the shining of a light and it is perhaps most famous in the writings of Isaiah who spoke prophetically about the day when the Jewish people will become a light unto all the nations of the earth.<sup>10</sup> As many national religious Jews see it, the main story of our present period in history concerns the fulfillment of this covenant. After thousands of years of exile, the people are finally returning to the land and rebuilding it. But, their struggle to return and to re-form their collective identity is one that has been plagued by conflict and political opposition. For many, this opposition is a spiritual event which has deep meanings many of which are not known or understood, but which guide Israel toward the fulfillment of its prophetic purpose. These are meanings that need to be uncovered in order for the lessons of recent history to lead us in the direction of unity and peace. For them, this vision is very real and practical and its obstruction by conventional, political and diplomatic peacemaking practices is something that stirs up vehement spiritual, Halakhic and political opposition. Appreciating this

---

<sup>9</sup> See Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov (1903–1993), *Kol Dodi Dofek (Fate and Destiny. From the Holocaust to the State of Israel)*, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2000, 42–44.

<sup>10</sup> Isa. 49:6.

is crucial to understanding the widespread opposition of the religious communities in Israel to diplomatic peace efforts in the last 30 years.

If we put this idea in slightly different terms, we might say that for many religious Jews, it is no accident that the conflict in the Middle East seems to defy the capabilities of modern diplomacy. It is spiritually and religiously significant that the framework for peacemaking that modern politics provides is emerging as inadequate to the task of imagining a workable solution to this situation. And so, it seems valuable, and perhaps even essential, to try to think beyond the limits of secular politics and consider the possibility that the working definition of peace that conventional diplomatic practices of peacemaking are based upon is not appropriate to the task at hand. If the Jewish narrative of return to the land is indeed a step toward the fulfillment of the biblical covenant, then it seems reasonable to imagine that the failures of western diplomacy in the region are grounds enough to turn to the prophetic concept of peace and see what we can learn from it.

## 1.2 The Three Elements of Prophetic Peace

Having said a few words about the authenticity and relevance of our topic, in what follows I will try to explain the meaning of “Prophetic Peace” as my colleagues and I have come to understand it. Prophetic Peace is a complex idea, and I therefore want to present it systematically by dividing it up into three component parts. Though these three elements can often appear separately in Jewish texts, my claim is that they coincide significantly in the full concept of prophetic or messianic peace. Thus, I submit that a deeper understanding of each one and, most particularly, of the connections between them, is the key to unpacking the meaning of shalom in Jewish thought.

The three elements of prophetic peace are:

1. Anti-Politics
2. Unity of Opposites<sup>11</sup>
3. Knowledge of God

---

<sup>11</sup> This concept has been developed most significantly in the research of Avinoam Rosenak who has dealt with its central role in the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook as well as in the extensive sources in Jewish thought upon which Rav Kook draws. See for example Rosenak, Avinoam. “Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries. The Life and Thought of Rabbi A.I. Kook,” *Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25:3 (2007), 111–47; *Prophetic Halakha. The Philosophy of Halakha in the Teaching of Rav Kook*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 2007, 44–56 [Hebrew].

I will first introduce the concept of anti-politics giving illustrative examples of how it has appeared in biblical and rabbinic texts. I will then pick up the theme of the unity of opposites presenting examples of its biblical and rabbinic history. Next I will trace the connections between these and the knowledge of God showing how the combination between the three can offer us a definition of prophetic peace that we will be able to see in modern religious texts. Finally, I will offer some insights and suggestions, gleaned from the work of Siach Shalom, into ways we can think about the practical value of Prophetic Peace in the context of today's conflict in the Middle East.

## 2 Anti-Politics

'Anti-politics' is not strictly speaking a "Jewish" term but it is useful for our purposes because it characterizes several concepts that are central to the Jewish understanding of God and the collective. George Konrad used the phrase "anti-politics"<sup>12</sup> in a book of that name that some would argue helped bring down the Soviet regime in Central Europe. Konrad urged his readers to think of "anti-politics" as a realistic way of dealing with political oppression. His book *Anti-Politics* argued *for* standing down and *against* engaging in confrontation. Konrad proposed a notion of: "*de-statification*", which basically meant imagining a political system characterized by a reduction of power from above. Ultimately anti-political thought seeks to protect society from the volatile fusion of a grand idea with political power.

Though this was not Konrad's intention, his phrase is very useful for describing a profound element of the prophetic ideal in which the vision of peace is connected to a feature of Jewish religious thought that downplays the role of power in the life of the collective. In religious Jewish thought, the nation of Israel is not a political community of individuals held together by a common origin or government. Rather the Jewish collective is primarily understood as an expression or even as a creation of the uniting will of God, which brings the people together through their shared obligation to collectively live the life prescribed by the Torah. Rather than applying force or building a lowest common denominator around which groups can rally, the Torah is addressed to the ideal of a People who can only serve God together. In order to unite in this way the People must align their individual and collective will with his will as an act of free-choice. Thus the national community is a full expression of the freedom

---

<sup>12</sup> Konrad, George, *Anti-Politics. An Essay*, trans. Richard E. Allen, New York: Quartet, 1984.

of each individual who finds his or her own unique place in the collective observance of the Torah by freely choosing it. This freedom depends on what the Torah refers to as “*hester panim*” i.e. the concealing of God’s face.<sup>13</sup> This is the concept that makes space for people to choose rather than being too heavily imposed upon by the divine presence. Similarly, the Kabbalistic tradition emphasized the notion that free-choice and even the basic independent existence of the world are only made possible by God’s withdrawal or constriction of his light (i.e. of our awareness of him) in the world. Kabbalistic texts refer to this idea as *sod ha-tsimtsum* which literally means ‘the secret of [God’s] constriction’<sup>14</sup>. Both of these ideas, *hester panim* and *tsimtsum*, underline the principle that freedom or room for choice is made possible by – what is perhaps the ultimate anti-political act of – self-effacement and withdrawal from power. In the context of this withdrawal, the notion that divine sovereignty or *malkhut shamayim* and covenant or *brit* has an anti-political nature emerges into view.

From the prophetic perspective, peace has no obvious place inside the individualistic, power-laden and belligerent political process at all. The prophetic notion of peace is not about conventional political action. On the contrary, the biblical visions of peace seem to suggest that an ideal peace for Israel can never be the direct outcome of political action at all but must rather emanate from a “circumcision of the heart”<sup>15</sup>. This inner transformation (which is the cumulative outcome of all the free choices that observance of the Torah requires Jews to make every day) is described by the biblical prophets as something that happens when the Jewish people return from exile to collective life in the holy land.<sup>16</sup> The phrase “circumcision of the heart” is a metaphor for the removal of a hard covering that prevents the heart (meaning the inner consciousness) from recognizing God and his perpetual presence in (and as) creation. The removal of this covering demands a profound psychological shift in how human beings interact with one another, with the world and with God. In this context peace is achieved through a kind of anti-political politics in which power is replaced by listening; negotiation by spiritual engagement; interests-based agreements and alliances by genuine efforts to live together in a loving unity that mirrors or echoes the true depths of human consciousness in a place where it merges with a total awareness of God.

---

<sup>13</sup> Deut. 31:17.

<sup>14</sup> *Tzimtzum* is a term widely used in Lurianic Kabbala. A useful explanation of the term in its various forms can be found in Kaplan, Aryeh, *Inner Space*, New York: Moznaim Publishing, 1990, especially 120–128.

<sup>15</sup> Deut. 30:1–6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## 2.1 Anti-Politics in the Bible

The anti-political theme occurs in the Bible both in terms of biblical theology and with reference to the organization of the collective life. Naturally, these two strands also overlap. The anti-political ideal of human life perhaps appears first and etiologically in the infamous choice presented to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.<sup>17</sup> Despite the long association of their choice with sin, the question remains, what is so wrong with the fruit of a tree that gives knowledge of good and evil? Why should God forbid human beings from knowing the difference between good and evil? Why should the Bible choose something so noble as the knowledge of good and evil as the object of the serpent's temptation?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch among many other traditional Jewish scholars understands this choice as an opportunity for Adam and Eve to resist the temptation of animalistic self-assertion.<sup>18</sup> It is this temptation that is associated with the animal or bodily side of the human self and as such it is the intuitive choice of the serpent. As animals, humans and serpents alike are instinctively anxious about self-preservation for which the cunning to distinguish between good and evil is indeed essential. The choice to eat of the fruit of this tree is therefore the choice between the natural human instinct for self-preservation, self assertion and perhaps even self-redemption and the choice to overcome these instincts in an act of restraint.<sup>19</sup> This restraint opens the door to the possibility of freely embracing the consciousness associated with the divine soul or *neshama*. In this framing, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge represents the presumption of humans that they can manage the world without God. From this tree humankind acquires the ability and the need to build a robust human political technological society.<sup>20</sup> However, as spiritual beings endowed with the divine soul which exists within and which is constantly enraptured in communion with God, choosing the fruit of this tree means turning away from a higher or inner anti-political option. Resisting the fruit of the tree would have meant yielding the urges of the ego to an act of self-restraint. As Rabbi Kook explains, *sod hagevura* or the secret of self-restraint means cultivating a point of contact

---

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 2:16–17.

<sup>18</sup> Hirsch, Samson Raphael, *The Pentateuch. With Translation and Commentary*, New York: Judaica Press, 1962. Reissued in a new translation as Haberman, Daniel, *The Hirsch Chumash*, New York: Feldheim/Judaica Press, 2009; Gen. 2:16.

<sup>19</sup> See Rabbi Abraham Kook, *Lights of Holiness*, vol. 3, Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1985, 199 (Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> Weinreb, Friedrich, *Roots of the Bible. An Ancient View for a New Outlook*, trans. N. Keus, Branton: Merlin Books, 1986, 183–220.

with deeper or higher desires than those which serve selfhood and ego.<sup>21</sup> Restraint at the end of the sixth day would have meant relinquishing human power in exchange for entry into a world without power represented eternally by the Sabbath day – the anti-political day – in which work, commerce and anxiety over the conquest of space are suspended.<sup>22</sup>

Many classical Jewish commentaries see the choice between individualizing self-assertion and finding one's place in unity with God as a root structure that recurs throughout the Bible. This is the choice that we are referring to as the dilemma between political and anti-political action. The contrast appears in the story of Cain and Abel in which Abel relies upon God by offering to him the best of his flock while Cain, resourcefully keeping the best for the needs of his own survival, offers God less.<sup>23</sup> For this he is sent away from the land and made ironically dependent on God for the rest of his life. The choice between life in the presence of the divine and the power of knowledge appears again in the structured contrast between the covenantal line of Shem and the people of Shinar who built the Tower of Babel.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the destruction – or perhaps deconstruction<sup>25</sup> – of the city and tower, provides us with one of the clearest anti-political metaphors in the Bible. The etiological story of Babel – in which the people band together in a city to protect themselves from their anxious fear of being scattered across the face of the earth – is an explicit example of biblical reticence about the polis. The people of Shinar seek to live in a political world of their own making and to ensure its permanence by building a tower to the heavens. Though the biblical text offers no clear indication that this desire is an act of defiance against God, classical rabbinic interpretation (Midrash) sees it in this way<sup>26</sup> understanding the construction of the city as a choice to live in a man-made world rather than in God's world. Similarly, the tower is seen as a means to enter the heavens and declare war on God.<sup>27</sup> This interpretive tradition, though not literal, is underlining the binary structure of the choice. The route that the people of Shinar take follows their own ingenuity and creative

---

21 Kook, *Lights of Holiness*, 199.

22 Heschel, Rabbi Abraham J., "Prologue: Architecture of Time," in: *The Sabbath*, 2–10, New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1951.

23 See Gen. 4 and Weinreb, *Roots of the Bible*, 221–236.

24 Gen. 11.

25 Jacques Derrida, "Des tours de Babel," in: *Difference in Translation*, ed. and trans. Joseph P. Graham, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, 165–248.

26 See Talmud Sanhedrin 109 a and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) Gen. 11:4.

27 "Let us build a city," He will come down to us and *we will ascend to heaven* and if not, *we will declare war on Him*. Despite this He left them alone and said to them "do as you will." See Midrash Tanhuma, Gen. Section 18.

power along a path that leads to their independence from God. This independence is echoed in the biblical detailing of how the city was built from man-made bricks that the people manufacture for this purpose.<sup>28</sup> The tower itself is perhaps then a synthetic extension of the Tree of Knowledge because it is built with the human technology that the fruit of that tree revealed. The polis is therefore understood as a godless place that human beings can only imagine living in because of the Tree. As such the story of the city and politics in general can be seen as the human journey away from the source, away from the Sabbath, away from the Garden and away from God. It is a rejection of the journey back to the Oneness of the divine and hence it leads to the very dispersion that the people of Shinar most feared.<sup>29</sup>

In direct contrast to this, the Bible tells the story of the line of Shem. The Hebrew letters Shin and Mem that spell the word Shem occur time and again in the Babel story meaning “name”, or “there”. This recurring leitmotif in the story prepares the reader for the subsequent passage and builds the contrast between the dispersion of Babel and “These are the generations of Shem.”<sup>30</sup> The line of Shem represents the Tree of Life; it is the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These are the bearers of the covenant who create the curve in history that eventually leads back to the as yet uncelebrated Sabbath day in the Garden of Eden. Abraham follows God almost blindly to a place that he is only told he will be “shown.”<sup>31</sup> The famous words of God’s commandment to Abraham, “*lekh lekha*” (literally, ‘go unto yourself’) suggest that his journey to Israel is a journey inwards toward the deeper self. Even on the surface of the text it is clear that Abraham does not know where he has been commanded to go and why he must go there. He only knows that he must follow the path to God and hence to the prophetic calling that he hears or perhaps visualizes in his inner self. Thus, Abraham is only told what he must leave behind: his land, his birthplace and his father’s house.

In the land, Abraham lives outside the city. He is a shepherd whose existence in the land is presented in anti-political contrast to that of his nephew Lot who chooses to inhabit the cities of the Jordan Plains. The text knowingly tells us that these are like the land of Egypt and they include the cities of Sodom

---

<sup>28</sup> See Gen. 11:4.

<sup>29</sup> See Weinreb, *Roots of the Bible*, 278–282.

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 11:10.

<sup>31</sup> In Gen. 12 God commands Abraham to travel to the land “that I will show you.” The Hebrew word for “show” has the same root as the word Moriah as in Mount Moriah or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.