

When the Father Does Not Come: Survival, Shame, Revenge, and the Theology of Divine Absence

“You learn to lie. To the living, to the dead, to the devil himself” - Betty

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ABSTRACT

The Good Liar (2019) appears to be a thriller about an elderly confidence man and his mark. Its final reversal discloses a different subject: a woman who was raped as a girl in wartime Germany, whose father was executed on her rapist's denunciation, whose mother and sisters died, and who, sixty-six years later, constructs the judgment that neither family, state, history nor heaven supplied.

This essay reads the film as a parable/mashal of survival when no one comes. It argues that Lili's deception belongs to a recognized rabbinic category, the lie told upward by the endangered, and that her shame, her guilt toward the dead, and her revenge are theological injuries as well as psychological ones. The absent father of the film opens onto the biblical fathers who fail violated daughters (Jacob with Dinah, David with Tamar) and onto the liturgical Father and King whose face is hidden.

Through hester panim, the Scroll of Esther, Job, Lamentations, the Akedah, the Shekhinah in exile, and the unreconciled voices of Rubenstein, Fackenheim, Wiesel and Levinas, the essay proposes that Lili's revenge is a human performance of the divine din that history withheld: a counterfeit eschatology that can expose but cannot restore. The conclusion is anti-theodic.

The film neither proves God present nor explains God's absence. It shows a survivor whose continued life exceeds both her violator and her vengeance, and it leaves the clinician with one obligation: to be the witness who arrives late and believes.

Keywords

Hester panim, Divine absence, Anti-theodicy, Sexual violence, Shame, Survivor guilt, Revenge, Midat ha-din, Esther, Post-Holocaust theology, Hermeneutic medicine.

The Wound That Asks to Be Believed

There are wounds that ask to be healed, and there are wounds that first ask to be believed. A long clinical life teaches the difference slowly, and usually by failure: the patient who was offered treatment when what she needed was a hearing does not always come back.

The Good Liar, directed by Bill Condon from Jeffrey Hatcher's screenplay of Nicholas Searle's novel [1,2], is ostensibly a film

about deception. Roy Courtney is a professional confidence man; Betty McLeish appears to be his latest mark; identities are invented, histories concealed, money moved, loyalties feigned. Beneath the machinery of the thriller lies a darker drama. The decisive lie of the film is not a false name or a fraudulent account. It is the lie that the moral world is dependable: that innocence will be defended, that fathers will protect their children, that societies will punish cruelty, that history will expose wrongdoing, and that God, or whatever now occupies the place God once held, will eventually intervene.

The girl who becomes Betty learns otherwise. No father comes. No judge comes. No God descends. She is left with a terrible possibility: if justice is to enter history at all, she may have to manufacture it herself.

My thesis is that the film, whatever its makers intended, works as a parable/mashal of that possibility, and that its three psychological themes (shame, survivor guilt, revenge) are also theological injuries. The survivor asks more than “Why did this happen to me?” She asks, “Why was I left alone inside it?” That second question is addressed to someone, and the tradition I work in has spent two and a half millennia on the problem of an addressee who does not answer.

Two matters of method need stating. First, I read the film as I have read other works of popular narrative: as a mashal whose nimshal is not supplied by its author and must be argued for [3-5]. A parable does not have to be great art to do its work, and I make no large claim for this one as cinema.

Second, the vocabulary I bring is borrowed, and the borrowing must be declared. The film does not present the Schröder family as Jewish. Lili’s catastrophe unfolds inside the perpetrator nation: a father denounced as a traitor and executed by his own state, a mother’s suicide, sisters killed by a bomb in the last weeks of the war, and then the occupation.

The language of *hester panim*, of Rubenstein and Fackenheim and Wiesel, was forged by and for the Jewish victims of the same regime. It is not hers, and nothing in what follows should be read as conscripting her into the Shoah. My warrant is narrower. David Blumenthal built a theology of protest by listening, in one frame, to survivors of the Holocaust and to adult survivors of childhood abuse, and he found that the two groups put the same question to God in the same grammatical mood [6]. I claim that congruence of question, and no equivalence of event. Samuel Sandmel’s old warning against parallelomania applies to theologians as much as to philologists [7]: a resemblance is a place to begin thinking and proves nothing by itself.



The essay proceeds from the film to the survivor’s education in deceit, then to shame and to guilt toward the dead, then to the father who does not come and the hidden face behind him. Its

central section’s ask whether Lili’s revenge can be understood as the human performance of a divine judgment that was withheld, and what such a performance can and cannot accomplish. It ends in the consulting room, where this question usually arrives without a film attached.

The Film and Its Reversal

The film is set in London in 2009. Roy Courtney (Ian McKellen), an elderly and accomplished swindler, meets Betty McLeish (Helen Mirren), a recently widowed woman with savings of more than two million pounds, through an online dating service. He feigns a bad knee to gain a room in her house and persuades her to pool their money in a joint offshore account that he intends to empty. In a parallel plot Roy and his partner Vincent defraud a group of investors. When a hired accomplice asks for a larger share, Roy has the man’s hand broken. When one of the defrauded investors, Bryn, tracks him down, Roy stabs him in an Underground station and pushes him under a train. The audience is thus taught to fear for Betty, and to discount the suspicions of her apparent grandson Stephen [1].

On a holiday in Berlin, Stephen brings them to a flat and discloses what he has found in Soviet records: the real Roy Courtney, a British officer, died there in 1948. The man who has carried his name ever since is Hans Taub, the officer’s German interpreter. Roy admits it. Betty appears to accept his account and to forgive him.

The money is transferred. Roy leaves, discovers that the keypad controlling the account is missing, and returns to find the house stripped bare and Betty waiting. She is Lili Schröder. In 1943 Hans was her English tutor. At their last lesson, after he had tried to kiss one of her sisters, he raped her. Her parents dismissed him over the attempted kiss. He then denounced her father to the authorities as a traitor, and her father was executed. Her mother killed herself. Her sisters died in a bomb blast two weeks before Hitler’s death. After the war Lili suffered at the hands of the occupying Russians, and it was then, she tells him, that she learned to lie well to live. Eventually she reached England.

She has known who he is throughout. Stephen is the partner of her real grandson, Michael. That Roy is Hans was confirmed by a DNA test on a strand of his hair, kept in a locket from her girlhood. Vincent has been turned. She empties the joint account, leaving him only enough to repay the men he cheated. He locks the door and attacks her; she fights him off. Two of his victims arrive. He refuses to repay them and is beaten. Weeks later he lies in a hospital bed after a stroke, unable to speak or move. The last scenes show Lili among her extended family [1].

Several critics found this reversal arbitrary: a grave historical motive attached to a light entertainment, with almost nothing in the first two acts to prepare it [8]. As a judgment on the craft that may be fair. As a description of how such a past behaves, the unpreparedness is exact. Judith Herman’s account of trauma begins from the observation that atrocity is the thing a community

arranges not to know, and that it returns without invitation and out of sequence [9]. For sixty-six years nothing in Betty's surface prepared anyone for Lili. The film cons its audience in the same way that she cons Roy, and for a related reason: the genre, like the society around her, had no place prepared for what she had to say.

Three details of the plot will carry weight in what follows. The father did act, but against the lesser offense. The proof of identity was a relic of the body, the only document in the story that could not be forged. And the avenger left the means of restitution on the table and did not herself strike the blows that ended him.

The Education of the Survivor

The literature of trauma has taught us to distrust the language of "overcoming". Extreme violation does not happen and then recede into autobiography. It reorganizes experience, so that the past stays contemporaneous with the present [9]. Jean Améry, writing of his torture, located the loss precisely: with the first blow a person loses trust in the world, the unreflective expectation that others will respect the boundary of one's body and that help will come if they do not, and that trust is not regained [10]. The violated child has learned something the protected child has not. She has learned that the door can open, that the trusted person can become dangerous, that the adult world can fail, and that an appeal can go unanswered.

What changes most deeply is the function of speech. A child ordinarily learns that language establishes relationship. "I am frightened" summons a parent. "He hurt me" brings intervention. When testimony does not protect, speech stops revealing the self and starts sheltering it. One learns what to disclose and what to conceal, whom to trust, and which version of oneself is safest in which room. Sándor Ferenczi described this as a confusion of tongues. The overwhelmed child, unable to resist, takes the adult's reality inside herself and learns to speak the adult's language, at the cost of her own [11].

The film gives Ferenczi's phrase a literal turn that I have not seen remarked. Hans Taub was Lili's English tutor. He was in her parents' house to teach her a tongue. She completed the course. Betty McLeish's flawless English is the language he was hired to give her, and it is in that language, sixty-six years on, that she undoes him. Both are Germans living inside English names. He stole his from a dead officer. She built hers out of what he left her.

None of this makes falsehood morally neutral. It makes the ethics of falsehood inseparable from power. Roy lies downward: he manufactures trust to violate it. Lili lies upward, as people do who have lived under forces stronger than themselves. Rabbinic tradition knows this distinction and is uneasy with it in exactly the right way. Scripture phrases the prohibition of falsehood uniquely as a command of distance: "Keep far from a false matter" (Exodus 23:7). Yet the midwives lie to Pharaoh about the Hebrew births, and the next verse says that God dealt well with them (Exodus 1:19-20). The Talmud permits one to alter the truth for the sake of peace and notes that God edits Sarah's words before repeating them to Abraham (Yevamot 65b).

Two passages come closer still. When Jacob meets Rachel, he tells her he is her father's "brother in deceit." She asks whether the righteous are permitted to deal in deceit. He answers with the verse that David will later sing: with the pure You show Yourself pure, and with the crooked You show Yourself wily (Megillah 13b, citing 2 Samuel 22:27). And of Yael, who received Sisera with milk and a blanket and then drove a tent peg through his temple, Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak says that a transgression committed for its own sake is greater than a commandment performed for an ulterior one (Nazir 23b).

The tradition therefore has a category for Lili's lie, and its name is instructive: *aveirah lishmah*. The lie is called great, and it is still called a transgression. This is the correct grammar. Her deception has nothing of purity in it and nothing of mere corruption. I would call it the intelligence of the endangered. Nor does the tradition let Jacob off. I have written elsewhere about the disguise in his blind father's tent and its long bill [12]. The midrash has Leah answer him on the morning after her substitution with his own deed: did your father not call you Esau, and did you not answer him? (Genesis Rabbah 70:19).

The asymmetry between Roy and Lili is real. He lies to create vulnerability; she lies because she has known it. But Jacob's phrase is a confession of kinship, and the confession applies here. "I am his brother in deceit" means that the opponent has chosen the terrain and that I have learned to fight on it. The perpetrator helped to educate the person capable of defeating him. Violence leaves methods behind it as well as memories, and this is one of the longest shadows abuse casts: one may defeat the abuser and still find his syntax in the strategy that did it.

Shame: The Crime That Migrates

Sexual violence carries a particular moral obscenity. The perpetrator commits the act, and the shame takes up residence in the victim. Helen Block Lewis drew the distinction on which the later literature rests: guilt concerns what I have done, and shame concerns what I am [13,14].

A violated child rarely has the concepts to say that an autonomous moral agent has wronged her and that she bears no responsibility. Another sentence forms in their place: something about me has become wrong. Ferenczi saw the mechanism. The adult disowns his guilt, and the child, who cannot afford to see the adult as bad, takes that guilt in as her own [11]. Primo Levi observed the same transfer on the largest scale, in the shame of the liberated: a shame the just feel at a wrong another has committed, because it has been brought irrevocably into the world of things that exist [15].

Scripture gives this migration its most exact sentence and gives it to a woman before the act. Tamar, daughter of David, pleads with her half-brother Amnon: such a thing is not done in Israel; **"and I, where could I carry my shame?"** (2 Samuel 13:13). She already knows that the shame will be hers to carry and that there will be nowhere to set it down. Afterward she puts ashes on her head, tears the long robe of a king's virgin daughter, and goes away crying

aloud. Her brother Absalom meets her with the sentence that every violated woman has since heard from someone who loved her: hold your peace, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this thing to heart. ***“So, Tamar remained desolate in her brother Absalom’s house”*** (13:20). Phyllis Tribble, whose reading of this chapter remains the indispensable one, notes that after this verse Tamar never speaks again [16].

The Torah’s own law refuses the migration in principle. Of the girl seized in the open country it rules: ***“to the girl you shall do nothing; she has no sin worthy of death; for as when a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this matter. For he found her in the field; the girl cried out, and there was none to save her”*** (Deuteronomy 22:26-27). I have discussed this chapter and its afterlife at length elsewhere [17]. Two things in it matter here. The law likens rape to murder, which places the whole of the guilt on one side. And it names the condition of the victim in three Hebrew words, *ve-ein moshia lah*, there was none to save her. Those words are the title of this essay in the Torah’s own mouth. Lili cried out, inwardly or aloud, in her parents’ house, and for the purpose that mattered the house was a field.

Read against these texts, the construction of “Betty” is more than a stratagem. Betty is certainly a deception: the elderly vulnerability, the loneliness, the financial innocence, the affection. Roy believes he is studying her while she is studying him. Beneath the ingenuity lies a proposition that I find almost unbearably sad. Lili can control the encounter only by ceasing, for its duration, to appear as Lili. The self that was once exposed survives behind a made face. Biblical humanity hides after shame from the beginning. Adam and Eve cover themselves; Jacob enters his father’s tent as another son; Joseph stands unrecognized before the brothers who sold him; Esther conceals her people until concealment has done what disclosure could not. The moral meaning of concealment in Scripture is never simple. There are concealments of cowardice and concealments of predation, and there are concealments practiced under the shadow of power. Lili’s belongs to the third kind.

Physicians should recognize this, because medicine manufactures shame of its own and then meets the patient’s older shame without noticing it [18]. The patient who presents a composed and cooperative surface may be presenting Betty. The clinician who takes the surface for the person has been conned, though not by a liar.

The Arithmetic of the Dead

Survivor guilt contains an impossible arithmetic. Why am I alive when they are dead? The question has no satisfactory answer because it does not arise from logic. It arises from attachment. William Niederland, who gave the survivor syndrome its clinical name, found this guilt at the center of his patients’ suffering decades after liberation [19] and Levi gave it its most honest form: the suspicion, which no evidence can lay to rest, that one is alive in another’s place [15].

Lili loses almost everyone. Her father is executed on Hans’s

word. Her mother dies by her own hand. Her sisters are killed two weeks before the war’s end. She alone receives what all of them were denied, which is time: sixty-six years of it, with a family, a grandchild and a home. Every one of those years can be felt as a gift and as an accusation. The dead remain a silent constituency. They do not age, and the survivor does. They do not marry or grow old or become grandparents, and the survivor does all of these while knowing that history distributed the possibilities without regard to merit.

There is a further turn that the film leaves implicit and that I think should be stated. Her father was killed because he dismissed the tutor, and he dismissed the tutor to protect his daughters. A child in that position can reason her way to a dreadful conclusion: my father died of defending us, and so, by a child’s logic, of me. Nothing in the film says that Lili thinks this. Survivors of family catastrophe very often do, and the thought does not yield to argument, because, like shame, it has taken up a responsibility that the guilty party declined.

Elie Wiesel’s testimony lives in this territory. *Night* does not resolve suffering into doctrine. It records a pious boy watching a child hang and hearing a voice within him answer that God is hanging there on the gallows, and yet the man who wrote it went on arguing with that God for sixty years [20]. There is a kind of unbelief that simply walks away, and there is a wounded faith that will not leave the courtroom. Job belongs to the second kind. He never stops speaking to God. He indicts God, and the indictment preserves a strange covenantal intimacy, since no one prosecutes a party, whose existence is a matter of indifference [21].

Survivor guilt may work in the same way. The dead stay present because love will not let their disappearance be complete. Memory becomes obligation: to remember them is painful, and not to remember them would be betrayal. The survivor therefore lives in a temporal double bind. Life requires movement forward, and loyalty seems to require looking back.

Lili resolves the bind by moving forward through going back. She organizes the present around an unfinished event of girlhood. The emblem of this is the locket. For sixty-six years she has kept, in a locket from her girlhood, a strand of the hair of the man who destroyed her family. The film does not explain why a girl would have such a thing, and I will not guess. What matters is what it becomes. In a story composed entirely of forged papers and assumed names, it is the one document that cannot lie. The body of the liar tells the truth about him. Hans believed that history had buried what he did. Lili had kept the evidence on her person and so had only postponed the hearing.

Job, at the lowest point of his argument, says: ***“I know that my redeemer lives”*** (Job 19:25). The word is *go’el*, the kinsman whose duty it is to redeem, and in the law of homicide the same word names the avenger of blood. Job expects that someone will stand up for him at the last. Lili stops expecting. I return to that word below.

The Father Who Did Not Come

At the center of the film stands a father who cannot save his daughter. This is no accusation against Herr Schröder. He acted on what he knew, and he was killed for it. But for the child in extremity the distinction between “my father abandoned me” and “my father was prevented from reaching me” does not close the wound. The essential fact stays simple. He did not come. Jennifer Freyd has shown why the injury is deepest when the violator stands inside the circle of trust [22]: Hans was no stranger in a field. He was the tutor, admitted to the house by the parents, and the protection the house offered was the thing he used.

The Bible has two fathers of violated daughters, and both fail in the same way. When Jacob hears that Dinah has been defiled, **“Jacob held his peace until they came”** (Genesis 34:5). He says nothing to her at any point. His only speech in the chapter comes after his sons’ massacre, and it concerns his own standing among the neighbors (34:30). When David hears what Amnon has done to Tamar, he is **“very wroth”** (2 Samuel 13:21), and nothing follows. The Septuagint and a Samuel scroll from Qumran preserve a longer verse that explains the silence: he would not grieve the spirit of Amnon his son, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. In one story the father is prudent and in the other he is fond. Neither comes. In both, brothers step into the space the father left empty, and they fill it with deceit, a feast and blood. I will return to them.

From here the film opens into theology, because Jewish prayer names God with exactly the compound that suffering splits. *Avinu Malkeinu*: our father, our King. A father loves, and a king has power. The metaphor promises intimacy and sovereignty at once. The child’s question (why did my father not come?) becomes the theological question in the same words, and the survivor can put it with a rigor that embarrasses most theodicy. If God is Father and watched, why did He not stop it? If He could not, in what sense is He King? If He could and did not, in what sense is He Father? This is rigorous theology and should not be dismissed as adolescent rebellion. Philosophers ask whether omnipotence and perfect goodness are logically compatible with evil. The survivor asks something else: where were You? The grammar is relational and has little to do with metaphysics, which is why Job remains stronger than the systems built to answer him. Job does not seek information about the necessity of suffering. He wants an audience. **“Oh, that I knew where I might find Him”** (Job 23:3). The scandal for him is divine unavailability more than pain [21].

Blumenthal went further than most Jewish theologians have been willing to go. Having listened to survivors of childhood abuse, he concluded that an honest theology must be able to say, at least in the voice of protest, that God has at times behaved as an abuser, and must then go on addressing that God [6]. I do not adopt his sentence. I record that a serious and observant thinker found he could not keep faith with those survivors without it.

The pastoral consequence is plain. For those whose experience of fathers is of failure, violation or absence, “Father” is not a neutral word. It can magnify the injury it is offered to heal [23]. One

cannot tell an abused person that God is “really” a loving father and expect the analogy to repair itself. Theological language must submit to the moral experience of the wounded. A theology that protects its metaphors at the survivor’s expense has chosen the wrong thing to protect.



Hester Panim and the Scroll of Esther

Jewish tradition has a name for this experience: *hester panim*, the hiding of the divine face. The phrase is dangerous, and its danger lies in its source. In Deuteronomy the hiding is a punishment. The people will stray, evils will find them, they will say that these evils have come because God is not in their midst, and God answers: **“I will surely hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have done”** (Deuteronomy 31:17-18). Applied to a girl in her teens, or to a million and a half-murdered children, that causal clause is an obscenity.

Post-Holocaust Jewish thought kept the phrase and cut the clause. Martin Buber spoke of an eclipse of God: something has come between, and the light is not thereby extinguished [24]. Eliezer Berkovits made the hiding the price of human freedom, the space in which people can act well or monstrously [25]. To my ear that is already an explanation, and so already too much. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik refused the question “why” altogether and asked instead what the sufferer is now commanded to do [26]. What survives these revisions is a phrase that names without explaining. God’s face is not visible. That statement leaves the reason unsaid. I have worked with the phrase on this condition in earlier studies of concealment and of the question Israel asked at Massah, **“Is the Lord among us or not?”** [27,28]. The hidden God offers no solution to the wound. *Hester panim* is the wound’s name.

The Talmud ties the phrase to a book. **“Where is Esther found in the Torah?”** it asks, and answers with a pun on her name and the verse just cited: *ve-anokhi haster astir*, I will surely hide (Hullin 139b). The Scroll of Esther is the canonical narrative of the hidden face. God’s name never appears in it. I want to propose that it is

also the nearest scriptural pattern for the film, and that reading the two together sharpens both.

Esther ***“had neither father nor mother”*** (Esther 2:7). She is an orphan, and the verb the text uses for her entry into the palace is passive: she ***“was taken”*** (2:8). The tradition does not linger over what happens to a girl taken into a king’s harem for a night, and the text does not hide it. She conceals her people and her kindred on her guardian’s instruction (2:10). Her weapon is hospitality. Twice she invites her enemy to a banquet of wine, and at the second, now of his greatest ease, she names him: ***“the adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman”*** (7:6). The book’s own word for what follows is reversal, *ve-nahafokh hu* (9:1). Haman falls upon her couch to plead and is taken for an assailant (7:8), so that he is condemned for the one crime he was not at that moment committing.

Lili is orphaned by her enemy. She conceals her name. She receives him at her table and in her spare room and waits. She discloses herself now he believes his triumph complete, in a house she has emptied for the purpose. The con film and the Purim story share a structure. The predator is destroyed through his own confidence by a woman he took for furniture. The film is a Purim story with the carnival removed.

Two features of the Megillah keep the comparison honest. The first is Mordecai’s sentence to Esther when she hesitates: ***“if you keep silent now, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father’s house will perish”*** (4:14). This is the hidden-God book’s single gesture toward providence, and it arrives as a demand on a human being. In a world of the hidden face, providence is an assignment. The second is the ending. Chapter 9 is a chapter of killing, and the narrator insists three times that the avengers ***“did not lay their hand on the spoil”*** (9:10, 15, 16). The Megillah knows that vengeance and profit must not be allowed to resemble each other. Lili takes the money. In a con film money is the only language the parties share, and the film does not say what she does with it. I note the discrepancy and do not resolve it.

In Baum’s parable (Wizard of Oz), which I have read elsewhere as a midrash on divine concealment, there is at least a man behind the curtain [4]. In Esther no one is behind the curtain at all, or no one who will speak. What is left on the stage is a woman deciding what to do.

Three Voices That Do Not Agree

Three post-Holocaust positions bear directly on Lili’s situation. They cannot be harmonized, and I will not try.

Richard Rubenstein carried the problem furthest. If God governs history, then Auschwitz falls within the divine intention, and Rubenstein judged that conclusion intolerable. He gave up the God of history and kept the moral intelligibility of the victims [29]. The film is no exercise in Jewish theology, but Lili behaves as though Rubenstein were right about history. No providence arrives. No tribunal convicts Hans. History shows no mechanism by which his

crime returns upon him. So, she builds one. Her revenge is anti-theodicy in action. She refuses to say that what happened served a purpose, and she refuses to let time convert atrocity into mystery. Her deed says: this happened; you did it; you escaped; I remember; and history will now answer, because I will force it to.

Emil Fackenheim heard something different in the same silence. He did not claim to explain Auschwitz and insisted that it ruptured every earlier system of explanation. But he heard a commanding voice in survival itself: the Jew is forbidden to hand Hitler a posthumous victory, and continued Jewish life, memory and stubbornness are acts of resistance [30]. Later he gave the idea a name from the Kabbalah. A *tikkun*, a mending, was performed during the destruction by those who resisted it, and it is therefore possible afterward, though it can only ever be partial [31]. Read through Fackenheim, Lili’s great act is the sixty-six years, and the trap in the emptied house counts for less. I return to this at the end.

Wiesel stands between them. His protest approaches blasphemy without abandoning address [20]. In *The Trial of God*, he stages the case directly. The setting is the eve of Purim, 1649, in the village of Shamgorod, after a pogrom. Three itinerant players and the innkeeper Berish convene a court to try God for what was done there. Berish, who insists on prosecuting, is a father whose daughter was violated in the pogrom. No one will take the defense. At last, a stranger volunteers, argues God’s justice with great eloquence, and is revealed in the final moments as Satan [32]. I know of no more compact statement of where theodicy stands after catastrophe. The defense of God against the testimony of the victims is the devil’s brief.

Irving Greenberg turned this into a working rule: no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children [33]. Zachary Braiterman later gave the stance its technical name. Anti-theodicy is the refusal to justify, explain or accept as meaningful the relation between God and suffering, and he showed that it has deep roots in the classical sources, which are far less pious about divine justice than their reputation suggests [34]. My own attempts at an anti-theodicy of the Shoah, and at its clinical application, belong to this line [35,36].

A fourth voice belongs here, and it differs from the other three in kind. Elliot Wolfson does not write as a theologian of the Holocaust, and I do not enlist him as one. His work on apophysis nevertheless reaches beneath the ground the other three share. Rubenstein, Fackenheim and Wiesel disagree about what to do with a God who was expected and did not come. Wolfson asks what the expectation was made of. In *Giving Beyond the Gift*, he shows that the twentieth-century Jewish philosophers most alert to the pitfalls of scriptural theism (Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, Levinas) still, in differing degrees, personified transcendence, even as they tried to purge their descriptions of God by negation. He argues that the logic of apophysis, allowed to run its full course, would go past every such figure to what he calls an apophysis of apophysis. It rests on an absolute nothingness, which he

distinguishes from the nothingness of an absolute, and it does not signify an unknowable One. The metaphor of the gift then yields to an unconditional givenness in which the distinction between giver and given collapses [37].

If I read him rightly, the bearing on this essay is direct, and it falls first on the previous section. A hidden face is the nothingness of an absolute: someone is there and is not seen. Wolfson's distinction asks whether even that much can be said. The Father who did not come would then be an image, and some part of the wound would belong to the image. The survivor would have a second labor beside her protest, which is to mourn the figure itself. Her sixty-six years, which I called a gift and an accusation, would be neither. They would be given, with no giver to thank and none to indict. Wolfson does not pretend that this comes without cost. Of Derrida and Wyschogrod, who carried the removal of images from God furthest, he grants that the move puts the life of devotional piety in serious doubt. I do not set his voice against the others, and I do not try to answer it. This essay goes on speaking of a Father because that is the grammar in which the injured child speaks. I owe to Wolfson the knowledge that it is a grammar, and that it is to be held with an open hand.

Rubenstein concluded that the providential God could no longer be believed. Fackenheim heard a commandment where Rubenstein heard nothing. Wiesel stayed in the courtroom. Wolfson asks what we pictured when we looked toward the bench. Their disagreement is the landscape after catastrophe and needs no repair. One survivor loses God, another curses God, another clings, another finds God only in other people, and another cannot bear the word at all. The theologian's task is to refuse to silence any of them. Lili, who is given no religious vocabulary by the film, enacts the first three positions. Like Rubenstein she waits for nothing from history. Like Fackenheim she has made a life. And like Wiesel she convenes a court. Whether the fourth voice describes her more truly than any of them, I leave open. By the film's account she asks nothing of heaven at all.

Din Without a Judge

I come to the proposal on which this essay turns. Lili's revenge is a human attempt to perform the divine *din*, the judgment, that history withheld.

The midrash teaches that the world could not have been created by judgment alone. God saw that it would not stand and joined to the attribute of judgment the attribute of mercy, like a king who pours hot and cold water together into a fragile cup so that it neither cracks nor contracts (Genesis Rabbah 12:15).

The teaching is usually cited for its tenderness. Its other half is as important. A world of mercy alone would not stand either. Judgment is one of the two pillars, and a world from which it has vanished is no gentler for the loss. It becomes the world the Targum puts in Cain's mouth as he rises against his brother: ***there is no judgment and no judge*** (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 4:8). For sixty-six years the evidence available to Lili supported Cain [1].

Scripture does not treat the desire for vengeance as pathology. ***"God of vengeance, O Lord, God of vengeance, shine forth"*** (Psalm 94:1). The verb is *hofia*, appear. Vengeance is asked for as a mode of divine appearing, the exact contrary of the hidden face. The Talmud observes that the word vengeance in this verse stands between two divine names and concludes, with visible unease, that in its proper place vengeance is a great thing (Berakhot 33a). The Torah reserves it: ***"Vengeance is Mine, and recompense"*** (Deuteronomy 32:35). A reservation, however, presumes that the one who holds the right will exercise it. When the right is left unexercised, the question of who holds the claim reopens.

In one domain the Torah itself answers. The nearest kinsman of a murdered person is the *go'el ha-dam*, the redeemer of blood (Numbers 35). This is Job's word. The law does not abolish the avenger. It fences him, with cities of refuge, with the requirement of witnesses, and with the distinction between the murderer and the one who killed by mischance. Lili is the *go'elet ha-dam* of her father, and Hans, who killed by deliberate denunciation, would find no city of refuge open to him.

The two biblical precedents for avenging a violated sister are warnings. Dinah's brothers answer Shechem ***"with guile"*** (Genesis 34:13), turn the sign of the covenant into a weapon, and kill every male in the town. Jacob curses their anger on his deathbed (49:7). Yet the chapter gives them the last word, and it is a question no one answers: ***"Shall he deal with our sister as with a harlot?"*** (34:31). Absalom waits two full years, prepares a feast, and has Amnon struck down when his heart is merry with wine (2 Samuel 13:23-29). The avenger then becomes a usurper and dies at war with his father. In both stories, vengeance taken outside the law exceeds its occasion.

Measured against these, Lili's judgment is remarkable for its proportion. The Mishnah states the principle: ***"by the measure with which a person measures, it is measured to him"*** (Sotah 1:7). Hans lived by manufacturing trust, and manufactured trust undoes him. He took the savings of others, and his are taken. He took a dead man's name, and she takes it back from him by naming who he is. Finally, the man whose whole instrument was his tongue ends without speech.

Three restraints separate her from Simeon and Levi. She does not kill. She leaves in the account what he owes the men he defrauded, so that the door of restitution, which in Jewish law is the door of repentance, stands open, and it is Hans who refuses to go through it. The blows that fell him come from his own victims and, in the stroke, from his own body. She raises her hand only to free herself from his.

In the idiom of the Kabbalah, her *din* has not been cut loose from mercy. Gershom Scholem showed that for the Zohar the root of evil is precisely judgment severed from its counterweight, which hardens into an independent domain, the *sitra ahra* [39]. The balance of mercy and judgment has been a recurring concern of mine on the theology of healing [40]. The rabbis also knew the

opposite failure: *whoever is merciful to the cruel will end by being cruel to the merciful* (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:16). Hans is no penitent. Within the film's own present, he has a man maimed and kills another. Had Lili forgiven him in that emptied house, the next Bryn would have paid for her magnanimity. Reconciliation between victim and perpetrator, about which I have written elsewhere, presupposes a perpetrator who turns [41]. This one does not.

The proposal has a cost, and Jewish law states it. A witness may not become a judge in the same case (Rosh Hashanah 26a). And the Mishnah warns: *do not judge alone, for none may judge alone but One* (Avot 4:8). Lili is victim, witness, investigator, prosecutor and judge. She has help in the investigation, but the sentence is hers alone. This is the exact sense in which she occupies the divine seat. And the Mishnah, read from her side of it, becomes an accusation: there is One who may judge alone, and for sixty-six years He did not.

Counterfeit Eschatology

Religious traditions commonly postpone perfect justice. The wicked may flourish now, but there will be a judgment, and history is not the final court. Eschatology spares the believer the need to see every account settled in his own lifetime. When confidence in a final justice collapse, revenge becomes an improvised eschatology. The avenger tries to make the last judgment occur inside history.

Lili's plan has this character, and its center is revelation more than punishment. She does not only take Roy's money. She unveils him. Hans Taub, who has lived for six decades inside a stolen name, is made to face the past he believed he had outrun. The structure is apocalyptic in the oldest sense of *apokalypsis*, an uncovering. You are not who you claim to be, and neither am I. The masks come off, memory enters the room, and the dead are called as witnesses.

It is counterfeit because the human avenger cannot do what eschatological hope promises. She cannot raise her father. She cannot restore her mother or save her sisters, and she cannot become the girl she was before the last lesson. Punishment moves forward and trauma reaches back, and the two never meet. Hannah Arendt called this the predicament of irreversibility. Human beings cannot undo what has been done. Forgiveness and punishment are the only two means we have of bringing to an end something that would otherwise go on without limit, and they share a boundary: people cannot forgive what they cannot punish, and they cannot punish what has turned out to be unforgivable [42].

Améry is the necessary witness on the other side. In his essay on resentments, he refuses the consolation that time heals, and calls that healing a moral scandal. He defends his resentment as a protest the natural drift by which what was done slides into what merely happened. And he states precisely what he wants. The criminal's suffering is beside the point. He wants the criminal brought to the point where he too wishes that the deed had never been, so that for one moment perpetrator and victim stand on the same side of it [10]. By that standard Lili's apocalypse fails at the decisive point,

through no fault of hers. Hans hears everything, and his response is to lock the door and attack her. The revelation is made to a man who will not receive it.

What of forgiveness? Simon Wiesenthal's silence at the bedside of the dying SS man still marks the limit: no one may forgive on behalf of the murdered [43]. Vladimir Jankélévitch put it more harshly: where pardon has never been asked for, the question of granting it does not arise [44]. Jewish law agrees. For wrongs between one person and another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until the offender has appeased the one he wronged (Mishnah Yoma 8:9), and the dead cannot be appeased. Forgiveness demanded of victims as a religious duty, for the comfort of bystanders, is the perpetrator's last privilege. Jeffrie Murphy has argued that a measure of resentment is what self-respect looks like in a person who has been wronged, and that a victim who feels none has accepted the offender's estimate of her worth [45].

Yet revenge cannot carry the whole weight either. Herman's late study of what survivors themselves mean by justice is sobering for anyone who assumes that they want blood. Most of the women and men she interviewed wanted acknowledgment. They wanted the truth established, the community to take their side, and the burden of shame returned to the person who earned it. Punishment mattered to them far less [46]. This suggests that what Lili most needed from the emptied house was a sentence said aloud in his hearing: you did this, and I am the one who knows it. The ruin of Hans mattered less than that. Revenge can do certain morally intelligible things. It reverses power, and it sends shame back along the path by which it came. It cannot, by itself, heal, because healing requires a self no longer organized around the abuser. Hatred has nothing of submission in it, yet it can remain a form of attachment. The opposite of domination is freedom, and revenge does not supply it.

A superficial reading would say that Lili risks becoming what she hates. I think that moral equivalence here is an evasion. She does not become Hans. The disturbing point is the one reached earlier: Hans has helped to determine the form her justice takes. Healing, if it comes, must mean more than victory over him. It must mean that he ceases to be the author of any part of her.

God after the Father

What theology is left when the father does not come? The tradition offers at least three places to stand, and each has a danger.

The first is Lamentations. In the five poems of *Eikhah* God never speaks. The book is all address and no reply. Its first chapter personifies the ruined city as a violated woman: the adversary has spread his hand over all her precious things (Lamentations 1:10), and the refrain, which returns in one form or another five times in that chapter, is *ein menahem lah*, there is none to comfort her. The phrase is the sister of Deuteronomy's *ein moshia lah*. The poet goes as far as to say that the Lord has become like an enemy (2:5), and the book ends on a question so bleak that the synagogue repeats the verse before it in order not to finish there (5:20-22). By

canonizing this book, the tradition has licensed, as Scripture, the speech of a violated woman to a God who does not answer. The survivor who can say only “You were not there” is quoting.

The second is the Akedah, and it is the harder case, because it looks like the opposite of our story. There the father is present, and it is his hand that holds the knife. What the Akedah offers to those who love it is that someone does come: the voice calls from heaven at the last instant and calls twice. Shalom Spiegel showed what happened to that comfort in the Rhineland during the Crusades. Jews who had watched their children die wrote liturgical poems in which Isaac is actually slaughtered, and his ashes lie upon the altar, because the biblical story, with its timely angel, no longer described the world they lived in [47]. Lili’s story is that medieval Akedah. No voice calls and no ram is caught in the thicket. To read her story with theirs is to see that the tradition has been here before and did not respond by defending the angel’s punctuality.

The third is the Shekhinah. Wherever Israel was exiled, the rabbis say, the divine presence went into exile with them (Megillah 29a). God weeps in the inner chambers, in a place called *mistarim*, the hidden places (Hagigah 5b, on Jeremiah 13:17). In the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe, returned to that passage. God’s weeping is hidden, he taught, because it is without limit, and the world could not survive hearing it. The one who presses through into the inner chamber weeps there together with God [48,49] [1]. Hans Jonas reached a neighboring conclusion by philosophical means: after Auschwitz we may keep God’s goodness and God’s intelligibility only by surrendering God’s power, and must think of a God who suffers, becomes and cares, and who could not intervene [50]. I have traced this figure of the suffering and darkened Shekhinah from the midrash to the present in two earlier studies [51,52].

Here I must apply to myself a caution I formulated for the bedside. A suffering God can become one more consolation administered to the victim. “*God wept with you*,” said to a girl who was raped in her parents’ house, relocates her suffering into a cosmic drama, and this is theodicy by another route. In an essay, I proposed three rules for theological speech in the presence of suffering. The third is that the divine name may be predicated neither of the event nor even of the human response to it. It may be used only, if at all, of the interval between the cry and our incapacity to answer it [53]. By that rule God is not to be in the denunciation, as though it served a plan. Nor is God to be located in the revenge, as though Lili was heaven’s instrument, nor even in her survival, as though it justified what preceded it. If the Name belongs anywhere in her story, it belongs in the moment the Torah itself isolates: the girl cried out, and there was none to save her. It belongs, that is, to the protest that this should not have been.

Levinas found the same place by way of a short story. Commenting on the fictional testament of Yossel Rakover, who dies in the Warsaw ghetto still addressing God, he describes an adult faith under an empty heaven, one that loves the Torah more than God. The commandment to do justice survives the hiding of the one

who commanded it, and may be the only form in which, for a time, that one can be met [54]. What “Father” can mean after this, I do not know. Perhaps, for a time, nothing. Here the fourth voice of Wolfson has its practical force: an image may have to be unsaid before anything can be said in its place. Perhaps the paternal image must be laid down for a generation in favor of others the tradition also owns: the fellow mourner, the hidden one, the exile, the voice that demands justice and cannot yet deliver it.

Where Were We?

Emmanuel Levinas gives the most ethically stringent direction. After the twentieth century, he argued, the attempt to justify another person’s suffering is itself the source of immorality. Suffering in the other is useless, for nothing, and no scheme can redeem it. It takes on meaning only as my suffering over the suffering of the other, and this meaning takes the form of a summons [55]. This reverses the direction of the question. Theodicy looks upward, and ethics looks across. In place of “Why did God allow this?” comes “What does this person’s suffering demand of me?”

Applied to Lili, this forbids us to look for a divine purpose behind what happened to her and directs us to another line of questioning. Did anyone hear her? Did anyone believe the violated child, protect the endangered family, remember the dead, or refuse the perpetrator’s version of events? Did anyone stand beside the survivor before revenge became the only form of justice she could imagine?

The film’s answer, which it gives almost in passing, is a list of human absences. A state had made denunciation a civic act, and a young man’s word against a father was enough. An army of liberation became, for a girl without a family, a further assault. A ruined continent allowed a Hans to become a Roy by a change of papers. And for sixty years no one in a peaceful country had reason to look behind an Englishman’s name. Divine absence is in large part a human indictment. People invoke the silence of God after they have taken part in a human silence. The father is removed, the neighbor says nothing, the institution protects itself, the witness looks away, the community doubts the victim, and then theology is asked to explain the result. I have written about one recent instance of that sequence and about our own share in it [56]. Levinas refuses the sequence. For him responsibility comes before explanation.

Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and himself a child survivor, described the Holocaust as an event without a witness. The victims were so enclosed that no one inside could step outside to testify, and the world outside declined to look. Testimony, he argued, comes into existence only when a listener is found, and until then the event has in a sense not finished happening [57]. Lili’s rape had no witness. The denunciation of her father had many, and none of them objected.

This corrects a tempting first reading of the film, which is that Lili acts alone. She does not, quiet. Stephen, her grandson’s partner, traces Roy’s history, produces the Soviet records, plays the suspicious grandson, and turns Vincent. Michael, her grandson,

is party to it. The witnesses do finally arrive. They come two generations late, from among the grandchildren, and they come the only way that counts, by doing the work. Belief, in this sense, is labor. A hearer who believes takes on some of the cost of the truth. This is the film's one image of a community functioning as it should, and it is easy to miss, because the film is busy with the duel.

It bears on how we speak of resilience. To say that Lili "took back her power" is true and insufficient. Why did she have to take it back alone, and wait until she was old? Therapeutic culture celebrates agency, and rightly. There is nonetheless a cruelty hidden in the demand for resilience. We praise the survivor for being strong because others failed to protect her, and we admire the architecture she built from wreckage and forget to ask why she was left standing in ruins. Resilience is admirable, and it must never serve as an alibi for abandonment. The survivor who becomes her own providence exposes the failure of every lesser providence around her. Braiterman's anti-theodicy has this human corollary [34]: the refusal to justify God's absence obliges us to stop justifying our own.

The Clinic

I said at the outset that this question usually arrives without a film attached. It arrives in a consulting room, often decades after the event, and often disguised as something else: pain without a lesion, a sleep that will not come, a body that flinches from examination. The neurobiology of such presentations is by now well described, and I have reviewed it elsewhere [58]. My concern here is what the patient is asking of the physician, and I think the film answers with some precision.

The physician is always a late witness. By the time the history is told, if it is told, the father has long since not come, and nothing the physician does will alter that. What remains possible is what Stephen does. To read a patient's history as a text is to give it the kind of attention that changes the standing of what is said [59]. The first clinical act in the presence of such a history is belief, and belief in the sense defined above: a willingness to bear some of the cost of its being true. Herman's stages of recovery begin with safety and pass-through remembrance before they reach reconnection, and none of them can begin with a clinician who is waiting to be convinced [9].

From my analysis I draw three prohibitions for the clinician.

1. Do not supply a theodicy. No sentence of the form "everything happens for a reason" passes Greenberg's test, and none belongs at a bedside. This holds for the refined versions as much as for the crude ones [53].
2. Do not ask for forgiveness on the perpetrator's behalf. It is not the clinicians to request, and a patient who is urged toward it will reasonably conclude that her anger is unwelcome in the room.
3. Do not use the patient's strength to close the file. "You are so resilient" can be heard as "so nothing further is owed to you."

There is also a caution about religious language. For many patients the religious vocabulary of childhood is bound up with the injury. Sometimes the perpetrator used it, and sometimes its promise of protection is the promise that was broken. Restoring the image of the protecting Father by pastoral insistence repeats the original confusion of tongues: an adult's reality is once more laid over a child's experience [23]. The clinician can follow where the patient's own speech goes and must be content when for a long time it goes nowhere near God.

Finally, the clinician should expect Betty. The composed, obliging, faintly apologetic patient who gives no trouble has sometimes learned to be that person under conditions we would rather not imagine. The mask is an achievement, and stripping it would be a second violation. What can be offered is a room in which, eventually, it is not needed. What survivors say they want from justice is very nearly what they want from medicine: to have the truth acknowledged by someone with standing, and to have the weight of it shared [46]. Absalom told his sister to hold her peace. The physician's whole task in this encounter may be to say the opposite and reveal the wound beneath, calling it for what it is.

Conclusion: You Did Not Get All of Me

At the center of trauma lies one memory: no one came. The violated child called, inwardly or aloud, and was not rescued. The survivor of historical catastrophe looked at civilization and found it brittle. The believer looked toward heaven and met silence. Out of that silence come shame, guilt, rage, concealment, memory and sometimes revenge.

The Good Liar gives us a woman who answers the silence by becoming the author of the judgment that history denied her. There is magnificence in her refusal to disappear, and heartbreak in its necessity. She had to be her own witness because the witnesses failed, and her own judge because judgment failed. Providence could not be seen, and so she became that as well. I have argued that her judgment was more measured than Scripture's own avengers managed, and that it was nonetheless a counterfeit of the thing it stood in for. It could expose Hans. It could not restore what he took.

The film appears to know this, because it does not end in the emptied house. Its last images separate the two liars completely. Hans lies in a hospital bed without speech, and Lili is among her family. Here Fackenheim's reading seems to me the true one [30,31]. Her greatest victory over Hans is that he did not determine how her life would end, and his punishment counts for less than that. Trauma tempts us to imagine that the perpetrator stands at the center of the survivor's story forever. His act said: I have the power to define what happens to you. Her sixty-six years answer that he did not finish the story. Revenge stays tethered to the perpetrator, and her life exceeds him. If the film has an eschatology that is not counterfeit, it lies in her return, and the punishment has no part in it.

Survivor guilt whispers that happiness betrays the dead. I think

memory makes another demand, which is to live. The demand rests on no claim that the catastrophe had meaning, or that everything happens for a reason, or that suffering strengthens. Those formulas are unbearable. One lives because the man who did the harm has no right to the years that remain. The dead need witnesses and are not served by additional corpses. And tenderness after brutality contradicts the metaphysics of the abuser. The survivor owes history no heroic life. Simply living is enough.

One image from the tradition holds what I have been trying to say about this peace. When Phinehas takes a spear and performs with his own hand the judgment that no court had issued, God grants him “*My covenant of peace*” (Numbers 25:12). The scribal tradition, recorded in the Talmud, requires that the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* in that verse be written broken, with a gap in its stem (Kiddushin 66b). The peace given to the one who took judgment into his own hands is a real peace, and it is written with a fracture that no scribe is permitted to repair. I have written before about that broken letter as a theology of wholeness that carries its wound [60]. It is the right letter for the final scene. Lili’s peace among her family is real, and it is written with a broken *vav*.

What, then, of God? The survivor does not prove that God was present, and she does not explain why God was absent. She lives, and her life leaves the question open. Post-traumatic theology may have to remain in the space she makes, where facile faith and facile despair are both refused, and to give up the hope of an answer to the absent Father. Job never receives an explanation. Wiesel never lets the accusation lapse. Rubenstein will not rescue providence at the cost of moral sense, and Fackenheim will not let the catastrophe own the future. Lili will not let the man who violated her girlhood own what is left of her life.

The Father did not come. The dead did not return. The past was not repaired. Yet the survivor stands, and theology may begin again there. Its starting point is a human being who stands during what should have destroyed her and declares, by continuing to exist: **You did not get all of me.**

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