Differences between contemporary Jews are often described as “choices in modern Jewish thought.”\(^1\) Behind this term is the assumption that philosophical and theological commitments are at the heart of distinctions that separate Jews from one another. Recently, this idea has been challenged or undermined by the assertion that “the religious experience of modern Jews should concentrate far more on practice than on belief.”\(^2\) Here, the emphasis is on the distinctions en-gendered by what Jews do, rather than by the ideas they claim to espouse. In this essay I want to suggest that alongside consideration of what a Jew believes and what a Jew does, there is a third category that distinguishes Jewish religious thinkers from one another—how and what a Jew quotes.

Quotation has become the subject of significant attention in the fields of literary theory and cultural studies.\(^3\) Scant regard, however, has been paid to the phenomenon of quotation in Jewish culture.\(^4\) There is much work to be done in sketching a history, a phenomenology, a taxonomy and a poetics of Jewish quotation. In this article, we will concentrate on the role played by one saying—“You are my witnesses” (Isaiah 43:12)—in the work of a number of key modern Jewish thinkers.

My aim is to discuss some ways in which Jewish thinkers attempt to employ tradition to articulate, transmit and enhance a modern Jewish theology. The article will consider a number of recurrent themes in modern Jewish thought, such as the paradoxical relationship between divine power and human initiative and the role of the Jewish people after Auschwitz, and how this quotation is used by various thinkers to develop these and other themes. In so doing we may reflect on what this says about quotation and the horizon of interpretations a reading allows.

The role that quotation plays in Jewish culture in general and in the formulation of modern Jewish theology in particular is significant and under-appreciated, and a consideration of this dimension yields...
results which are sometimes surprising. To cite one example, despite the fact that Eugene Borowitz’s debt to the thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel has been noted by others and acknowledged by Borowitz himself, it is surely worthy of note that a comparison of Borowitz’s 1991 Renewing the Covenant with Heschel’s 1955 God In Search of Man from the perspective of quotation reveals a stark contrast between the two works.

Borowitz refers to a number of thinkers in Renewing the Covenant: individuals or works are mentioned a little over 400 times in the work’s 300 pages. Martin Buber features on thirty-six pages, Hermann Cohen on thirty-two, and the aforementioned Heschel on twenty-nine pages. Non-Jewish philosophers such as Kant (21) also figure prominently. However, if a quotation is understood as a sentence explicitly excerpted from an earlier source, there are only sixteen cases of a quotation in Renewing the Covenant. In the overwhelming majority of cases, when an individual is mentioned it is without reference to any particular book, and no excerpt is actually quoted. Of the 400 mentions of individuals, only 30 involve pre-modern Jewish sources—from the liturgy to Philo, from Maimonides to Midrash.

By comparison, there are over 1500 sources quoted, cited and mentioned in God In Search of Man. Of them, only a handful is mentioned in the style later adopted by Borowitz in Renewing the Covenant. In short, there almost one hundred times as many quotations in Heschel’s summa than there are in Borowitz’s masterwork. God In Search of Man cites from twenty centuries of Jewish creativity. If that work contains some 285 quotations and citations from rabbinic literature, we find over 6000 such sources cited and quoted in his monumental three-volume Torah min Hashamayim. This figure is equal to all the Rabbinic sources quoted in Urbach’s The Sages, Montefiore and Loewe’s Rabbinic Anthology and Schechter’s Aspects of Rabbinic Theology combined. In Kaplan’s Judaism as a Civilization, by comparison, there are a little over 60 sources from Rabbinic literature to be found. Arnold Jacob Wolf records that Heschel “once told me that every word he wrote was originally a quotation from a classic Jewish source”. Exaggerated as it undoubtedly was, this was not quite as hyperbolic a statement as may initially appear.

It should be pointed out that Eugene Borowitz has demonstrated his profound engagement with Rabbinical literature and other staples of the Jewish canon: in a recent work by him some 3000 classical Jewish sources are deployed! However, in composing his most resonant theological statement, these sources are rendered all but invisible.
In a future study I hope to present a systematic analysis of the quotational styles of a number of Jewish thinkers. In this article our emphasis will not be on the quantity of sources, nor on an analysis of the range of sources adduced. Rather, we will pay attention here to one midrashic tradition. It appears in Sifre to Deuteronomy 346 and in a number of parallel sources, and, as already noted, it is based on a phrase which appears in Isaiah 43:10 and 43:12 (see also 44:8). The midrash, part of a longer tradition in the name of Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, offers a daring reading:

When you are my witnesses, then I am the Lord. But if you are not my witnesses, I am not the Lord.

In a number of the variant readings, the latter statement is qualified by the term kivyachol, “as it were”. This teaching, or the verse from Isaiah on which it is based, is to be found in a variety of iterations in the work of many central figures in modern Jewish thought. In the following section of the article we will survey the ideas that the source is used to exemplify, illustrate, or amplify. Ten distinct (though related) uses have been identified among the modern Jewish thinkers under discussion. Some attention will then be given to the connection between the ideas propounded by these thinkers and the ways in which the saying is quoted.

A THEOLOGICAL PARADOX: DIVINE POWER AND HUMAN INITIATIVE

In 1952 Emil Fackenheim addressed the paradox inherent in the notion that “God is infinite and yet directly related to each finite person.” The rabbis use metaphors, he writes, “to describe a relation which cannot be termed in any terms other than symbolic.” Our midrash is quoted to show that the rabbis “in their stress on human responsibility… even make the omnipotent God dependent on impotent man.” In 1968 this midrash is one of a number which demonstrate in his view that “the contradictions between divine transcendence and divine involvement and between divine Power and human freedom are not resolved but only expressed.”

As will be discussed below in the tenth section, Fackenheim maintained a conscious interest in this teaching throughout his life. In his late work What Is Judaism? he adduces this text among others as an example of “the ultimate principle of Judaism: the intimacy of the divine infinity.” He stresses the use of the midrashic term kivyachol, “as it were.” Without it the paradox of God’s intimacy and infinity would be ruptured and become a contradiction. Taken without the theological reservation “as it were,” “a God needing witnesses in order to be God would possess intimacy but lack infinity.”
The paradox at the heart of the midrash and the verse on which it is based also occupied Abraham Joshua Heschel. In a presentation on the teaching of Jewish theology he described Rabbi Simeon’s teaching as “one of the most powerful statements found in Rabbinic literature. It is paradoxical to be sure, in that it indicates... the necessity of co-operation. In this world God is not God unless we are His witnesses.”\(^{13}\) In his *Man Is Not Alone*, as he advanced the notion that God is in need of man, he quoted our Rabbinic teaching as an expression of “[t]he extreme boldness of this paradox.”\(^{14}\)

Heschel wrestled with the question of Divine power for his entire adult life. Already in the early 1930s he had developed the notion of Divine pathos, and was prepared to risk a pristine theological concept of absolute omnipotence and impassability in order to promote the notion of a God who feels human suffering and is in search of human response.

We also find the midrash in an essay of Martin Buber’s dating back to the second decade of the twentieth century. His subject is the realization of God through human decision and human action, which comes to expression in the world in three stages, three underlying strata. The first and earliest of these is *imitatio dei*. Our midrash is cited as a motto of the second stratum, in which human agency serves to thicken and intensify the presence of the Divine on earth. Buber’s words are worthy of extensive quotation:

> The more man realizes God in the world, the greater His reality. This seemingly paradoxical formulation of the idea is instantly grasped when the words “Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 43:10) are complemented by the interpretation given them by Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, “if you are My witnesses, I am the Lord, and if you are not My witnesses, I am not the Lord”. God is man’s goal; therefore, the force of all human decision flows into the sea of divine power.\(^ {15}\)

Buber points to the development of this idea in the Kabbalah. At the third level, “the concept of God’s realization through man is expanded by the notion that man’s deed affects God’s destiny on earth.”\(^ {16}\) The words of bar Yochai provide the lynchpin of a profound process from imitation to amplification and thence to influence upon God.

Modern Jewish theologians have framed this paradox in different ways. Fackenheim speaks, as we have seen, of Divine infinity and intimacy, while Heschel prefers to speak of God’s ineffability, claiming that “the idea of absolute omnipotence is somewhat missing in classical Jewish theology.”\(^ {17}\) Buber describes the attempt to imitate “the invisible, incomprehensible, unformed, not-to-be-formed” God as “the central paradox of Judaism.”\(^ {18}\) For Buber, Fackenheim, Heschel
and others God is reliant, as it were, on humanity. The Rabbinic teaching constitutes a supreme expression of a sublime paradox.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In his 1970 work The Religion of Ethical Nationhood, Mordecai Kaplan marshals the Rabbinic teaching in the service of one of his key goals: the reconstruction of the traditional conception of God. He makes bold claims in this regard:

Demythologized, man’s sin of irresponsibility culminating in violence, if unpunished, would not only disprove God’s omnipotence, it would deny His very existence. The Rabbinic tradition confirms this version of the belief in God as dependent on the behavior of man.

Our midrash is then quoted as evidence of this claim, followed by the statement that “[m]ature wisdom or authentic religion depends upon faith in man. The reality of God can be experienced only when mankind acts in a way that makes for its creative process.”

Kaplan is not alone among modern Jewish thinkers in reading the midrash and the words of Isaiah on which it is based as a sanction for human initiative. Eugene Borowitz, too, is particularly struck by the theological daring of the originators of our midrash and others like it, in which “rabbis can...unhesitatingly diminish God’s greatness.” He marvels at how the Rabbis’ “words can be Torah though they approach blasphemy.”

In a work published in 1973, Ignaz Maybaum employs the verse from Isaiah in expressing his profound appreciation for Franz Rosenzweig, praising his “Copernican turn from medieval metaphysics concerning the Jewish law to the Jew himself.” He regarded his master as the embodiment of a modern sensibility, in which

[n]o longer is the Torah understood as the eternal law, the guaran-
tee. The Jew is the guarantor of the eternal Torah. The modern, post-medieval understanding of Jewish existence is already formulated in Isaiah’s “My witnesses”, says the Lord, “are you”.

For Maybaum, Isaiah’s words, unqualified by bar Yochai’s gloss, are a watchword of modernity, a slogan of a new sensibility in which the guarantee is succeeded and in some sense supplanted by the guarantor.

THEOCENTRISM

Decades earlier Franz Rosenzweig had both anticipated and feared the potential for interpreting our midrash to support faith in man at the
expense of faith in God. In his “Atheistic Philosophy” (1914) he emphasizes that the teaching which may be read as a mandate for human empowerment “is pronounced precisely as a Word of God”\(^\text{22}\). The essay both traces and resists the influence of trends within Protestant theology on Liberal Judaism, and offers a spirited defense of the concept of revelation.

Rosenzweig describes myth as “the superhuman grasped as the offspring of the human.”\(^\text{23}\) He knows that traditions such as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s midrash may be understood in such terms, and for that reason precisely he points out that the radical theological message is delivered by God. The modern thinker may be “under the curse of historicity” but he “cannot circumvent the notion of revelation.”\(^\text{24}\) For Rosenzweig, this imperative is indicated by the fact that the mandate to act as witnesses, or in the Rabbinic reading the mandate to realize God through testimony, comes from God. It is not a deduction, or a construct. It is a commandment whose source is external to humanity.

DEATH AS TESTIMONY

This Rabbinic teaching is adduced by some as an expression of the inexplicability of the most profound truths. The response to which humanity is called is not intellectual in nature. Rather, it is in testifying through one’s life that the reality of God is magnified.

Leo Baeck quotes the midrash among a number of others as part of his presentation of “the sanctification of the Divine Name,” and in support of his assertion that “[j]ust as God is recognized through man, so is God’s existence demonstrated through his ethical action.”\(^\text{25}\) He then proceeds to address the “quintessence of human obligation to God,” namely martyrdom.

Mordecai Kaplan also relates our rabbinic teaching to martyrdom, stating that “the Jew’s crowning distinction is to be a witness to God.”\(^\text{26}\) Martyrdom is the ultimate expression of wordless testimony. A martyr is a witness, as the original meaning of the Greek term demonstrates. Willingness to die speaks louder than any argumentation. God is affirmed in self-conscious sacrifice.

LIFE AS TESTIMONY

Michael Fishbane deploys the midrash as part of a discussion about living theologically. The existential assertion “Here I am” is both a
religious commitment and “a fundamental act of testimony”:

This is the core of the covenant. It can only be lived and enacted. No dogmatic piety can serve as substitute. In covenant theology, the world becomes “God-real”.

After quoting the midrash, Fishbane adds:

God is a reality for human life wherever humans attest to God’s presence, through the character and commitments of their lives.27

Fishbane’s concern is not the ultimate testimony of martyrdom. Rather, he is speaking against a tendency to privilege high-sounding principles and rare moments of ritual affirmation at the expense of quotidian acts. In the most recent of the theological works under review here, the testimony under discussion is not assessed in the currency of martyrdom, or in some abstract leap of faith. Instead, bar Yochai’s teaching is read as a mandate for a Jewish life comprising tangible expressions of commitment.

We have noted that Rosenzweig made use of our midrash in an early essay. In the second book of Part Two of the later Star of Redemption (1921), Rosenzweig’s use of the Rabbinic source is quite different than in the earlier piece. The section, entitled “Faithfulness,” is concerned with the notion that the soul is permanently beloved of God. Rosenzweig undermines the notion of a passive state of being loved, and rather describes the inner turmoil of each human being whereby defiance of God’s love gives way to faithful acceptance. In order for God’s love to be permanent, it must be encountered by the hard-earned faithfulness of the beloved. All this is epitomized in the teaching of “the master of Kabbalah”:

The faith of the soul testifies, in its faithfulness, to the love of God, and it gives to it permanent being. If you testify to Me, then I shall be God, and otherwise not – these are the words that the master of Kabbalah puts into the mouth of the God of love. The lover who surrenders himself in love is recreated in the faithfulness of the beloved, and from then on, it is forever.28

Testimony is taken to be here an act of reciprocity between the source of love and its object. In confirming the love generated by the divine lover, the beloved realizes and renders permanent the love which has been offered.

In a recent work by Byron Sherwin we find our source cited alongside the declaration that “the Almighty God has chosen us out of love
to help realize the divine purpose for the world."29 Here, too, the testimony called for in the verse is understood to be a testimony of love.

TERROR

Emmanuel Levinas quotes the Rabbinic teaching not as a mandate for the love of God but as a watchword of the fear of God. Dedicated to Paul Ricoeur, "On Religious Language and the Fear of God" was published by Levinas in French in 1980. Commenting on a saying (attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Berakhot 33b) according to which the Holy One only has the fear of heaven in His treasury, Levinas develops the notion that fear at its most sublime level, "[t]he fear of God which reveals itself concretely as the fear for the other man," can be "a sense of terror which would bear witness to God." A footnote then refers his readers both to Isaiah 43.12 and to the commentary of the Sifre. Levinas emphasizes that the fear of which he speaks is not provoked by an external threat. Rather, the possibility of adhering to God's Highness is that which defines and justifies the humanity of Man, and that which describes human freedom.30

Here again, God’s presence must be affirmed through testimony, and the purely intellectual sphere will not suffice. A reciprocation of the Divine initiative of Love, and an expression of fear translating into profound ethical consideration—both of these can be understood as expressions of human response as testimony. The martyr of Baecck and Kaplan gives her life as testimony. Rosenzeig’s lover gives his love, and Levinas’ human agent offers up his fear and awe in testimony.

BEYOND PROOF

We have already noted that a number of modern Jewish thinkers deploy the verse from Isaiah and Rabbi Simon bar Yochai’s teaching to underline the inadequacy of reason. Abraham Joshua Heschel cited Isaiah 43.10 on two separate occasions to underscore this point. In his 1955 work God In Search of Man he quotes the verse and avers:

The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining a concept of God but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by His presence.31

We find the verse again some years later in a paper given at a Catholic conference. Railing against the tendency to speak of God as an abstraction, Heschel declares:

There are no proofs for the existence of the God of Israel. There are only witnesses. You can think of Him only by seeking to be present
to Him. You cannot define Him, you can only invoke Him. He is not a notion but a name.32

In his talk he goes on to refer those who suggest that the name of God can be removed or downplayed in the spirit of contemporary thinking. Against these tendencies, which Heschel regarded as futile and risible, he brings the words of Isaiah.

Five years after Heschel’s 1968 paper, Eliezer Berkovits also cited the phrase from Isaiah to illustrate the view that “[r]evelation is never provable. One can only testify to its occurrence.” Here, though, the insight relates not to the field of theological disputation but rather the arena of history. The outcome of the Six Day War spurs Berkovits to observe that “the words of Isaiah have found their realization in world history.”33

Here, then, is another recurrent use for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s teaching: it expresses the essential poverty of words and theories in addressing the most profound questions and occurrences.

THE MISSION OF ISRAEL

In a paper entitled “God, Torah and Israel” probably penned in the 1960s, Abraham Joshua Heschel cited our midrash, describing it as a bold expression of the interdependence of God and Israel, a thought that occurs in various degrees of clarity in the history of Jewish theology. This particular statement maintains: If there are no witnesses, there is no God to be met. There is a mystery, an enigma, a darkness past finding out. For God to be present there have to be witnesses.34

Heschel tended to make universalistic statements about God and man, but in his reading this teaching held a distinct particularistic bent.

The tension between universal and particular in Heschel’s work is in evidence in the first volume of his Torah min Hashamayim.35 An entire section of that work is dedicated to ideas of human-divine reciprocity. In one mini-chapter he argues that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva expanded his notion of the Shechinah, the Divine presence, going into Exile along with the people Israel. He then cites the teaching in full from Sifre to Deuteronomy, including Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai’s interpretation of the verse from Isaiah 43. Commenting on the extraordinary daring of this teaching, Heschel suggests that the transcendent value of human actions can be learnt from it. On the one hand, the context relates to the exile of the people Israel. On the other hand, the lesson of the midrash is taken to be of universal import.
In 1967 he used the source as a mandate for the particular status of the Bible. Here he describes the teaching of “a rabbi of the second century” as “one of the boldest utterances in Jewish literature, a manifesto of meaning.” He then repeats the comment quoted above with some slight changes, and then adds:

Without the people Israel, the Bible is mere literature. Through Israel, the Bible is a voice, a power and a challenge.\(^{36}\)

In order to understand the particular function of the midrashic source in Heschel’s 1967 work, an appreciation of the context is called for. His book on Israel was penned hurriedly in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War. Heschel directed his work to Christian theologians struggling to justify Israel’s actions, or indeed the very mandate of its existence. He strove to argue that the eclipse of the Bible in the late twentieth century was a tendency to be resisted with vigor. The mission of Israel was taken to be inextricably linked with the centrality and perpetual relevance of the Bible.

In that work Heschel omitted any direct Holocaust resonances to the source mandating the testimony of Israel (although An Echo of Eternity contains more explicit references to the Holocaust than any of his other works). His use of the text relates to the eternal mission of Israel, rather than to any particular historical exigency. Similarly, in This People Israel Leo Baeck cites the verse from Isaiah to describe a ceaseless quest:

From generation to generation, this people was pledged to the One God against all gods, to the one way as opposed to all ways, to the one kingdom above all kingdoms, to the one hope beyond all hopes. “Ye are My witnesses, saith Him-Who-Is” (Is. 43:10). Thus did the prophet of the Exile give Israel direction. To this end had Israel battled. In its striving, the soul had made and kept the spirit fertile. This striving had maintained its life, and its power had created new forms of living.\(^{37}\)

It is surely no coincidence that while for the Baeck of The Essence of Judaism the verse from Isaiah relates to the individual confronting God, the Baeck of This People Israel reads the verse from the perspective of this people Israel.

Whether it be as guarantors of the Bible or as perpetual witnesses to the Divine, we find the words of Bar Yochai and Isaiah employed by these thinkers to speak to the mission of Israel. As Michael Fishbane notes in his commentary to the Haftarah for the first portion of the book of Genesis, which includes Isaiah 43:10, “Israel is God’s proof—His living witness, attesting through their history to the providential glory of God.”\(^{38}\)
For Eliezer Berkovits, the words of Isaiah are used in his 1959 *God, Man and History* to bolster the notion that Jewish peoplehood is devoid of meaning without "loyalty to the significance of the Jewish encounter with God." Without this encounter the existence of the Jewish people is inexplicable. Indeed, "Israel itself is the witness. The existence, the history and the survival of the Jewish people are themselves the most imposing witnesses to the Jewish encounter with God."³⁹ It is worth noting the nuance of this position: in the act of testimony the Jewish people affirms its own existence, not God’s. In a footnote⁴⁰ Berkovits acknowledges the daring of the Rabbinic teaching, but he prefers a more modest claim.

As we bring this section to a close, it is interesting to note Irving Greenberg’s mediation between the particularistic and universalistic. A chapter on Covenantal Judaism in a recent work on Jewish-Christian relations begins thus:

"You are my witnesses, says the Lord" (Isaiah 43:10). The people of Israel are God’s servants called – yes, chosen – to witness to their living God and the divine plan for humanity and the cosmos.⁴¹

Greenberg then goes on to explain that in his reading, “the people Israel” can be extended to include Christians and Muslims committed to an ethical way of life.

**SURVIVAL AS WITNESS**

Berkovits returned to the notion that survival constitutes testimony, and to the words of Isaiah, in his *Faith After the Holocaust*. There he suggests that

[a] careful reading of the text will show that Israel does not witness, nor was it chosen, because it knows, believes, and understands. On the contrary, it has been made the witness and has been chosen, so that it may know, believe and understand. Out of his chosenness, from his own history he should learn to know, to believe, and to understand. He is the witness, whether he knows it or not, whether he consciously testifies or refuses to testify. His very existence, his survival, his impact, testifies to God’s existence.⁴²

Once again, Berkovits eschews any possible reading of the prophetic teaching likely to encourage a self-aggrandizing position. It is almost as if Israel testifies despite itself.

In *Crisis and Covenant* Jonathan Sacks quotes the Rabbinic tradition and concludes that “[t]he survival of the Jewish people is the promise on which the entire covenant rests.”⁴³ For both Berkovits and Sacks, as for other post-Holocaust theologians, the continued existence of the Jewish people takes on a central theological significance.
It is not only that the Jews are called upon to testify to the Divine; their very existence is itself testimony.

The radical Rabbinic reading of the prophetic declaration of Israel’s role as witness found a particular resonance in the years following the Holocaust. A Hebrew CD-Rom of Holocaust testimonies produced recently by Yad Vashem is entitled *Atem Edai*, “you are my witnesses.” A hall at the United Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC is called the “You Are My Witnesses” hall, and bears the words form Isaiah 43:10 inscribed on one of its walls. Elie Wiesel makes use of the midrash in his conversations and writings, suggesting that this saying of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai illustrates that “the changes he underwent bring him closer to us – to our generation and its experiences.”

Witness has been a major theme in the life and work of Wiesel and other survivors. Maurice Friedman wrote a book about Wiesel and Heschel which he chose to call *You Are My Witnesses*.

We come now to what may be seen as the most resonant and dramatic deployment of our source in the literature of modern Jewish thought. It also provides a unique example of self-conscious reflection on the use of this midrash. We have noted above the fact that Emil Fackenheim, “the philosopher as witness,” related to the Rabbinic teaching on the Isaiah verse throughout his career. His most significant work, *To Mend the World*, concludes with a section entitled “The Sharing of Teshuva after the Holocaust.” In its closing paragraphs the book addresses the wish of some to universalize the concept of Israel to the point at which it loses all meaning. Only a generation after an unprecedented attempt to make an end of Jews, there are even those from within the Jewish people who may consider “leaving the task of witnessing to others.”

However, whether or not the world today realizes it, it cannot do without Jews – the accidental remnant that, heir to the holy ones, is itself bidden to be holy. Neither, in our time, can God Himself.

Fackenheim chooses to close the work with two midrashim, one addressed to the world at large, suggesting that those who seek to uproot the people Israel are in fact acting against God. The second of them is our own, and it is worth examining both the midrash and the note with which the work ends:

Another midrash addressed Israel itself:

“You are My witnesses, says the Lord” – that is, if you are My witnesses, I am God, and if you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.”*
*Midrash Psalms, on Ps. 123:1. I first cited this Midrash nearly thirty years ago (see *Quest*, p.39). The careful reader will notice that its significance has changed for me in these many years – with an immense burden now falling on the “as it were”:46

Emil Fackenheim ends his masterwork with what appears to be a self-referential bibliographical aside. He points the careful reader of his work to the changed significance of this midrash, noting that he now affords more significance to the theological qualifier “as it were.”

This should not be read as an incidental remark, or an uncharacteristic lapse of attentiveness to matters of style. Fackenheim chooses to conclude the work with a declaration of the essential role which the Jewish people fulfills in its very survival, and then issues a stern warning against an anthropocentric reading of the text. His concern is closely related to that of Rosenzweig in “Atheistic Theology” written seventy years earlier and before the epoch-making events of the twentieth century. While Rosenzweig emphasizes that the call to be a witness emanates from the Divine, Fackenheim attaches great significance to the use of kivyachol. The bold metaphor should not be misinterpreted as a banal solution to the immense theological challenge. Rather, both for Rosenzweig and Fackenheim it is a strident statement of that challenge.

In her Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust, Melissa Raphael expresses a preference for Fackenheim’s earlier reading, in which the infinite God is dependent on finite humanity.47 To what are we to attribute his later emphasis on “as it were”? In part, this may be read as a critique of a general tendency within liberal circles to elide, blur, and go beyond inconvenient and uncomfortable notions, preferring congenial and uplifting sentiments. He came to believe less and less in the optimistic idea that all the weightiest questions of politics, philosophy, and belief could be harmonized. A more likely result would be that such questions would be in effect neutralized.

Alongside his jaundiced view of a liberal humanism, and perhaps at its root, Fackenheim’s rejection of an unqualified declaration of the primacy of human agency was rooted in his reading of the Nazi phenomenon. As Martin Plax has argued, in Fackenheim’s understanding “Nazism internalized the idolatrous identification of finiteness and infinitude.”48

Nazism is to be read as a perverse interpretation of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s teaching, stripped of the crucial “as it were.” It is a monstrous misappropriation of the notion that the ultimate depends on human action for its very existence. The Jewish people is seen as stubborn testimony to a Divine presence and a moral order which cannot be bludgeoned out of existence. To cease to exist would in this sense provide a double victory to those who sought our
destruction—it would crown their efforts with success, and it would also undermine the criteria by which their actions might be deemed sinful.

Fackenheim’s declaration that God needs the Jews to survive appears in the final paragraphs of To Mend the World without qualification. It is in the appended note that he adopts a reflective stance, notes his previous use of the teaching, and emphasizes the significance of kivyachol. Fackenheim addresses his readers in two voices. The self-conscious one warns of the dangers of religious metaphor, while the other voice declares: in our time, God Himself cannot do without Jews. Alongside the eternal theological paradox there is now a contemporary imperative.

A footnote to this discussion of the deployment of our midrash in post-Holocaust context should be mentioned. A recent work on Jewish philosophy suggests adding a contemporary sentence to the words of the saying. Michael Oppenheim quotes a version of the source (devoid of “as it were,” in the style of Rosenzweig), and then adds in parentheses to the body of the quotation: “And now it must be added: without Her witnesses, both God and we are lost.” In a late twentieth-century recension, an accretion has been added to the ancient tradition. The chance of Oppenheim’s addition being accepted into the canon of Jewish sources may not be great. But his sense that in our time the teaching must be both communicated and altered, taking account of a new consciousness of gender inclusivity, for example, is significant nonetheless.

Before concluding our discussion it is worth considering the relationship between the quoting text and the quoted source. Who of the thinkers we have surveyed above quote the source accurately? Any attempt to answer this question exposes a number of methodological challenges. The textual unit includes a source text from Isaiah, the name of a transmitting Sage (Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai), the teaching itself (if you are not My witnesses, I am not God), and the collection in which the unit is found. In each case, the picture is indeterminate. The expression “You are my witnesses” appears in the sources mentioned above as appearing in Isaiah 43:10 (Kaplan, Levinas, and Baeck, for example) and in Isaiah 43:12 (Berkovits, Sacks, and Fishbane, for example). Some of the examples quote Isaiah only, without any Rabbinic addition (Maybaum, and both Heschel and Berkovits in certain cases). Even when bar Yochai’s comment is not included, it resonates. This is one of the characteristic features of Jewish quotation culture: earlier sources are often seen through the prism of later readings and contexts. Similarly, Biblical verses which figure prominently in liturgy carry those echoes with them to any listener whose ear is attuned to such resonances.
Some of the midrashic collections bring the source anonymously,\textsuperscript{50} while the others attribute it to Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai. We noted above that Rosenzweig refers on both occasions to the “master of Kabbalah,” and the question of his acquaintance with the original Rabbinic teaching has been the subject of some discussion.\textsuperscript{51} In the case of Elie Wiesel, the character of bar Yochai is seen as a bridge between the ancient and contemporary worlds.

With regard to the teaching itself, there is one significant discrepancy. Some of our thinkers include the term “as it were,” “so to speak,” or some other approximation to \textit{kivyachol} (Fackenheim certainly, and also Borowitz, Kaplan, Berkovits and Sacks). Others—Buber, Weisel, Levinas, Heschel, and Baeck—eschew the midrashic qualifier altogether. The lack of consistency regarding this quotation is in fact a reflection of the ancient sources. The word is present in some manuscripts of the \textit{Sifre} and \textit{Pesikta}, and absent in others.

None of the works examined here take great liberties in the quotation of midrashic teaching. Even in the case of Oppenheim’s addition to the text, no attempt is made to pass off the emendation as anything but his own. In the main, it is less how they quote the adage than the emphasis they give to it where the creativity of these thinkers comes to expression.

With regard to the collection from which the tradition is excerpted, the authors surveyed in this discussion differ widely. Some do not attribute—Borowitz and Rosenzweig for example. Others quote the text as coming from \textit{Sifre} (Buber, Levinas, Fishbane), the \textit{Yalkut Shimoni} quoting \textit{Sifre} (Berkovits, for example), \textit{Midrash on Psalms} to Psalm 123 (Sacks, Fackenheim) and \textit{Pesikta de Rab Kahana} (Baeck). Kaplan cites two different works (and two different translations).

We are left with the question of the elusive “as it were.” Sacks and Berkovits prefer it, one may argue, because it places the teaching at a distance from its more radical theological potential. Buber ignores it for the converse reason—he is interested in bringing the image of human involvement in the amplification of the Divine to stark expression. Interestingly enough, Heschel leaves the \textit{kivyachol} out of his English works, but includes it in the Hebrew volume, designed for a different audience.

This kind of speculation cannot be anything more than a hypothesis, and it does not explain every deployment of every source. In many cases, we can imagine, a Jew of one generation draws upon the storeroom of tradition they know best—be it a compendium, a colleague, their own memory, or some other treasury.

With all appropriate caution, I believe that an assiduous reading of Jewish culture from the perspective of quotation can add much to our understanding of the dynamics of tradition. Through this prism a
number of dimensions come to the fore—the erudition and sensitivity of the thinker, the intended audience, the canon of sources employed, and more. Much work remains to be done in understanding how and why Jewish culture involves the act of cutting and pasting to the extent that it does, in virtually every generation and genre.

Modernity certainly represents a watershed in the history of the Jewish art of quotation. The practice of quotation both expresses and mediates the rupture between the past and the present. Those seeking to articulate various Jewish responses to modernity quote different sources, and they do so in different ways. Some have adopted Western academic practices, while others perpetuate Rabbinic traditions of quotation. Yet others eschew quotation, since an emphasis on immediacy sees little merit in swathing self-expression with parallels and precedents. The stereotype of the “new Jew” promulgated by the Zionist movement was far removed from the Diaspora Jew swaddled in precedents and ornate allusions.

Despite this rupture, we find modern Jewish thinkers turning to Jewish sources to bolster their claims, deepen their arguments, adorn their creativity, establish their bona fides and place their work within Jewish tradition. For some, to use Rosenzweig’s expression, they reach from the periphery of Jewish culture towards its center in search of raw material. For others their journey is from the heart of a thick textual culture out towards the world at large.

Aristotle described quotations as witnesses. Quotations of earlier traditions continue to testify on behalf of men and women. It is almost as if the modern Jews surveyed here, and countless others, summon the sources of Jewish tradition to act as witnesses for them. The quoted sources of Judaism bear witness to the attempts of contemporary Jews to give their words resonance and legitimacy. In turn, those who choose to quote these sources act as witnesses to an unfolding tradition. Tradition and testimony are inextricable.

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE – JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION, JERUSALEM

NOTES

1. This is the title of a book by Eugene Borowitz published in 1983.
3. In 2010–2011 two significant works explicitly on this theme were published in the United States. See Willis Goth Regier, Quotology (Lincoln, 2010); Gary Saul Morson, The Words of Others (New Haven, 2011). Since the turn of the century a number of important contributions to the theory


5. Borowitz is hailed by Harvey Cox as Heschel’s successor in a quotation reproduced on the dustjacket of *Renewing the Covenant*.


7. Eugene B. Borowitz, *The Talmud’s Theological Language-Game* (Albany, 2006). Most of Borowitz’s work includes a small selection of classical sources. This late work is a remarkable departure from Borowitz’s usual style.

8. In *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 12.6 and *Yalkut Shimoni* to Jethro #271, the teaching is attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This attribution is also implied in the *Sifre* version.


12. Ibid., p. 286.


16. Ibid.


23. Ibid., p. 18.
34. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 204
40. Ibid., p. 166, note 13.
45. See *The Philosopher as Witness; Fackenheim and Responses to the Holocaust* (eds.) Michael L. Morgan and Benjamin Pollock (Albany, 2008).
50. See *Midrash Tehillim* (ed. Buber) to Psalm 123.2 and *Midrash Tannaim* to Deuteronomy 14:1.