

Franz Rosenzweig's Attitude towards the Law and the Mitzvah

The Binding of Isaac as a Psychotheological Case Study

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Abstract

Franz Rosenzweig's references to Sigmund Freud in his diaries and letters are not extensive. However, they are exceptional in the intellectual landscape of Jewish religious philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. Based on these references, this article presents a Psychotheological reading of the Binding of Isaac. This interpretation treats the rabbinic account of Abraham's childhood in Genesis Rabbah 38:13 as an unconscious layer of the biblical narrative. The demand to take his son and offer him as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:2) is understood as stemming from Abraham's superego, which includes the internalized father's law (Terach, his father, and Nimrod, the father symbol in the culture into which Abraham was born). The actual revelation, however, is the liberation from the phantasmatic demands and sanctions of the superego, which suspends the individual's moral relationship to the world. This is exemplified by Abraham's resolution not to proceed with the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:12). The preceding interpretation provides a framework for examining the relationship between commandment (mitzvah) and law in *The Star of Redemption*. According to Rosenzweig, the revelation of the divine commandment of love softens the rigidity of the law while maintaining its relevance and importance in providing orientation for the individual's daily life.

This article offers a new perspective on the place of psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular in early 20th century existential philosophy, focusing on the importance of psychoanalytic research for the development of Franz Rosenzweig's (1886–1929) thought. The research is based on Rosenzweig's explicit references in his diaries and letters to Sigmund Freud's thought, and even his careful use of it, mainly in the context of interpreting the biblical story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), which expands into a discussion of the

epistemology of idolatry. According to Rosenzweig, a Freudian interpretation can contribute to the understanding of the binding story if we also refer to the rabbinical homiletical interpretation of Abraham's childhood in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 38:13 in the appendix). A central argument discussed in this article is that, following Rosenzweig's approach, we should see the rabbinic interpretation of the binding story as the unconscious layer that underlies the biblical story. In light of this, I argue that the crucial moments in the story of Isaac's binding, especially the decision not to sacrifice Isaac, express Abraham's release from the phantasmatic demands and sanctions that originate in the superego (the internalized father's law). This reading of the biblical narrative will provide the framework for a fresh examination of Rosenzweig's approach to the divine commandment (the mitzvah) in *The Star of Redemption*, as well as the relationship between the commandment of love and the law.

Another claim, which is beyond the scope of this study, is that a deep and comprehensive theoretical engagement with the Law in contemporary Jewish thought should be incorporated and enriched by the "Freudian revolution." It is widely recognized that the core of psychoanalysis lies in the exploration of the non-rational and unconscious aspects of the individual. Questions about the origins, authority, and phenomenology of the law in Judaism, before and after Freud, are loaded with additional meanings. In this sense, following Eric Santner's research on Rosenzweig and Freud, I share the conviction (with Eric Santner, Harold Bloom, Erich Fromm, Jean-Gérard Bursztein, Hans Martin Dober, Ephraim Meir, and others)¹ that the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis can demonstrate the contribution of the monotheistic tradition to the values of Western culture, especially in reducing violence (aggressive and defensive) and paving the way for a pluralism that is not based on cultural relativism. The first section highlights Rosenzweig's unique attitude towards Freud and psychoanalysis, which stands out in the landscape of Jewish thought in the early 20th century.

1. Rosenzweig's reference to Freud

Rosenzweig draws attention to Freud in his diary. On April 3, 1922, he wrote about the relationship between the pairs of morality and psychology, and theology and idolatry:²

"Freud moralizes psychology. Regarding the previous: At all times one must pay attention to the force acting against assimilation (dissimilation), which always marches together with assimilation, which is self-evident."³

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¹ SANTNER, ERIC, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

² It was at this time that Rosenzweig was working on a draft of the curriculum for the winter semester at the Lehrhaus in Frankfurt. He may have considered whether to include psychoanalysis and religion in the curriculum.

³ ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *Gesammelte Schriften I, Briefe und Tagebücher 1918–1929*, eds. RACHEL ROSENZWEIG and EDITH ROSENZWEIG-SCHEINMANN (Den Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 770: "Freud vermoralisiert die Psychologie. Zum vorvorigen: zu beachten wird dabei in allen Zeiten die Dissimilation sein, die stets neben der selbstverständlichen Assimilation einhergeht." The translation I have chosen for "Dissimilation" as the force acting against assimilation follows Horwitz's Hebrew translation, which I believe accurately expresses the mental tension

The subject of assimilation occupied Rosenzweig all his life. In his youth, Rosenzweig saw assimilation as a conversion to Christianity,⁴ and at an older age, assimilation was seen as giving up a spiritual lifestyle in light of revelation and redemption. In my opinion, he identified the “force acting against assimilation” in figures such as Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel, Hermann Cohen, Ernst Simon, Rudolf Hallo, Martin Buber, and himself. Namely, the image of the Jew, who cannot be completely metahistorical and must walk within time and act against the “*selbstverständliche[n] Assimilation*” (self-evident assimilation). On the one hand, he must turn inwards, to the Jewish sources, Jewish law and eternity. On the other, he should turn outwards and engage in dialogue with representatives of German culture and Christianity and be able to speak their language.

I will focus briefly on the first part of the statement: “Freud imposes morality on psychology.” If morality, according to Rosenzweig, is a scientific-secular term, then the culturally assimilated Freud seeks to bestow psychology, which is also scientific-secular, an additional dimension of depth – an ethical one – as a substitute for philosophy and religion. However, if by morality Rosenzweig (following Hermann Cohen) means religious ethics, then Freud’s thought also participates in “the force acting against assimilation, which always marches together with assimilation.” The difficulty with this interpretation is accepting the assumption that psychoanalysis is not a total rejection of religion but a perspective that allows a different approach to religion and religious experience. I argue that this possibility aligns more closely with Rosenzweig’s perspective, which envisions a world where God and religion should be liberated from the rigid idealism that restricts them.

Rosenzweig formulated those thoughts nine years after the publication of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (published in 1913), a book that received worldwide recognition, praise and criticism and is one of Freud’s first works dealing with the beginnings of civilization and morality and the application of the Oedipal complex to the study of religion.⁵ As is known, Rosenzweig’s teacher and mentor is Hermann Cohen. In his philosophical method, as well as in his philosophy of religion, Cohen explicitly struggles with psychological and anthropological-historical approaches to the study of the origin of religion, civilization and morality.⁶

that Rosenzweig faced regarding assimilation. ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *Briefe und Tagebuecher (Auswahl)* (ed. RIVKA HORWITZ; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 232 (Hebrew).

⁴ In his youth, Rosenzweig resisted conversion to Christianity for economic and social rather than spiritual reasons. While he did not approve of Hans Ehrenberg’s (his cousin’s) conversion to Christianity, he justified it by saying: “What can be expected – Judaism is not attractive enough.” The story of Rosenzweig on the verge of converting to Christianity is well known. See POLLOCK, BENJAMIN, *Franz Rosenzweig’s Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁵ In 1907 Freud published the article “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices.” This was the first essay in which Freud linked mental pathology (obsession, anxiety) to compulsivity in religion, a claim Freud expanded upon in *The Future of an Illusion*, published twenty years later.

⁶ In *Ethics of the Pure Will* Cohen pointed out the shortcomings of the natural sciences and psychology in the understanding of human being and the world. According to his approach, the natural sciences are not pure science precisely because they are based on sensory experience and not on mathematics, pure logic, and, ultimately, ethics. He claims that in Kant’s system, scientific fact is considered eternal. The equivalent of mathematics in science is the legal system in ethics. See COHEN, HERMANN, *Ethik des reinen Willens* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1904), 8–9, 15. Cohen tried to describe the rational concept in science not in the field of the “critique of pure reason” but in the field of the “critique of practical reason.” According to Cohen, law does not exist in the being (“sein”) of the

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud argues that conscience (the superego) arises out of ambivalent feelings towards the father (admiration, fear, and guilt).⁷ According to Freud, the “pure moral” duty and sense of justice articulated in philosophy (similar to morality in religion) are intellectualizations that should be seen in the context of the tension that arises between pleasure and reality principles. In his approach, the human being is an instinctive creature whose moral development depends on processes of sublimation. It should be noted that, in any case, as in other naturalistic approaches, in Freud’s approach the human being is not fully defined by its rational and moral essence, as conceptualized in philosophical approaches that emerged after Immanuel Kant. Cohen’s explicit objection to the innovative discoveries of anthropology and psychology in the early 20th century may be surprising, but it is firmly based on his critical idealism. Cohen returns to Kant’s ethics in order to “rescue morality” from its loss in naturalistic and pantheistic approaches, which he believes gained momentum with Spinoza, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx. At the same time, based on the fundamental principles of his method – the idea of God as a guarantee of morality and the messianic mission as moral socialism – Cohen emphasizes the immanent connection between religion and ethics. He declares, “Religion itself is moral teaching, or it is not religion.”⁸ Cohen believed that in naturalistic approaches, morality is impossible because it is not possible to determine the morally desired reality based on experience, but rather the morally desired can be driven merely by the idea of good. In fact, once we formulate a rational concept of what is morally desired, we cease to be naturalists and become idealists.⁹ Accordingly, in a naturalistic approach, discussing the concept of “the good” and “the morally desired” (“Sollen”) is deemed impossible as these are ethical notions and the result of pure reason. Consequently, the naturalistic approach must rely on the conscience to establish “the morally desired.” For Cohen, conscience (as opposed to the formalization of the moral law in ethics) operates according to a relativistic principle of an immanent sense of justice and, as such, is insufficient for moral judgment. He argues that this is the conclusion of ancient Greek philosophy itself. Namely, conscience cannot be the part of consciousness in which the human being’s moral task in fulfilling the desired future is supposed to be revealed. Conscience is “a daemon which everyone has.”¹⁰

This is the root of the problem Cohen sees in psychology, a field whose starting point is the empirical individual and his or her consciousness rather than the correlative (relational) individual and his divinely created reason. Cohen starts *Religion of Reason* with what can be

human person, but in the ought (“sollen”). In short, Cohen rejected approaches based on the assumption that the moral purpose of the organism cannot be external to it.

⁷ FREUD, SIGMUND, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. vol. 13 (trans. James Strachey; London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 22, 24, 68, especially, 141–44, 156–161.

⁸ COHEN, HERMANN, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* (trans. Simon Kaplan; Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1995), 33.

⁹ According to Freud, as he described in *Totem and Taboo*, the source of civilization is sublimation. That is, the etiology of morality should be seen as the moment when aggression is channeled (sublimated) into less violent action. In contrast, according to Cohen, civilization emerges when humanity understands that the ability to distinguish between “good” and “evil” is based solely on reason rather than sensory experience. Cohen contends that the biblical story of the Tree of Knowledge is a metaphor for the origins of civilization. The tree of knowledge, or God’s knowledge, represents the idea that the understanding of “good and evil” is limited to an a priori basis.

¹⁰ COHEN, *Religion*, 186: “If conscience were a sufficiently correct concept, then at no time would a philosophic ethics be necessary. Conscience is a daimon which everyone has in common with Socrates.”

seen as an explicit criticism of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*: "One has preferred, however, to follow the tracks of religion among the savages of America rather than in Plato, Aeschylus, and Pindar."¹¹ For Cohen, the tendency to search for the origins of religion among savage tribes not only misunderstands the origins of religion and its contribution to modern culture but rather is itself a materialistic worldview that leads to a wrong moral orientation. In my opinion, Cohen at the very least anticipated what would be called Eurocentrism in 20th century anthropology, but his starting point is philosophical-religious. His words concerning "the love of one's neighbor" are explicit: "This is removed from any process of development. Here, there is no place for concessions to evolutionary thinking. It cannot be allowed to have developed; this is what the philosophers call *a priori*."¹² According to Cohen, morality is not shaped by sensory experience but precedes experience and is revealed through rational thought (the created reason). This forms the epistemological foundation for his criticism and rejection of myth and mysticism, which, he believes, obscure the correlation between logic and ethics.

Like Cohen, Rosenzweig recognized that Freud promoted psychoanalysis as more than just a method of therapy. Unlike Cohen, though, Rosenzweig, in light of his harsh criticism of the tradition of idealistic philosophy and "old" rational theology, did not see psychology as a threat to religious ethics or as a challenge that had to be philosophically settled, but rather the opposite. According to Rosenzweig, we may not be able to establish ethics without psychology. In his diary, he writes for his own amusement: "I am always a 'realist' in logic, a 'psychologist' in ethics, a 'utilitarian' in aesthetics, and a 'dogmatist' in the philosophy of religion."¹³ His discussion of metaethics, in the third book of Part I of *The Star of Redemption*, deals with the possibility of a morality that is not drawn from the rational principles of universalism and autonomy (as in Cohen's ethics), but rather from what he calls psychogony ("psychogonien")¹⁴ – that is, "the history of the birth of the soul" and "coming out from the enclosedness."¹⁵

Like Cohen, Rosenzweig quotes Heraclitus: "The *daimon* of man is his ethos", and adds "This blind and mute *daimon*, enclosed in itself, which surprises man for the first time in the mask of Eros, and from then on accompanies him throughout his life up to that moment where it removes its mask and reveals itself to him as Thanatos."¹⁶ According to Eric Santner, the *daimon*, according to Rosenzweig, is analogous to the superego according to Freud¹⁷: an internal ethical authority, which manifests in childhood within the "space of Eros", and rewards the self with a substitute form of pleasure. In adulthood, in its pathological form, this authority serves the death drive. Rosenzweig emphasizes that the metaethic in the human being does

¹¹ COHEN, *Religion*, 9.

¹² COHEN, HERMANN, *Writings on Neo-Kantianism and Jewish Philosophy* (eds. SAMUEL MOYN and ROBERT SCHINE; Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2021), 226.

¹³ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 779: "Ich bin in der Logik immer 'Realist', in der Ethik 'Psychologist', in der Asthetik 'Utilitarist', in der Religionsphilosophie 'Dogmatist'."

¹⁴ ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *The Star of Redemption* (trans. Barbara Galli; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 100.

¹⁵ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 91.

¹⁶ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 80.

¹⁷ SANTNER, *On the Psychotheology*, 83–84.

not indicate the absence of the ethic; it is not a-ethic (“aethisch”), but rather it indicates an “unusual status” (“ungewohnte Einordnung”) – that is, “the passive position instead of the imperative position that is usually assigned to it.”¹⁸ He states what is often quoted in the research: “The law was given to man, and not man to the law.”¹⁹ According to Rosenzweig, this statement contradicts the concept of law, as seen in the accepted ethical thinking that highlights the importance of the law for ethical order in the world. Rosenzweig’s *Metaethics* is based on the principle of God’s freedom and openness of the self; it is not merely a criticism of the idealistic philosophical conception of the human being as a rational-moral entity,²⁰ but rather combines the philosophy and theology of the self to expand the concept of the human being. Hence, Rosenzweig’s Metaethics is psycho-theology. In his short philosophical, “non-theological” book, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, Rosenzweig clearly links the project of *The Star of Redemption* with a therapeutic paradigm. Love is offered as a solution to the problems of closure, lack of vitality in life, and the inability to integrate the experience of philosophical wonder into the flow of daily life, a disease Rosenzweig calls “apoplexia philosophica” (acute philosophical stroke).²¹

The statement that “Freud moralizes psychology” can be seen as a limitation of psychology, with the understanding, for example, that the definition of a pathology should be based on ethics alone. However, Rosenzweig suggests the other way around – namely, that psychoanalysis should deal not only with pathologies but must also provide answers to, and an orientation towards, the problems of normal everyday life, such as human autonomy. This was indeed Freud’s intention.²² Five years after Rosenzweig penned these words in his diary, Freud confronted religion in *The Future of an Illusion*, aiming to release religion from its influence on the moral development of humanity. In any case, according to Rosenzweig, even if we see psychoanalysis as a threat to traditional religion, he does not perceive it as a threat to the individual’s religious experience.

¹⁸ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 20.

¹⁹ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 20.

²⁰ In his discussion of “the birth of the self,” Rosenzweig uses the terms Eros and Thanatos. He argues that the art of ancient Greece was more successful than its philosophy in discussing the human condition and its enclosed self. This approach brings Rosenzweig closer to Nietzsche and Freud. See PINKAS, RONEN, “The Unconscious in Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*: On the Threshold of a Possible Revelation,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 31 (2023): 102–26.

²¹ ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* (trans. Nahum Glatzer; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 59. And see PINKAS, “The Unconscious in Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*: On the Threshold of a Possible Revelation.” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 31 (2023): 102–26., 123–24.

²² E.g., In “An Autobiographical Study”, FREUD, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 20, 56: “The depth-psychology revealed by psycho-analysis was in fact the psychology of the normal mind.” On p. 62: “From the time of the writing of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, psychoanalysis ceased to be a purely medical subject. Between its appearance in Germany and France lies the history of its numerous applications to departments of literature and aesthetics, to the history of religions and to prehistory, to mythology, to folklore, to education, and so on. None of these things have much to do with medicine; in fact, it is only through psychoanalysis that they are connected with it.” FREUD had expressed similar ideas earlier (e.g., in 1901 in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 6, e.g., 240. And see FROMM, ERICH, *Sigmund Freud’s Mission: An Analysis of his Personality and Influence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 105–20.

2. A psychoanalytic reading of “The Binding of Isaac” in light of Rosenzweig

On April 4, 1922, Rosenzweig wrote in his diary:

“According to Freud, the Aqedah [the Binding] could be interpreted wonderfully. One would also have to add Abraham’s childhood from the Midrash [Genesis Rabbah]. The incest issue could have been represented by Sarah.”²³

Rosenzweig did not dismiss the notion of employing psychoanalytic hermeneutics.²⁴ He maintains that the biblical story of the binding can be interpreted according to the Oedipal family complex. However, we should address the story as it appears in the rabbinic literature, in the midrash Bereshith Rabbah (Genesis Rabbah 38:13). In the Hebrew Bible, the test that Abraham faces goes beyond common logic and even beyond psychoanalytic reasoning, and is not easily interpreted in light of the Oedipal complex. It is not an easy task to prove the Freudian assertion that the binding story is actually a symbol, an archetype, according to which Abraham wanted to distance his son from the mother. Specifically, why would Abraham seek to sacrifice Isaac when circumcision – that is, the symbolic substitute for castration²⁵ – was already performed on Isaac before the binding event? We should add that according to the biblical narrative, his mother was already quite old at the time.²⁶

However, our evaluation changes when the story of Abraham’s early years unfolds before us. In the midrashic story, the young Abraham subtly rebels against both common social conventions and the demands of his father, Terach. He fulfills the tasks assigned to him by his father, but only to a certain extent. According to psychoanalytic interpretation, the midrash sees the binding as a representation of Abraham’s recurring confrontation with the “law of the father.” The father’s unreasonable demands are persistent. In the midrash, this voice is external to Abraham: it is the voice of his father Terach and his demand to sell idols, and of Nimrod and his demand to worship idols. In the Bible, however, in light of a psychoanalytic reading, the demand to take his son and offer him as a sacrifice can be seen as the (return of the) father’s voice, which has already been internalized in the superego. In both the midrash

²³ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 770: “Die Akeda würde nach Freud herrlich zu interpretieren sein. Man müßte noch die Kindheit Abrahams aus dem Midrasch hinzunehmen. Der Inzest wäre mit Sara gegeben.” Incest is mentioned when Abram (not yet Abraham) asks his wife Sarai (not yet Sarah) before they enter Egypt: “Please tell me that you are my sister” (Genesis 12:13). This teaches us that the taboo of incest, as well as respect for the institution of marriage, was already in place at that time. If Sarai is his sister and not his wife, it means that another person is allowed to marry her and, therefore, may not kill her husband to “legally” remarry the widow. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer an alternative interpretation of this story. Abram’s statement that Sarai is his sister implies that she is not his wife, and thus may be married to another person. However, it is still not an explicit statement that they did not have sexual intercourse. In this interpretation, the prohibition against incest (Leviticus 18:6) is seen as a law prohibiting behavior that was previously accepted, as illustrated by the story of Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19:30–36). This interpretation would be less consistent with Freud’s views, since in *Totem and Taboo* the taboo of incest is placed in the context of prehistoric human history, preceding the biblical era.

²⁴ See his diary from March 30, 1922. It is implied that there is a correlation between the scientific methods of history, psychology, and sociology in the sciences and the religious concepts of creation, revelation, and redemption. ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 769.

²⁵ FREUD, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 23, 122. “Circumcision is the symbolic substitute for the castration which the primal father once inflicted upon his sons in the plenitude of his absolute power...”

²⁶ Compare with SUGAR, MAX, “Commonalities between the Isaac and Oedipus Myths,” *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 30 (2002): 691–706. See Kaplan’s criticism of Sugar: KAPLAN, KALMAN, “Isaac Versus Oedipus: An Alternative View,” *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 30 (2002): 707–17.

and the Hebrew Bible, rebellion is not absolute; it is ambivalent and does not constitute a firm renunciation of loyalty to the Father.²⁷ In this manner, Abraham's first revelation at the binding – "Take your son, your favored one [...] and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you" (Genesis 22:2) – expresses the father's law (Terach, Nimrod), which was already internalized in the superego. In contrast, the second revelation – "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him" (Genesis 22:12), which stops the knife from swinging and prevents the killing – represents liberation from the phantasmatic pressures of the superego that keep the human subject at a distance from his responsibility within the world.²⁸ In other words, the angel's revelation expresses the resolution of the conflict that exists in the superego. A similar situation occurs during Abraham and God's dispute regarding Sodom's fate.²⁹ Thus, the midrash constitutes the unconscious layer of the biblical narrative. According to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Abraham's compulsivity, as described in the biblical story, can be understood as a repressed traumatic experience from his childhood.³⁰ Even earlier in the biblical story, the commandment, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12: 1), can be psychoanalytically interpreted as Abraham's rebellion, which involves projection onto a God who is a substitute for his father's God. Specifically, in the midrash Nimrod is presented as the king of Babylon and thus a father symbol for Terach. Abraham felt guilt over overcoming his ambivalent feelings towards his father, which peaked and were resolved at the binding event.³¹ It should be noted that Freud believed that the impulse that gave rise to Jewish monotheism's high ethical standards originates from the tension that these ambivalent feelings

²⁷ Abraham's ambivalence toward Terach is also reflected in his decision to delay his departure from Haran until after his father's death. The Hebrew Bible states that Terach died at the age of 205 (Genesis 11: 32) and that Abraham was born when Terach was 70 years old (Genesis 11:26). If Terach did indeed die at the age of 205, this means that Terach lived for another sixty years after Abraham's departure. The biblical commentators recognized this chronological problem and solved it by explaining that Abraham respected his father and did not leave him alone in his old age. In the Samaritan Pentateuch, it is written that Terach was 145 years old at the time of his death, an age that chronologically coincides with Abraham's departure after Terach's death.

²⁸ See SANTNER, ERIC, "Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor," in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (eds. MARK TAYLOR and THOMAS CARLSON; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 97. According to Martin Buber, the demand for the sacrifice of the Son should be understood as the voice of Moloch imitating the voice of God. Buber writes that, especially in our time, it seems extremely difficult to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of Moloch. He writes: "In the realm of Moloch honest men lie and compassionate men torture." BUBER, MARTIN, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 103–105. I thank Yemima Hadad for bringing this to my attention.

²⁹ See Genesis 18:23–29. In contrast to Abraham's rebellious character (whether against God or the sanctions of the superego), his father Terach is described in the Midrash as a passive and conformist person. The neighbors had an influence on Terach's behavior: "They were patting his head and saying, great shame." Furthermore, it is stated that Haran's death occurred "during the lifetime of Terach his father," which is interpreted as a punishment for Terach's passive attitude.

³⁰ GOTTLIEB ZORNBERG, AVIVAH, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 237–65. See PERI, TUVIA, "Applied Psychoanalysis in Biblical Interpretation," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 10.4 (2013): 349–60.

³¹ See ZELIGS, DOROTHY, *Psychoanalysis and the Bible: A study in Depth of Seven Leaders* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1974), 5–6.

toward the father generates (love and admiration with fear and hatred, and consequently feelings of guilt and the need for atonement).³²

Rosenzweig's statement that Freud imposes morality on psychology shows that he understood a central contradiction in psychoanalytic reasoning: namely, that the conscience (as the superego) also includes a dark, fanatical aspect that suspends an individual's moral relationship to the world. Freud, as we know, attributed neuroses to the inability to moderate the demands and sanctions of the superego. The binding story illustrates, archetypally, the conflict that exists in the superego as well as its resolution. According to the psychoanalytic reading that Rosenzweig does not reject, Abraham's liberation from the fanatical, total, fundamentalist voice of the superego should be seen as the revelation itself. This experience of revelation is authentic precisely because God does not appear in it. On April 4, 1922, Rosenzweig wrote in his diary:

“As long as the human being knows *nothing at all* about God, as long as he simply accepts each of His revelations *as they come to him*, he is not yet idolatrous. Only with *theology* does idolatry begin. Namely, by making projections and substantializations (which cannot be separated from each other) of his experiences. [...] All of this with regard to Freud – namely, the father experience would be a genuine revelation of God, precisely because God doesn't ‘appear’ in it at all.”³³

Psychoanalytic interpretation, in Rosenzweig's opinion, does not contest the possibility of revelation. Revelation is, first and foremost, an experience that is not religious in nature but rather an event whose cause is inherent in its core. Only its interpretation belongs to the realm of religion.³⁴ Revelation as an authentic experience is possible only when the human being has no prior knowledge of God, when the human being does not recognize his thoughts, insights, and moral convictions as the word of God. In other words, the recognition of the “voice of the superego” as the word of God is the epistemological component of idolatry.³⁵ In psychoanalytic terms, the foundations of the idolatrous worldview can be found in the etiology and analysis of psychological defense mechanisms. As Randi Rashkover notes, at the heart of Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* is a driving desire to “publicize” and philosophically justify the miracle of divine revelation and the God-speech of the biblical text over and against the prior century's tendency to reduce God-talk to human fantasy, hope and projection.³⁶

³² See, for example, FREUD, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 23, 115, 134.

³³ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 770. “Solange der Mensch *überhaupt nichts* von Gott weiß, solange er jede seiner Offenbarungen einfach annimmt, *wie sie an ihn kommt*, solange ist er noch gar kein Heide. Erst mit der *Theologie* beginnt das Heidentum. Nämlich indem der Mensch Projektionen und Substanzialisierungen (nicht von einander zu trennen) seiner Erfahrungen vornimmt. [...] Dies Ganze zu Freud. Nämlich: das Vatererlebnis wäre eine echte Gottesoffenbarung, grade weil Gott gar nicht darin „vorkommt“.”

³⁴ See the letter from Rosenzweig to Martin Buber from June 5, 1925. ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 1039–40. “So ist Offenbarung sicher nicht Gesetzgebung; sie ist überhaupt nur – Offenbarung. Sie hat unmittelbar nur sich selbst zum Inhalt, mit וירד [Er stieg herab] ist sie eigentlich schon fertig, schon mit וידבר [Er redete] fängt die Interpretation an, geschweige denn mit ואנכי [Ich = Erstes Wort des Dekalogs].”

³⁵ This idea is also evident in Rosenzweig's interpretation of the biblical story of the golden calf. He claims that the sin of the golden calf is not in worshipping an object and associating God's actions with the statue, but rather in making a statue not according to God's instructions. The sin is deafness to the Word of God and identifying the voice of the superego as the Word of God. See BATNITZKY, LEORA, *Idolatry Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 26–27.

³⁶ See RASHKOVER, RANDI, “Liberalism, Post-Liberalism and The Fact-Value Divide,” *Modern Theology* 33.1 (2017): 141. Rashkover claims that Rosenzweig failed to make room for faith and resolve the dichotomy between

In this context, one should understand Rosenzweig's statement that Kant's categorical imperative expresses an idolatrous position.³⁷ That is, unlike idolatry, which is the externalization of the superego into the word of God (theomorphic deification out of the split within the self), idolatry of the categorical imperative is the reduction of the divinity into the superego (anthropomorphic attribution of the "divine dignity" to the superego). The former expresses projection, and the latter expresses intellectualization. According to Rosenzweig, securing divine freedom is crucial because it is the only way that humanity can be liberated from its idolatrous inclinations. He declares that idolatry can be understood through revelation, but not the other way around.³⁸ Based on our interpretation of the biblical binding story, we can conclude that release and liberation from the rigidity of the superego and its sanctions is not idolatry, as long as it is not conceptualized as divine intervention (although according to Rosenzweig it may be).

In my opinion, Rosenzweig's approach is consistent with what Erich Fromm later argued: "Although there is no place for theology, I suggest that there is a place and a need for

theoretical knowledge and experience. In my opinion, Rashkover's paper, which starts from a Hegelian point of departure, does not offer a sufficient discussion of Rosenzweig's concept of law, and it arrives at its non-exhaustive conclusions because of an inaccurate attempt to assign a logical category to Rosenzweig's "concept" of God.

³⁷ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 791: "Nicht bloß der kategorische Imperativ, auch der kategorische Indikativ ist heidnisch." "Not just the categorical imperative, also the categorical indicative is pagan" (my translation). Rosenzweig extends Cohen's philosophical critique of Kant (concerning the ambiguous relationship between autonomy and moral obligation) within the theo-psychological domain. It is noteworthy that Freud regarded Kantian ethical philosophy as a worldview that denies reality, a perspective that aligns with his assessment of Christian theology. See MACK, MICHAEL, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 136–42. Additionally, Rosenzweig may have been alluding to Isaac Breuer (1883–1946, the grandson of Samson Raphael Hirsch), who, in his 1918 publication *Das Judenproblem*, articulated the belief that the incorporation of Kantian concepts could facilitate the realization of his grandfather's objective, namely, the synthesis of Jewish Orthodoxy and modern culture. Similarly to Hermann Cohen, Breuer posited that had Kant, in addition to his profound philosophical insight, been a devout Jew, the tenets of his philosophy would have been more encompassing. In Breuer's estimation, the advantage of Kant's thinking lies in his notion of the pursuit of human liberation through an obligation to the moral law. He posits that this represents a formalization of the idea of obedience to divine law. In both cases – that of the Kantian and that of the Jew – the human is freed from the determinism that dominates the experience of the world's phenomena. Breuer identifies the categorical imperative's primary limitation as its abstract nature and its inability to provide moral guidance that is applicable to real-life situations. In Breuer's view, Kant would have argued that Abraham should have understood that God could not have issued a command that violated the categorical imperative. See HORWITZ, RIVKA, "Exile and Redemption in the Thought of Isaac Breuer," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 26.2 (1992): 77–98. See BEN HARUSH, IDO, "On Miracles and Experience: Franz Rosenzweig and Isaac Breuer," *Rosenzweig Jahrbuch* 13 (2023): 95–118.

³⁸ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 761: "Es läßt sich zwar das Heidentum aus der Offenbarung verstehen, aber nicht umgekehrt." Rosenzweig did not reject anthropomorphism. He claims: "Für den Menschen, um es nun auch psychologisch zu sagen, sind sie die einzige Sicherung gegen den Rückfall in Vielgötterei, die ja nichts andres ist als Verfestigung einer echten augenblickhaften Offenbarung des wirklichen Gottes zu einem dauerhaften und eben dadurch dem immer-neuen Offenbarungswillen Gottes widerstehenden Gottesbild." ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *Gesammelte Schriften III, Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken* (eds. ANNEMARIE MAYER and REINHOLD MAYER; Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 741. In my opinion, there is an analogy between the anthropomorphisms in Rosenzweig's approach and the defense mechanisms in Freud's approach. Both are states of basic self-enclosure that entail the possibility of self-liberation.

‘idology’, the science of idols.”³⁹ There are similarities between Rosenzweig’s definition of idolatry as a form of the enclosed self before revelation and Fromm’s definition of idolatry in modern society as alienation and narcissism.

In November 1924, after a conversation that took place at the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus in Frankfurt, Rosenzweig writes the following in a letter titled *Divine and Human* to several recipients:

“A Freudian student can analyze the [religious] experience into its elements of the old yet ever new story [...] Psychological analysis finds the solution to all enigmas in self-delusion, and historical sociology finds it in mass delusion. [...] What do we know when we do? Certainly not that all of these historical and sociological explanations are false. But in light of the doing, of the right doing in which we experience the reality of the Law, the explanations are of superficial and subsidiary importance.”⁴⁰

Analyzing the religious experience “into its elements of the old yet ever new story,” similar to Rosenzweig’s theology, also represents a novel return to the Jewish sources in light of personal experience.⁴¹ Psychoanalysis releases the biblical narrative from what Rosenzweig calls “the curse of historicity,”⁴² restoring its relevance to the present. Although the idea that “the solution to all enigmas” lies “in self-delusion” runs into criticism, analyzing the religious experience “into its elements” ultimately means a truthful encounter with the rejections and defense mechanisms of self-delusion. Unlike historical-sociological explanations that, according to Rosenzweig, may be false, I claim that examining the “self-delusion” constitutes a suitable psycho-theological practice not only because it constitutes a crucial epistemological basis for the hermeneutics of returning to the sources,⁴³ but also because the “self-delusion” is, in Rosenzweig’s approach, the existential state of the self (“das Selbst”) before revelation. The true meaning of religious experience can be achieved only through “doing,” by carrying

³⁹ FROMM, ERICH, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1969), 40: “The ‘science of idols’ must show the nature of idols and of idolatry, and it must identify the various idols as they have been worshiped during man’s history up to, and including, the present time.” Regarding idolatry as a relevant term to describe modern phenomena, there is a similarity between Rosenzweig and Fromm.

⁴⁰ ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 1003: “Die religiöse Unbegreiflichkeit des einzelnen Gebots ist auch hier keine Unbegreiflichkeit schlechthin. So wie der Schüler James’ jede “religiöse Erfahrung” religionspsychologisch zu kategorisieren versteht und der Schüler Freuds sie in die Elemente der alten ewigeneuen Geschichte auflöst [...]. Wie die psychologische Analyse in der Selbsttäuschung die Auflösung aller Rätsel findet, so die historische Soziologie im Massenwahn. [...] Wir wissen es anders, nicht immer und nicht in allem, aber immer wieder und wieder. Denn wir wissen es nur, wenn wir – tun. Was wissen wir im Tun? Gewiß nicht, daß all jene historisch–soziologischen Erklärungen falsch seien; aber sie werden zu Äußerlichkeiten und Nachträglichkeiten gegenüber der im Tun, im rechten Tun erfahrenen Wirklichkeit des Gebots.” The English translation is taken from GLATZER, NAHUM, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953), 244–45.

⁴¹ In contrast to the historical and psychological approaches that developed after Hegel, Freud’s starting point is that, despite the development of culture and technological progress, there has been no fundamental change in the structure of the human psyche from the beginning of civilization to modernity. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he explicitly states that in one’s mental life, nothing once formed can perish and that everything is “somehow preserved.” FREUD, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 69–70.

⁴² ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, “Atheistic Theology,” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings* (trans. and ed. PAUL FRANKS and MICHAEL MORGEN; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 24.

⁴³ Rosenzweig’s conception of revelation does not grow out of theological thought and turn outward into the practical world. On the contrary, inner experience precedes and nourishes theological sources. See DAGAN, HAGAI, “Objectivity out of the Subjectivity: A Further Examination of Franz Rosenzweig’s Concept of Revelation,” in *Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack* (eds. ZEEV GRIES, HOWARD KREISEL, and BOAZ HUSS; Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2004), 287–89 (Hebrew).

out the actual deed of the Torah laws; however, the “right doing,” is conditioned by the existential situation – that is, by the state of the self.

3. The *right doing* of the commandment (the Mitzvah)

3.1. Opening up the isolated and silent self from its enclosedness

To gain a greater understanding of Rosenzweig’s views on the Torah law and the commandment (mitzvah), one should read his correspondences and diaries in addition to his discussions of revelation in *The Star of Redemption* and the “Germ cell (“Urzelle”) to *The Star of Redemption*.” In *The Star of Redemption*, God’s love for the world is expressed in creation; this is the “first revelation”,⁴⁴ in which the “shell of the mystery breaks”.⁴⁵ As such it is an event without content, independent of previous revelations. At the same time, the revelation of God’s love for the human being is an event of opening up:

“To man. He is the other pole of Revelation. Upon him the divine love pours forth. How does he make himself ready to receive it? For he must prepare himself. [...] He must also, in his enclosedness, begin to open up in order to learn to hear God’s word, to gaze upon the light of God. Defiance and character, *hybris* and *daimon*, had united in him and had made him a mute Self, turned in on himself.”⁴⁶

There is an analogy between God’s love for the world as an event in which the “shell of the mystery breaks” and God’s love for the human being as an event of opening up the self from its enclosedness. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig describes the opening up of the self as made possible not by the containment of psychic powers but rather by their inversion (“Umkehrung”). The enclosed elements of the self – defiance and pride – are transformed into mental foundations that allow openness, humility, and peace. Rosenzweig states that “it is a matter only of inner movements in man”.⁴⁷ There are similarities between Rosenzweig’s inversion of the self and Freud’s concept of sublimation in the libido economy. In both cases, it is the channelization of mental powers rather than restraining, permitting, or negating them. According to Santner, who based his conclusions on Rosenzweig’s description of revelation in the “Urzelle”,⁴⁸ revelation should be seen as an event that changes the self’s direction in life, that opens it up to completely new possibilities. Santner argues that the opening up of the self is the revelation itself.⁴⁹

In the *Urzelle*, at the center of the discussion about revelation, Rosenzweig writes:

“‘Ideals,’ ‘imperatives,’ ‘ideas,’ and *hoc genus omne* [Latin: all things of this kind] say to man: devote yourself to me! Out of ‘gratitude,’ ‘voluntarily,’ so that ‘you become what you are.’ [...] Contrarily, revelation says: Do my Will! Carry out my work! [...] The highest [God], instead of demanding our devotion, devotes itself to our very selves; instead of raising us to its height, it lowers itself down to us; and once again, instead

⁴⁴ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 174.

⁴⁵ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 123.

⁴⁶ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 180.

⁴⁷ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 76.

⁴⁸ ROSENZWEIG, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 48–72. The “Urzelle” is a letter dated November 18, 1917, that Rosenzweig wrote to his cousin Rudolf Ehrenberg (1884–1969), who accompanied him during the period when he was debating whether to convert to Christianity. Ehrenberg had converted in 1913, the year in which Rosenzweig moved away from his thoughts of conversion. In the letter, Rosenzweig emphasizes the idea of his converted friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (1888–1973) that revelation is orientation.

⁴⁹ SANTNER, *On the Psychotheology*, 100: “There is a form of loneliness, in other words, that is openness to what is other, and revelation is the event of our conversion to it.”

of promising us our Selves as payment ('become what you are'), it promises us a self-abandonment, nearness to God as blessedness [...] So no 'law' ["Gesetz"] is given to the pious, for he stands under an 'order' ["Befehl"]. An order that gives him complete authority over the whole world and its ideals. But, to be sure, an order."⁵⁰

According to Rosenzweig, the "openness of the self" as the revelation is a *middle point* ("Mittelpunkt") for examining ideals, imperatives, and ideas. Revelation as openness is paradoxical because it affirms and simultaneously negates the psychic core, through which our values and modes of interpretation of the world are determined. In the "Urzelle" the passive aspect of revelation is emphasized, unlike the "inversion" of the self as presented in *The Star of Redemption*. God "lowers itself down to us." God's nearness implies a new orientation. However, also in the "Urzelle" (as in *The Star of Redemption*), Rosenzweig argues that contrary to Spinoza's view that "whoever loves God should not demand that God loves him in return," a human being "should and must demand that God love him back. Indeed, he must demand that God even love him first," because, according to Rosenzweig, it is only because God loves that humans are able to love.⁵¹ The description of revelation in *The Star of Redemption* links the openness of the self to God's love. According to Rosenzweig, the commandment "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) is the authentic expression of revelation; however, it is a descriptive (not imperative) experience. The beloved has a natural tendency and an urge to return love to the lover.⁵² In this way, Rosenzweig clarifies the transition from the God that loves (the etiology of the Eros) to the imperative to love God (canalization of the Eros). In my opinion, similar to Fromm's model of obedience to God, which is also "the negation of submission to man,"⁵³ Rosenzweig proposes the model of love for God, which is also the negation of submission to ideals that expropriate the human being from actual life.

At the beginning of the third book of *The Star*, which deals with redemption, Rosenzweig handles the enclosure of the mystic. The mystic, in Rosenzweig's description, wants to preserve the relationship of love with God and therefore remains closed to the world, and is even forced to deny the world in order to maintain this relationship. This discussion illustrates the complexity of the expression of the "enclosure of the self" and means that not all openness to God's love necessarily means establishing a moral attitude toward others.⁵⁴

The transition from Revelation, which allows a moral relationship to the world, to redemption, which realizes this relationship, occurs with the commandment to love the fellow man. Love of the other is formulated by Rosenzweig (even though it is a dialogical-correlative event) not in the ethical sense (e.g., Hermann Cohen's version: compassion, responsiveness

⁵⁰ ROSENZWEIG, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 64–65.

⁵¹ ROSENZWEIG, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 60–61. See BERGMAN, SAMUEL HUGO, "Revelation, Prayer and Redemption in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig," *Moznaim* 24 (1955): 105–108 (Hebrew).

⁵² ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 182–83.

⁵³ FROMM, *You Shall Be as Gods*, 73–75.

⁵⁴ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 223–24. Rosenzweig's discussion of "the mystic's enclosure" is based on this assumption: the mystic represents a person with a real relationship with God. The soul of the mystic is open to the love of God, "but because it is open only to God, it is invisible for the rest of the world and cut off from it." Thus, the mystic "must deny the world." And see ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *The New Thinking* (trans. Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli; New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 91. Rosenzweig argues that the extraordinary position of Judaism and Christianity lies in the fact that they find within themselves "the impulse" to free themselves from their religiosity and find their way back to "the open field of reality."

and not being indifferent to the other's suffering, or Emmanuel Levinas' version: the imperative of "Thou shalt not kill" arises from the face of the other), but rather as an openness that means recognizing the status of others in creation on the basis of their presence. In the act of love, Rosenzweig says, "the neighbor" transforms from a general thing ("Etwas") into a soul ("Seele").⁵⁵ Rosenzweig's basic premise is that God loves everything in the world, and one must be open to this love in the present and actively participate in it – that is, partnering with God to bring about the world's redemption. Love of the other means approval and responsiveness to the other as a subject standing alone in a relationship with God (triadic status). This approval overcomes the cognitive system that orients the other's perception of me through attraction or rejection. In psychoanalytic terms, love of the neighbor is the recognition of the existential status of the other based on the suspension of the superego's defense mechanisms: narcissism (attitude of utilitarianism toward the other), projection, and rationalization (relations of dominance over the other). In light of this, revelation, according to Rosenzweig, is not understood as a law whose purpose is to establish a moral and just superego, nor as the way for tradition to validate laws that already exist in it, nor the attempt to replace an existing order of values with a new order – that is, to update the limitations of the superego. Rather, its central meaning is in the present – in the period after a law has already been internalized in the superego.⁵⁶

3.2. Softening the rigidity of the Law

According to Rosenzweig, God's love is an experience of openness and liberation from bondage to ideals, while the commandment "love your neighbor" is the actual manifestation of this experience, which demands that the individual step out of his or her solipsistic consciousness towards a concrete historical reality. He writes:

"Love your neighbor. This is, Jews and Christians affirm, the embodiment of all commandments. With this commandment, the soul declared grown-up leaves the paternal home of divine love to go out and travel through the world. It is a commandment of love like the original commandment of Revelation that accompanies all the single commandments and that alone removes the rigidity of laws from them and makes them living commandments."⁵⁷

In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig distinguishes between law ("Gesetz") and mitzvah ("Gebot"), and between the primary commandment to love God, and all the other commandments. The commandment to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) is an original commandment ("Urgebot") that is experienced only in the present moment, and, unlike all other commandments, cannot become a law. Similar to the categorical imperative, the commandment is an imperative that lacks specific content and cannot be recognized theoretically. Unlike the

⁵⁵ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 252.

⁵⁶ Sagi's notion of "the ethics of the inner retreat" seems to be helpful in understanding Rosenzweig's revelation as a middle ground between an ethics based on justice and an ethics based on compassion. See SAGI, AVI, *Living with the Other: The Ethic of Inner Retreat* (trans. Batya Stein; Cham: Springer, 2018). In my view, however, Sagi presents a narrow conception of Rosenzweig's revelation (see there, 61, 88–89).

⁵⁷ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 221. ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Freiburg: Suhrkamp, 2002), 229: "Liebe deinen Nächsten. Das ist, so versichern Jud und Christ, der Inbegriff aller Gebote. Mit diesem Gebot verläßt die mündig gesprochene Seele das Vaterhaus der göttlichen Liebe und wandert hinaus in die Welt. Ein Liebesgebot wie jenes Urgebot der Offenbarung, das in allen einzelnen Geboten mittönt und sie erst aus der Starrheit von Gesetzen zu lebendigen Geboten schafft."

categorical imperative, the commandment appears within the framework of an intimate relationship with God and refers to the present moment: “The commandment knows only the moment: it waits for the outcome right within the moment of its growing audible [...]. The commandment is thus – pure present.”⁵⁸ The commandment of love cannot be turned into a law, but as an experience, it can pour its content into the law and transform it into a commandment. The law, Rosenzweig argues, is based on the past and turns to the future. The law is eternal, general, and impersonal. According to Ernst Simon, for Rosenzweig, “the law [“das Gesetz”] was not really a law, since its binding metaphysical power was very limited for him.”⁵⁹ In my opinion, Rosenzweig’s argument that the commandment to love softens the rigidity of the law can be understood in two ways. (Rigidity in the English translation of *The Star* refers to the German term “*Erstarren*”, which means to stagnate, stiffen, freeze, or solidify).

On the one hand, the rigidity of the law, as Yehoyada Amir demonstrates, is a sign of the holiness of the law.⁶⁰ Its stagnation is its eternal dimension. Nevertheless, it is not the ancient, archaic nature of the law that makes it holy, but rather its nature of being an “unchangeable present”⁶¹ – that is, its objective validity. For Rosenzweig – unlike, for example, Spinoza⁶² – the emphasis is not on trying to attain a state of awareness, which is external to daily activity, but rather on living daily life in the light of God’s eternal love.⁶³ This means that there is no one particular moment that is given more importance than another; each moment can absorb the “plentitude of eternity.”⁶⁴ Softening the rigidity of the law is a *response* that is renewed at every moment. This idea of “stagnation” as holiness and eternity serves Rosenzweig’s concept of metahistorical Judaism, according to which the Torah is “a bridge over the river of time.”⁶⁵ As “a bridge,” the law grants those who walk it perseverance over time. The law excludes the community from history and gives an eternal dimension to the liturgical cycle of life. As a feature of the law, stagnation in this sense is a positive stagnation, while “softening” means not changing this feature, but rather the way we understand the “doing” of the

⁵⁸ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 191.

⁵⁹ SIMON, ERNST, “Persönliche Erinnerungen an Franz Rosenzweig,” *Zion: Monatsblätter für Lehre, Volk, Land* 1 (1930): 6: “Rosenzweig mündlich einmal dahin formulierte, daß ihm das Gesetz eigentlich nicht – Gesetz sei, da seine verpflichtende, allgemein verbindliche, metaphysische Kraft für ihn nur sehr eingeschränkt bestehe.” Simon claims that Rosenzweig’s rich knowledge and high thinking were already proven. However, in Rabbi Nehemiah Noble’s Talmud classes, Rosenzweig was still a student and somewhat distant from those whom Simon calls the “Talmud Füchsen” (Talmud foxes). That is, according to Simon, Rosenzweig did not have an extensive knowledge of Halacha and Jewish law.

⁶⁰ AMIR, YEHOYADA, *Reason Out of Faith: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2004), 290 (Hebrew).

⁶¹ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 322.

⁶² Spinoza strives to establish an observation of reality from the perspective of eternity, a perspective that evaluates the changeable and temporal in light of the eternal. While Rosenzweig, endeavors to imbue the present moment with meaning. In general, Spinoza’s reference to eternity can be characterized as epistemological, whereas Rosenzweig’s is ontological.

⁶³ Rosenzweig ontologically characterizes God’s renewed love for the world through the law of growth (“das Gesetz des Wachstums”), and God’s love for humanity is expressed in the commandment of love.

⁶⁴ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 245.

⁶⁵ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 323, 359.

law. According to Rosenzweig, the law can be “evaded but not changed.”⁶⁶ The law has social significance. Softening the rigidity of the law by turning it into a mitzvah does not mean giving up its eternal dimension, but rather experiencing the law in its relevance and significance to the daily life of the individual as part of a community. The softening of its rigidity has to do with the concrete validity it grants to liturgical life – not by adapting the law to the needs of the present (through reform, selection, or categorization of laws), but rather by presenting “eternity” in the present moment. The liturgy does not elevate toward eternity, but eternity is enclosed in it. In other words, the “attainment of eternity” should not be seen as a goal (mystical, prophetic, etc.) of fulfilling the mitzvah, but as an additional dimension of depth, which accompanies the deed itself. The Jewish person, as part of a community, learns to discover the law by “rooting in oneself.”⁶⁷ Rosenzweig did not seek rational or irrational justification for fulfilling the mitzvah, but emphasized the importance of living in light of the mitzvah. “Rooting in oneself” indicates that, in his view, the law does not contradict the psychological nature of the human being. Therefore, the claim that the law can “be evaded but not changed” has a radical meaning. A Jewish person who chooses to leave Jewish life is essentially denying himself.

On the other hand, the stagnation of the law can be understood as a negative stagnation – that is, as the rigidity of the law. This approach to the law puts the individual, according to Rosenzweig, ostensibly in an all or nothing (“Alles oder Nichts”) relationship to the observance of a law. Rosenzweig wrote these words to his friend Rudolf Hallo in March 1922, the same week he addressed the commentary on the biblical story of the binding of Isaac.⁶⁸

Sigmund Freud proposed many discussions of what might be called the stagnation and rigidity of the law. The rigidity of the law constitutes an unconscious element that is not included in the content of the law itself. On the one hand, it imposes sanctions of guilt and anxiety on the ego from not upholding the law. On the other hand, it grants substitutive satisfaction, “a yield of pleasure” to the ego by the performance of the law “without the acquiescence of the ego, [... and] without its understanding.”⁶⁹ The law’s stagnation is an additional factor, an element associated with fantasy and seduction, which causes us to give more importance to the validity and source of authority of the law than to value its meaning. This “foreign,” idealistic, fanatic element favors the law and violently does not tolerate an offense

⁶⁶ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 323.

⁶⁷ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 324.

⁶⁸ Rosenzweig’s friend Rudolf Hallo considered converting to Christianity, but Rosenzweig influenced him to return to Judaism. Letter dated March 27, 1922. ROSENZWEIG, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 761–62: “Glaubst du, das Gesetz wäre so schwer zu halten? Sieh dir doch die Leute an. Es ist ein sehr zahmes Gesetz, und wenn ich will, fange ich morgen früh an. Ich würde keine Spur eckiger und kantiger davon werden. [...] Uns gehört weder das All noch das Nichts, uns gehört das Etwas. Das *Etwas* ist uns gegeben. Im Etwas haben wir uns einzurichten. Ich sage nicht, daß dieses mein Etwas musterhaft für irgend einen andern ist. Musterhaft aber ist, daß ich den Mut habe (Mut sowohl gegen den Idealisten des Nichts wie gegen den des Alles), in meinem Etwas zu leben. [...] Ich, wir, alle die *nicht* “Alles oder Nichts” sagen, wir unternehmen heut von neuem, was der jüdische Liberalismus vor hundert Jahren unternommen hat und woran er gescheitert ist. [...] Wir fangen mit den Handlungen an. [...] Das Judentum *ist nicht* Gesetz. Es schafft Gesetz. Aber es *ist es nicht*. Es “*ist*” Judesein. So habe ich es im Stern dargestellt und weiß, daß es richtig ist.”

⁶⁹ FREUD, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 23, 127, 116–122. See *Civilization and its Discontents* in Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. 21, 123–145.

or violation of the law, and requires full submission or, alternatively, a complete abandonment. The stagnation can be seen as the fanatical religious component of the law – namely, the ideological veil that obscures consciousness: national totality, superstition, and the ideologies that underlie religious behaviorism and theo-political messianism. In *The New Thinking*, Rosenzweig writes that the extraordinary position of Judaism and Christianity lies in that “even when they have become religions, [they] find in themselves the impulse to free themselves from this religiosity of theirs and to find their way back again to the open field of reality from out of their specialization and their fortification.”⁷⁰ This statement provides a sociological expression of what was previously described as the enclosures of the mystic (fn. 54).

Softening the rigidity of the law and its transformation into a commandment (through love) can thus be understood as an honest and critical examination of the law while still following its intended direction. In other words, Rosenzweig’s intention regarding the law can be seen as pointing to refining the consciousness of the law from its preceding principles and its automatic, fanatic, and ideological aspects, but without negating the law itself. Ephraim Meir demonstrates that, in Rosenzweig’s view, Judaism is not a religion of law but rather sees the law as a way to express and channel love.⁷¹ The law in Judaism, according to Rosenzweig, is not divided into positive “thou shalt” and negative “thou shalt not” commandments, but rather into the search for what fills life with vitality and coping with whatever prevents life from having this vitality. In his letter to Rudolf Hallo, Rosenzweig notes that “Our inheritance is neither *all* nor *nothing*, but rather it is *something* (“Das Etwas”) that is given to us, and with this *something*, we have to make ourselves at home.”

4. Das Etwas: The New Law and Redemption

The interpretation proposed for softening the rigidity of the law (“Gesetz”) and turning it into a commandment (“Gebot” – i.e., a mitzvah) is consistent with Rosenzweig’s “capability” approach to the observance of Jewish law. The right observance of the law is primarily based on moderating the fanatical system of “all or nothing.” In *The Builders: Concerning the Law* (“Die Bauleute: Über das Gesetz”), written in 1925 in response to Martin Buber, and expressing the heart of the controversy in modern times concerning the relationship between theory and practice,⁷² Rosenzweig offers a unique understanding of the observance of Jewish law. In his view, the Torah (“die Lehre”) is not a conservative legal system, as Jewish Orthodoxy claims. The law does not require obedience to a divine authority and is not an institution of tyranny. At the same time, the law is not ancient and irrelevant, as Jewish liberal reform claims. According to Rosenzweig, the law is based on harmony between consciousness and action. It fills all spheres of life and is intended to orient them. Rosenzweig states that the

⁷⁰ ROSENZWEIG, *The New Thinking*, 91.

⁷¹ MEIR, EPHRAIM, *Letters of Love: Franz Rosenzweig’s Spiritual Biography and Oeuvre in Light of the Grillo Letters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 149–57.

⁷² BATNITZKY, LEORA, “Revelation and Neues Denken – Rethinking Buber and Rosenzweig on the Law,” in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber* (ed. Michael Zank; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 149–164. And see HORWITZ, RIVKA, *Franz Rosenzweig: The Star and The Man. Collected Studies by Rivka Horwitz* (ed. AVIEZER COHEN; Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2010), 67–79, 176, 197 (Hebrew).

“new law” (das neue Gesetz) is founded on this perspective.⁷³ Rosenzweig argues that the law does not rely on coercive force, whether external or internal, and, at the same time, does not depend on free will.

“It is true that ability means: not to be able to do otherwise – to be obliged to act. [...] A decision based on ability cannot err, since it is not choosing, but listening and therefore only accepting. For this reason, no one can take another person’s task, though he can and should teach him; because only *I* know what *I* can do; only my own ear can hear the voice of my own being, which I have to reckon with.”⁷⁴

The law undergoes internalization and subjectification, and the acceptance, relevance, and implementation of the law rely on individual self-responsiveness and ability. A law must be fulfilled only if it has been internalized, and there is no negation of a law that has not yet been internalized. This perspective, as Amir notes, legitimizes the various personal ways that each individual responds to the commandments according to his or her ability.⁷⁵ In my opinion, the new law based on the “ability approach” should be viewed in light of Rosenzweig’s statements in *The Star of Redemption* concerning the opening up of the isolated self from its enclosedness, and softening the rigidity of the law. Ability becomes an obligation, as long as the dialogical experience of fulfilling the law has not been suppressed. At the same time, ability maintains a guilt-free awareness regarding laws that have “not yet” (“noch nicht”) become commandments.⁷⁶ Fulfilling the new law, according to Rosenzweig, brings a person closer to himself and to his immediate environment. It paradoxically combines turning inward toward “rooting in oneself,” which involves the experiential relation to creation (being loved), with turning outward and loving (“Beseelung”) the world. “The man at his prayers [...] learned to love the one who is more-than-nearest, his Self; not his Self as a closed, rigid Self, but as the personality whose own destiny is woven into the destiny of the world.”⁷⁷

In light of the concept of the new law, it is possible to understand another aspect of the dimension of redemption proposed by Rosenzweig. In my opinion, his conception of law extends beyond the question of law within the framework of religion and liturgy to life as a whole.⁷⁸ Rosenzweig believes that the redeemer has not been asked to redeem the world, but rather to enable redemption: “This is how love makes the world a world inhabited by soul, not, fundamentally, through what it does, but because it does it through love. That in spite of all something happens there, a realized action without it requiring in the proper sense any taking of action, is what benefits not man but the world, for it goes to meet man’s act of

⁷³ ROSENZWEIG, FRANZ, *On Jewish Learning* (ed. NAHUM GLATZER; Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 87; Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften III*, 708.

⁷⁴ ROSENZWEIG, *On Jewish Learning*, 90–91; Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften III*, 711: “Freilich, sowie das Können kann, kann es nicht mehr anders; es wird Nichtanderskönnen, Müssen. [...] Die Entscheidung, die aus dem Können geschieht, kann nicht irren, weil sie ja gar nicht zu wählen, nur zu gehorchen hat. Eben darum kann auch keiner den andern zur Rede stellen, obwohl jeder den andern lehren kann und muß; denn was einer kann, weiß er nur selber; die Stimme des eignen Seins, der er zu gehorchen hat, wird nur von seinem eignen Ohr vernommen.”

⁷⁵ AMIR, *Reason Out of Faith*, 294.

⁷⁶ When Rosenzweig was asked if he put on Tefillin (the phylacteries), he replied, “not yet.” HORWITZ, *Franz Rosenzweig: The Star and The Man*, 68.

⁷⁷ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 311. See PINKAS, RONEN, “On Prayer and Dialectic in Modern Jewish Philosophy: Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig,” *Religions* 14. 8:996 (2023): 13–19.

⁷⁸ Compare with MENDES-FLOHR, PAUL, “Secular Religiosity: Reflections on Post–Traditional Jewish Spirituality and Community,” in *Approaches to Modern Judaism*, vol. 1 (ed. MARC LEE RAPHAEL; Chico, CA: Scholar Press, 1983), 19–30.

love.”⁷⁹ This is a central element in Rosenzweig’s concept of redemption, where love (both from God and humans) advances the world toward its redemption. Regarding the structure of *The Star of Redemption*, there is a connection between creation as an expression of God’s love (first part of *The Star*); revelation as the opening up of the Self from its narcissistic enclosedness and establishing relations to oneself, God and the world (second part of *The Star*); and redemption as the merging of the first two (third part of *The Star*). Under the influence of God’s love, the self (“das Selbst”) becomes the soul (“die Seele”); it goes from being loved to being a lover. Thus, this is not entirely dependent on the human being alone. However, in my opinion, Gershom Scholem exaggerated his claim about an apocalyptic dimension in Rosenzweig’s concept of redemption.⁸⁰ In light of the analysis I proposed, the argument that Rosenzweig internalized a psychological dimension into his existential philosophy is more relevant. Redemption is expressed in turning general matters into a personal and intimate matter. As Rosenzweig asserts, “For what else is redemption but that the I learns to say you to the he?”⁸¹

5. Concluding Remarks

Rosenzweig’s approach to Freud is unique and unusual in early twentieth-century Jewish thought. While Hermann Cohen (before Rosenzweig) rejected Freud’s approach based on his neo-Kantian method, and Martin Buber (after Rosenzweig) preferred to avoid a deep conceptual confrontation with the assumptions of psychoanalysis and, like other Jewish thinkers, focused on rejecting Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Rosenzweig leaves open the possibility of an in-depth discussion of Freud’s approach and of applying psychoanalytic hermeneutics. This implies two conclusions: First, psychoanalytic research is a valuable tool for examining Rosenzweig’s thought. Second, contemporary Jewish philosophy is ready to engage with the concepts and assumptions of psychoanalysis and to use this theoretical framework to enrich the theoretical discourse on law.

This article offers a creative interpretation of the biblical story of the binding of Isaac according to Rosenzweig, and employs this interpretation to explore new aspects of the relationship between the law and the commandment to love in Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*. When the biblical story of the binding of Isaac is viewed alongside the Rabbinic interpretations of Abraham’s early life in the midrash Genesis Rabbah 38:13, it becomes possible to apply a psychoanalytic interpretation that illuminates the biblical narrative. The midrash is considered the hidden unconscious layer of the Hebrew Bible, illustrating Abraham’s relationship with Terach, his father and Nimrod, the father symbol in the culture into which Abraham was born. The superego, which is the product of internalizing the father’s law in childhood, returns in adulthood with the demand to sacrifice the son. In light of this, I suggested that, according to Rosenzweig, the moment of revelation should be understood as the liberation from the fanatical voice of the superego. Rosenzweig’s interpretation draws attention to examining the relationship between psychological defense mechanisms and idolatrous

⁷⁹ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 257–58.

⁸⁰ SCHOLEM, GERSHOM, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 322–24.

⁸¹ ROSENZWEIG, *The Star*, 292.

consciousness – namely, not distinguishing between God’s word and the voice of the super-ego is the epistemological foundation of idolatry. Liberation from the fanatical demands of the superego is not idolatry, as long as it is not conceptualized as divine intervention, although according to Rosenzweig it may be.

The psychoanalytic study of the biblical narrative, when combined with the rabbinic literature presented in this paper, reinforces the claim that the study of the openness of the self in revelation should be combined with Rosenzweig’s theoretical analysis of the Law. Based on an interpretation of the biblical story of binding, this paper offers a fresh perspective on Rosenzweig’s analysis of how love can soften the rigidity of the law. On the one hand, the softening of the law is a change in the way one understands the law through doing – that is, the possibility of experiencing eternity is inherent in the holiness of the law, without renouncing its relevance and significance for the daily life of the individual as part of a community. On the other hand, the softening of the law from its stagnation should be seen as a moderation of the fanatical component of the law, which constitutes the epistemological basis of ideological approaches, without negating the law and its importance for orienting life. Rosenzweig’s approach to the law in Judaism, much like his approach to life in general, is unique.⁸² Rosenzweig proposed a path in both his life and thought that passes between poles without one side having to give itself up for the sake of the other. He introduces a new middle way that navigates between philosophy and theology, knowledge and faith, and liberalism and orthodoxy.

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⁸² Richard Koch, for example, describes Rosenzweig’s position in the field of tension (“das Kraftfeld”) of the debate on Zionism between the Zionist rabbi Nehemiah Noble and the philosopher Hermann Cohen. For Rosenzweig, openness and dialogue were more important than choosing sides and taking an absolute position on a political–historical issue. KOCH, RICHARD, “Das Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt am Main,” *Der Jude: eine Monatsschrift* 7.2 (1923): 116–120.

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Appendix

Midrash/ Genesis Rabbah 38: 13⁸³

“Haran died during the lifetime of Teraḥ his father” (Gen. 11:28). Rabbi Ḥiyya grandson of Rav Ada of Yafo: Teraḥ was an idol worshipper [and a seller of idols]. One time, he went away to some place, and he installed Abraham as salesman in his stead. A person would come seeking to buy. He [Abraham] would say to him: ‘How old are you?’ He would say to him: ‘Fifty or sixty years old.’ He would say to him: ‘Woe to this man who is sixty years old and seeks to prostrate himself before something that is one day old.’ He would be ashamed and leave. One time, a certain woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to him: ‘Here, offer it before them.’ He arose, took a club in his hand, shattered all the idols, and placed the club in the hand of the largest among them. When his father came, he said to him: ‘Who did this to them?’ He said to him: ‘I will not lie to you, a certain woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to me: Here, offer it before them. I offered it before them. This one [idol] said: I shall eat first, and another one said: I shall eat first. This big idol, who was standing among them, got up and took the club and shattered them.’ He [Teraḥ] said to him: ‘What, are you mocking me? Are they sentient at all?’ He said to him: ‘Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?’

He [Teraḥ] took him and handed him over to [king] Nimrod. He [Nimrod] said to him [Abraham]: ‘Let us bow down to fire.’ Abraham said to him: ‘Let us better bow down to water, that extinguishes fire.’ Nimrod said to him: ‘[All right,] let us bow down to water.’ He said to him: ‘If so, let us bow down to the clouds, that bear the water.’ He said to him: ‘[All right,] let us bow down to the clouds.’ He said to him: ‘If so, let us bow down to the wind, that scatters the clouds.’ He said to him: ‘[All right,] let us bow down to the wind.’ He said to him: ‘Better let us bow down to a person, who can withstand the wind.’ He said to him: ‘You are saying mere words. I bow down only to fire. I will cast you into it, and let that God to whom you bow down come and rescue you from it.’ Haran was there and he was conflicted. He said: ‘Either way [I will know what to do]; If Abraham is victorious, I will say: I am with Abraham, and if Nimrod is victorious, I will say: I am with Nimrod.’ When Abraham descended into the fiery furnace and was rescued,⁸⁴ they said to him [Haran]: ‘With whom are you?’ He said to them: ‘I am with Abraham.’ They took him and cast him into the fire and his innards were scorched. He emerged and died in the presence of Teraḥ his father. That is what is written: “Haran died in the presence of Teraḥ.”

⁸³ Midrash/ Genesis Rabbah 38: 13. https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.38.13?lang=bi (accessed on 2 November 2024).

⁸⁴ “...The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him [to angle Gabriel]: I am unique in my world and Abraham is still unique in his world. It is fitting for the unique to save the unique. Therefore, God Himself went down and saved him.” (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 118a: 20).