

“I still felt in the last moment / The unsheathing of the great knife of parting”: Absence,
Abandonment, and Maternal Lament as Poetic Theology in Five Poems by Nelly Sachs

by

Noah L. Van Brenk

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
April 2020

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Abstract

Images of mothers and children proliferate throughout German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs's first two post-World War Two collections of poetry. Compelled by this pattern, this thesis contends that mother and child figures in five poems from these two collections utter laments for those Jews murdered in the Shoah which articulate a specifically female theological position. This position laments the absence of God's immanent and intimate maternal presence in the Shoah and therefore the dissolution of the covenant, thereby differing in its concerns and attitudes from certain post-Shoah theological responses by male thinkers. Whereas these male theological responses lament what they view as an abusive encounter between God and his covenant people, Sachs's poems lament a perceived total *lack* of an encounter between the Shekhinah and her children. This perception, and the lament response it elicits, unites these five poems as a poetic theology.

List of Abbreviations Used

NIV	New International Version translation of the Bible.
2 Chron.	Book of Second Chronicles
Ezek.	Book of Ezekiel
2 Sam.	Book of Second Samuel
Jer.	Book of Jeremiah
Lam.	Book of Lamentations
Gen.	Book of Genesis
Isa.	Book of Isaiah

Acknowledgements

Heavily influenced by its maternal theme, I find myself unable to avoid describing this thesis as having been birthed after a long labour, the longest of any of my academic projects.

Consequently, it is only right to acknowledge those people who acted as scholarly midwives to me, accompanying me in various stages of this project from its conception, through gestation (with its periods of nausea and changing tastes), to final delivery.

Thanks are due first and foremost to my supervisor, Dr. Dorota Glowacka – since introducing me to Nelly Sachs, Dr. Glowacka's keen argumentative awareness and emphasis on razor sharp precision were instrumental in helping me refine and expand early drafts of this work from mere regurgitation of other people's ideas to something far more coherently and distinctively my own. It has been a pleasure to be her student and know that we share topics of interest.

Thank you to Dr. David Patterson, who was gracious enough both to serve as my second reader from afar and to offer new and profound angles of vision on familiar topics.

Thanks to Dr. Alice Brittan, who indulged my interests in Derrida when we first met, and has since offered advice at just the right times when our paths crossed.

There are also others who deserve mention for their support which has long predated this project; Mom, who helps remind me when I've found my writing voice and that it has something worthwhile to say; Dad, whose clearheadedness is the perfect corral for my tangential and sometimes turbulent thoughts; Erik and Hannah, two of the funniest people I know, whose teasing helps me avoid taking myself too seriously; and finally, Eileigh, my companion and helpmate, whose constant encouragement and vocal confidence in my abilities gave me the endurance to bring this thesis fully out into the world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On the sixteenth of May 1940, German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs and her mother Margarete (Rudnick 41) fled to Sweden with the aid of Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf (Bahti and Fries 7; Langer 635). Having already been summoned for ‘transport’ to a concentration camp by the Gestapo (Bahti and Fries 7), the elder Sachs and her forty-eight year old daughter managed to catch the last flight from Berlin to Stockholm before that service was terminated for the duration of the war (Shanks 261). During the war, after learning of the murders of her former lover as well as several of her relatives and close friends at the hands of the Nazis (Rudnick 32), Sachs began writing about those who perished in the Shoah (Langer 635), with the fate of the Jews of Europe providing the impetus for her poetry of witness (Rudnick 43).

Sachs would spend the rest of her life in Sweden until her death in 1970 (Langer 635), and that portion of her life was in many ways defined by her mother’s death. Having narrowly escaped the horrors forced upon the Jews of Europe together, and given the deeply stabilizing presence she was to Nelly (Bower 126), Margarete’s death on 7 February 1950 represented its own kind of cataclysm for Sachs, leaving her stricken with grief (Dinesen 33). So severe was the blow that she wrote six apostrophic poems addressed to her deceased mother (Rudnick 41n73), and confided in letters to friends, “I have been hurt to the utmost. She, the last, most precious good of the earth kept me together.... Now only the yearning is left... I have been so deeply immersed in the suffering that I have often thought that only death could give me life again” (qtd. in Rudnick 41). Linked by the grief they both elicited, this relation between Sach’s mourning for her mother and mourning for European Jewry more broadly – both of which she performed through writing - retroactively highlights the prevalence of maternal motifs in her poetry written in the aftermath of the war. Images of the mother in various manifestations

proliferate throughout Sachs's first post-war collection of poetry published in 1947, *In den Wohnungen des Todes (In the Habitations of Death)*,¹ and those images and references continue to recur in her second post-war volume of poems, *Sternverdunkelung (Eclipse of the Stars)*, published in 1949. Given this prevalence of the maternal motif, unsurprisingly, children also feature heavily in both postwar collections – you cannot be a mother without children, of course. Compelled by this pattern, this thesis contends that motherhood and childhood function as a primary mechanism by which Sachs laments for those Jews murdered by the perpetrators of the Shoah and the resulting “destabilization of [Jewish] faith and identity” (Bower 126). Mother and child figures in Sachs's poetry utter laments in the aftermath of the Shoah which, both in form and in content, are reminiscent of those uttered by biblical figures. More specifically, the poems selected here² are laments which are gendered female, and thus articulate a specifically female theological position.

I am classifying Sachs's poems as both gendered and inherently theological by reading them through a hermeneutic of lament grounded in the Hebrew scriptures, and particularly Lamentations' personification of Jerusalem as mother, who exemplifies what constitutes a specifically female lament. More specifically, she acts as the primary foil against which the theological position of Sachs's own lamenting mother figures is compared and interpreted. This personal female hermeneutic lens is additionally inflected by Gershom Scholem's understanding

¹ Kathrin Bower has independently observed the same prevalence of the maternal in this specific collection: “The image of the mother... appears repeatedly in many manifestations, both positive and negative: as a nurturing force that ensures peace and love, as the vessel and guardian of memory and suffering, as maternal animal and protectress, and as a barrier to the child's painful acquisition of autonomy” (126).

² The German originals of every poem examined in this thesis were published in *In den Wohnungen des Todes*; all but one was subsequently published in English in *In the Habitations of Death*, with “Hands” published in *Eclipse of the Stars*. Both English anthologies were completed by groups of translators led by Michael Hamburger, and have been criticized by Alvin Rosenfeld for turning Sachs into “an awkward, rather flat-footed poet, who is hardly worth reading” (“The Poetry of Nelly Sachs,” 358), among other things. Valid as his concerns might be, they lie outside the bounds of this project and, more importantly, hold no sway over its conclusions.

of the inextricable link between lament and accusation, highlighting how each of the poems selected here contains elements of accusation while never ceasing to be a lament. Sachs's theological stance laments the absence of God's immanent and intimate maternal presence and therefore the dissolution of the covenant, thereby differing in its concerns and attitudes from certain post-Shoah theological responses by male thinkers. Whereas these male theological responses lament what they view as an abusive encounter between God and his covenant people, Sachs's poems lament a perceived total *lack* of an encounter between the Shekhinah and her children. It is this perception, and the lament response it elicits, which represents the unifying essential concern of the five poems that follow here. United by this concern, these five poems function as a poetic unit which asserts their theological position, not through systematic abstract propositions, but through repeated imagery, motifs, and themes; in short, they constitute a poetic theology.

Chapter 2: The Discombobulated, Maternal, and Accusatory Essence of Lament

The understanding of lament from which Sachs's poems, and by extension her poetic theology, proceed from is anchored in the meaning and nuances of the Hebrew word *eikhah*. The word and its connotations represent the underlying note, the downbeat, the essential characteristic of any lament according to Jewish thought. *Eikhah*, or "how," begins the biblical book of Lamentations, and questionings expressed through *eikhah* form the foundation of lament in Jewish thought. However, it is crucial to note that these questions are not aimed at obtaining information; instead, they attempt to articulate bewildered protest, outrage, and brokenness in response to events which are unexplainable (Halbertal 3-4). There is a certain incredulity contained within *eikhah*, a disbelief brought on by the stark contrast between the current desolation it laments and the previous wholeness that it recalls (Halbertal 4). Thus, when someone cries *eikhah*, 'how', they are asking, "how could this have happened?," with an already implicit understanding that an answer to that question is not – and cannot be – forthcoming. This singular word encapsulates the basic stance of the lamenter (Halbertal 3) and is thus seminal to all subsequent discussions here of lament in Sachs's poetry.

Illustrative examples of *eikhah* are found throughout the Hebrew scriptures, both referenced and spoken aloud. The second book of Chronicles records how the prophet Jeremiah composed laments for the Judaic king Josiah after he was killed in battle (*Holy Bible*, New International Version, 2 Chron. 35:33);³ the prophet Ezekiel devotes an entire chapter as a lament for Israel's princes and the fate of their nation (Ezek. 19) and in his foretelling of the destruction of Tyre; moreover, after learning of the deaths of his dear friend Jonathan and King Saul at the hands of the Philistines, David issues perhaps the epitomic example of a lament in the Hebrew

³ All biblical references and quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) translation unless otherwise indicated.

scriptures (Greenstein 68): “‘A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel / How [*eikhah*] the mighty have fallen!’” (2 Sam. 1:18). This cry expresses the essential bewilderment and discombobulation of a lament, caused in this instance by the inversion of the once-glorious past David experienced with Jonathan and his present loss – it seems both paradoxical and incomprehensible that a warrior as capable as Jonathan would die in battle and be desecrated after death (2 Sam. 31:8-10) “like a scoundrel” (Greenstein 68). Each of these speakers’ uses of *eikhah*, and David’s perhaps most viscerally, express traumas which undermine and preclude their speakers’ ability to comprehend the reality of their loss (Halbertal 4).⁴

And yet, while these examples represent consummate examples of the posture, mindset, emotional stance, and rationale of lament as defined by *eikhah*, the gender of the male speakers who utter these canonical laments belies the overt link in the Hebrew scriptures between the female sphere and lament as an activity. Indeed, only a few verses after he wails “How the mighty have fallen!” David as male lamenter summons the ‘Daughters of Israel’ to “‘weep for Saul, / who clothed you in scarlet and finery, / who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold’” (2 Sam. 1:24); similarly, the prophet Jeremiah, conveying a message from God in anticipation of the destruction of Jerusalem (Greenstein 68), commands:

“Call for the wailing women to come;

send for the most skillful of them.

Let them come quickly

and wail over us

⁴ *Eikhah* is also the root of *Ayeka*, the first question God asks the first human in Eden: “where are you?” (Gen. 3:9) In this context, *Ayeka* can be equally translated as “How could you? What have you done to yourself?” Like *Eikhah*, *Ayeka* is a cry of pain, anguish, suffering, and shock. My thanks to Dr. David Patterson for making me aware of this linguistic connection and offering his theological interpretation of it.

till our eyes overflow with tears
and water streams from our eyelids.

.....

Now, you women, hear the word of the LORD;
open your ears to the words of his mouth.

Teach your daughters how to wail;
teach one another a lament.” (Jer. 9: 17b-18, 20)

Ezekiel’s lament for Israel’s princes makes sustained metaphorical reference to Israel as their mother using imagery of a lioness and a vine, with the implication that to lament for the princes is to lament for their mother, and vice versa. Moreover, the first time that Job speaks following the calamities which befall him, the content of his lament is overtly concerned with the link between mother and child:

“May the day of my birth perish,
and the night that said, ‘A boy is conceived!’

.....

May its morning stars become dark;
may it wait for daylight in vain
and not see the first rays of dawn,
for it did not shut the doors of the womb on me
to hide trouble from my eyes.

Why did I not perish at birth,
and die as I came from the womb?

Why were there knees to receive me
and breasts that I might be nursed?

.....

why was I not hidden away in the ground like a stillborn child,
like an infant who never saw the light of day?

There the wicked cease from turmoil,
and there the weary are at rest.” (Job 3:3, 9-12, 16-17)

In the wake of the catastrophes inflicted on him, Job’s automatic response is to interpret his calamities through his relationship with his own mother. The foundation his lament is grounded in, the place from which he launches his questionings, is the maternal realm with which he has been intimately connected since his conception and through which he entered into the world.

Clearly, then, the activity of lamentation is neither gender-neutral nor gender-blind in traditional Jewish thought, with women representing an integral and distinct part of that activity. Indeed, according to Hebraic thought and logic,

Laments are above all about separation and the severing of ties between mothers and their children, or other relationships often configured as ties between mothers and children. It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that it is exactly the harsh contrast between the intuitive, wished-for inseparability of the mother-child relationship and the finality of the separation caused by death that constitutes the bleeding heart, the burning epicenter of laments. And thus, in an inverse move, lament proves to be all about life. (Hasan-Rokem 36)

The book of Lamentations represents an example par excellence of this motif and its posture of lament; in the Hebrew Bible (as opposed to the Babylonian Talmud), *eikhah* is both the title of

the book and its opening word (Hillers 8): “How deserted lies the city, / once so full of people!” (Lam. 1:1) Exemplifying the connotations of *eikhah*, this opening salvo, the overarching question of the book, might be rephrased as, ‘how could this city, so vibrant and full of life, become deserted and desecrated?’ Razed by the Babylonians and its people carted off (Hillers 3), the city of Jerusalem is personified as a mother whose “children have gone into exile, / captive before the foe” (Lam. 1:5b) and who elsewhere wails, ““No one is near to comfort me, / no one to restore my spirit. / My children are destitute / because the enemy has prevailed”” (Lam. 1:16b). Her sense of shock at the fate and treatment of her children is palpable, and Jerusalem as mother stands among other female figures in the Hebrew scriptures who occupy similar places of lament. For instance, the matriarch Rachel, invoked by the prophet Jeremiah, laments for Israel as her exiled children:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.” (Jer. 31:15)

Nevertheless, the personification of Jerusalem in Lamentations is distinguished among those other lamenting women by her overt use of *eikhah*, her status as a paradigmatic example of a lamenting figure for scholars, and the Jewish tradition of interpreting tragedies through her hermeneutics. Consequently, for the purposes of this thesis, the trope of Jerusalem as mother functions as the primary interpretive foil for the theological positions of Sachs’s own lamenting mother figures.

Amongst Jewish thinkers who have written on lament, Gershom Scholem represents a thinker whose scholarly work on the topic, while written before the Holocaust, is particularly relevant for an analysis of lament within Sachs's early poetry. Incidentally, Sachs's own familiarity with Scholem's work, and especially with his writings on Jewish Kabbalist thought and the Zohar, is well documented (Rudnick 185). As a result of this exposure, Ruth Dinesen argues, Sachs viewed herself as a poetic successor to the writer of the Zohar whose telos was to enact the healing of the world through poetry (34). Such themes, however, become overt only in her poetry collections written after the publication of *In the Habitations of Death* and *Eclipse of the Stars* (Bahr 49-50), and thus fall outside the bounds of this particular study. Moreover, to date there has not been a sustained analysis written in English of the relevance of Scholem's theory of lament to a study of Sach's poetry written between 1940 and 1949.

Such relevance can be found in Scholem's comments on the intrinsic relatedness of, though essential difference between, lament and accusation. The foundations of Scholem's particular theory of lament are grounded in his 1917 essay entitled "On Lament and Lamentation," or "Über Klage und Klagelied" in the original German, and his diaries dated from early 1918 indicate his continued preoccupation with the subject of lament (Skinner 216). Written as the epilogue for his translation of the Book of Lamentations from Hebrew to German (Ferber 162), Scholem's essay betrays little of the gendered sensibilities of the biblical examples of lament cited above. Rather, with an awareness of the gender difference between Scholem as male theorist and Sachs as female poet, it is notable that in his study of the book of Lamentations, he nearly completely disregards its gendered aspects (Hasan-Rokem 48), and his overall theory of lament as outlined in "Über Klage und Klagelied" is distinctly genderless, with overarching linguistic concerns superseding theological ones (Ferber 164).

Nevertheless, when Scholem maintains, “There is no answer to lament, which is to say, there is only one: falling mute” (“On Lament” 316), he alludes to the dialectic between lament and accusation, a crucial tension present both within his wider thought and more broadly within the understanding of lament established by *eikhah*. Drawing on the outraged and bewildered questionings of *eikhah*, questions which defy the possibility of a response, and using Job’s speech in Job 3 as a paradigmatic example, Scholem argues that lament, or *klage* in German, is inherently inclined towards silence because it contains an internal dialectic with accusation, or *anklage*: “Lament is an accusation that can never turn itself into a verdict. Thus the book of Job contains nothing more than the depositions of witnesses, but no verdict, because, in this book, God himself in the end remains a witness, albeit the *ultimate* witness, but not yet the judge” (Scholem “Job” 322). *Anklage* is a complaint or accusation that can be addressed to and answered by another, and it communicates a claim about a specific object, event, or grievance within a specific context, all of which assume the possibility of receiving a response to that claim. Conversely, *klage* is, by definition, impossible to respond to; it has no object towards which it is directed, it communicates no specific message, and, crucially, it fundamentally anticipates no response (Ferber 173). Scholem notes that while all laments betray structures of accusation, they are never directed at a particular addressee or defendant (Ferber 173); in fact, the lack of this recipient of *klage* is always and essentially bewailed by *klage* itself, even as it continues to be uttered within that necessary absence of a recipient (Ferber 174-75). *Klage* always hovers on the edge of *anklage* without ever transforming into *anklage* itself, since by definition it cannot receive an answer or verdict to its question. Consequently, lament or *klage* is essentially impenetrable to response (Ferber 176). In short, lament always includes accusation,

but it is never reducible or equivalent to that accusation – a lament always supersedes any accusation contained within it.

The dialectical logic at work between lament and accusation and lament's gendered nature is further reinforced by attention to their grammatical function within German. On a preliminary note, as a noun in German, *Klage* is not neutral but rather gendered feminine. In this sense, on a German paradigm, all laments might be considered 'feminine,' an activity inherently connected, albeit implicitly, with the female. More concretely, while the shift from the 'lamentation' to 'accusation' may seem for certain English readers to be a stark or separative one, as a German separable prefix verb, *anklage* clearly contains *klage* as its root, with the prefix *an-*⁵ working to grammatically focus the outcry of the lamenter towards an identifiable addressee; put a different way, both linguistically and conceptually, lament/*klage* is accusation/*anklage* stripped bare, divested of all control, all focus, reduced to sheer pain and pure wail, evocative of the word *eikhah* itself "that is more a sound than a word" (Maier 145). Given that no direct German equivalent word for *eikhah* appears in any of the following poems from Sachs, and that Sachs and Scholem both wrote in German, Scholem's theory of lament, with its engagement with and translation of Hebraic laments and concepts into German, thus forms an important link between the gendered scriptural precedents of lament and Sachs's own poems, helping to unpack the nuances of *eikhah* and circumventing issues of translation.

⁵ More generally, the prefix *an-* works to focus the action of its root verb at, towards, or on something or someone. For instance, the verb *sehen* translates as 'to see,' while *ansehen* means 'to look at,' 'to face,' or 'to behold' a particular direct object; similarly, *rufen* means 'to call' or 'to shout,' whereas *anrufen* is the verb for calling someone on the telephone. Of course, these are by no means exhaustive examples.

Chapter 3: Destructions of Mother-Child Relations in Four Poems by Sachs

Sachs's most explicit implementation of these dynamics for poetic effect occurs within "Chorus of the Orphans."⁶ Published as one of fourteen poems which comprise a cycle entitled "*Chöre nach der Mitternacht*" (Choirs after Midnight), including "Choir of the Dead," "Choir of the Rescued," and "Choir of the Stones" (Sachs *Das Leiden Israels* 177), this poem is narrated by children orphaned by the Shoah, a collective reminiscent of choruses of classical Greek drama, now victims of and witnesses to a modern European calamity. Their repeated self-descriptive refrain "We orphans / We lament [*klagen*] to the world" both opens and closes the poem, bookending it within the logic of *eikhah*; from a Scholemian standpoint, this poetic choice immediately establishes the dialectic between lament and accusation, a tension which courses through the entire poem and reaches its climax in the poem's final five words: "*O Welt / Wir klagen dich an!*" "O world / We accuse you!" (Sachs *Chimneys* 31).⁷ Given the nature of *klage*, this climax produces neither consolation nor a movement into pure *anklage*, since the addressee of the speakers' accusations is highly non-specific; who in the world is expected to respond to the speakers' charge? Perhaps more importantly, who is even able to? Similarly, the speakers' concluding accusation contains no specific content – it is not a measured allegation which anticipates a verdict, but rather a cry of bewildered outrage, a blank cry which echoes Scholem's declaration that "In lament, nothing is expressed and everything is implied" (Scholem "On Lament" 313). Moreover, while the word *eikhah* is not explicitly present, the utter disbelief communicated by its 'how' questions permeates the entire poem. This incredulity is both heightened and reinforced by the juxtapositions of contrasting images and concepts throughout.

⁶ Both the German original and English translation of each poem discussed in this thesis are included in their entirety in Appendix A.

⁷ See Lam. 5:3, wherein Jerusalem's inhabitants cry out: "We have become orphans, fatherless; / our mothers are like widows" (*Holy Bible*, English Standard Version).

The orphans ask, how did “Stones... become our playthings” (Sachs *Chimneys* 29)? “Kindling was made of our protectors” (29) – how could this happen?

The operative imagery of the face throughout “Chorus of the Orphans” establishes the dialectic of presence and absence. More importantly, this dialectic is derived from the separation of mother or maternal figures and their children that is so central to Sachs’s poetic theology. The murders of their parents which made them orphans is the impetus for the children’s lament, and they now lie “stretched out on the fields of loneliness” (*Chimneys* 29). This interrogation of the absence of parental figures by their bereft children is reiterated only lines later when the children, after recapitulating their refrain “We orphans / We lament to the world,” declare: “At night our parents play hide and seek – / From behind the black folds of night / Their faces gaze at us” (29). This imagery of the face recalls the biblical understanding of ‘the face’ as a metonym for divine presence (Raphael 105). However, such an understanding of presence is subverted through its vehicle of communication when the orphans describe how just as “Stones have become our playthings” so too do “Stones have faces, mother and father faces” (Sachs *Chimneys* 29); the parent-child relationship has been collapsed entirely, forcing the orphans to interact with their parents as objects rather than persons. Devoid of this authentic parental relation, the orphans’ world is incomprehensibly and inherently impersonal, fragmented, and threatening.

Whereas “Chorus of the Orphans” laments the absence of parental presence, protection, and nurturance, Sachs’s poem “O the night of the weeping children!” laments the predatory presence of those who have filled that maternal void. The poem begins with ‘O,’ another hallmark of the Hebraic lament tradition which Sachs emulates in that it is onomatopoeic of the characteristic wail of *eikhah* in Hebrew lament, sometimes translated as ‘Alas!’ in English translations of the Hebrew Bible (Greenstein 68). This wail draws attention to the abhorrent

inversions of maternal care which dominate the poem. Melissa Raphael defines the maternal posture as being “a capacity to bend over and cover, stroke, warm, feed, clean, lift and hold the other” (Raphael 10), and in this lament, such care is so inverted as to render it utterly absent, merely a memory. The care given when “Mother still drew / Sleep toward them like a white moon” occurred not today but “Yesterday,” a word which encapsulates both the speaker’s shock at the reversal of the children’s fortune and Sachs’s understanding of ‘the gorge dividing the pre- and post-Auschwitz worlds as unbridgeable’ (Martin *Nelly Sachs* 70) within her thought as a whole. The contrast between the simple, innocent language of the second stanza and the violent, searing, dreadful, cruel language of the first (Martin *Nelly Sachs* 96) serves to concretize the shockingly horrific reversal of reality that *eikhah* both encapsulates and responds to. Indeed, yesterday even the children themselves acted as mothers to “the doll with cheeks derouged by kisses / In one arm, The stuffed pet, already / Brought to life by love, / In the other - ” (Sachs *Chimneys* 7), but the first word of the subsequent line reverses that reality: “Now blows the wind of dying, / Blows the shirts [sic] over the hair / That no one will comb again.” Now it is death which perversely ‘dresses’ the children, children “branded for death” by those on whom they should be able to depend:

Terrible nursemaids

Have usurped the place of mothers,

Have tautened their tendons with the false death,

Sow it on to the walls and into the beams –

Everywhere it is hatched in the nests of horror.

Instead of mother’s milk, panic suckles⁸ those little ones. (*Chimneys* 7)

⁸ See Lam. 2:12: “They [children and infants] say to their mothers, / ‘Where is bread and wine?’ / as they faint like the wounded / in the streets of the city, / as their lives ebb away / in their mothers’ arms.”

Here the anti-relation depicted in “Chorus of the Orphans” is made horrifically tactile and physical; rather than nursing, nourishing, and cradling those children under their care, death is ‘hatched’ in an almost reptilian manner by terrible nursemaids whose tautened hand muscles evoke images of bestial claws. This imagery of the Nazi perpetrators of the Shoah, and particularly those involved in the camps, as anti-nursemaids who paradoxically feed children with death and cultivate it as if it were a living entity, who essentially feed on and prey on the children themselves, calls to mind Jerusalem’s own outraged response to the violations of her people: ““Look, LORD, and consider: / Whom have you ever treated like this? / Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for?”” (Lam. 2: 20).⁹ Sachs’s utilization of this image, of a maternal figure who devours those whom she should sustain, carries a similarly accusatory weight (*Anklage*) to Jerusalem’s questions while never allowing such accusation to negate the essentially inexplicable and debilitating reversal of reality which the *Schreckliche Wärterinnen* represent. The poem’s nature *qua* lament is thus confirmed by its gesturing towards a reality that is incomprehensible precisely because it attempts to communicate the ultimate desecration of the mother-child relation.

Sachs’s response to this desecration takes another form in “Hands.” Here the hands of the nursemaids metamorphose to become the hands of a child, and both sets of hands are linked by their respective handlings of death. Here, however, rather than acting in response to death, this child’s hands dole out death in their adult form as “gardeners of death” (Sachs *Seeker* 15). Just as panic and hopelessness is the unnatural milk¹⁰ which the infants suckle in “O the night of the

⁹ See Lam. 4:10: “With their own hands compassionate women / have cooked their own children, / who became their food / when my people were destroyed.”

¹⁰ Sachs’s friendship with Paul Celan is well-known, and her use of nursing imagery faintly echoes the “Black milk of daybreak” from Celan’s own poem “Todesfuge” (Felstiner 31). For more on their correspondence, see the collection of their letters edited by Barbara Wiedemann and translated by Christopher Clark.

weeping children,” “An acute sense of despair... is audible in this poem [“Hands”] through the use of rhetorical questions which, significantly, remain unanswered” (Martin *Nelly Sachs* 87), all of which represent another example of the *klage – anklage* dialectic at work within Sachs’s poems. More significantly, the reality that, in the Nazi perpetration of the Shoah, childhood innocence mutated into murderous “camomile death / which thrive[d] on the hard pastures / or on the slope” (Sachs *Seeker* 15) and aimed not at the preservation and cultivation of life is viewed as implicitly blasphemous; the evils of the perpetrators are understood as being akin to “breaking open the tabernacle of the body, / gripping the signs of the mysteries like tiger’s teeth – ” (*Seeker* 15). Crucially, these execratory deeds are connected to the death of the mother when the speaker demands:

You strangling hands,
was your mother dead,
your wife, your child?
So that all you held in your hands was death,
in your strangling hands? (15)

In his chapter “The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother,” David Patterson comments that, from a specifically Jewish perspective, “the mother represents not the primeval but the immemorial, the remembrance of something that transforms everything, prior to everything, and forever afterward into something *meaningful*” (166-67, emphasis in original), possessing an inherent sanctity. In associating the murderous nature of the perpetrator’s hands with the death of the mother figure by proximity, Sachs suggests that the child’s blasphemy makes it as if they had murdered their own mother. Thus when the speaker asks, “Hands, / what did you do / when you were tiny children’s hands? / Did you hold a mouth organ,

the mane / of a rocking horse, clutch your mother's skirt in the dark" (Sachs *Seeker* 15), she despairs that those who were once children could commit evils which constitute an assault on both the integrity of the mother-child relation and on the holiness of the mother herself. Indeed, Sachs refuses to dehumanize the perpetrators of the Shoah (Martin *Nelly Sachs* 87) – they remain human beings who willingly violated the sanctity of life as embodied by the figure of the mother, not beasts, and it is precisely because they are not beasts that the poem's anguished rhetorical questions echo with the wailing of *eikhah*. Here the mother-child relation is desecrated from within, not from without - the child is not a victim but the aggressor, the assailant, the murderer, the defiler, and such a profanation amounts to an assault on humanity (Patterson 167). In other words, since the mother-child relation is utterly necessary, essential, and fundamental for life, the desires of the Shoah perpetrators to destroy that relation and to destroy life itself are one and the same.

Moreover, the profound dis-integrating and dis-combulating consequences of this desecration are addressed in "Already embraced by the arm of heavenly solace." This poem is notable in relation to the poems discussed thus far for the perspective of its speaker. Here, rather than lamenting herself, the speaker observes instead how "The insane mother stands / With the tatters of her torn mind / With the charred tinders of her burnt mind" (Sachs *Chimneys* 15), physically enacting her own lament for her murdered child by "Twisting her hands into urns, / Filling them with the body of her child from the air, / Filling them with his eyes, his hair from the air, / And with his fluttering heart –" (*Chimneys* 15). This image of a female figure as a clearly gendered voice of lament, deranged by the separation from her child in death, raises the question of how Sachs's own poetic voice may be gendered as female beyond her use of the

mother-child motif as poetic content, since the gendered content of that motif in no way precludes its use by a male voice.

A possible answer to this question can be found by turning once again to the book of Lamentations and to its two gendered speakers: an unnamed man whose lament comprises the book's third chapter (Kalmanofsky 54) and Daughter Zion. Comparing the various prayers of these two voices is insightful in that "Whereas Daughter Zion suffers because others suffer, the [unnamed male lamenter] laments his personal situation" (Kalmanofsky 56); indeed, his opening lines are highly self-focused when he declares,

I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of the Lord's wrath.
He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long. (Lam. 3:1-3)

He is both the active subject and receptive object of his own lament, and one might also think of Job's laments similarly exhibiting this 'male' voice when he declares:

"May the day of my birth perish,
and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!'
.....
Why did I not perish at birth,
and die as I came from the womb?
Why were there knees to receive me
and breasts that I might be nursed?" (Job 3: 3, 11-12)

Conversely, the laments of female voice in Lamentations are decidedly and persistently externally and other-oriented, recalling Jerusalem's wail that "'My children are destitute / because the enemy has prevailed'" and that "'Young and old lie together / in the dust of the streets; / my young men and young women have fallen by the sword'" (Lam. 1: 16b, 2: 21a). In other words, "Daughter Zion suffers as an individual, yet her suffering is in response to the suffering of others. Her emotional life is bound up with the lives of her dependants. Her release will come through the release of her children...The independent [male lamenter] seeks his own salvation. He wants to be saved from the pit. *Enmeshed Daughter Zion wants her children to live*" (Kalmanofsky 63, emphasis mine). While the ancient gender roles and voices of Lamentations should not be uncritically superimposed onto Sachs's work, Kalmanofsky's observation about the biblical text highlights the way in which, in each of the poems discussed thus far, Sachs either ventriloquizes the voice of or laments for another – for those children orphaned by the Shoah and for those preyed upon by its hideous anti-mothers, for those mothers whose children were consumed by Nazi machinations. In this sense, then, Sachs's poetic voice might be seen as gendered female in addition to her use of the gendered mother-child motif, a voice which laments alongside and for those whom she represents.

Read collectively, these four poems can and should be understood as laments both on a biblical model and with Scholemian accents, laments which are gendered with distinctly female content and distinctly female concerns. Each of their poetic voices is haunted by the degradation of the relation of mothers to their children while attempting to articulate their laments from different perspectives, resulting in a polyphony of *eikhah* cries. In this regard, given its thematic content – in which the speaker ventriloquizes the voice of a child who narratively laments their separation from their mother at the hands of Nazi cruelty - the poem "A dead child speaks" is in

one sense simply another wail in the chorus of polyphonic female laments uttered by the poems discussed thus far. However, the manner in which this particular poem utters its female lament distinguishes it by raising the multitudinous yet unified concerns of the speakers of those other poems – their sufferance on behalf of those violated in the Shoah, their debilitated shock at the destruction of both mother and child, their horror at the desecration (and absence) of the holiness of the maternal – to an agonizingly apothecotic representation. The framework for this distressing elevation is established within the first two lines of the poem; in narrating how “My mother held my by the hand / Then someone raised the knife of parting” (Sachs *Chimneys* 13), the poem’s child speaker reenacts the moment on Mount Moriah when, after having “bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood,” Abraham “reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Gen.22: 9b-10). Excluding the mention of ‘heavenly solace’ (which in itself is a rather abstract concept), the previous four poems display little to no overt scriptural references, contrasting sharply with this biblical allusion. Consequently, as will be seen, Sachs’s use of the biblical episode of the *Akedah*, and her crucial revisions to that story, as the form through which this poem utters its lament introduces post-Shoah theological questioning as the central concern and characteristic of her female laments.

Chapter 4: The Revisionary *Akedah* of “A dead child speaks” and a Poetic Theology of (Divine) Separation

Indeed, by virtue of its form, “A dead child speaks” places itself within a long tradition of employing the *Akedah* as an interpretive theological paradigm, “especially given its use in the medieval Hebrew martyrologies of the Crusader and post-Crusader period... during which the biblical event of the *Akedah* became the prism through which the horrific Jewish medieval experience became refracted and was made ‘intelligible’ to Jews of that era” (Katz 355).¹¹ Within the context of this tradition, however, “A dead child speaks” distinguishes itself through the gender of its central parental character. Sachs’s retelling of the *Akedah* with a female mother figure in the place of Abraham recalls other stories from the first crusade, wherein mothers openly offer their children as sacrifices (Kartun Blum 16). Moreover, in her analysis of the use of the *Akedah* motif in the work of contemporary Israeli female poets, Kartun Blum notes how “the use of this charged myth is rare in the poetry of women, while almost ubiquitous in the work of their male contemporaries. Up until the Eighties it seems the *Aqedah* [sic] remained an almost exclusively male *topos*” (“Don’t Play Hide and Seek” 13). Indeed, Amir Gilboa, Jacob Glatstein, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Hayyim Guri have all penned poems in which revisions to the *Akedah* story demonstrate how the depredations committed against the Jews of Europe have radically altered how their poets understand the covenantal relationship between God and his chosen people (Rosenfeld “Reflections on Isaac” 248). In this regard, “A dead child speaks” represents

¹¹ Shalom Spiegel records one particular instance that occurred amidst a slaughter of Jews by crusading forces at Worms in 1096 when, over a period of two days, eight hundred people were murdered. During these events, one father declared to those around him: “Here is my son whom God gave to me and to whom my wife Zipporah gave birth *in her old age*; Isaac is the child’s name; and now *I shall offer him up as Father Abraham offered up his son Isaac*” (Spiegel 24); he then killed his son with a knife before walking into the street with his wife, where they were both murdered (24).

an intriguing exception to Kartun Blum's blanket observation, and is thus noteworthy both in its simple use of the motif and its revision of the original source matter.

While this emulation of the *Akedah* narrative presents us again with what by now has become a horrifyingly familiar reality – the sundering of child and of mother by the perpetrators of the Shoah – what we now witness is the sundering as it occurs and not its aftermath. The “knife of parting” (Sachs *Chimneys* 13) is raised before our eyes, and “So that it should not strike me, / My mother loosed her hand from mine.” It is this separation which constitutes the essence of not only this lament but of every lament examined in this paper. In her analysis of another of Sachs's poems,¹² Elaine Martin interprets the word *Abschied* (parting) as an evocation of “the selection process on the ramps of the death camps” (*Nelly Sachs* 79), an observation which is equally applicable to “A dead child speaks.” Coerced by the *Abschiedsmesser*/knife of parting wielded by the Nazis, the mother's release of her child's hand, done with the intention of sparing her child from the knife, nevertheless amounts to a cleaving away, the irruption of absence into their relation. It is an absence which is distinctly gendered *female* and, crucially, which gestures towards the other equally as disturbing absence in the poem: the absence of God.

Of the several revisions made in “A dead child speaks” to the biblical episode, including its narration by the Isaac figure and wielding of the knife by someone other than the parent figure, those relating to God are the most significant for the poem in its nature as a lament, its asking, *eikhah*, “how could this have happened?” In Sachs's *Akedah* account, God's precipitating command to Abraham to “Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Gen. 22:2) and his ultimate staying of Abraham's hand (Gen. 22:12) are omitted,

¹² “Abschied.” Originally published in *Sternverdunkelung*, Michael Hamburger, Ruth Mead and Matthew Mead translate *Abschied* in this poem as “farewell” (Sachs *Seeker* 112-113).

consigning Him to the realm of ignorance or perhaps even granting him the role of silent and callous observer.¹³

More importantly, in light of the centrality of the maternal within *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, the connotations of the particular name for God's presence – Shekhinah – are of profound significance for a consideration of this poem; deriving from the Hebrew verb *shakhan* 'to dwell,' the term 'Shekhinah' "suggests not simply divine presence, but divine nearness and even intimacy" (Lodahl 51). In other words, according to Ephraim Urbach, "In Tannaitic literature the term Shekhina [sic] is used when the manifestation of the Lord and His nearness to man are spoken of" (43). Scholem himself observes that "In Talmudic literature and non-Kabbalistic Rabbinical Judaism, the *Shekhinah* – literally in-dwelling, namely of God in the world – is taken to mean simply God himself in His omnipresence and activity in the world and especially in Israel. God's presence, what in the Bible is called His 'face,' is in Rabbinical usage His *Shekhinah*" (Scholem *On the Kabbalah* 104-105). However, somewhat ironically, in contrast to his decidedly a-gendered conception of lament, Scholem himself also provides nuanced insights into the confluences of gender and historical Jewish understandings of the Shekhinah; within the mystic thought of Jewish Kabbalism specifically, the Shekhinah was understood as the feminine element of God in relation to His masculine element, a notion which Scholem saw as "one of the most important and lasting innovations of Kabbalism" (Scholem *Major Trends* 229). In this conception of the Shekhinah, "She is not only Queen, daughter and bride of God, but also the mother of every individual in Israel" (Scholem *Major Trends* 230), and thus 'Shekhinah' as denoting God's intimate and immanent presence with his people simultaneously connotes a specifically female gendered, maternal intimacy.

¹³ Rudnick notes how, throughout her post-Shoah poetry, Sachs's God "does not speak but merely acts" (*Post-Shoa Religious Metaphors* 190).

It is this understanding of God which is mirrored by the human mother who departs from her child under the threat of the *Abschiedsmesser*. While S/He is never explicitly mentioned, God's absence haunts the poem as a result of its *Akedah* form. Despite the fact that the mother released the hand of her child in an attempt to preserve their life, the word 'But' immediately following that action undermines any potentially hopeful result: "But she lightly touched my thighs once more / And her hand was bleeding –". While Martin is certainly justified in reading this image as metaphorically signaling the mother's own death after being selected by the Nazis to be murdered ("Biblical Archetypes" 301), with the parallel between human mother and the Shekhinah as divine mother in mind, it can also be understood as signifying the Shekhinah's own failure to remain present with the children of Israel in the face of the Nazi assaults against them. Moreover, Her highly conspicuous absence in this poem casts similar aspersion on her barely-present liminality in the other poems studied here, particularly that absence in 'heavenly solace' which offers no authentic solace for the insane mother burying her child, and as a mere word pointed to by childish blaspheming hands in "Hands." Every instance of motherly absence in Sachs's work here reflects a perceived absence of the Shekhinah, and consequently, each of these poems can be seen not only as laments provoked by the depredations inflicted upon the Jewish people in the Shoah, but also as cries which express utter shock at the absence of both human and divine mother. Such cries are narrativized by the final stanza of "A dead child speaks" when the child recounts: "As I was led to death / I still felt in the last moment / The unsheathing of the great knife of parting" (*Chimneys* 13). Here "*the true terror of a child is of the sundering from its mother – rather than death*" (Peterson 202, emphasis mine) and the dialectic of *klage* and *anklage*, directed now at the Shekhinah, is felt in its most profound and distressing sense.

Together, then, the dereliction and desolation of both human maternal presence and of the Shekhinah comprise the essence of the horror which this lament attempts to articulate.

Furthermore, the concerns of this singular poem also summarize and encapsulate the fundamental concern of every poem studied – it acts as a spokes-poem for the polyphone of female *eikhah* cries that these five poems are. In addition to encapsulating the various aspects of female lament embodied in the previous four poems, the biblical form of “A dead child speaks” brings the echoes of the *Akedah* present in the other poems sharply into focus. These fragments appear in the use of certain motifs; for instance, the orphans’ claim in “Chorus” that “Our branch has been cut down / And thrown into the fire” (*Chimneys* 29), certainly an oblique reference to the crematoria of the Nazi camps, also alludes to the knife or cleaver as the instrument which did the cutting, not to mention the implicit connection between actual fire and the sacrificial fire which nearly consumed Isaac. Similarly, images of hands proliferate throughout these poems – as the operative metaphor of “Hands,” the predatorily tensed hand muscles¹⁴ of the nursemaids in “O the night of the weeping children!” but also in the image of the bereft mother in “heavenly solace” “Twisting her hands into urns” (*Chimneys* 15). In each of these examples, the close connection between hands and death is concretized by their prevalence in the biblical *Akedah* account (cf. Gen. 22:10, 12) as well as the hand raising the knife of parting occupying the centre of focus in Sachs’s version. Moreover, when viewed in conjunction with the *Akedah*, the mother figure of “heavenly solace” bears a strong resemblance to the figure of Sarah as she is depicted in the midrash upon learning of why Abraham has taken Isaac to Mount Moriah. Just as the death and dissolution of her son into an “airborne being” (*Chimneys* 15) precipitates this mother figure’s death, so too does *Genesis Rabbah* 58:5 recount how Sarah died from grief and despair

¹⁴ Hamburger et al. render Sachs’s original *Handmuskeln* as “tendons,” which to me obscures or dilutes the visceral leering terror and immanence of the ravenous and murderous *Schreckliche Wärterinnen*.

after learning what Abraham had set off to do, with her husband having to bury her after returning from Moriah (Zierler 12). In both narratives, one poetic and the other exegetical, the death of the child is so cataclysmic that it is fatal to the mother herself. These five poems thus function as a poetic unit, united in their natures as female laments and undergirded by the *Akedah* as their hermeneutical theme.

That this thematic relatedness between these poems exists should not be overly surprising, given the coherent organization that has been observed existing within Sachs's corpus. For Alvin Rosenfeld, the publication arrangement of Sachs's poems imposed in the original German editions (and subsequently lost in the English translations) is of paramount importance, since "Miss Sachs's writings, persistent as they are in their remembrance and interpretation of the Holocaust, accumulate their effects most strongly in large groups of poems" ("Poetry of Nelly Sachs" 358-359). The group or cycle in question for the poems of this paper is entitled *Dein Leib im Rauch durch die Luft* (Your Body in Smoke through the Air).¹⁵ and it comprises the opening cycle of *In den Wohnungen des Todes*. With the exception of "Chorus of the Orphans," every poem discussed in this paper is found within this first cycle and all ordered relatively close together within the set of thirteen poems (Sachs *Das Leiden Israels* 176). While Rosenfeld is certainly correct in asserting that within each cycle "the poems in the sub-sections relate to and reinforce one another, and, in this fashion, they begin to accumulate a total effect of theme, mood, and general poetic value" ("Poetry of Nelly Sachs" 359), that accumulation of effect is not limited to these characteristics. Rather, with their shared identity as female laments, grounded upon (the destruction of) the mother-child motif, and minorly reinforced by their relatedness in publication arrangement, I contend that the poems studied here from this particular

¹⁵ This is another image in Sachs's poetry which can be read as an allusion to the sacrificial fire of the *Akedah*.

cycle accumulate and assert their own unified theological position, or what I am terming as Sachs's 'poetic theology.'¹⁶

Such a label brings these poems, with "A dead child speaks" as their spokes-poem, into conversation with other seminal post-Shoah theological claims, responses, and arguments. Given the status of the *Akedah* as the poems' underlying hermeneutical theme, this indirect dialogue centers around the issue of the covenant.¹⁷ Within this dialogue, when compared with how certain post-Shoah theological thinkers understand the status and essence of God's covenant with Israel in the wake of the Shoah, Sachs's own theological stance on the covenant as articulated by these five poems begins to crystalize. Crucially, part of this elucidation involves a recognition of the ways in which the gendered concerns, content, and voices of her poetic theology shape its conclusions to be, while related, significantly different to those articulated by certain male theologians. Of the various theological positions articulated by men in the aftermath of the Shoah on this issue, responses by Elie Wiesel, David Blumenthal, and Irving Greenberg are perhaps the most profound of those positions when placed in dialogue with Sachs's.

Of these three thinkers, Wiesel is the one who engages with the literariness of the *Akedah* as interpretive theological paradigm most vividly. Indeed, the *Akedah* represents a fundamentally recurring theme in his early thought and writing;¹⁸ Isabel Wollaston claims that "In many ways, *Night*, his memoir of his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, can be interpreted as a

¹⁶ This argument depends in no way on Sachs's biography or theological comments she made outside her poetry. For those readers wishing to learn more about Sachs's writings on and understandings of her own Jewishness, see Bahti and Fries and Dinesen.

¹⁷ For those readers even moderately familiar with Jewish thought and theology (or Christian theology, for that matter), this connection between the covenant and the events of the *Akedah* may seem obvious. Indeed, when Abraham raises the knife on Mount Moriah, nothing less than the covenant between God and Israel, Israel's basic paradigm of meaning and existence (Wollaston 42) hangs in the balance. For more, see the first few pages of Shepherd's "Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22."

¹⁸ Wollaston reiterates the etymological link Weisel identifies between the words 'Akedah' and 'Holocaust' (46); for more, see Wiesel's own comments (*Messengers* 71).

sacred parody of the Akedah... The theme of the testing of the relationship between fathers and sons runs throughout the narrative” (47). One oft-cited passage from *Night* is worth revisiting for the active role it assigns to God, a role which interrogates the validity of the name *Adonai-jireh* or “the Lord has seen,” given to Him by Abraham (Rosenfeld “Reflections on Isaac” 245). After a young boy is hanged alongside two men, Wiesel erupts with accusatory (*anklage*) questions during a makeshift Rosh Hashanah service:

Blessed be God’s name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar? (*Night* 67)

With this final image of the altar, Wiesel replaces Abraham with God as the figure holding the knife, and since he does not stay His hand, He is ultimately responsible for the deaths of those who perished in the Shoah. Since the covenant is a promise of life (Rosenfeld “Reflections on Isaac” 245), in the wake of the Shoah Wiesel accuses God of being the butcher of his own people, with the fidelity, devotion, and trust inherent in the Covenant utterly delegitimized precisely because God did not supply a substitutionary ram in the Shoah (“Reflections on Isaac” 243).

Elsewhere in his earlier writings, in statements on the covenant in the wake of the Shoah, Wiesel is more overt: “I believe during the Holocaust the covenant was broken. Maybe it will be

renewed; perhaps later, maybe it was renewed even then, on a different level. So many Jews kept their faith or even strengthened it. But it was broken, because of the clouds and because of the fire” (Cargas 57). In each of these claims, Wiesel views the Shoah as inexplicable and incomprehensible, the same attitude expressed by Sachs’s female laments. Since, he observes, in making His covenant with Israel, God promised them bodily protection (Cargas 56), Wiesel thus understands the Shoah as a betrayal of that covenant (Langton 33).

Blumenthal’s position on the nature of God’s relation to the Shoah, as articulated in his book *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, qualifies Wiesel’s own attitude, but only slightly: “I do not wish to indicate, nor have I done so, that humankind is not responsible. On the contrary, human beings did perpetrate the holocaust and human beings must resist abuse everywhere. But God was involved, too; God was co-responsible” (262). This co-responsibility differs from Wiesel’s accusation of God in that it is understood as passive maltreatment, rather than active; for Blumenthal, “*God is abusive, but not always*. God, as portrayed in our holy sources and as experienced by humans throughout the ages, acts, from time to time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term ‘abusive.’ In this mode, God allows the innocent to suffer greatly. In this mode, God ‘caused’ the holocaust, or allowed it to happen” (Blumenthal 247). In other words, God’s inaction and non-intervention on behalf of the victims of the Shoah amounts to his causing those evils inflicted upon them to occur. At the same time, contrary to Wiesel, Blumenthal is unswerving in his assertion that “one cannot reject God. One can question God, one can even accuse God; but one cannot reject God” (262). Elsewhere he arrives at the same conclusion differently: “God is our creator, and God is in a covenant with us that cannot be nullified. God’s presence is irreducible and we are in a relationship with God that

cannot be nullified” (262). In other words, the covenant between God and Israel continues to exist, but the Shoah allegedly emphasizes that the covenant can be, and has been, abusive.

Greenberg amalgamates Wiesel’s and Blumenthal’s arguments into his own, echoing both Wiesel’s emphasis on the broken covenant and Blumenthal’s understanding of God’s periodic abusiveness. The Shoah’s undoing of the covenant is a central concern of Greenberg’s 1982 essay “Voluntary Covenant”: “Since there can be no covenant without the covenant people, is not the covenant shattered in this event? (“Voluntary Covenant” 544). Augmenting further the assertion that God’s covenant with the Jewish people is rendered invalid by the Shoah, however, Greenberg claims those covenantal dynamics have been inverted:

What then happened to the covenant? I submit that its authority was broken but the Jewish people, released from its obligations, chose voluntarily to take it on again. We are living in the age of the renewal of the covenant. God was no longer in a position to command, but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry on its mission...If after the Temple’s destruction, Israel moved from junior participant to true partner in the covenant, then after the Holocaust, the Jewish people are called upon to become the senior partner in action. (546-47)

For Greenberg, then, God’s apparent failure to deliver on his covenantal promise of redemption for two-thirds of European Jewry (Langton 53) amounts to the forfeiture of his moral authority; consequently, any traditional adherence to the covenant is not done out of obedience but sheer selflessness and devotion, not to God, but to the task of redeeming the world.

In contrast, the significance and uniqueness of Sachs’s poetic theology is borne out by attitudes that are categorically different from those of Wiesel, Blumenthal, and Greenberg. Sachs’s poems certainly do echo the catastrophic diagnosis of the covenant as the result of the

Shoah by these male theologians; the enormous horror of the murder and violation of maternal figures by the Nazis is reflected by the horror of the perceived and discombobulating dereliction of the Shekhinah's presence in her poems – indeed, these are the primary issues to which each poem cries, *eikhah*, how are these things possible? Such questions are covenantal questions – Sachs understands the covenant in terms of the relationship between the Shekhinah as mother and the Jewish people as Her children, and the destruction of that relationship is calamitous. However, while its diagnosis of the state of the covenant as broken after the Shoah is roughly similar to those of Wiesel, Blumenthal, and Greenberg, the attitude of Sachs's poetic theology towards that diagnosis is categorically different. Crucially, Sachs's poetic theology displays none of what Melissa Raphael labels as the masculinist dual tendencies in post-Holocaust theology to emphasize and desire God's omnipotence and then criticize his apparent inability or refusal to prevent the Holocaust from unfolding (35); instead, her poetry consistently evinces a desire for relationality embodied in the mother-child relation. Consequently, rather than the apparent failure of God to uphold his claims of bodily redemption through mighty acts of power, the true horror communicated in this particular unit of Sachs's poems is the degradation of the human mother and child relation and the vacation of the intimate, immanent, and maternal presence of the Shekhinah from her children.

This absence of the maternal Shekhinah is signified throughout the five poems studied here by their distinct lack of maternal care. Recalling Raphael's definition of that care as “a capacity to bend over and cover, stroke, warm, feed, clean, lift and hold the other” (Raphael 10), such care might also be understood as *hesed*, according to Blumenthal's own definition of the term as ‘gracious love’ (Blumenthal 109) and more specifically “God's covenantal love for us, God's compassionate dealing with us, God's faithfulness” (Blumenthal 152). Raphael herself

understands *hesed* as the essence of presence, as the act of “staying by the side of the other” (Raphael 100), which aptly describes the essence of covenant between the Shekhinah and her children that is utterly absent in Sachs’s poetry. Unmet desires for *hesed* abound in these five poems; the insane mother of “heavenly solace” desperately attempts to bestow her slaughtered child with dignity and care through burial, ultimately unable to be present to him, and thereby provide him with a good death (Raphael 50), since he is already dead; the primary accusation of the orphan chorus is that their parents are absent, and no comfort from the Shekhinah is implied; the trace of *hesed* in the second stanza of “O the night of the weeping children!” lingers long enough to foreground the perverted reality of the anti-*hesed* or anti-presence of the terrible nursemaids; “Hands” laments for the snuffing out of *hesed* by the strangling hands of the Shoah perpetrators; and perhaps the most distressing instance of anti-*hesed* is witnessed to in “A dead child speaks” as the mother creates absence by releasing that child’s hand. It is a real-time manifestation of the covenant’s dissolution that can only be met with *eikhah* as a response. In every mention of a loving maternal gesture of *hesed* – blowing hair away, kissing, the holding of a hand – the ephemerality of those gestures reflects and emphasizes the perceived utter lack of maternal *hesed* from the Shekhinah, her perceived disappearance.

Here the crucial difference between the theological responses of the male theologians discussed above and Sachs’s own poetic theology is distilled; whereas Wiesel, Blumenthal, and Greenberg lament what they view as an abusive encounter between God and his covenant people, Sachs laments a perceived total *lack* of an encounter between the Shekhinah and her children. Peterson’s claim that “*the true terror of a child is of the sundering from its mother – rather than death*” (202) is thus a succinct summation not only of the tone of “A dead child speaks” but of the concerns of Sachs’s poetic theology as a whole. Furthermore, the issue of

testing inherent within the *Akedah* motif cements Sachs's poetic theology as one of gendered lament. That Abraham was tested by God on Mount Moriah is explicitly stated in the Scriptural text; however, if one also views Abraham's obedience to God's test as a test of God's own fidelity to his covenantal promises of blessing (Breitbart 26), Sachs's revisionary *Akedah* takes on even greater force of accusation and lament by reenacting that test. If the Shekhinah is defined and known by her immanent, suffering presence and if "In Jewish understanding, the suffering of the Shekhinah is that of one who, being among us, suffers with us" (Raphael 550), the awful *Abschiedsmesser* pronounces the failure of the Shekhinah to be present with and to suffer with her children in the Shoah – in short, to keep the covenant which she established. The true horror of the knife of parting is not that it deals bodily death, but that it proclaims the death of the covenant, which is worse than death. This killing of relation defines the remainder of each victim's life prior to their bodily death; the knife of parting dominates the child's taste, smell, and sight in the poem's highly sensory second stanza until the child issues their final apothecic cry: "As I was led to death, / I still felt in the last moment / The unsheathing of the great knife of parting" (Sachs *Chimneys* 13). Thus the unanswerable question expressed to God by Sachs's female lament poems in the aftermath of the Shoah, both individually and collectively, is not "How could you do this to me?" with the implication that God himself in some way inflicted the Shoah upon the Jews of Europe, but instead, "How [*eikhah*] could you abandon me?" Drawing on maternal metaphors of God from scripture, this question might be expanded to ask: how could You who, as Isaiah testified, promised to always comfort us as your children like a mother (Isa. 66:13), to never forget us when even our own mothers who nursed us may forget us (Isa. 49:15), You who were wracked with groans at the end of your labour when you birthed us as a people (Isa. 42:14), how could you so cruelly abandon us to suffer alone? With these questions, the

mother and child figures of Sachs's poems do not protest the terms of the covenant or the suffering which may result from those terms, as all three male theologians do, but rather that Shekhinah as covenant partner has seemingly refused to suffer with and to comfort Her people amidst their suffering, has refused to *be with* them.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Painted in 1947, Mordechai Ardon's painting *Sarah* depicts its own post-Shoah interpretation of the *Akedah*, placing its titular character in the foreground, her faceless child dead at her feet (Amishai-Maisels Colourplate 36).¹⁹ Sarah as mother looks upwards, grasping at her hair, mouth agape, in an epitomic posture of lament; one can almost hear her wailing *eikhah*, "how could my child be dead?" In the painting's background, a ladder lies in the dirt, reminiscent of Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-22), with another figure²⁰ huddled covering their head with their arms. Rather than signaling revelations from heaven, the position of the ladder implies what Sarah herself (along with Sachs) already asserts: in light of the events of the Shoah, God as Shekhinah has withdrawn from her relation with her covenant people, abandoning them to suffer the murderous machinations of the perpetrators of the Shoah alone.

Just as with Sachs's poems, the desolation of Ardon's painting evokes comparison with Jerusalem's plight in Lamentations and her laments addressed to God. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp understands these laments as reaffirming the "the radically relational nature of the divine-human relationship that undergirds biblical faith... In one respect, complaint is the lifeblood of the biblical notion of the covenant: it ensures that the relationship is alive, dynamic, and open. Here faith is real, contested, actively negotiated" (qtd. in Mandolfo 75). However, whereas Jerusalem's accusations of God may be viewed as evidence of their continued relationship, there is no indication within Sachs's female laments that the Shekhinah will even hear the complaints of her children. Sachs's laments are laments precisely because there is no one to answer her anguished accusations; the Shekhinah as accused is nowhere to be found, and Her vacation is so

¹⁹ See Appendix B.

²⁰ Amishai-Maisels understands this figure to be Abraham himself, and the ladder as signifying Abraham "having broken off communication with a God who breaks his promises" (168).

discombobulating that it can only be met with *eikhah*. These poems of Sachs's which comprise her poetic theology certainly accuse God – not of inflicting the evils of the Shoah herself, but of abandoning her children when they needed her comforting presence the most. They assert, contra Greenberg, that one cannot simply opt out of the covenant, nor do they desire to. They desire its restoration, the restoration of divine presence who will comfort Her children amidst suffering that She is helpless to prevent; for them, the covenant is the greatest comfort, and comfort only. They, like Jerusalem's complaints, are therefore faithful in that they desperately desire the reinstatement of the relation of presence between the Shekhinah and her children. Yet the raising of the knife of parting is met with no response; since Sachs's God never speaks (Rudnick 190) there is an awareness that a return to relation may not be possible, that the blow dealt by the *Abschiedsmesser* of the Shoah is fatally final. Ultimately, the horrors of the events of the Shoah are equaled by the horrific possibility that the Shekhinah has utterly abandoned her children. Thus, when read through the lens of Sachs's poetic theology of female lament, the last lines of Lamentations might be amended to read: "Come back to us, Shekhinah, that we might have You there with us to share in our suffering and ward off total desolation, unless you have totally abandoned us and care for us no longer" (cf. Halbertal 8-9). In this sense, Elaine Martin's claim that Sachs's use and revision of biblical archetypes like the *Akedah* "brings to expression the rupture that has occurred" ("Biblical Archetypes" 306) between pre- and post-Shoah understandings of the covenant between God and the Jewish people is correct. Nevertheless, while her poems may communicate this rupture, their theological stance so desperately desires that it was not so.

Sachs's poetic theology places her squarely in the middle of the debate between those who, after the Shoah, affirm God's continued covenantal faithfulness and authority such as Emil

Fackenheim and Eliezer Berkovits and those like Wiesel, Blumenthal, and Greenberg who reject God's authority and declare the death of the covenant. Sachs's speakers simultaneously desire to be faithful and assert that the Shoah means that God has been unfaithful, rendering the covenant void. In this regard she deserves to be remembered not only as a seminal Holocaust poet, but also as a theological thinker who deserves a place in the conversations surrounding post-Shoah theology.

Appendix A

Chor der Waisen

Wir Waisen
Wir klagen der Welt:
Herabgehauen hat man unseren Ast
Und ins Feuer geworfen –
Brennholz hat man aus unseren Beschützern gemacht –
Wir Waisen liegen auf den Feldern der Einsamkeit.
Wir Waisen
Wir klagen der Welt:
In der Nacht spielen unsere Eltern Verstecken mit uns –
Hinter den schwarzen Falten der Nacht
Schauen uns ihre Gesichter an,
Sprechen ihre Mäuler:
Dürrholz waren wir in eines Holzhauers Hand –
Aber unsere Augen sind Engelaugen geworden
Und sehen euch an,
Durch die schwarzen Falten der Nacht
Blicken sie hindurch –
Wir Waisen
Wir klagen der Welt:
Steine sind unser Spielzeug geworden,
Steine haben Gesichter, Vater- und Muttergesichter
Sie verwelken nicht wie Blumen, sie beißen nicht wie Tiere-
Und sie brennen nicht wie Dürrholz, wenn man sie in den Ofen wirft –
Wir Waisen wir klagen der Welt:
Welt warum hast du uns die weichen Mütter genommen
Und die Väter, die sagen: Mein Kind du gleichst mir!
Wir Waisen gleichen niemand mehr auf der Welt!
O Welt
Wir klagen dich an!

Chorus of the Orphans

We orphans
We lament to the world:
Our branch has been cut down
And thrown in the fire –
Kindling was made of our protectors –
We orphans lie stretched out on the fields of loneliness.
We orphans
We lament to the world:
At night our parents play hide and seek –
From behind the black folds of night

Their faces gaze at us,
Their mouths speak:
Kindling we were in a woodcutter's hand –
But our eyes have become angel eyes
And regard you,
Through the black folds of night
They penetrate –
We orphans
We lament to the world:
Stones have become our playthings,
Stones have faces, father and mother faces
They wilt not like flowers, nor bite like beasts –
And burn not like tinder when tossed into the oven –
We orphans we lament to the world:
World, why have you taken our soft mothers from us
And the fathers who say: My child, you are like me!
We orphans are like no one in this world any more!
O world
We accuse you!

O der weinenden Kinder Nacht!

O der Weinenden Kinder Nacht!
Der zum Tode gezeichneten Kinder Nacht!
Der Schlaf hat keinen Eingang mehr.
Schreckliche Wärterinnen
Sind an die Stelle der Mütter getreten,
Haben den falschen Tod in ihre Handmuskeln gespannt,
Säen ihn in die Wände und ins Gebälk –
Überall brütet es in den Nestern des Grauens.
Angst säugt die Kleinen statt der Muttermilch.

Zog die Mutter noch gestern
Wie ein weisser Mond den Schlaf heran,
Kam die Puppe mit dem fortgeküssten Wangenrot
In den einen Arm,
Kam das ausgestopfte Tier, lebendig
In der Liebe schon geworden,
In den andern Arm,-
Weht nun der Wind des Sterbens,
Bläst die Hemden über die Haare fort,
Die niemand mehr kämmen wird.

O the night of the weeping children!

O the night of the weeping children!
O the night of the children branded for death!
Sleep may not enter here.
Terrible nursemaids
Have usurped the place of mothers,
Have tautened their tendons with the false death,
Sow it on to the walls and into the beams –
Everywhere it is hatched in the nests of horror.
Instead of mother's milk, panic suckles those little ones.

Yesterday Mother still drew
Sleep toward them like a white moon,
There was the doll with cheeks derouged by kisses
In one arm,
The stuffed pet, already
Brought to life by love,
In the other –
Now blows the wind of dying,
Blows the shifts [sic] over the hair
That no one will comb again.

Hände

Hände
Der Todesgärtner,
Die ihr aus der Wiegenkamille Tod,
die auf den harten Triften gedeiht
Oder am Abhang,
Das Treibhausungeheuer eures Gewerbes gezüchtet habt.
Hände,
Des Leibes Tabernakel aufbrechend,
Der Geheimnisse Zeichen wie Tigerzähne packend –
Hände,
Was tatet ihr,
Als ihr die Hände von kleinen Kinder waret?
Hieltet ihr eine Mundharmonika, die Mähne
Eines Schaukelpferdes, fasstet der Mutter Rock im Dunkel,
Zeigtet auf ein Wort im Kinderlesebuch –
War es Gott vielleicht, oder Mensch?

Ihr würgenden Hände,
War eure Mutter tot,

Eure Frau, euer Kind?
Dass ihr nur noch den Tod in den Händen hieltet,
In den würgenden Händen?

Hands

Hands
of the gardeners of death,
you who have grown the greenhouse monster of your trade
from the cradle of camomile death
which thrives on the hard pastures
or on the slope.

Hands
breaking open the tabernacle of the body,
gripping the signs of the mysteries like tiger's teeth –
Hands,
what did you do
when you were tiny children's hands?
Did you hold a mouth organ, the mane
of a rocking horse, clutch your mother's skirt in the dark,
did you point to a word in a reading book –
Was it God perhaps, or Man?

You strangling hands,
was your mother dead,
your wife, your child?
So that all you held in your hands was death,
in your strangling hands?

Schon vom Arm des himmlischen Trostes umfassen

Schon vom Arm des himmlischen Trostes umfassen
Steht die wahnsinnige Mutter
Mit den Fetzen ihres zerrissenen Verstandes,
Mit den Zundern ihres verbrannten Verstandes
Ihr totes einsargend,
Ihr verlorenes Licht einsargend,
Ihre Hände zu Krügen biegend,
Aus der Luft füllend mit dem Leib ihres Kindes,
Aus der Luft füllend mit seinen Augen, seinen Haaren
Und seinem flatternden Herzen –

Dann küsst sie das Luftgeborene
Und stirbt!

Already embraced by the arm of heavenly solace

Already embraced by the arm of heavenly solace
The insane mother stands
With the tatters of her torn mind
With the charred tinders of her burnt mind
Burying her dead child,
Burying her lost light,
Twisting her hands into urns,
Filling them with the body of her child from the air,
Filling them with his eyes, his hair from the air,
And with his fluttering heart –

Then she kisses the air-born being
And dies!

Ein totes Kind spricht

Die Mutter hielt mich an der Hand.
Dan hob Jemand das Abschiedsmesser:
Die Mutter löste ihre Hand aus der meinen,
Damit es mich nicht träfe.
Sie aber berührte noch einmal leise meine Hüfte –
Und da blutete ihre Hand –

Von da ab schnitt mir das Abschiedsmesser
Den Bissen in der Kehle entzwei –
Es fuhr in der Morgendämmerung mit der Sonne hervor
Und begann, sich in meinen Augen zu schärfen –
In meinem Ohr schliffen sich Winde und Wasser,
Und jede Trostesstimme stach in mein Herz –

Als man mich zum Tode führte,
Fühlte ich im letzten Augenblick noch
Das Herausziehen des grossen Abschiedsmessers.

A dead child speaks

My mother held me by my hand.
Then someone raised the knife of parting:
So that it should not strike me,
My mother loosed her hand from mine.
But she lightly touched my thighs once more
And her hand was bleeding –

After that the knife of parting
Cut in two each bite I swallowed –
It rose before me with the sun at dawn
And began to sharpen itself in my eyes –
Wind and water ground in my ear
And every voice of comfort pierced my heart –

As I was led to death
I still felt in the last moment
The unsheathing of the great knife of parting.

Appendix B



Mordechai Ardon's *Sarah*.

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