

Article

Dry, Weary, Smiling Bones: Finding a ‘Yes’ through Hebrew Narrative and a Reduced Spirituality

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Abstract: Life can be a difficult phenomenon to acquiesce to, much less embrace. Tragedy is seemingly around every corner, and very many philosophies and faiths both ancient and modern have championed the exit from existence over its entrance. Existentialism and nihilism proclaim the seizure or suicide of one’s undesired birth, moksha and nirvana the blessed non-return of a wandering soul. Yet against these currents the Jewish ideational approach to being, with its ever-old and newness, has consistently given the world a ‘yes’, and this apparently despite having every reason not to; although perhaps “because” is more appropriate to that prior clause than “despite”. In what follows we therefore consider how we might uncover from within Judaism an abstracted “spirituality” for our times, a numinousness that is not necessarily a “belief”: a “faith” that is more in line with a hope. Our objective is to learn how to think differently rather than to convert, and thus towards this more modest goal we set out to explore some images from Hebrew poetry and narrative, attempting to bring forth core conceptualities which could then be applied to an affirming notional framework befitting anyone who would ponder—who would feel—a way through. How might we state this ‘yes’ for our lives?

Keywords: Ezekiel; interpretation; Judaism; phenomenology; poetry/literature; spirituality



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1. Despite

We are here concerned with finding, framing, and learning from an ancient ‘yes’, an echoing ‘yes’ that is no quieter for the centuries between its initial enunciation and today. This ‘yes’, we will argue, is something that might be found within the spirit of Judaism: it is a gift—a potential—interior to Judaism but yet open, we think, for everyone; it is an attitude (a “theology” or “spiritualism” perhaps; more than anything a type of being-in-the-world) that is there to be grasped but must first be found; a comportment visible from the horizons of Jewish thought and approach while not being Jewish properly (and hence we shall make heavy use of inverted commas/quotation marks to designate such).¹ Due to the nebulousness of this venture our style will be literary and, we hope, provocatively speculative. This is not an empirical endeavor but it is one grounded in philosophical and exegetical methodologies. It is not an addition to a scholarly discussion; it wishes to start one. We therefore ask for the reader’s patience since our way may be deemed meandering; and in the best phenomenological spirit we kindly request too for a full bracketing on the journey ahead: to purposefully close out all expectations, received interpretations, presumptions of “is” and “should”, and to focus on one’s “conscious of” in the flow and feel of what follows. (Husserl 1999, 2014; Smith 2013) We will first try to locate this ‘yes’, thereafter turn to our opening biblical narrative in order to decipher from it a form of “hope” which will become a necessary element of our sought-after attitude, thence to a different biblical narrative in an attempt to explicate “Israel” as a way-of-being and to apply such to a “weak theology”, before finally closing the circle on what it could mean—practically—to live a ‘yes’. These are suggestions, mere ideas based on analyses and textual interactions; no proofs will be forthcoming, no rights and wrongs; nor indeed do we think any possible. Ours is an exploratory effort; let us see what we discover.

To begin then, and as every reader knows, it must be admitted that each ‘yes’ has its subterranean ‘no’, each sock its buskin,² (Mask n.d.) and so let us commence with the tragic, an acknowledgment that—despite it all—we (mostly) choose perfunctorily to carry on with neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no’ as life, this life, hangs about us as so many cobwebs. For setting, for structuring, a short piece from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“Spring and Fall”
to a young child

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for. (Hopkins n.d.)³

Ever unclear, these days of ours that pass and fade can certainly feel like a kind—a measure—of “blight”; and perhaps for them we have been born. That preposition, *for*: it is purposive, set, it is to be gone through, a determinative which we often mistake for a “To Be Determined”; the way, unnoticed, is already being trod. Regarding our opening poem, the philosopher John D. Caputo (whom I must thank for introducing me to it), writes that “Hopkins was a Jesuit priest, but he was not peddling any theological solutions there [that is, in his poem; Caputo quotes the final two lines]; he was not trying to dissipate mortality with a big story about salvation but to *sustain it as a mystery*.” (Caputo 2018, p. 237; poem on p. 233; emphases in the original) This life: not merely unknown, but unknowable; we can but shrug, or weep, and very frequently there are no words. Nancy Moules, professor of nursing and practitioner of the same, relates the story of a mother whose six year-old daughter was struck with terminal cancer. First designated by her parents as “full code” for her hospital care—meaning her organs would be kept functioning mechanically whenever necessary—the family decided to shift this treatment response, and: “So we took her off full code and I [the girl’s mother] started telling her that if she was tired, it was all right to quit fighting, that it was okay to go. And then she died. I held her.” (Moules 1999, p. 252; Caputo 2018, p. 242) As a father of daughters I find this heartbreaking; as a grateful father of healthy daughters it is unimaginable. To remark further seems unconscionable.

The Buddha of course taught that life is suffering: *is*—simply, definitionally, nothing more need nor could be expounded. (Buddha (The) (2004); Hagen 1997) A trial and test the ultimate goal of which must be escape, to simply get out: flee this burning building of a consciously animated body, passing marks only for a death with no reincarnation.⁴ Such is certainly one of our ‘noes’ to the existences we tumble into. Yet the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was born and raised a prince sheltered from every misfortune who then willingly chose his walk through life; what suffering he met could, ultimately, be judged as stemming from his own accord: an acceptance, one part of his great spiritual undertaking. We may thank him, we may admire him—deeply—yet he was never forced to hold his daughter as she took her last pain-filled breaths; he had after all abandoned his wife and only child when he began his search for meaning and enlightenment. (Violatti

2013) Deeply compassionate, he saw the world with its misery and said “No”; but there are those who have *felt* the world’s misery and said “Yes”; and perhaps none more so than the people Israel. For this ‘yes’, then, it is to the prose-poetry that emerged from their midst—to the words of one of their great prophets—that we now turn.

2. Dried

Historically and culturally the Jewish people must surely be a group who live: exuberantly, forcefully, proclamatory, leaving a wonderfully beneficent shade on the world far out of proportion to number or size; and, as John Oesterreicher has emphasized, the Jewish nation as a *nation* is celebrated within this ethno-communal framework by the Hebrew phrase *Am Yisrael chai*: “The people of Israel lives”. (Oesterreicher 1971, p. 24) Her continuation—naturally not only in the sense of statehood but importantly in that sense—is itself an ongoing miracle: her presence on this Earth an indication of hope, trust, joy in the face of come what may; she is a being who thrives against the odds, a ‘yes’ as absolute as any a torch-bearing Prometheus might carry down from his mountain hermitage to we townfolk going about our unsuspecting business on the flatlands below.⁵ Israel as a geographic entity firstly was not, her existence merely a promise, then she was, was not again, was again, for long centuries was not once more, was, was not, was, and is, *is yet*. During one of those more ancient stretches of “was not” (the Babylonian captivity, circa 598/7-538 BCE (“[Babylonian Captivity: Jewish History](#)” n.d.)) the prophet Ezekiel lived and wrote, and amongst the many famous images and imaginings he left us we have the so-called Valley of Dry Bones of chapter thirty-seven. The whole vision covers verses one through fourteen, but here we quote only a part—the opening ten verses—for reasons that will (if we are successful) better align with our objectives, which differ from the prophet’s original ones. Firstly, then, the text (from the New Jewish Publication Society (hereafter NJPS) translation):

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “O mortal, can these bones live again?” I replied, “O Lord GOD, only You know.” ⁴And He said to me, “Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵Thus said the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. ⁶I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am the LORD!”

⁷I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O mortal! Say to the breath: Thus said the Lord GOD: Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again.” ¹⁰I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude. (Ezekiel 37: 1–10 in [Tanakh 1985](#), p. 957)

Prior to thinking—to *plumbing*—the symbolic potential of this passage (that is, what may be *read into* it, which we will quite openly do since, as mentioned, ours is not the intent of the author and neither does our undertaking need affiliate itself with his; nor moreover with the long centuries of commentary on this and the following biblical texts: instead we attempt the task of a fresh, *unshadowed* hermeneutics: a midrash bound to nothing and for no one⁶), I would like to draw our attention to two odd phrasings which may be easy to overlook. Both are, in fact, of the same oddity, and both are uses of one tense where another is to be expected; indeed, where another is even to be found depending on the translation.

In verses four and nine Ezekiel is told⁷ to prophesy “over these bones” and “to the breath”, and then given the content of what was to be stated, in each case with the same prefatory remark: “Thus said the Lord GOD” (verses five and nine); what follows of course being the prophecy itself. “Thus *said*”, and thereafter “I *will* cause” and “Come, O breath”; why the past tense in the attributive introduction? Why not “Thus *says*”?

That indeed is how the translators who produced the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible have it; the relevant verse sections there read as: “⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live”, and “⁹ . . . Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” (Ezekiel 37:5 and 9b in *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha 2010*, p. 679) This usage of “says” makes much more logical sense within the future direction under deliberation in this passage—what God will do—and more grammatical sense as well considering the following verbs (but maybe the New Revised Standard Version’s “breathe upon” of verse nine is less attractive than the Tanakh’s “breathe into” since the latter is more positively evocative of a life force *entering*), but precisely the illogic and non-grammaticalness of the former give us pause. The translators of the Tanakh (a cross-section grouping of rabbis and scholars) make no (punning: *valley of dry*) bones about—are really quite proud of—their fidelity to the received Hebrew of the Masoretic Text,⁸ the sacrosanct and treasured literary heritage, no “yod” (or “yud”; the smallest Hebrew letter) of which was ever (purposefully) allowed to be misplaced throughout the venerable tradition. Might there then be a half-buried lesson at work? Perhaps the answer lies in the divine issuance: God/“God” has willed such and such, decided upon X and instructed (or, let us take the soft road, *asked* rather than *commanded*) its prophet to announce the *fait accompli*. God/“God” does not speak without also having acted; its word is deed and whatnot. These nuances bear dwelling on and are deserving of whatever time is given them—possibly more—and so let us now shift, with this same mental bearing, to the more straightforward theme of resurrection found here.

The prophecy itself is addressed to those Israelites forcibly living abroad in Babylon and is in regards to the fulfillment of their longed for return to their ancestral land, as verses eleven through fourteen (the closing of the vision) state explicitly; we have previously truncated these verses to give weight to the contemporary application we wish to make, but for the sake of clarity and forthrightness can quote them now:

¹¹And He said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’ ¹²Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said [note: *said* once more] the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel. ¹³You shall know, O My people, that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. ¹⁴I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have acted”—declares [interestingly not *declared*] the LORD. (Ezekiel 37: 11–14 in *Tanakh 1985*, p. 957)

Thus an assertion of certain restoration, a renewal of hope, an urge to trust and wait, to have faith; surely a message that need not be historically nor ethno-specifically fastened, and hence I repeat the reason for choosing to cut this portion initially. In most matters, when approached from a scholarly point of view, context is naturally everything (or at least is extremely important), but in the present we wish to be *in the present*, and this calls for a perspective that leans more towards the fully human—shall we put it—rather than the academic; or the straitjacketed “academic”, at any rate. We need not overly confine ourselves when looking to this type of literature to find in it a morsel for sustenance, a piece of heavenly manna (punning again); such is the wonder and reach of the world’s collective scriptures.

Is this though the “world’s collective”? Does it not instead belong primarily, and perhaps exclusively, to the Jewish people? There are no doubt some who would argue so, and possibly even many within Christian traditions and denominations, whose own

sacred compendiums are of course composed of the Hebrew Bible plus what are, in effect, a number of appendices (with no offense nor denigration of said documents intended). Yet I think the numinous urge and the quest for transcendence that each world faith displays is sufficiently panhuman to justify the determination of applicability found for anyone in *any one* of what we have generously received from our species' forebears: every text is "world collective", and although beauty may be in the eye of the beholder it is more so in the heart.

Let us return to our bones. Dried and scattered, bereft of any semblance of life, nary a drop of blood—that spark of energizing biological fire—to be located anywhere. Dead: absolutely. What is the procedure of regeneration for this sad lot? Seemingly nothing internal; the bones are first fitted together by an unseen outside power, and then sinews, flesh, skin grow over them by layer, before finally being animated by a summoned breath of life (recalling, incidentally, the "first man" Adam's invigoration in the second of the Genesis creation accounts; Genesis 2: 7, cf. 1: 27 in *Tanakh* 1985, pp. 5 and 4).⁹ The direct contextual allegory here is the contemporary assemblage of Israeli political abductees in Babylon, but we will not hesitate (we will make "no bones about", to re-apply our earlier pun) to stretch this line the very distance to those presently concerned; and each of us is presently concerned. As I write this a worldwide pandemic has gripped rich and poor alike in a manner not seen for over a century.¹⁰ Humanity—literally the current whole of humanity—lives under a plague the final end of which is neither entirely predictable nor preparable; uncertainty has suddenly turned the daily life of every one of us on its head, and it seemingly happened overnight. It definitely feels that way. Like Israel in her Babylonian exile many of us still sit and wait, wearied, wondering. Verse eleven informs us that Ezekiel's fellows declared their hope gone, but we today, having by necessity become aware of more of her history, know that the Jewish nation—as a nation—are the people who live, who declare 'yes'; and how could that be in the absence of hope? To hope is to 'yes' in the adverbial usage of the noun; can we join in this, not only in relation to immediate needs and worries, but in general? Might we "be" "Israel" in this way? What might that mean? Could it even mean anything? These questions will drive our below contemplations on an outside application of Judaism's 'yes' broadly and attitudinally.

3. Defining

What we are asking is whether or not there is a comportmental level of or to Judaism as a way-of-being (that is, to Israel properly and not the "Israel" we query) that might be made distinct from its obvious—and obviously centrally important—hereditary and ethno-cultural level. Firstly here, to help engage our thinking, let us spell out the currently standardized and standardly accepted accounts of full and established (as it were) membership in the people Israel. By tradition, that is, by Jewish religious law, belonging concentrates on matrilineal descent: one must have a Jewish mother (i.e., with traceable Semitic lineage and the added expressed convictions of the religion and covenant as delivered through Moses (there have been/are other Semitic peoples)). (Kahn-Harris 2012) Fathers too are wonderful and to be welcomed, but strictly the affixation rests with the other procreational side. If one converts into Judaism, therefore, one is adopted as the "daughter" or "son" of Abraham and Sarah (*bat/ben Avraham v'Sara*), the foundational biblical forebears, and thus attains the "proper genetics" (to put it somewhat crudely and loosely). Yet this might seem tenuous at best and dogmatic at worst—I imagine many an Orthodox/non-Orthodox argument has been centered around such—what, after all, is to become of a child who has grown up in a practicing Jewish home where only the father fit this bill while the mother was otherwise (i.e., a "gentile")? Does that child need to go through the whole conversion process? Some authorities would indeed require just that, others would be more embracing, perhaps reducing or eliminating anything of the sort for continued communal enrollment. That though is perhaps the real key to the entirety: the notion and quality of *community*.

One who has not been born into that tribe which unites the many types of Judaisms as a community might still take and learn much, however, and it is in that reduced (*redacted?*)

sense that I wish to argue for a “being Israel” which will assist—which will enable—these dry bones of ours to resurrect in a ‘yes’ to existence absent the further ritual and lifestyle details to which many may wish no part; while for those who do so wish a more correct accession is always possible.¹¹ In some ways moreover, at least as far as our objectives are concerned, the rigorously definitional aspect as delineated within Judaism as we know it today (and aware that it too travels along—as everything does—its ever-evolving routeway) is neither applicable nor inapplicable: the identitarian label “Jewish” we are querying is primarily intended as an internal aid towards the espousal of a certain conceptual framework provided by the lineage that word symbolizes. What we hope is only to achieve a bit (a *bite*, a morsel), simply such that we become able to take the world in a particular way so that—despite—we can align with Israel’s affirmation over the Buddha’s refutation. What, then, might be involved in “being” “Israel” in this additional or alternative manner that is not a conversion but is a form of adoption? Two criteria seem to me best fitted for this: (1) an acceptance of “complete monotheism”, which need not necessarily be mainstream theist nor even theist in an “existence of” sense: it could instead indicate mystery, or force, transcendence, event, et cetera (even the Neoplatonist aethereal and removed One of a philosopher like Plotinus, (Hadot 1993; O’Meara 1993) or the “call” to that which is always something better of Caputo; (Caputo 2006; Caputo 2016) the cruciality here is of an otherwise-than), and (2) a “wrestling with” this “God”, a not sure but will try/keep trying approach to the other/Other, to the question and to the unknown, to the (as we will expound) importantly *unknowable* within the experience of human functioning in all its many forms.¹²

We shall take these in turn. On the first criteria what I mean to put forward is the readiness to accede to the event—as it has become known in philosophical circles—to what Martin Heidegger termed Being or ground or clearing or the uncovered, (Heidegger 2010) to the delicate and epistemologically empty pre-formed (pre-enunciated, pre-figured) intuition we have of a *something*, that which rests (or lurks) foundationally, undergirding while simultaneously flowing through life and the cosmos, as Paul Tillich’s exposition of God/“God” conceived as the “ground of being” does. (Tillich 2001)¹³ To put this very simply, it is an embrace of the “I have no idea”. Expressed in that way we admit that it hardly seems like a worthy philosophical concept (but that we can put it that way may indicate just how opaquely or exaggeratedly Heidegger wrote; some have gone further and criticized it as highfalutin, but perhaps even *bloated* would be appropriate . . . (and I write this as an appreciator of his work myself); e.g., (Glover 2012)), yet as with much that appears shallow at first there is a great depth here. The history of religion, and its professional and/or scholarly cohort theology, has been one of an ongoing attempt to pin down and encircle—to square in and categorize—the numinous such that it¹⁴ might be more readily grasped by our limited intellectual capacity. This trend may have reached its zenith, or its limit, in so-called apophatic (negative) theology (describing by not describing, indicating only what the transcendent is not), a system with roots in ancient Hindu schools of thought where the Ultimate Reality is put simply as *neti, neti*: not this, not this. (Müller and Navlakha 2000) Yet whatever the case, Heidegger was not indicating the divine (although we are here willing to gloss his Being with an other/Other that might be “divine”), but he was nevertheless engaged in what is essentially the similar move of pointing to the (and to the importance of) I-know-not-what; which is an empty pointing, but still a pointing. This acceptance and openness to the acknowledged impossibility of ever arriving at a pre-assigned meaning, a solidity, an endpoint, is our first necessity to think “Jewishly” in the manner we wish to argue for, and it is naturally strongly connected to our second; but more on that in a moment. At its core this mental attuning might be best termed a tenuous ever-discovery, a comfort in the void, a friendly association with unsettledness, a stroll along the edge. Who knows? No one. Thank God/“God” for that!

Our second criterion, as mentioned, takes the first’s mental framing but does not leave it there. Rather, a kind of application is made, a practice that could be (not without irony) depicted as acting on the unactable, as a fool’s errand, as purposely waging a losing

battle; but never ceasing to so wage. This is the “wrestling with”, the ever-try, seek, search, and it is conducted without the hope of an answer but within the hope of a hope: that last clause will—I sincerely hope(!)—make more sense as we proceed. To meditate more thoroughly on this then, and to seek to clear it up, we will begin by visiting the notion’s scriptural source: the famous story of our/“our” Jewish/“Jewish” patriarch’s extra-human grappling match as related in Genesis 32:25-29. We will quote initially again from the NJPS Tanakh and thereafter, for comparison, from the New Revised Standard Version (whose verse numbering differs slightly). Thus from the Tanakh, with some comments inserted in brackets for clarification and use in our later discussion:

²⁵Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.

²⁶When he [this is the wrestling partner, note that there is no capitalization of this “he” pronoun throughout although this version of the Tanakh always does so where God/“God” is concerned, hinting that this participant might not be—but yet might be, see below—God/“God”] saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. ²⁷Then he [again, the partner] said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But he [Jacob now] answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁸Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” [Another hint this is not God/“God”, who surely would have known; unless the question were rhetorical?] ²⁹Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” [*Divine and human!* A designation that this partner is both at once? Or a reference to this occurrence and to other ones? We bracket the many commentaries and allow ourselves to wonder; on this, moreover, we might query too the plural usage of “beings”. A footnote in the Tanakh reads: “Or ‘God (Elohim, connected with the second part of “Israel”) and men.’”] (Genesis 32: 25–29 in *Tanakh* 1985, p. 52)

There are many fascinating levels at work in this passage, primary amongst them the entirely open question of the identity of the wrestling partner and the suddenness—and apparent pointlessness—of the assault itself. (“And a man wrestled with him”: to what end or for what purpose? No justification is provided.) To start with, we might ascertain that the combatant here is an angel or “intermediary” creature between we *homo sapiens* towards the low end of the spectrum and the singular Creator God/“God” on the highest. What is puzzling about that view though is the *el* marker in the awarded nomenclature of *Israel*: it is an indication of divinity—Jacob’s striving with—and is typically used throughout Hebrew scripture to refer to *the* divinity, that is, to God/“God” proper.¹⁵ A further complication is one that James Kugel has pointed out, that at this period in the Hebraic narrational and theo-cultural development there were a great many theophany stories wherein God/“God” would appear out of nowhere in a form very much like any one of us, and only after some interaction did the recipient of divine attention realize (in a kind of enlightenment moment) whom they were dealing with. (Kugel 2003) In that context the intended meaning of the above could well be that the partner *is* God/“God”. Or, on the other hand (and perhaps just as conceptually easily), another superhuman “personage” of a third sort (neither an angel nor God/“God”; if “personhood” can be applied absent its anthropomorphic implications, that is); but again that *el* would seem to support the former reading. Why the text does not indicate this directly no one living today can really know, and we are probably best served in reminding ourselves that its original author (and subsequent editors/redactors) almost certainly did not know either, and might not even have thought much about it. The tale is a founding one about a “forefather” (a real historical figure? an historico-cultural placeholder?) who was so strong as to “wrestle” (struggle) with God/“God”, never to give up, not to win but neither to lose, to ask for (to plead? or rather demand? either reading would fit) a blessing, and in return to receive a transformation. This is inspirational, and its telling and centrality within Jewish mythology gives us a very good example of the manner and degree of notional affirmation that I wish to advance in our task of moving towards a “being” “Israel” in (partial) thinking and feeling, in our progression towards a ‘yes’.

Here is how the New Revised Standard Version has the same (although notice that the verses are instead numbered twenty-four through twenty-eight), again with bracketed comments included:

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel [a footnote reads: "That is *The one who strives with God* or *God strives*"], for you have striven with God and with humans [another footnote: "Or *with divine and human beings*"], and have prevailed." (Genesis 32: 24–28 in *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha* 2010, p. 28)

In this translation the signals of who is speaking when are somewhat clearer, but what is most pronounced as compared with the NJPS Tanakh's wording is that the naming act of "Israel" is much more straightforwardly connected with God/"God" (in the striving) and not only "beings divine and human". (Interesting as well is the alternate reading given in the footnote of "God strives", placing the emphasis on the other half of the equation, as it were.) On the whole this appears to reduce the possibility of taking the apparitional partner in the lesser "angel" or "intermediary" sense, but a definitive conclusion remains out of reach. Yet such is after all precisely our point: There is not now, and additionally can never be, a definitive conclusion to any of this. We are arguing that opacity as a positive. The tradition has handed down to us this tale as "Jacob wrestling with God/'God'", and the lived ramifications that flow (that are allowed to flow) from taking that on conceptually are significant and potentially wide-ranging. We do not know, we cannot know, but we keep at it: that is without doubt a 'yes'.

Caputo champions what he has labeled a "weak theology", or a "theology of the event" or "the unconditional", (Caputo 2006; Caputo 2016; Caputo 2019) recently offering such as a type of post-religion religiousness or a postmodern faith that he thinks is more in keeping with where we culturally find ourselves: increasingly at odds with belief in the form of a pure fideism but nevertheless maintaining that intuition Heidegger bespoke above. (Caputo 2018) This "theology" is the transcendent understood as the *unforeseen* rather than—or more than—as the *unseen*. For Caputo God/"God" is far more of a symbol than anything else, and therefore as part of, or indicative of, an event or the unconditional (for example, in the works cited he often frames this as something happening "in the name (of) God"), and hence too as a token of the future as being beneficent (i.e., hope): "The name of God is a nickname for hope, for hope against hope. The future is always better, not because it is, but because that is our hope." (Caputo 2018, p. 320) To Caputo the constituent sense of awe evoked by opening oneself to mystery in the way we have been considering need not come from a spiritual direction, but could also be had via a study of modern physics (astro-, quantum) and what is being revealed about our cosmos in those sources.

In responding to this I would add that from my perspective, and contrary to Caputo's view, since the disciplines of the empirical sciences are based on methodologies and presumptions of ultimate discoverability (or in other words, in "end results"; however remote and tentative these may be at times, confidences are nevertheless developed: e.g., very few today doubt that gravity is an active force), I think rather we ought to move beyond the version of "mystique" even of a field such as theoretical physics too, and thus more fully into a comfortableness and a homebuilding simplicity with and within "I do not know". A sense of awe in mystery has also been beautifully expressed by the renowned rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel; providing a nice intersection with our way-of-being project here. (Heschel 1955) We might give God/"God" more substance than the whisper or call of the event's to-come while still, while delicately, taking care to keep it hinged on the fractional breadth of air between existence and existentiality, and far, far removed from the human-(self-)reflecting impositions and attributive lists we

have pushed onto the numinous. The phenomenology of religious experiences appears to offer some support along these lines, and structurally this matches better with our “wrestling”. Thus, while we have and can have no deep hope of an “answer” to this—to life, circumscribed and overwhelming as it so often is when we pay enough attention to it—we yet do have and can have hope in hope, in the hope of having hope if our two proposed criteria are indeed sufficient and are met: if we (1) open ourselves to (the possibility of) an other/Other/“Other”, and (2) continually strive/struggle/seek that unknowable. This is what we have called “being” “Israel”, becoming “Jewishly attuned” in the (far) lesser manner described. Where might this take us in a life affirming ‘yes’?

4. Decide

I will admit that I have sometimes found it very hard to live, that I have often kept going merely because I did not stop rather than out of a desire for more or longer. Certainly the wish for longevity has been far from my mind; quite the opposite. Out of this have sprung my probably too many meditations on death (the reader will no doubt roll her eyes at what a stereotype all this is), and the final analysis I have come to is the need for a constant and active engagement with one’s personal passing conducted in a manner of “welcome”: a not-yet but a nod, a wave of peace instead of a shrug of the shoulders, much less a retreat. To commit the faux pas of a self-quotation, by way of summary I would like to offer the following:

What is it to not wish to be alive but to also not wish (strongly enough) for death such that one makes the very large extra step to suicide? To think and feel this way might result in a life experienced as a passing of the time, as a kind of bizarre purgatory, a sentence being served, neither an acceptance (life!) nor a release (suicide). To such an individual I offer this attitudinal ‘welcome’: finitude as balm. (Oberg 2019, p. 14)

Here we are, stuck and having to make the most of it. The days and hours pass slowly, demanding that they be *passed*, that they be borne out, refusing to simply drift, and with the attendant crush of awareness bearing down on us minute by minute; little wonder that entertainment and other consciousness-altering routes which beckon with an escape appear so seductive. Unchecked a plain weariness at being sets in, for some more quickly than others. Emina Melonic, in a review of a new biography on Sylvia Plath, writes that, “A few days before she [Plath] took her own life [on 11 February 1963], she expressed both mental and physical fatigue to Barnhouse [Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, Plath’s therapist at the time]”, and “According to Rollyson [Carl Rollyson, the biographer] Plath’s ‘last surviving words revealed her distracted thinking: “I am incapable of being myself and loving myself. Now the babies are crying, I must take them out to tea.”” (Melonic 2020; Rollyson 2020) A feeling of alienation within the flesh one is (body = mind = body); busyness and the “musts” of tedium as release. Plath was thirty years-old when she died, leaving behind two children. She would have identified with the “blight man was born for” in the penultimate line of our opening poem, (Hopkins n.d.) and too with finitude as balm, its promise of an end as a welcome—a grateful—signal granting solace to one’s footfalls on the way, prodded from behind as we are, finding ourselves at the (possibly merciless) mercy of these multiple embedded circumstances of birth.

Stuck, traipsing along, making the most of it; these are not matters of “why” but of “how”, and will likely strike as being far more affiliated with the analyses of Buddha than with those of Moses. This is our failing, perhaps, or our inadequacy at not having been born into (or raised with) what we have called the “Jewish perspective” if we have not; can we therefore make a way “in”? Might we transmute ourselves as “Jews”? Gain the strength for a ‘yes’ and for hope absent the encouraging cultural and identitarian facets of community that are the accoutrements of the de rigueur religious law benchmarks and their automatic group belonging? Can we flip that internal switch? The outlook is there waiting: In the *haftarah* supplementary reading to the weekly Torah portion called *B’har* (covering Leviticus 25:1-26:2; the *haftarah* is from Jeremiah 32:6-27), the prophet (a contemporary

of Ezekiel) is currently under imprisonment as a traitor for counseling surrender to the Babylonian army again besieging Jerusalem in 588 BCE. (“[Babylonian Captivity: Jewish History](#)” n.d.)¹⁶ Nevertheless, the text informs us that he makes the necessary legal and financial arrangements through his secretary to purchase a plot of land on his cousin’s behalf, paying the full price while the city and nation are struck by starvation, disease, and utter frailty perched on the edge of collapse before overwhelming enemy forces: and he does this from the confines of his own punitive prison cell. (Plaut 2005, pp. 861–63) There could be few more forceful pictures of firm (of obstinate) hope than this. Disaster may now be at hand but there will be a return, the land and people will grow again, the generations to come will indeed come: continuation and renewal a surety. We might marvel at this; the foregoing has been an argument to marvel *with* it.

The condensed, collapsed, refined, and redacted “being” “Jewish” of our double criteria takes us far towards a ‘yes’ through the acknowledgment that although there are no answers—not really—something good might yet come of the struggle if we keep at it, if we hope and try, if we as Jacob do not let go no matter what happens to our “hip sockets”. Of course the beneficial could arrive just as well as not (and the obverse: the detrimental could arrive just as well as not; one never knows, one never *can* know¹⁷), but we may hope in hope, particularly if we are also able to fully aver—to unabashedly embrace—the first criterion’s transcendence, wonder, mystery. The world is a difficult mess any way one looks at it; birth is not chosen and continued existence requires affirmation, positivity born of a willed confidence; I think the minimized “Jewish” point of view outlined in the preceding—the conceptual realignment this device signals, the espousing of the notional framework it represents—allows for an unreservedness that is less fragile to life’s vicissitudes while yet retaining a core hushed expectation of “Who knows? These bones might yet live again.”

Thus we find ourselves returning to Ezekiel’s valley, to the possibility—I will not put it as a promise, not quite—of reinstatement and regeneration: of the form returning, then the sinews, skin, a smile. This is Judaism’s gift, the anticipating readied ‘yes’ of the “being” “Jewish” we have proposed, the tranquility of a placid hope, the lifeworld framing there to be taken in a (re)surrection of spirit and (re)vision of mind. Towards this no stimulating external force is necessary; existence is ours to think anew.

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Notes

- ¹ In the following we shall seek to establish the deep history of this existential position in Judaism; contemporary expressions of it (beyond those experiences one might have with others or oneself) can be found in many places, such as works and resources oriented towards theology (e.g., [Borowitz 1991](#)), introduction (e.g., [Kahn-Harris 2012](#)), lifestyles and practices (e.g., [MyJewishLearning.com n.d.](#); [ReformJudaism.org n.d.](#)), or even personal anecdotes given by authors writing on other topics (e.g., see the closing story on pp. 218–19 in ([Mlodinow 2008](#))).
- ² The celebrated dual masks of Greek theatre; See ([Mask n.d.](#)).
- ³ Hopkins (1844–1889) was a Victorian era English Catholic priest and poet whose work was greatly out of sync with his generation and not published till thirty years after his passing; see his biography on the referenced website ([Gerard Manley Hopkins n.d.](#)).
- ⁴ This is naturally a broad generalization; but for that it is not, I think, inaccurate. Still, there is much depth to Buddhism’s approach to existence, and I would encourage the interested reader to pursue such at length.

- 5 I mean to make a Nietzschean allusion here, of course; were the Prometheus of myth to break free of his punishing chains he might well appear as Zarathustra, and clearly Nietzsche imagined both himself and his character in that way. The message, moreover, would anyway be the same; see (Nietzsche 1999) (this edition is an unabridged re-publication of the original printing done by the Macmillan Company of New York, 1911). Nietzsche worked on the text in parts from 1883–1885, but the book was not published in full until after his death in 1900; see the introductory note, pp. vi–vii. See also the general introduction in (Nietzsche 1954). Interesting too is the overall thrust in Nietzsche’s oeuvre towards a different version of life affirmation—another form of ‘yes’—which can be found in many places but perhaps particularly so in the aforementioned *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *The Antichrist* (Nietzsche 2006). Exploring a comparison between the ‘yes’ of Judaism that we are considering here with Nietzsche’s ‘yes’ could be quite fascinating, but unfortunately such lies beyond our present scope.
- 6 To refer again to Friedrich Nietzsche and to paraphrase his original subtitle for *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “A Book for All and None”; see the informative introduction to the text by Walter Kaufmann in (Nietzsche 1954) on pp. 103–11.
- 7 We could attitudinally frame it as either “commanded” or “requested”, I suppose, and our inclination one way or the other would probably speak volumes about personal theological/hermeneutical leanings; the Hebrew term is rendered into English simply as “said”.
- 8 The authoritative Hebrew text (with some Aramaic) produced by the Masoretes and including diacritical marks (e.g., to supply the unwritten vowels or distinguish between pronunciations), accentuations, and other reading guides; for an historical overview of the people and processes involved, including their legacy today, see Ofer (2020).
- 9 Genesis 2: 7, “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” The first creation account, in the previous chapter, simply has (Genesis 1: 27), “And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”.
- 10 Specifically the coronavirus, or COVID-19 in the more technical appellation, pandemic; my hope—prayer—is that it too will pass as quickly as possible. Words cannot do justice to the suffering of this (and much else).
- 11 The Reform movement perhaps has the most experience with “outsiders” in this regard; see the questions and answers page on the conversion process on: “[Choosing Judaism: Frequently Asked Questions \(n.d.\)](#)”, *ReformJudaism.org*. Reconstructionist Judaism may also interest readers wishing to engage, or simply to learn, more: “[Reconstructionism \(n.d.\)](#)”, *Reconstructing Judaism*; and the final major non-Orthodox grouping is Conservative Judaism, an introduction to its approach on converting can be found here: “[Conversion to Judaism \(n.d.\)](#)”, *The Rabbinical Assembly*.
- 12 Hence, with regards to the other two dominant monotheistic faith lines in our present historical trajectory, not mainline Christianity because I think the Islamic critique of orthodox Christianity as an essentially polytheistic religion holds, and not Islam since it is perform a “submission” and not a “struggle”, as its very name makes abundantly evident (the literal English translation of this Arabic noun is just that: submission); see the highly informative introduction in *The Qur’an: A new translation*, (Abdel Haleem 2004) and merely on the translation see the “History and Etymology” portion of the entry in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: “[Islam \(n.d.\)](#)”, *Merriam-Webster*.
- 13 This is Tillich’s striking panentheism (and not pantheism): God/“God” in everything and everything in God/“God”. Note that the term “panentheism” was evidently coined by Charles Hartshorne to describe his own views; see the preface by the editors in *Hartshorne: Process Philosophy and Theology* (Kane and Phillips 1989, p. ix).
- 14 Or “It”; as will have been noticed, we forego gendered pronouns in our referencing and ask the reader to keep in mind too that the abstraction we are seeking to develop can or cannot (either way) be thought of in a being-ness or creature-type figuration; we might—sooner or later—have to learn to take God/“God” as an existence without existentiality. This could be akin to, but even vaguer than (or further beyond), Heidegger’s splicing of “existentiell” and “existential” (Heidegger 2010, especially sections fifty-four and sixty-two).
- 15 There is also something of a tension between this term’s usage and the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) within scripture when studied from a viewpoint of historical development; R. Scott Chalmers, for instance, has produced an interesting work on this topic centered on the Hosean period (8th century BCE); see (Chalmers 2008).
- 16 This was the second of two conquests, within which several waves of deportation and exile took place.
- 17 Caputo stresses this unevenness of the event (or “call”) in his “weak theology” as well; see his works referenced here, especially 2016 and 2006. I owe very much to his provocative treatments, and must be forthright in my gratitude.

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