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Chapter 6

*The Poor in Deed Facing the Lord of All Deeds: A Postmodern Reading of the Yom Kippur Mahzor*

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I. A Critique of the *Mahzor*: Context and Method

For most secular Jews in Israel, there is still an aura of sanctity about the High Holy Days, and Yom Kippur in particular. On that day the synagogues are full of people who do not visit synagogues any other day of the year. People who do not believe in sin and repentance go to the synagogue as a thing that is done, out of respect for their grandfather or because they follow their father's custom, and are reluctant to abandon a tradition they have followed for years. For others, the service is a way of participating in a particular Jewish community and a way of belonging to the Jewish people as a whole. Many worshippers come to the synagogue because they still feel a sense of dread, the last trace of respect for a god whose decrees they do not follow any longer. They feel a troublesome sense of guilt that whispers to them: "It mightn't help, but it can't do any harm." Whatever the reasons, multitudes of secular Jews fill the benches of the synagogues (and are therefore often labeled "*masortim*," that is, traditionalist Jews) and mix with their religious brethren. They sit or stand cramped beside one another, and with some help from the more habituated Jews they leaf through the Yom Kippur *Mahzor* ("Cycle") or book of prayers. Because of the high proportion of secular Jews who visit the synagogue on this day, the *Mahzor* is the most read and most known Jewish religious text, apart from the Passover Haggadah.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

most of the Israeli secular Jews who participate in the prayer ritual of Yom Kippur fulfill—even if only for a brief period of time—the role of the worshipper as dictated by the *Mahzor* and join the congregation of learned and experienced worshippers. When this is the case, there is no difference between the secular worshipper and the religious one: they both practice the ritual as dictated by the text and by the customs of their congregation.

Thus, the Yom Kippur prayer ritual is a cultural arena that a broad secular public shares with the entire religious population. In this arena, each worshipper takes up a preordained position, that of the sinner who repents for his sins, asks for atonement, and stands, as if alone yet always together with the entire congregation, facing the Almighty. The worshipper's position has a more or less fixed form, and his liturgic practice follows rules that are relatively independent of the beliefs or attitudes he happens to have regarding theological or ethical questions. These practices, which the secular and the religious Jew share, pertain to relations between the individual and the community and the nation, and relations between the latter three entities and the Creator. These practices also pertain to the differentiation between the private and public spheres and the demarcation between the sacred and the profane. True, after the concluding *Mei'ach* service, secular and religious Jews return to quite different worlds. And the manner of return, too, is quite different. But for a brief while a partnership exists, at least a partial one. The gathering around a common text and the performance of the common rite for which the text is a *partitur* blurs the distinction between religious and secular Jews, separated as they are, even in the synagogue, by different life-worlds and belief systems.

The fascinating ability of secular and religious Jews to sit together on Yom Kippur will be a focus of this essay. And what makes this topic so fascinating, of course, is the bitter and painful separation of secular and religious Jews at all other times during the year. This separation is what meets the eye of any keen political or social observer of Israeli-Jewish society. Not only political rivalry and conflicting interests split the two groups apart, but they are split by social and cultural isolation in institutions from schools to the judiciary. And they differ not only in their worldviews but also in everyday practices from modes of consumption to habits of leisure. There are also sometimes open, even violent, expressions of hatred, xenophobia, and resentment on both sides, and no less

importantly and certainly related to these phenomena, there is also a steadily growing gap of mutual ignorance (cf. Gotkind-Golan 1990; Levi 1988; Oron 1993).

Of course, this picture is oversimplified. Neither the "secular" nor the "religious" form monolithic groups. It is questionable if there is any significant overlapping between that segment of the secular population that crowds the synagogues on the High Holidays and those who are quick to become militant in matters of coexistence between the two communities. But despite all of this, lines of intensive interaction and successful cooperation may be delineated no less than lines of confrontation and strife, for example, in the army, in the great endeavor of colonization of and quarrel over the occupied territories, in certain sectors of the economy, and, to a lesser extent, in the academy (cf., e.g., Liebman 1990; Friedman 1991, chaps. 10–11).

However, what is perhaps most significant about the partnership between secular and religious Jews during the Yom Kippur ritual is that it is the only one enacted entirely on a religious terrain. In the army, in politics and State ceremonies, in the economy, the religious Jew meets the secular Jew in a world that has been thoroughly secularized, even if there are ongoing attempts to endow portions of these with new religious meanings. Even on Passover night, when most Israeli Jews read the Haggadah at the Seder table, the common ground is not a religious public sphere but the private sphere of the family. On Yom Kippur, at the synagogue, the common ground is religious from beginning to end and there is a reversal of movement, even though a temporary one, from the secular back to the religious sphere. In Israeli-Jewish culture, changes of terrain and a partnership of this sort are quite unique.

My hypothesis is that what allows the secular and the religious Jew a common ground during the High Holidays<sup>2</sup> is precisely what makes their continuous strife bearable and their ongoing cooperation through the rest of the year possible. This may be so not because of any secret spiritual quality of the Holy Days, and it certainly does not imply any causal link between the social time and space of the synagogue and other social spheres. My claim is rather that looking at the synagogue may be worthwhile for economic reasons, the economy of observation and analysis: it is there that whatever has survived secularization in the secular Israeli Jew may become visible and readily given to articulation. Not merely the effective accommodations of religious Jews to modern life in a secularized, albeit

Jewish society,<sup>3</sup> this element that has survived secularization is constitutive of the uneasy but nonetheless successful coexistence between secular and religious Jews in Israel.

I will not be able to make good on this sociological claim in this essay. It is presented here as a context and suggestive motivation for the analysis that follows. This analysis has a much more limited scope: it is an attempt to use the main liturgic text of the Yom Kippur ritual in order to articulate that "unsecularized common ground" between secular and religious Jews. The *Mahzor* is conceived here as the script and framework for the ritual of repentance, but my critical reading of it does not pretend to consist of a comprehensive interpretation of the ritual. Rather, I intend to bring about an understanding of how that unique partnership in the ritual between religious and secular Jews is made possible and shaped by the prayer book itself.

The major hermeneutical questions stemming from the above socio-political context are: How does the text constrain its possible uses by so diverse readers? and, vice versa, How do different users, with different, sometimes conflicting purposes, manage to maneuver so diversely within the framework of the same text? And the brief answer is, I think, that it is not meanings and interpretations but practices that are at stake here, not expressions of Jewish "mentality" or "worldview" but expressions of the rules that regulate behavior in a single, relatively isolated arena of the life-world. Once the hermeneutical questions are set in these terms and the text is conceived as an aggregate of discursive practices and a set of rules for ritualistic practices, it is only natural to approach both the questions and the text by way of some kind of deconstructive reading.

Another hermeneutic presupposition may be drawn from a further examination of the context of reading. It is a context of seemingly deep divisions between two parties; the opposition seems clear and the evidence for it quite compelling. Therefore, so as not to beg the question, so as not to impose upon the text a preconceived cluster of opposing meanings, that opposition must be avoided as much as possible in the context of interpretation. Once again, there is an appeal here for a deconstructive or, more widely, postmodern approach.

Finally, "the text itself"<sup>4</sup>—if I may still be allowed to use the term, provisionally, at least—gives some directions for its critical reading. The *Mahzor* is a hybrid of texts composed in different

periods, arranged, so it seems, in a quite haphazard way, except for the skeleton of the *Amidah* (eighteen prayer) and the standard confession ("we have trespassed . . .") at each of the five services. It is neither a work of art nor a collective oeuvre but an amalgam of prayers, hymns, and supplications that lacks coherency and systematicity. Such a text calls for a reading that looks neither for origin nor for an author, a reading that can ignore the myriad strands of the text's genealogy in favor of its present playfulness. This playfulness is enabled yet constrained by the procession of the ritual. The ritual may be looked at like a game whose rules it is the interpreters' task to discern and articulate. If the secular and the religious Jew find there a certain common ground, they must be able to play in the same field by the same rules. This is, of course, already the language of a postmodern reading.

The discussion that follows is part of a fragmentary series in six sections.<sup>5</sup> Each section articulates, interprets, and critiques a different aspect in the repentance game, a different phase in the position that the *Mahzor* guides the worshipper to adopt. It does so with a conscious attempt to explicitly relate the text-object and the technique of its objectification. The point of departure for each section is a thesis familiar to readers of postmodern theory, one of the tenets of the postmodernist point of view. In each section, one such tenet—or its very negation—is exemplified and demonstrated by certain discursive practices in the *Mahzor*. The interpretation of these practices is then further developed, applying that same postmodernist tenet.<sup>6</sup>

Now these postmodern readings are articulated on the background of an alternative approach, a typically "modernist" one that negates or ignores the said postmodernist tenet. Two divergent forms of this kind of modernist reading are discerned and very briefly examined: an "intrinsic" reading that usually produces the ideology of the religious practice and an "extrinsic" reading that may be conceived in terms of a critique of ideology. The advantage of a postmodern reading would consist in showing both the ideology of the ritual and its critique to be options opened by the very same text.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the dialogue of the deaf between the modernist secular critic and the believer who defends himself in modernist or premodernist terms may be avoided. In fact, both directions of modernist reading are never engaged in order to be refuted; they are bypassed. No attempt is made to disprove the explicit content of the religious "worldview" embodied in the prayer, to justify or delegitimize the

prayer's "deep intention" or to expose its "hidden" motivations in the depths of the individual's soul or its "disguised" function at the basis of social existence.

Postmodern reading (mine, at least)<sup>8</sup> stays close to the surface of the text; it hardly asks what one means by a phrase but rather how one can play, act, cope, and compete by phrasing. Not only is use preferred over meaning, and the reader has become a user, but also the question of use is reversed: How does a text use its own users, manipulate them, prepare, in advance, the scope of their strategic moves in the game it constitutes? Thus, postmodern reading does not grant its object the unity of an artifact. Rather, it exposes through it the texture of a landscape, a cultural field that runs further, but not deeper, than what first meets the eye. And postmodern reading never forgets that the landscape it exposes is not given to it from high and above, through observation alone, for it too traverses the landscape it delineates, it too is affected by it.

## II. A Transcendent Point of View

The God of the universe is omnipotent! His word is established for ever, but he is invisible to all. . . . He knows all things eternally, he writeth and numbereth what hath ever been done. . . . He beareth rule over his work . . . tremendous in his habitation . . . [He] expandeth the earth on a vacuum, yet shall its inhabitants not be destroyed. (*Muscaph Service*, 325-27)<sup>9</sup>

Both modernists and postmodernists know that no transcendent, disinterested point of view is available for humans, that the totality of nature or history is beyond humans' grasp. They both assume that an omniscient God, who "knowest . . . all the secret things, as well as the revealed" (33) and "callest to mind all things long forgotten" (337), is a construct of religious discourse. But whereas modernists who have killed God sought to replace Him, postmodernists look calmly at the corpse and care little about what is done with it. They are free of bad conscience and of the anxiety for finding substitutes. These, however, are not statements about the possibility of faith in God, only of His representation in human language.

An omniscient God is represented in the Yom Kippur prayer and addressed by it. Many of the phrases in the *Mahzor* have a fixed reference and most have a fixed addressee: an all-knowing God Who

remembers all things long forgotten and before Whom nothing is concealed. This is a God who is exalted and transcendent; the distance between Him and the individual worshipper is infinite. But the *Mahzor* does not attempt to represent the totality of that which the Omnipotent God knows and upon which He acts; the text only specifies the kinds of things supposedly contained in this totality and the point of view from which it is apprehended. God is present in the text in the multiplicity of His praises, superlative descriptions, the garments of His glory, and the dread of His power and verdict. In contrast to what might be implied by the austere demands of rational speech about a transcendent god ("there is no possible estimation of the innumerable attendants of thy glory nor any explication of thy holy name" [339]), the Almighty of the *Mahzor* is neither unknowable nor indescribable. He is represented to His believers in a rich and many-layered language.

A critical modernist reader may ask, of course, if it is really the same God who is both "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in beneficence" (49) and at the same time "delighted in the affliction of the soul of his pious people" (149), and, on the other hand, how it is possible that "He who calleth forth the generations . . . foretelling the end from the beginning" (321) is also the one who needs to "searcheth all the hearts on the day of judgment" (223). And one can reply, with both the medieval philosophers and with Yeshayahu Leibovitch, that the Holy One Blessed be His Name is beyond all description, that any description is an unjustified limitation of His essence, and that any attempt to describe Him is fundamentally false testimony to the mental and spiritual incapacity of the person who intends Him, an empty and poetic expression of reverence and no more (and this answer would still be a modern one [Leibovitch 1979, chap. 1]). And from here one can conclude that true statements about the Almighty are only those sentences that negate the descriptions existent in religious discourse. The object being described is so perfect, the descriptive language is so inadequate, and the gap is unbridgeable in principle.<sup>10</sup>

Other modernist readers have tried to defend the language of the prayer by arguing that it does not "seriously" intend to describe the God it addresses. The object of the prayer is not to be sought between or beyond heaven and earth, not even in the fictive world that the prayer itself creates, because this is a language whose function it is to direct the mind and arouse the emotions, to ease communication among the worshippers and between each individual

and the divine addressee, an empty hole that the prayer both creates and fills. In other words, the prayer is meant to enact, not to represent (e.g., Phillips 1968; Lawson and McCauley 1990, chap. 3).

Two assumptions are common to these modern approaches to the language of the prayer: (a) there is a sharp division between representation and action, and hence the represented content does not depend on the character of the act of representation and is capable of being examined apart from it (this division is what finally leaves the epithets of God in the prayer with only an emotive or performative function); and (b) the phrases addressed to God have a signified that is absent in principle, an absence so extreme that it obliges an eschewal of any pretension to refer or to mean adequately. From a postmodern perspective, which conceives representation itself as a mode of action and the absence of the signified as an effect of certain strategies of representation, both assumptions are flatly denied.

Hence, for a postmodernist reading, God is no longer the absolute, always absent referent; descriptions of God are no longer taken as linguistic faults or as performatives disguised as descriptions. From a postmodernist viewpoint, the God of the *Mahzor* is an addressee of a special sort, a pole of intentions, flexible and not uniform, created by the ensemble of representations that describe Him, that is, the entire series of phrases and subphrases that refer to Him. Conceived as an addressee, not merely as a referent of the liturgical discourse, God's existence or essence is not a basic assumption necessary for "making sense" of (or endowing) each of His diverse representations.<sup>11</sup> "God," the referent, is an accompanying implication and a late effect of several discursive genres or language-games in the prayer, and this referent takes a specific form only when there is a demand or a quest for meaning of particular phrases or of the entire series of phrases. Usually, such a quest is external to the ritual, to the event in which the text is actually used (cf. Lawson and McCauley 1990, chap. 3).

In the ritual, by virtue of the descriptions those phrases contain, God becomes transformed from the object of reverence and dread into the addressee of confession and repentance. It is impossible to understand the prayer without understanding the way in which it produces God as an absolute pole of address and concern, and the function of God as an absolute addressee cannot be understood without grasping the game of labels, epithets, and predicates that represent Him.

Of course, it would be a mistake, a false move in the game, to understand any of God's numerous epithets and labels that fill the *Mahzor* as an adequate representation of any single aspect of the perfect One. Yet the epithets, labels, and predicates follow upon each other with a seeming compulsiveness ("*Excellence and faithfulness . . . understanding and blessing . . . ornament and decency . . . unity and reverence . . . crown and glory . . . good doctrine and sensibility . . .*" [209]), as if they sought to replace the Unique One with their variegated, restless multiplicity. As though the only way to represent the unrepresentable in principle is by multiplying epithets to infinity, thus denying any of them an independent viability, letting them cancel each other out in the way they follow upon each other, replacing each other, diverting the gaze, sending it off around the whole breadth of the earth, across all times, to all the spheres of existence. Together they combine into a description of what is beyond all description, of God "in-itself," but also, and perhaps mainly, of God's relation with all His creatures and with His chosen nation in particular.

There is no point in seeking out contradictions between the various descriptions or in trying to extract from them a coherent picture of God as it is formed in the worshipper's mind. The descriptive language has one referent and an infinity of predicates, which are almost always differentiated from each other not due to the differing meanings (their signifieds) but by the first letters of their signifiers (*aleph, beth, gimel, dalet* or the reverse, *taf, shin, resh, kuf* is generally the order of the titles in most of the *piyyutin* or versified prayers). Such principle of difference is arbitrary, of course, but with a few simple rules (e.g., the alphabetical order), it creates numerous possibilities of play among the epithets. Playing consists here of employing irregular disparities and difference of tension among the various epithets, transforming the order of their sequences. Apparent contradictions<sup>12</sup> are blurred in this abundance, silenced by the intensity of these sequences. Series of epithets follow one another, borrow from one another, inverse or even explode one another, yet all the while adding glory to the Name, being always short of expressing its infinite meanings but never short of expressing the infinite distance of its omnipresent referent.

This is a distance that must be bridged without being denied or eliminated. Each one of the manifold epithets and predicates is but one of the small paving blocks that cover the solid structure—the

interplay of epithets' sequences—of a bridge to infinity. Through acts of naming, labeling, and predicating, repeated ad nauseam, the prayer turns the transcendent and sublime One into an accessible interlocutor and at the same time reaffirms His status as the source of all speech and its absolute end. Thus it becomes possible to live a human life suffused with sin in the shade of an omniscient God Who grasps all sins at once, without being terrified to death, without losing hope, without even ceasing the round of daily life or making any change in the habits, customs, or tradition in the milieu where sins pile up and darken as crimson.

This kind of intentionality that the *Yom Kippur Mahzor* produces is part of a conspiracy behind which there is no planning mind. The conspiracy has a clear function: to confuse the Omniscient, without for a moment ceasing to acknowledge His authority as the Judge of all the earth. The entire community of worshippers is party to it, as if trying to evade, through sophistry abundant in verbiage, the risks of speaking blasphemy or slander. And at the same time, it is a conspiracy that joins the community and enjoins it against the individual, to alarm him, to domesticate him, to empty him of deeds, to posit him as a nihil in the face of the One before Whom all things are annihilated.

Yet this conspiracy, one must remember, is but a game, a game whose arch-rule (and also one of whose main stakes) is to include the absolute source of all rules as a participant in the game. He can become a participant precisely because His image is so full with gaps and contradictions that allow the maneuvers of the game. Thus, for example, the one who remembers everything is asked to forget (the sins, e.g., 59); the one who never forgets is reminded of what he might have forgotten (the covenant and the *z'hut*, the merits, of the forefathers). The God of the *Mahzor* is a player with a defined position, against Whom one may mobilize the best devices to mislead Him (without ever defying His will) to combine against Him in changing alliances (while seeking reassurances for His Own alliance, the covenant), and in the end, to subsist in the shade of His presence.

It is possible, for example, to multiply His epithets and predicates extensively so as to include all kinds of attitudes with regard to all possible kinds of sin: "Answer us, thou who are good and beneficent one, answer us, thou who knowest the inclination of man . . . thou who suppresseth anger . . . who are clothed with righteous . . . thou who art near to those who worship thee" (71). One can

negate oneself before Him completely, beg mercy like a leaf in the wind: "O my God, before I was formed, I was unworthy and now that I have been formed I am as though I have not been formed. Dust am I in my lifetime, how much more at my decease" (39). And even though the Almighty is omniscient it is worthwhile to remind Him of His covenant (e.g., "Look therefore to the covenant, and regard not at the impulse [Yetzer]" [55]) and point to a selection of the deeds of salvation He has performed in the past.<sup>13</sup> But in every case one must always preserve the double status enjoyed by the Judge of all the earth, Who is both the source of the rules ("And with love hath thou given us, O Lord our God this Day of Atonement, for pardon, and forgiveness and atonement" [27]) and also the chief player on the court of the game of forgiveness ("Verily it is thou who art Judge and Arbitrator, who knowest all, and art witness, writer, signifier, recorder, and teller" [337]).

This game of repentance, it must be reemphasized now, is kept open for any Jew, the most secular included, who can join the game without committing himself to any specific command or defined contents of belief. All he needs to do is to accord God His double role as an arch-source of and arch-player in the game. And this he does by his very speech acts, by the almost mechanical way he joins the crowd in uttering the hymns of the prayer, being carried away by their consoling, unchanging rhythm. Neither his sins as a Jew who does not observe the Halakic law nor any other particular sin calls for any special attention. For in any case, all possible sins have been written down in advance and none of his sins excludes him from the community of worshippers who are seeking repentance and atonement.<sup>14</sup> His almost natural integration into the congregation of the more orthodox worshippers<sup>15</sup> is an important mechanism for the reaffirmation of Jewish solidarity and of the secular Jews' partnership in a national-religious community. Thus the primacy of religious practices that claim to determine the limits and force of this partnership is also reaffirmed.

The secular Jew who participates in the prayer activates this mechanism—whether unknowingly or in complete agreement—thus endowing the entire ritual with a surplus national value. For on *Yom Kippur*, on each *Yom Kippur*, secular Jews who take part in the ritual reaffirm that they are still playing that old game that goes on forever, until the Messiah comes, on that same court handed down by tradition, together with God and the community of His believers. This is a game in which all rules have been fixed in

advance, never to be replaced or transformed and in which there are two kinds of stakes: an explicit one, to survive harsh judgment until next year's round, and an implicit one, to remain part of the team. The secular Jew does not really play for the first kind of stakes, for he has lost faith; he is playing in order to belong. But he can belong only according to the rules of the game. Thus, together with the religious Jew, he reaffirms every year his uncompromising differentiation from the Gentile, the source of his afflictions,<sup>16</sup> the non-ratable, painful presence of his desires (*Yetzer*)—the source of his sins,<sup>17</sup> and the presence of God in his life-world as an absolute absence.

The attempt to belong, so it seems, opens an enormous gap between the secular life-world and the ritual of repentance. In the life-world of most secular Israeli Jews, God is not absent (but signified). He is simply irrelevant (hardly has any signifiers). The *Yetzer* is cultivated, desires are welcome, and their satisfaction are intensively pursued in many sinful ways. But there remains the Gentile, blessed be he; being repeatedly negated, he maintains the necessary continuity with everyday secular life (but no more than the necessary; see below, 206ff.) that enables the relation of the sacred ritual to the secular life-world. He thus saves the secular Jew from a complete inversion of the basic values and norms of his life-world and the ritual of repentance from becoming a carnival of secular life.

### III. A Single Metanarrative

All vows, obligations, oaths or anathemas . . . which we shall have vowed, sworn, devoted, . . . or bound ourselves to, from this day of atonement until the next day of atonement (whose arrival we hope for in happiness). . . . Blessed art thou, O Lord, the King who pardoneh and forgiveh the iniquities of his people . . . and causeh our trespasses to pass away annually. (Evening Service, 15, 29)

From a postmodern perspective, the pursuit of principles for comprehensive, everlasting forms of representations is a vanity fair. This is the case not necessarily because reality is inherently chaotic or infinitely prolific and not only because there is no final ground or procedure to judge among conflicting representations of "the same" but because representation takes part in the proliferation of the

represented and in the production, as well as in the transgression, of its assumed order. Narratives take part in the formation and transformation of that which they narrate. The memory of the past is actively present in an inevitable manifold of fragments; metanarratives are blueprints for syntheses of these fragments that wish, and fail, to escape the fate of the fragmentary manifold. The attempt to reconcile or decide among competing narratives always necessitates the telling of more narratives. No claim to present one unifying metanarrative that encompasses the life of mankind, or universal history, or even the life of one nation or one individual can be redeemed.

The Yom Kippur *Mahzor* assumes as self-evident the complete opposite of this postmodern theme. The text implies and gives partial expression to a diasporic (*galuti*) metanarrative that frames Jewish history, encompassing the whole of time, from the creation of the world to the messianic culmination of God's presence in history. At several moments during the ritual the text narrates decisive moments from a historical, biblical past. This past consists of a series of specific events that may but do not always yield a chronological order, from the covenant with Abraham to the destruction of the Second Temple. In common, fixed patterns, the *Mahzor* portrays a posthistorical future, God's return to Zion, and the restoration of the Kingdom of David.<sup>18</sup> In the posthistorical future of promised redemption, the past will be restored in some undecided sense (political? spiritual?) of restoration.

But these two temporal axes are but background to a continuous diasporic present. This present is enclosed in a cyclic pattern of cosmic temporality that robs it of all historicity and annihilates—retroactively and in advance—any possible effect of human action on the course of affairs. This ahistorical present stretches from the destruction through the present moment of enunciation (in the prayer or otherwise) and further into the entire foreseeable future.

To this threefold temporality there roughly corresponds a triple classification of sins. In the first group of sins (mentioned only once in the text, in the *Muscaph* service) there are sins that are considered to be the origin and cause of exile (291; Goldschmidt 1970, 766). Another cluster of sins consists of those reproduced in each generation and that, together with their accompanying afflictions, are the very essence of exile (those are mentioned *ad nauseam*). In this group some sins are privileged: they postpone redemption and prevent the end of exile.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the exilic mode of existence

is not represented as a special, "abnormal" historical condition but a metaphysical one, not merely something that happens in time, but rather that which gives time its form, investing all meaning in a remote past and an even further remote future and emptying the present of meaning in the meantime.

Whatever the details of such a diasporic metanarrative are, it is immediately called into question by both kinds of modernist readings. The modernist may cast doubt on the historical rupture that runs through this metanarrative—before and after the Temple's destruction—and question the undifferentiated present lasting ever since. These two points, however, are but two aspects of the same fault: lack of historicity. The modernist rejects the notion of a cyclical, repetitive present upon which the diasporic metanarrative is based and calls for an alternative metanarrative that gives a historical account of the continuous existence of the Nation, against all odds, and for the conditions of its exile.

Modernists do not differ in their search for an alternative metanarrative, only in the kind of alternatives they propose. The first intrinsic modernist readings must work within the main tenets of Jewish religion and, at most, transform the basic structure of the diasporic metanarrative.<sup>20</sup> Free of religious tenets, the second extrinsic modernist readings may try to include the diasporic metanarrative as an expression of diasporic conditions of existence, or, perhaps, even as a factor in their reproduction. But in any case, this diasporic narrative is seen as a phenomenon to be accounted for in the framework of an alternative metanarrative. However, the wide differences between these two positions need not occupy us any further in this context, for it is their basic similarity—the fact that they both presuppose an alternative metanarrative—that is crucial in the present discussion. Most important among these metanarratives, in the Israeli context at least, is the Zionist one, which has, as is well known, both intrinsic (religious) and extrinsic (secular) forms.

From a modernist point of view, Jewish history must be conceived historically, that is, as the story of a single entity, the Jewish People, that has emerged at a certain historical moment, and later evolved and developed gradually through time, revealing different, changing aspects of its "nature" in different times and places and due to changing historical circumstances, yet maintaining a solid continuity of some primordial element: "spirit," "faith," "culture," or "fate." "Diaspora" is the general term for these changing historical circumstances, and the modernist metanarrative must pretend that

they too have maintained a basic unity and continuity. It must also frame the explanations for the fact that the Nation has survived all challenges to it and that in this century, at the eve of its almost total destruction, it chose the route of political emancipation.

Of course, one does not read all this directly into or out of the *Machzor*; but if one holds a modernist position, this is what frames one's reading of the text. The way biblical stories are mentioned thus becomes a pretext for the main plot, the relation between God and his people in exile.<sup>21</sup> Redemption becomes a telos of the historical process, a false one according to the extrinsic reading, or a real one to be achieved with some help from the faithful pioneers of Jewish history, according to the intrinsic reading.<sup>22</sup> And most importantly, the cycle of sins and repentance is reincorporated into the history of the Nation. It is presented either as that which has produced false consciousness and obscured the way for Jewish political emancipation,<sup>23</sup> or as that which, because still unbalanced, prevents the realization of the telos of Jewish history.<sup>24</sup>

A postmodern reader does not believe in metanarratives. In contrast to the attempt to see various expressions of the state of the Nation in various moments of its history in the *Machzor*, she looks there for the textual means that create the Jewish diasporic metanarrative and stabilize its temporal organization. Without begging the question of the role of these textual means in the preservation of a diasporic "mentality" or the formation of a modern Israeli one, she may seek to understand them as a factor that is still shaping Jewish forms of diasporic existence. In particular, she may look for the possibilities these textual strategies have opened since they have become a main scene for interaction and cooperation between secular and religious Jews.

First, it must be noted that the unfolding of the history of the Nation and the formation of the ritual's temporality take place in the course of intense negotiation. On the one side stands—or is posited—the divine partner who creates the opportunity. In an attempt to restore a cosmic equilibrium repeatedly violated, He offers the sinners—each individual and the entire Nation—a mechanism of self-purging and confession: for He "*desire[s] not the death of the sinner, but that he return from his evil way and live*" (33:7). On the other side stand the worshippers; they try to join the process of repair in relatively comfortable conditions and propose the terms of the deal: "*And the sins that I have committed against thee, blot out through thy mercy, but not by means of severe bodily*



*sufferings and malignant diseases*" (39). These terms are repeated several times during the holy day and later the Almighty is even pressed to act accordingly: "O Lord, we have done what you dictated to us, you too do with us what you have promised" (347).

What this positioning of the two partners establishes, in fact, is an annual (cyclic) rhythm of sin and repentance (as the opening *Kol Nidrei* clearly expresses it: "From this day of atonement until the next day of atonement"). But the annual rhythm is also a rhythm of annulment. As sins meet their judgment, destined to be punished or forgiven, they are erased from divine memory. And after the last service, *Neilla*, a new list of sins to be confessed next year is opened at once. Through all of the years the individual and the community can become neither more sinful nor purer. There are no means for comparison; all social or historical differentiations that might have been relevant (for example, that this generation is inferior to the one before it, or that the sins of a particular section in the community are greater than those of other sections) are removed in advance: accumulation, progress, or decline are out of the question.

The worshipper makes his confession and awaits his forgiveness this year exactly as he did last year and will in the next. Atonement, so it seems, is designed to ensure peaceful coexistence between a fragile creature with a propensity to sin and his perfect Creator, who has made everything in wisdom—the evil impulse, the disaster of the destruction of the Temple, and the distress of exile included. The worshipper asks his Creator to forgive him for being driven too often by that evil impulse and calls upon Him to put an end to the shame of destruction and the suffering of exile. But, in fact, he makes it known that he is guilty, no matter what, and therefore unworthy of redemption, and also that he still has faith in that God who has made his situation so miserable. He expresses this faith, or simply consoles himself, through the story of redemption in some unforeseeable future. Then, at the end of the day, everything returns peacefully to its place, the shofar is blown, everyone says, with relief and new hope, "Next year in Jerusalem," and they all run home to revive their hungry bodies.

Between that present moment of temporary relief and the unforeseeable future of final redemption, a foreseen future has been anticipated, of next-year prayer, when the ritual will be repeated. This future is not posthistorical but ahistorical, a repetitions present or a future of repetitions, and not only of the same ritual but also a repetition of the same kind of relations between the individual and

his God, between God and His Nation, and between the Nation and any of its members, a repetition of the same kinds of behaviors, sins, and repentance and the same kind of withdrawal from action in history (more adequately, the repentance, the whole ritual of atonement, was not designed to diminish sin, let alone to eradicate it or change the conditions generating it. If there is a narrative here, a plot, a drama, it does not lie in the seemingly volatile relations between God and his worshippers, for on this scene everything is foretold and no authority is given. The diasporic metanarrative preempts any attempt to speak about the life of individuals, the community of worshippers, or the Nation as a whole in the language of the drama or of historical narrative.

Despite the obvious fact that sin relates to action, and diverse, detailed tables of sinful actions are represented repeatedly,<sup>25</sup> the ritual (in sharp distinction from the Catholic confession) does not refer to any particular—past or future—act of the individual or the community. Sins are actually inevitable, because "no living creature can be just in thy presence" (53), and one need not look for any particular act to determine their source. Human action seems but a dull decor in the ritual of atonement that clearly divides the sphere of action in two: divine acts that determine the fate of humans, human acts that hardly affect anything but divine judgment. The ritual is persistently arranged so as to neutralize, in advance, any attempt to act in history or even to conceive of sin, evil, and suffering in terms of actual social reality and its possible transformation.

However, the cycle of sin and repentance is not a nonmediated relation between the sinner and his God but a mediated one, the mediator being the People of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Being a member of the Nation means having a special spectrum of sins, options of repentance, and chances for being forgiven that no gentile has. The cycle of sins and repentance is incorporated into the history of the Nation and its functions there as that which bends the axis of time and forces it to go in circles, with neither memory nor progress, except for preexilic memories and postexilic hopes.

Sin and exile seem perpetually linked: "We have acted wickedly, and have transgressed, we, therefore, have not been relieved" (63). But only at a few, quite exceptional points does the *Machzor* state this explicitly: "Because of our sins we have been exiled from our native country" (291; Goldschmidt 1970, 766). Sins come first; they

are exile's moving cause, what gives it substance and form, what defers its coming to its end. Whereas the Nation mediates between the sinner and his God, sins mediate between the individual and the Nation. Sinning individuals keep the Nation in exile and preserve exile as the mode of existence of the Nation. At the same time, a Nation in exile is the framework of and scene for the perpetual sins of individuals.

Sins come first and yet no sin is original. Sins originate in individuals, they belong to them by right; responsibility for sinning is never transferred to an Other, another time, place, or cause: "We are not shameless of face . . . to declare that we are righteous . . . we have sinned. We have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have . . ." (33). In contrast to the original sin of Christianity, which preceded human history and constituted its very possibility, the principal form of the original Israelite sin is fixed within history and accompanied the Nation from the exodus from Egypt until the destruction of the Temple. Before that destruction, in historical past, sin had a history of its own—the Golden Calf, Korah, Achan, Bathsheba on the roof, Naboth's vineyard—each sin with its unique character and its crisis and tragedy, its pride and moral. But of this history there is no mention in the *Mahzor*. Instead there is a short list, not really a history but a chronicle, of events in which God answered famous pious men in trouble. This list is revealing for its acute historical sensibility: it runs from Abraham on Mount Moria to Ezra in exile, with whom historical time ends and the long ahistorical present begins. As the list concludes: "May he who answered the virtuous, pious, perfect, and upright, answer us" (73). No particular events are recorded any longer, let alone their sequence, only their general kinds. There is no longer any connection between particular acts (sins or supplications) and their consequences (punishment or relief), only a general, continuous punishment: exile forever accompanied with the never-ending murmur of its supplication.

Both sin and salvation are subsumed under the most general pattern of the Jewish metanarrative, summarized in a common formula that is not unique to Yom Kippur alone: "Thou have chosen us of all people . . . and brought us near . . . unto thy service" (27). The addition to the *Musaph* prayer makes explicit what the formulation in the rest of the prayers implies: "But because of our sins, we have been exiled from our native country and removed from our land"

(291). Framed with a diasporic narrative, individual sins are shaped as contingent but anticipated expressions of the national sin.

The history of the nation in exile is a monolithic block of time that contains only two fundamental situations that frequently alternate with each other: persecution and salvation. There is no generation in which one cannot say, with a sense of self-recognition: "I will give vent to my soul, and recite how the presumptuous have eagerly swallowed us up; for in the reign of a certain Emperor, no remedy was found" (383); there is no generation about which one cannot say "for we have strayed from thee, we have erred from thy precepts" (383); and there is no generation for which one cannot wish for the day when "all manners of wickedness vanish as smoke, when though shall remove the dominion of wickedness from the earth" (27). The individual bewails the general disaster, confesses the sins of the whole community, and reaffirms, on every Yom Kippur, the most basic pattern of the Nation's history.

This is a very flexible metanarrative indeed. Precisely because it is indifferent to action in history—it does not record any particular biblical event and erases the memory of outstanding individuals—it opens the way to a myriad of approaches to history for both the individual and the collective. The dehistoricization of action and the deconstruction of particular and individual cases of sin and punishment make drama and history irrelevant for *re*<sup>27</sup> behavior, for the purity and purification of everyday life. By the same token it makes *re* behavior, sin, and punishment irrelevant for action in history. Therefore, the modernist metanarratives alluded to above are not so much competitors of and substitutes for the diasporic one, but possible options contained within it (toward which it is equally indifferent). The ultra-orthodox objections to Jewish action in history come from elsewhere, they have no roots at the Yom Kippur ritual and its accompanying literature, and they find no support in its temporality. Whether one works for a messianic redemption or for more earthly, political forms of relief from suffering, one is placed outside the cycle of sins and repentance. The ritual bears very little on the world of everyday practice, of politics and social action, no matter what position one holds. It is precisely for this reason that secular and religious Jews can overcome their differences in the framework of the ritual and share, with ease, the open structure of its metanarrative.

## IV. The Status of the Individual

*On the authority of the Mahom and on the authority of the community [Kahal], in heavenly gathering and in earthly gartering, we hereby permit to pray with the delinquents. (Beginning of Evening Service, 15)*

*We have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously, we have stolen, we have spoken slander. . . . For the sin which we have committed against thee, either by compulsion or voluntarily, and for the sin which we have committed before thee with a stubborn heart . . . and for the sin which we have committed . . . and for the sin which we . . . and for the sin. (Standard prayer in all services; e.g., 33)*

Postmodern discourses deconstruct the subject. The subject is not the origin of its unity and identity; these are never stable and always in need of being recaptured and reasserted. Subjectivity is not a structure that can ground judgments of any sort, be they cognitive, moral, aesthetic, or, least of all, personal-intrrospective. Subjectivization, not subjectivity, is what is at stake in the way a historically determined culture and society shapes individuals. To be a subject means to occupy or hold a pre-given position in a discourse, a cultural field, a social system. To be a subject means to be caught in an intricate, fluid field of power relations and to be always in need of taking certain positions with respect to these relations. Like the "emissary of the community,"<sup>28</sup> the postmodern individual is "poor in deeds": she may excel or fail in her performance, but she is neither the proper author nor the proper end of the deeds she would like to claim her own as well as those ascribed to her by others.

Anachronistic as it may sound, the subject is indeed deconstructed in the Yom Kippur ritual (perhaps in Jewish liturgy in general). Most of the confessions are written in the first person plural. The worshipper does not stand alone opposite his Creator or opposite his impulses, limitations, fragility, sins. Like the entire prayer, the confession, too, is a collective one. There is no correspondence between the individual's deeds and the nature of his repentance. The confession, the forgiveness, and the atonement are arranged in a fixed format: private sin is always already part of the condition of the collective. The worshipper faces his God through the mediation of the entire nation or in its name and always as its member. As the directions of the popular commentator on Jewish

liturgy, Eliyahu Kitov, suggest, the penitent "should say the entire text of the confession without skipping even those sins that he knows in the depth of his heart that he never committed. For all Israel are accountable/responsible [*arevimi*] for each other" (Kitov 1972, I, 53). Even "the emissary of the community" who stands in front of the Ark is not really individualized; any male with a clear voice who knows the melodies can become the emissary [*Shlich* *Tzibur*] and sing the hymns that are written for him in advance.

God, Lord of all Deeds, is the only subject in the full sense of the word. Except that His subjectivity is a projection of the religious discourse that, in this ritual at least, constitutes God as the eternal addressee whose own words are always anticipated, uttered, and reiterated by others, the worshippers. About themselves, the worshippers admit that they are "lacking in deeds."<sup>29</sup> The emissary of the community opens his prayer before the additional service with a complete abnegation of his selfhood: "*Here I am the poor in deeds*" (Goldschmidt 1970, 325). In the final analysis, no deed can originate with the individual. This is a problematic statement, for the notion of repentance requires that individuals would be the authors of their sins. Forgiveness presupposes responsibility, intention, choice, and resolute decision—in short, personal sovereignty and autonomy of some kind. But such moments of subjectivity are excluded from the regular order of the ritual or relegated to some prayers that precede it.<sup>30</sup>

One of these prayers is *Tfila Zakka* (pure prayer), composed in Hungary in the eighteenth century. Though not very popular anymore, it is still said in some communities before *Kol Nidrei* "with wailing and with great intending." It deals with the sovereign subject as if it were a kind of necessary nuisance that one cannot manage with and cannot manage without. One cannot do without choice between good and evil, otherwise the whole notion of providence would collapse; but one cannot bear the consequences of this choice, for the evil impulse is so tempting and the reasoned will so weak. So instead of taking direct responsibility for his sins, the worshipper asks for the permission to take responsibility for the holiness of the day and for its five kinds of tortures that would purify him of his mistaken choices. The confessor thus acknowledges individual responsibility and at the same time rides himself of it. And even before the prayer is halfway done the plural voice takes over from the language of the first person singular: "*And we knew that we are committed to suffer the tortures . . . and torment*

our body" (H33). The Zakeh is but a tuning of an instrument.<sup>31</sup> From here on only the entire orchestra is heard: "And it shall be forgiven to the whole congregation of the children of Israel, and to the stranger who sojourneth among them; for all the people act ignorantly" (15).

From the outset, the authority of the community ("daat ha'hal'") presides over the individual and allots him a range of possible actions and attitudes. The individual is not totally exempt from a private confrontation with his sins, but this privacy has a limited force, which originates in the public sphere (*reshut harabim*), and a limited, defined time before and outside the official prayer. When sin has been driven out of the individual's private sphere, the entire world of practice has become a public matter: the extent of the various practices is prescribed by the law (that endlessly extensive network of precepts and prescriptions) and the ultimate end of these practices is eternally fixed by the spiritual survival of the Nation and its redemption at the end of time. Private experience and instrumental reason have no place in this religious public sphere. These two outcasts, privacy and instrumental reason, will continue to play side by side in close affinity: there will be no privacy other than that which has been exteriorized in everyday instrumental actions and there will be no social actions that have any value or significance except for a transient, private meaning for those involved in them. Above all, the individual cannot construct his image and identity out of the splendor of his deeds, even if these are pure and innocent, nor can the world of practice be measured according to the splendor or innocence of those who take part in it.

The prayer constitutes for each (adult male) individual in the community the same position of a participant-performer. There is no mechanism for expressing private feeling, not even for making social distinctions according to moral or religious standards. Yet the individual's private sphere, his existential experience and social distinctiveness, is not eliminated; it is ignored. The individual is thus allowed to keep his privacy uninjured, for the prayer neither calls it by name nor gives it any existence in the official language of religious discourse. With the blowing of the shofar after the *Neilah* prayer, the individual remains within his own realm exactly as he was at the beginning of *Kol Midrei*—desiring, dreaming, and suffering, devoid of meaning. Any attempt by a particularly impudent privacy to overrun its bounds is stifled at its inception; and,

vice versa, no attempt is made to reshape the private realm. Prayer, like Wittgenstein's philosophy, leaves everything as it is.

The first person singular has not been entirely erased from the *Ma'azor*, but in what remains of it there is nothing to attest to the traces of the individual as a subject or to offer him a crevice through which he might save a lost "authenticity." On the contrary, the use of the singular is part of the mechanism that negates the individuality of the individual worshipper. In the section that closes the silent prayer (*Amidah*), after the confession, "We have sinned," in which all the kinds of sins have been mentioned and classified, the worshipper says, "O My God, before I was formed, I was unworthy, and now that I have been formed I am as though I have not been formed" (39). By this he accepts the fact of his nullification in the face of his Creator and reaffirms the equality, in principle, of all worshippers, each one of whom is nothing but "dust in [his] lifetime, how much more at [his] decease, a vessel full of shame and disgrace" (39). And in the same breath he asks to be given atonement without too much "bodily sufferings and malignant diseases" (39). Of the entire process of repentance, only the anticipated suffering obliges a shift to the singular. Even this suffering, however, is apprehended in its universal dimension only, as future suffering that equally threatens every single individual.<sup>32</sup>

The most distinctive use of the first person singular is found in the *Musaph* service, in the words of the High Priest in the Temple at the moment of his entrance into the Holy of Holies: "O God! I now acknowledge that I have sinned. I have committed iniquity; I have transgressed against thee; even I and my household" (359). There is a distant echo here of the special emotional state of the individual standing before his Creator and of the experience that happened, in Maimonides' words, "at the height of the day." The text becomes intense, highly poetic, sensual, openly celebrating appearances ("how glorious was the appearance of the high priest when he came forth safe from the holy sanctuary" [367]). But then too, we must recall, the priest was the only one who confessed; the entire nation looked on from afar and he alone, stripped of his privacy, in a well-staged moment of the ceremony at the Temple, embodied the way the nation stands before its God.<sup>33</sup> The *Ma'azor* reconstructs that moment in several passages that break the continuity of the *piyyutin* and attest to the distance between worship at the Temple and in the synagogue, between sovereignty and exile, and between the biblical ritual as a mechanism of social

distinction and social hierarchy and the diasporic ritual with its tendency to level hierarchies and erase social differences.

At this point, the critique of ideology might emphasize the substitution of a national subject for an authentic individual one. It might point to a double process of projection of individual sin and punishment onto the nation and of the moment of individual choice onto God. This type of external reading might seek to disclose the illusion of repression and fraud involved in shifting the focus of responsibility for the sin from the individual to the collective. It would stress the manner in which the language of the prayer gives expression to the identity and unity of the collective subject.

The ideology of the prayer, on the other hand, might try to balance the effects of deindividuation and deprivatization by presenting the existential force of the prayer and the resultant act of repentance. It might seek to restore an irreducible status to the individual and to make the success of the entire process of repentance dependent on his inner, most private *kavanah* (intention). The text may tolerate this extrapolation, as much as it can bear the extrapolation of an extrinsic, "psychologized" reading. In the first case, one's *kavanah* is taken seriously, as an authentic expression of an inner self; in the second, it is interpreted as an expression, a symptom, of a deluded self, of the work of false consciousness. But in both cases the individual is assumed to be an active agent who controls, to a certain extent at least, the meaning of the ritual, and this assumption is maintained without any evidence on the surface of the text or the course of the ritual. Which is to say, the individual, as a source or a victim, is interpreted as a hidden, "deep" structure of the religious phenomenon and his subjectivity is constructed without adequate textual evidence.

Free of that supposedly inner depth that the text expresses and activates, a postmodern reading of the same sections looks at the same textual practices not as expressions of subjectivity but as a mechanism for its construction and deconstruction. Such a reading seeks to articulate a network of connections and differences between the various occurrences of the first person singular in the *Mahzor* and the plural language generally adopted by it and considers the effects of these connections and differences. The analysis of the worshipper's position presented above is a partial example of such an approach.

The subject, both the private and the national one, is grasped not as the foundation of liturgic discourse but as its construct, a position defined from within the liturgy. In the *Mahzor*, this

position is produced by the systematic "we," the pole around which the entire text is woven. The addressor designated by this "we" is never the source of the speech that flows from him, but always only a performer of a text that was there before him. This text is an aggregate of quotations, where quotations of quotations are heaped up on top of one another and interlaced within one another, lacking a clear source, or any trace for the context of composition. Everything there has always already been said more than once, in other times and places, by different speakers to different addressees, but now all these phrases are gathered and directed to one pole, to the absolute addressee of the discourse. The position of the subject-speaker is defined by the mode of presence of this absent addressee and by the mode of intentionality toward Him. The *Mahzor* contains instructions for performing discourse in the absence of a source and in the presence of an absent addressee.

Postmodern reading thus reveals here—in clear opposition to what the ideology of the prayer wishes to praise and its critique wishes to dismiss—a game of gestures and positionings free of any authorial presence. The absence of both source and addressee liberates the ritual from any fixed authority and opens before the individual speaker a horizon of nonhierarchical relations with all other worshippers, those co-present at the site, or performing the ritual in other sites at the same time, but also all those who have performed the ritual in the past.<sup>34</sup> The worshipper's relation with the collective is unmediated, and the collective itself is unbounded by spatio-temporal boundaries. A national subject and a way to take part in it emerge here, and they are both concrete in the infinity of their expressions, but abstract in their conceptualization.

In the *Mahzorim* that were prevalent in Eastern Europe and are still widely used in many ultra-orthodox congregations in the United States and in Israel, there appear some additional prayers and hymns (some of them only in Yiddish) in which the singular is used consistently and without reservations.<sup>35</sup> Yiddish is a channel by which the worshipper can relate an alienated, sublime, and ornate rhetoric to his everyday life, the privacy of his experiences, and, ultimately, to his actual sins. But this is a one-way channel. Yiddish, the "*mane loshen*" (mother-tongue) and language of everyday life, allows the individual to come to terms with the intellectual expectations of the prayer at his own level of understanding, but not to take full part in it. Yiddish creates a special route of prayer for people with "linguistic handicap," dividing the prayer into two levels of performance, one more private, the other

wholly public, but also one more historically embedded and dependent, the other disembodied and historically independent.

This distinction only emphasizes the disparity between text and performance, between the text as a sacred source that is beyond time and place, and a performance that is dependent on a profane context and dictated by the limitations of a particular congregation of worshippers. Ultimately, the limitations of performance derive from the arbitrary and accidental everyday world, and they give expression to differences between different congregations within the ahistorical totality of the nation—a totality that erases all differences. The connection that Yiddish creates between the sacred and the profane and between the ahistorical and the historical marks a boundary between the two realms, but at the same time makes possible a certain coexistence between them. The linguistic disparity is a disparity between an earthly world in which the individual can actualize both his existence as a separate person and his affiliation to a concrete community and a world in which the ahistorical idea of the nation exists and provides the individual with both the basis of his affiliation to the whole and the meaning of his existence. In both cases, the presence of the Yiddish beside the Hebrew makes possible a hierarchical coexistence of the sacred with the profane and of the collective with the individual.

On the face of it, the hierarchical difference between the languages protects the sanctity of the ritual and the purity of the prayer. In fact, it protects the life-world and its experiences from the incursion of the sacred dimension. The differentiation in the modes of performance preserves the experience of *ts'huva*, of repair and conversion, which the ritual shapes, from bursting uncontrollably beyond the bounds of the Holy Day and instigating an unbridled process of conversion in everyday life. But this differentiation also makes it possible to channel something from the sacred into the profane world.<sup>35</sup>

When Hebrew is both the profane language and the sacred language,<sup>37</sup> the barriers are removed, eliminating the hierarchy, reducing the distance between text and performance, between sacred and profane, and between the sense of privacy and the sense of belonging to the collective. Orthodox and secular Jews tend to react to this in different ways. On the one hand, among the Orthodox there is an expansion of the sacred into the distinctly profane realms, and the institution of *ts'huva*<sup>38</sup> has begun to flourish in many contexts beyond that of the High Holidays. On the other

hand, in the absence of faith, the secular Jew, even when he is a "traditionalist," is not a partner to the fundamentally religious intentionality that turns the ritual into a ceremony of conversion. In the absence of mechanisms of mediation between the sacred and the profane, more and more parts and aspects of the ritual are becoming obscure to him. He thus remains alienated from the "deep meanings" of his prayer, whatever these may be. He plays the ritual and he plays with the text; he follows some of the rules, more or less mechanically, and evades other rules. But he still plays on the same court with the Orthodox worshipper, and he accepts in fact, unknowingly or clear-mindedly and gladly, the slide of the sacred into the profane world. Indirectly he collaborates with the increasing process of colonization of the life-world and of the private realm by a transcendental collective, that same collective that pretends to bridge the gap between the individual who has no deeds and the Sovereign of All Deeds.

For the religious Jew, the ritual of repentance starts long before the Day of Atonement. *Slichot*, penitential prayers, are said through the month of Elul preceding Yom Kippur, during the two days of prayer of Rosh Hashanah, and throughout the week of the "ten days of repentance." On Yom Kippur eve itself the religious Jew comes to the synagogue after a whole day of preparation and sanctification that includes a private ritual of confession in the afternoon or after the meal. For him repentance is clearly a kind of work, in the psychoanalytical sense, in which his entire personality is involved. When the ritual finally erases most traces of individuality and molds the many singular voices into the singular voice of the nation of Israel, the individual is prepared and ready for the transforming experience. Not so with the secular Jew.

The secular Jew comes to the synagogue right after the meal, which is an event in itself, usually a delight for the senses and a very earthly pleasure. He may have spent Rosh Hashanah on the beach (the lake of Galilee is especially popular at that time) and has not changed his routine of life during the following week, except perhaps for some additional shopping in packed stores. For him, Yom Kippur can never function as a rite of passage and when he comes to the synagogue he can hardly understand the ritual as a possible rite of passage for others. He is usually quite ignorant of most of the context of the ritual as experienced by the religious Jew.

He participates in it in a very selective way, yet this selection is quite brutal, an outcome of neglect, ignorance, and cultural distance; it is not deliberate and it is executed with little awareness. The secular Jew who comes to the synagogue on Yom Kippur, to the extent that he uses the *Mahzor* at all, is left with the skeleton of the ritual, devoid of those mechanisms—textual and social—that balance or resist the forces of dehistoricization and collectivization and compensate for the process of deindividuation that the worshipper undergoes during the ritual.

The secular Jew is welcome into an extremely flexible text that contains no prerequisites for participation in the ritual it sustains. Relatively easily he is drawn into the world of the exile, powerless Jew, for whom the present resembles the past. This congregation of believers resembles any other and all sinners resemble each other. Relatively easily he is *minnaser* to the forces of collectivization and dehistoricization. He has come there in the first place because he wants to belong and partnership is what he gets. It is a partnership in an ideal, idealized community, whose locality and historicity—the power relations that pervade it and the desires that motivate it—have all been effaced, or blurred, or brought to a common, undifferentiated denominator. The more one belongs to this community, the less one can be aware or give an account of the real forms of partnership(s) maintained within the concrete religious community and the real relations between this community and other communities and other social structures, from the state to the family, and from the Jewish to the non-Jewish population. The distinction between the ideal and the real here is not metaphysical; it is a socially and culturally embodied distinction between the world of the synagogue and everything that takes place outside of its spatial domain and the sacred time demarcated by the religious ritual. For the secular Jew this distinction is quite clearcut. In other words, for the secular Jew, the *Mahzor* is an ideological text, pure and simple, in the old, good Marxist sense of the term. But it takes a post-Marxist, poststructuralist, postmodern reading and analysis to realize this.

## NOTES

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1. In the last decade there has been a remarkable change in patterns of behavior of secular Israelis during Yom Kippur, especially in highly secularized areas like downtown Tel Aviv and some of the city's more affluent suburbs. More people in more places dare to drive their cars during the Holy Day, fewer people visit the synagogue, and if they do they stay there for shorter periods of time. Most interesting is the new habit of many to gather outdoors on Yom Kippur evening and walk along the empty streets, turning them, for one night, into a truly public space. Still, synagogues are full with worshippers for whom Yom Kippur is the only time that they visit the synagogue throughout the year. As to the central role of the Haggadah in Israeli life, see Ophir 1994.
2. And in Passover too, yet in a different form. See Ophir 1994.
3. Many social, political, and cultural phenomena in contemporary religious communities in Israel may be ascribed and interpreted as responses to modernization and accelerated secularization of the Israeli-Jewish environment. See, e.g., Eisenstadt 1985; Fischer 1991 and forthcoming.
4. Apart from the theoretical objections to the idea of "the text," the mere diversity of versions among the various communities and their transformations along the years do not permit one to deal with the *Mahzor* as a single text; at most the *Mahzor* is a family, or rather a tribe, of texts, the reconstruction of whose genealogy can be only partially accomplished. For such a reconstruction, cf. Elbogen 1972, 24, 33; Goldschmidt 1970. Nevertheless, in what follows I hardly refer to any textual modification or transformation and concentrate mainly on the more or less fixed liturgic structures and on those passages that appear in most versions of the *Mahzor* in use today in Israeli synagogues. Therefore, I keep referring to the *Mahzor* conveniently and inaccurately as "a text."
5. Three sections appear below; the three others deal with the representation of divine judgment, the representation of power, and the semantics of sin in the *Mahzor*. The unpublished sections roughly correspond to three main presuppositions of postmodern discourse: there is no final grounding for cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments; discourse is a scene of rivalry and competition and is always pervaded by power relations; what matters in discourse is not the meaning of the signified but the play of the signifier. An earlier version of these fragments appeared in Hebrew (Ophir 1991).
6. No attempt is made here to give an exhaustive description of a "post-

modern point of view"; neither the possibility of such a description nor the unity of that point of view are presupposed. And yet the tenets or themes used here as points of departure and perspectives of interpretation are characteristically postmodern.

7. More generally, and more accurately, an "extrinsic" reading takes discursive and nondiscursive religious practices as its object, without ever holding a position in a religious discourse or becoming a participant in a religious language game. An "intrinsic" reading engages itself with the interpretation and critique of religious practices from within a certain religious discourse and takes seriously the validity claims of such discourse, seeking to reaffirm or refute them with reasons. I am speaking here about two kinds of approaches, without any claim to do justice to the enormous bodies of literature that embody, qualify, and differentiate them. Extrinsic critique of Jewish religious discourse may be traced back to the writers of the Haskalah. Max Nordau and Yoseph Haim Brenner are two of the most prominent critics in the earlier years of the Zionist movement (e.g., Nordau 1936, vol. 2; Brenner 1985a; cf. Channi 1976, 36-55, 71-81). A contemporary critic is Boaz Evron (1988, 21-127). It is worth noting that the critique of religion is a marginal issue in contemporary Israeli public life; its place has been taken long ago by political criticism of the policies of the religious parties. As for a contemporary, modern, intrinsic reading of Jewish religious discourse, see Leibovich 1979; Hartman 1985. Levinas or Soloveitchik may supply more prominent examples for intrinsic reading, perhaps, but I have mainly the former thinkers in mind, for they have a much wider Hebrew readership.
8. I am writing under the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language (especially as developed by Lyotard 1988), the Foucauldian conception of discourse (especially Foucault 1972, 1981), and more generally the philosophical "mood" known as deconstructionism, but I am not following or applying any of these systematically.
9. Most references to the *Mahzor* are to the *Form of Prayers for the Day of Atonement* (no date). A few passages are translated from Goldschmidt's critical edition (1970) or from a popular Hebrew edition, *Mahzor Krasset Israel* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, n.d.). References to this text are marked with "H."
10. Medieval negative theology is "modern," at least in the sense that it limits what can be said and claimed to be known about the divine Being in rational discourse. For a consistent and more radical Israeli version of negative theology that follows Leibovich, see Kasher 1977.
11. As the long tradition of negative theology has made clear, God cannot become a referent for "rational" discourse without running into difficulties of predicating an unbounded, unlimited being, which is actually not "a being" but Being-itself (e.g., Tillich 1951, vol. 1, 237). However, whatever the theological difficulties, in the language of the ritual God

- is clearly posited as a referent, and repeatedly so. Conceived as a referent of a believer's or an atheist's utterance, God's existence must be one of His predicates, a necessary one. God is not a Centaur, or Kant's coin, that may or may not exist, without affecting the meaning of all other phrases that refer to Him. Existence is part of what Heschel calls "the minimum of meaning" of God (Heschel 1955, 125-28; cf. Adams 1987, chaps. 13, 14; Alston 1989, chap. 5).
  12. For example, the contradictions between "He dwelleth in secret" (183), "hidden from all" (210), and "He covereth himself with light, as with a garment . . . the splendence of his throne is radiant fire" (197), or between a merciful Father whose "garment [is] righteousness" and "He has girt himself around with zeal and revenge" (183).
  13. There are at least two lists of famous supplications and divine answers, a short one that includes Micha, Daniel, and Ezra (67), and a longer one that runs from Abraham on Mount Moria to Ezra in exile (71). On the latter, see below, 198.
  14. Even Elisha Ben Avioia, "Acher" (Other), was given, according to one tradition at least, a last occasion to repent (Babylonian Talmud, *Hagiga* 15a).
  15. If during the ritual there are social forces at work that undermine this integration, they cannot use the *Mahzor*; they rather circumscribe it, for no hierarchy among different ranks of worshippers is inscribed in the text or can be extracted from it.
  16. This, despite the fact that in the *Mahzor* the separation between Jew and Gentile is relatively marginal and expressed almost only in the language of everyday prayer ("Thou hast chosen us from all people"). The blurring of the separation between Jew and Gentile is expressed most typically in *Mafir Jonah*, the Book of Jonah, read in the afternoon service. God, so the Book ends, has pity even on a corrupted Gentile city like Ninevah, whose dwellers "cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand." The universal moment, however, is immediately placed in a proper particularized context, in the way the *Mafir* is concluded and its lesson is drawn. An appeal is made to God to pardon his people, for as everyone has just learned, He is known as One "who keepeth not his anger forever" (411).
- Some hymns included in older versions of the prayer, which emphasize the separation and call upon God to take revenge on the Gentiles, were mostly excluded in recent times and are hardly ever sung. Thus, for example, there is the hymn of the morning service in the Ashkenazic version "Mi Lo Yirachia Melech Ha'goyim" (Who does not fear you, King of Nations) that presents a series of differences between Israel and the Gentiles in a simple form of opposition and uses the same form to call for divine revenge (Goldschmidt 1970, 186-201). Another example is a hymn from the Additional Service, "Adonai Melech audo Goyim/bala batei goyim" (God has reigned as a king, the



- gentiles have perished/He swallowed gentiles' houses) (380-81). See also Goldschmidt 1978, 363-68.
17. In some hymns and prayers, e.g., in the prayer *Zakka* that precedes the Evening Service, the Yetzer (impulse) is presented as the "internal Other" of the practicing Jew (see below). Sometimes the soul-body opposition is expressed in an almost Platonic-Christian fashion, e.g.: "*Guf v'hesama yariv/ze el ze ammarin yashiv*" (body and soul quarrel, answer back each other) (Goldschmidt 1970, 296-97).
  18. According to one outstanding passage only, the third benediction added to the Eighteen Benedictions in the Morning Service (242).
  19. One may say that sins postpone redemption and no sin is an exception to this rule. The fact remains, however, that only a few sins are mentioned explicitly in this context.
  20. The most famous representative of this kind of reading in this context is that of Gush Emunim, of Rabbi Kook and his disciples. In their hands, the diasporic metanarrative has been historicized and politicized. The destruction of the Temple is still a main turning point, but now the loss of political sovereignty is foregrounded, overshadowing the loss of a whole system of religious practices. Exile has become a story of continuous heroic attempts to maintain the link between the Nation and the Land of Israel, and redemption has become the telos and coming end of a long historical process, among whose discernible stages are the main events of our time: the slaughter of European Jewry, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the "liberation" of Western Eretz-Israel in June 1967.
  21. The most impressive story is that of the ritual at the Temple. It is pervaded with yearning and nostalgia, a mixture of a sense of awe and deep loss: "How glorious was the appearance of the High Priest when he came forth safe from the holy sanctuary" (367). The apotheosis of the preexilic relation between God and His people is also what best describes what is now (ever since the destruction of the Temple) absent. The loss is immediately interpreted in the following *Techinot* that continue the narrative: "But our ancestor's sins destroyed the House . . . and as a result of *our* sins we have no *Ishim* and no *Asham* [kinds of sacrifices]" (368).
  22. The most prominent modern teleological interpretation of repentance (in general, not necessarily that of Yom Kippur) is that of Rav Kook (Kook 1985). For the relation between cosmic, cyclical time, repentance, and historical progress in Kook's thought, see Aronson 1980.
  23. This is the main argument in the secular Zionist critique of religion. See, for example, Brenner 1985b; Sirkin 1929; Tavenkin 1972.
  24. In a standard orthodox textbook on Yom Kippur, in the context of interpreting the phrase "*Al daat ha'kaval v'el daat ha'makom*" (on the authority of the public and on the authority of God), one finds the following typical statement: "And now, that it is permitted for them

- [the criminals] to pray with all of Israel, for all of them are descendants of Abraham, Issak and Jacob, and the will of them all is to do the will of God. And who retards [the harmony between God and his nation]? Exile retards and the temptations of evil impulse" (Kitov 1972, I, 51-52). Exile is both the cause and effect of the retarded salvation, and also both the cause and effect of the prolongation of sinful behavior.
25. I have elaborated on these tables in the unpublished section of this essay on the semiotics of the *Mahzor*.
  26. For the trinity individual-God-Nation in the prayer, see, e.g., Soloveitchik 1968, 33-41. The diasporic mode of existence of the Nation gives sin and repentance their special, cyclic form. At the same time, the nation also provides a shelter against the ire of God: being part of the Nation is reassuring (the worshipper reassures himself time and again) for the promise of the covenant is always present, never to be broken, yet the fulfillment of this promise is always postponed and so can be repeatedly invoked.
  27. I.e., religiously correct.
  28. "Emissary of the Community" is the title given to the person who leads the prayer and recites those passages for "solo voice" to which the congregation responds.
  29. In Hebrew, *ein banu masim*. The edition I am using here renders the phrase "despite of good works," whereas "good" is certainly an addition of the translator.
  30. Ancient and recent thinkers alike have noticed this tension without necessarily resolving it. Thus, for example, Maimonides, in his "Codes of Tshuva" (1961, chap. 1:1), when talking about confession in general, emphasizes the first person singular. But he makes it clear that in Yom Kippur both confession and forgiveness are collective matters (chap. 2:7-8). Even Rav Soloveitchik follows Maimonides here, despite his characteristic existentialist sensibilities, and excludes the first person singular from the ritual of atonement. He accepts the common rule that makes a special room for a private confession in the afternoon service at the eve of the Holy Day (in Pei 1984, 97-125). And there are more simplistic explanations that take the confession in the plural voice as "but a framework fixed for those who do not know to express themselves, so they too will be able to confess" (Falk 1980, 17).
  31. In the Sephardic *Mahzor* there is a parallel hymn of a different kind, "*Lecha El Teshukati*" (To you, God, my desire, that sticks to the singular language throughout. It is said to be "a kind of confessor" and is sung before *Kol Nidrei* (Kitov 1972, I, 50-51). In general, I assume that a careful comparison between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic prayer books (which I have not done) will point to a greater degree of expression to the personal voice in the Sephardic *Mahzor*.
  32. The next appeal to God is still in the singular, in the form common to every Amidah prayer ("*My God! preserve my tongue from wicked*

- calumny"), and it is transformed immediately into the second person ("O do it for the sake of thy name") and then is sealed in the plural, in an utterance about all of Israel ("He may give peace to us and also to the whole People of Israel") and its redemption (39).
33. In a parallel passage of the *Birkat Cohanim* (Priests' Benediction), in a section that has been omitted from the most versions of the text in Eretz-Israel, the common worshipper says: "Sovereign of the Universe! I am thine and my dreams are thine; I have dreamt a dream, but know not what it portends" (Goldschmidt 1970, 597). The privacy of the dream, itself a threatening locus of inhimacy, is erased; its interpretation, which might have been of special significance to the individual, is something he gives up from the outset; and finally, in a last act of repression, it becomes the dream of all the people of Israel.
34. There is no trace of authorship in any of the *piyyutin*. No particular contribution to the ritual is recorded in the framework of the ritual itself, and the difference between author and performer has been erased.
35. Examples may be found in ordinary American editions of the *maḥzor* with Yiddish translation and commentaries; e.g. *Maḥzor Kol Bo with Hebrew Textsch [Yiddish] Interpretation in the Name of Beit Israel*. The book contains additional prayers in Yiddish in the first singular (e.g., before *Zakeh*, "Tehina far licht baarshkein" for Yom Kippur eve [15-17]; two *tehinot* before *Kol Nidrei* [33]; "Request after the Prayer," said after the evening service [88]), as well as additional prayers in the first person singular in both Hebrew and Yiddish (e.g., a hymn sung at the end of the morning service, while taking the Torah scrolls from the ark ["Lord of the world, fulfill the requests of my heart"] [175] and a prayer during the afternoon service while taking the Torah scrolls out of the ark ["Lord of pity and forgiveness, listen to me and answer me"] [286-87]).
36. In a later section of the unpublished part of this essay, I try to show how this tension between the sublime and the everyday is elaborated so as neither to desecrate the sanctity of the former nor violate the routine of the latter.
37. This is the case in most of the communities in Israel today, except for the ultra-orthodox. But here, too, Hebrew penetrates into some realms of social reality, especially when dealing with politics and the economy. Among Sephardic ultra-orthodox Jews there is no equivalence to Yiddish.
38. *Tshuva*, "repentance," also means "return" or "conversion" of secular Jews to Orthodoxy.

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