"The Tremendum"
Arthur Cohen's understanding of faith after the Holocaust

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Among the most sustained recent Jewish theological discussions of the Sho'ah is Arthur Cohen's The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust. Though a relatively short book, 110 pages in all, it attacks this immense conceptual issue with all of Cohen's customary verve and intelligence. No school theologian, either in the dogmatic or systematic sense, Cohen here makes a prodigious effort to strike out in a new, more radical metaphysical direction as a necessary response to the Event with which he deals.

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Four highly ramified theses lie at the root of Cohen's philosophical reflections. They are: (1) the Holocaust is unique and this uniqueness entails particular theological concomitants; (2) thought is unable to grasp the reality of Auschwitz; (3) no "meaning" is to be found in this genocidal carnage; and (4) evil is more real, more consequential, than Cohen had heretofore allowed. These four intellectually radical pre-suppositions lead Cohen to recognize the need to return, with a newly acquired uncertainty, to the traditional questions of theology. To ask again concerning "the reality of evil and the existence of god, the extremity of evil and the freedom of man, the presentness of evil and the power of God." To ask still more concretely if "like our ancestors we are obliged to decide

1 Published in New York in 1981.
2 Ibid., p. 38.
whether (national) catastrophies are compatible with our traditional notions of a beneficent and providential God. The past generations of Israel decided that they were. The question today is whether the same conclusion may be wrung from the data of the *tremendum*.

If this is, and I agree that it is, the essential question, what is Cohen's answer? If "there is no end until the end is final. Until that moment, it is only caesura and new beginning," what is the substance of the new, post-*tremendum* beginning? Cohen presents the following schematic formulation of its defining and necessary characteristics:

Any constructive theology after the *tremendum* must be marked by the following characteristics: first, the God who is affirmed must abide in a universe whose human history is scarred by genuine evil without making the evil empty or illusory nor dis-allowing the real presence of God before, even if not within, history; second, the relation of God to creation and its creatures, including, as both now include, demonic structure and unredeemable events, must be seen, nonetheless, as meaningful and valuable despite the fact that the justification that God's presence renders to the worthwhilness of life and struggle is now intensified and anguished by the contrast and opposition that evil supplies; third, the reality of God in his selfhood and person can no longer be isolated, other than as a strategy of clarification, from God's real involvement with the life of creation. Were any of these characteristics to be denied or, worse, proved untrue and unneeded, as strict and unyielding orthodox theism appears to require, creation disappears as fact into mere metaphor or, in the face of an obdurate and ineffaceable reality such as the *tremendum*, God ceases to be more than a metaphor for the inexplicable.

What these three theological requirements entail for Cohen is the bringing together of two seemingly opposite traditional theological strategies. One is that "of the kabbalistic counter history of Judaism" by reference to which Cohen intends to call attention to the kabbalistic doctrine of the Eyn Sof and the related doctrine of creation in which:

God, in the immensity of his being, was trapped by both its absoluteness and necessity into a constriction of utter passivity which would have excluded both the means in will and the reality in act of the creation. Only by the spark of nonbeing (the interior

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3 Ibid., p. 50.
4 Ibid., p. 58.
5 Ibid., p. 86. It should be noted that Cohen is very, and rightly, critical of liberal theology after the *tremendum*; see pp. 45 & 46. He is also correct in his critical judgement of what he terms "the varieties of neo-orthodoxy" (p. 55) which he scores as follows: "Neo-orthodoxy does not cope adequately since it situates the *tremendum* as the dialectic counter of an absent or hidden God, enabling the immensity of the one to pass the mystery of the other in the dark night of this century without compelling them to their dreadful confrontation" (ibid., pp. 85-86).
6 Ibid., p. 86.