



## Workshop

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### Limits of Faith: Jewish Women's Views of the Divine, Jewish History, and Tradition after Auschwitz

13–14 June 2023

#### Abstract

The Holocaust was a traumatic event that challenged human understanding and occasioned impassioned, intellectual reactions in various genres. It is well known that the Holocaust provoked many to question and/or reinterpret their understanding of God and religion (Hans Jonas; Elie Wiesel). At the same time, its material realities also gave rise to questions about the ethical limits of scepticism and sceptical inquiry (Hayden White; Jean Amery). Many of these questions and their answers have been discussed by male thinkers; what about the many women who wrote on similar topics? This workshop seeks to give a specific voice to Jewish *women's* views on questions such as the nature of the Divine, the place of persecution in Jewish history and memory, and the meaning of Jewish tradition after Auschwitz by examining a wider repertoire of religious responses.

The workshop will foreground papers that explore women's theological reactions—widely conceived—to the antisemitic persecution of the 1930s and the Shoah. It will ask how female authors and thinkers questioned the nature of Jewish religion and tradition in light of the Holocaust and how, if at all, these religious and theological considerations influenced possible limits they placed under inquiry.

#### Convenor

- Sarah Wobick-Segev (Universität Hamburg)

#### Participants

- Natalia Aleksion (University of Florida)
- Kirill Chepurin (Universität Hamburg)
- Sara R. Horowitz (York University, Toronto)
- Melissa Raphael (Leo Baeck College, London)
- Abraham Rubin (University of Dayton)
- Charlotte Weber (Technische Universität Berlin)
- Cornelia Wilhelm (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

## Programme

Tuesday, 13 June 2023

10:15–10:40	<b>Welcoming Remarks</b> <i>Stephan Schmid (Universität Hamburg)</i>
	<b>Introduction</b> <i>Sarah Wobick-Segev (Universität Hamburg)</i>
10:40–12:10	<b>Panel 1</b> <i>Chair: Kim Wünschmann (Director of the Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg)</i>
10:40–11:25	<b>The Female Face of God in Auschwitz—20 Years Later</b> <i>Melissa Raphael (Leo Baeck College, London) (online)</i>
11:25–12:10	<b>Between Purity and Degradation: Gender and the Ethics of Literary Memory</b> <i>Sara R. Horowitz (York University, Toronto)</i>
12:10–13:00	<b>Lunch Break (Room C315)</b>
13:00–15:35	<b>Panel 2</b> <i>Chair: Sarah Wobick-Segev (Universität Hamburg)</i>
13:00–13:45	<b>Polish Jewish Women in Hiding and Their Religious Practices</b> <i>Natalia Aleksion (University of Florida)</i>
13:45–14:30	<b>Beyond mere “Enablers”: The Wives and Daughters of German Refugee Rabbis in the United States</b> <i>Cornelia Wilhelm (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)</i>
14:30–14:50	<b>Coffee Break (C315)</b>
14:50–15:35	<b>Knowledge, not Moral? Gertrud Luckner and the Founding of the <i>Freiburger Rundbrief</i></b> <i>Charlotte Weber (Technische Universität Berlin)</i>
16:00	<b>Visit to the Exile Library</b> <i>Doerte Bischoff (Universität Hamburg)</i>
19:00	<b>Dinner</b> (Restaurant “Citta Vegan Izakaya,” Grindelhof 17, 20146 Hamburg)

Wednesday, June 14 2023

09:00–11:35	<b>Panel 3</b> <i>Chair: Sara R. Horowitz (York University, Toronto)</i>
09:00–09:45	<b>Margarete Susman’s Theological Traversal of the Jewish-Christian Borderlands</b> <i>Abraham Rubin (University of Dayton)</i>
09:45–10:30	<b>Selma Stern’s Literary Search for Religious Meaning in <i>The Spirit Returneth</i></b> <i>Sarah Wobick-Segev (Universität Hamburg)</i>
10:30–10:50	Coffee Break (Room C315)
10:50–11:35	<b>“Negative Theodicy”: Susan Taubes on Simone Weil and the Question of Suffering</b> <i>Kirill Chepurin (Universität Hamburg)</i>
11:35–12:30	Final Round-Table Discussion
12:30	Lunch and Goodbye (Room C315)

### Venue

Universität Hamburg | Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS) | Jungiusstraße 11c | 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Room C319 | 20355 Hamburg

Please contact MCAS for further information and registration: [maimonides-centre@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:maimonides-centre@uni-hamburg.de)

### Zoom (Panel 1, Lecture | Melissa Raphael)

Link: <https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/61016014399?pwd=cTV1UWRReHBZd0VEWDAxb0lBd3IxZz09>

Meeting ID: 610 1601 4399

Password: 82300908

## Abstracts

### **Natalia Aleksiu, “Polish Jewish Women in Hiding and Their Religious Practices”**

In her postwar account, Genia Wieser, a survivor from Boryslaw in eastern Galicia (today western Ukraine) described how a group of Jewish women prepared for death when a large hiding place under the electric plant was discovered: “The women cooked the last supper using all the provisions they had. They dressed in their best clothes and covered their heads with white handkerchiefs. [...] They sang songs. This is how they celebrated the last night of their life.” We lack any further details about the ceremony and its solemn nature. It indicates, however, women took an active role in creating rites that accompanied daily life and death during the Holocaust. Based on Polish Jewish diaries, postwar testimonies and memoirs, my paper will focus on accounts of women and about women who continued and refashioned their religious practices while in hiding. These accounts suggest a profoundly pragmatic aspect of women’s daily efforts. Rather than reflect on theological implications of the persecution and destruction, some women tried to keep kosher, celebrate Shabbat and mark Jewish holidays and to prepare for what they perceived as a dignified Jewish death.

### **Kirill Chepurin, “Negative Theodicy”: Susan Taubes on Simone Weil and the Question of Suffering**

This presentation revisits Susan Taubes’s engagement with the thought of Simone Weil through the concept of “negative theodicy” that Taubes advances in her 1955 essay “The Absent God.” Traditionally, theodicy is a mode of thought that attempts to resolve the question of the meaning of evil and suffering that one encounters in the world by affirming the goodness of divine order, thus reconciling one with the world itself despite its negativity. In the post-Holocaust context, debate around theodicy intensifies, and Taubes’s analytic of negative theodicy, I suggest, offers a unique intervention into this debate through a reconfiguration of Weil’s response to the problem of suffering. From Taubes’s re-reading of Weil, negative theodicy emerges as an ambivalent concept that suggests an attempt to affirm the divine even in its apparent absence in the world, while refusing to reconcile suffering or the world. Through this concept, Taubes at once reconstructs Weil’s antagonism to the world and critiques what she calls Weil’s “religion of suffering.”

## **Sara R. Horowitz, “Between Purity and Degradation: Gender and the Ethics of Literary Memory”**

Most reflections by men on Jewish women during the Shoah see the spiritual life of Jewish women in polarized terms: either impossibly pure or impossibly degraded. Narratives by women, by contrast, reflect the broad complexities of women’s inner lives and ethical choices. Looking at a range of narrative material encompassing literary, liturgical and testimonial genres, this paper contrasts the ways in which the representation of women’s (real or imagined) life and choices serve as a foil or screen upon which Jewish men negotiate their own spiritual and ethical negotiations, and the ways in which women’s narratives present women not as objects but as subjects, as thinkers, opening up a more nuanced and complicated sense of their own understanding of their lives.

## **Melissa Raphael, “The Female Face of God in Auschwitz—20 Years Later”**

Twenty years after the publication of my book *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, this talk reaffirms its suggestion that post-Holocaust Jewish theology's androcentrism leaves its assumptions and conclusions open to question. Focussing on Jewish thinkers' emphasis on God's hiddenness during the Holocaust, I will ask how feminist reflection on women's experiences of sustained relationship in Auschwitz can produce a counter-patriarchal Jewish theology of covenantal presence.

## **Abraham Rubin, “Margarete Susman’s Theological Traversal of the Jewish-Christian Borderlands”**

One year after the war, the poet and philosopher Margarete Susman (1872 – 1966) published a controversial work entitled *Das Buch Hiob und das Schicksal des jüdischen Volkes*. *Das Buch Hiob* was one of the first postwar publications to grapple with the theological meaning of the Holocaust and articulate its ramifications for modern Jewish identity and existence. Reading the biblical Job as a personification of the Jewish people, Susman portrayed the Holocaust as a religious event in which the Jews served as sacrificial victims for the sake of humanity. Some of Susman’s early Jewish readers balked at her valorization of the Jews’ victimhood, while others vehemently questioned the Jewishness of her work, pointing to its Christian-theological underpinnings. Contrary to the notion that Susman’s post-Holocaust reflections cross some kind of clear-cut border separating Jewish and Christian and theologies, this paper examines *Das Buch Hiob* as a work that aims to question the notion of fixed religious boundaries in the first place. Scholars commonly theorize Jewish-Christian dialogue as an interaction between two hypostatized, self-contained communities. Reading Susman’s work

as a case-study of Jewish-Christian dialogue, this paper aims to complicate the traditional picture of interreligious dialogue by looking at how these two religious traditions converge and interact within the theological reflections of this radical thinker. The paper traces the continuities and connections that Susman draws between Judaism and Christianity for what they tell us about the dynamics of modern Jewish identity, and the ways it is constructed and challenged in relation to other religious traditions and cultural identities. By reclaiming *Das Buch Hiob* as a legitimate work of Jewish theology, this paper looks at how Jewishness has been transmitted and refashioned beyond its confessional and communal boundaries.

### **Charlotte Weber, “Knowledge, not Moral? Gertrud Luckner and the Founding of the *Freiburger Rundbrief*”**

Approximately 5000 Jews survived the Second World War through the help of non-Jewish German citizens—one of them was Gertrud Luckner (1900–1995), a Catholic woman from the south of Germany. Her rescue efforts ranged from emotional support, assisting in escape and emigration, to finding hideouts to extensive courier activities. Due to her activities, she was caught in March 1943 by the Gestapo and detained in the Ravensbrück concentration camp until the end of the war.

In reaction to the Nazi persecution and the Holocaust, she started the *Freiburger Rundbrief*, a journal dedicated to Jewish-Christian encounters, with a special emphasis on informing and educating Christians on antisemitism and promoting a theological re-orientation. This journal established Luckner as one of the most influential voices on issues relating to Jewish-Christian and German-Jewish relations after the Holocaust. Drawing on the *Freiburger Rundbrief*, this paper looks into Gertrud Luckner’s responses to the Holocaust, her fight against antisemitism and asks how she dealt with, specifically, the morally charged topic of rescue. It will also contextualize the reception of her positions against the backdrop of West German politics of the past, the postwar attitude of the Catholic Church, and gendered images of rescuers.

### **Cornelia Wilhelm, “Beyond mere ‘Enablers’: The Wives and Daughters of German Refugee Rabbis in the United States”**

The paper will explore the professional and personal paths of the “better halves” and daughters of refugee rabbis’ who fled to the United States. The research is based on the rich data the digital humanities project on German Refugee Rabbis in the US at LMU München has collected on the rabbis and their families. The interest of the paper includes who they were, how they affected their husbands’ rabbinate, how they experienced displacement either themselves or dealt with it as part of preserving their father’s memory or their own careers.

The paper will also explore their role in saving their families, their interpretations of the Holocaust in their public lives, in Jewish education, in the Jewish religion and at Jewish institutions. Last but not least, the paper will evaluate the options the German and American settings have provided to them as women and as Jews.

**Sarah Wobick-Segev, “Selma Stern’s Literary Search for Religious Meaning in *The Spirit Returneth*”**

Between 1942 and 1944 the famous German-Jewish historian Selma Stern wrote a historical novel. The book—written in German and begun only roughly a year after she and her husband, Eugen Täubler, had fled Germany for the safety of Cincinnati—was translated into English and published under the title *The Spirit Returneth* in 1946. Focusing on a largely fictional family of German Jews living in and around Baden, the novel tells of the tragic fate of Jewish communities at the time of the Black Death during the particularly bloody years of 1348 and 1349. In the afterword of the German version of the book published in 1972, Stern explains that working on the book had given her unexpected consolation. The “writings of the wise teachers of my people” as well as philosophical and religious writings of Christian mystics and scholars provided not only comfort for the exiled historian but also a playbook with which Stern attempted to work through, consider, and reflect upon different reasons for and responses to anti-Jewish and antisemitic persecution and violence. This paper will explore several of the religious responses Stern offers in her novel, including historically inspired models of repentance and her own, newer conception of a cyclical, lachrymose understanding of Jewish destiny.