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<ca>Ken Koltun-Fromm</ca>

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<ct>Authenticity, Vision, Culture: Michael Wyschogrod’s *The Body of Faith*</ct>

In the preface to the second edition of his *The Body of Faith*, Michael Wyschogrod notes the change in subtitles from the first to this more recent edition. Where he had once appended *Judaism as Corporeal Election* to the title (first edition, 1983), the reissued second edition now defined *The Body of Faith* as *God in the People of Israel* (1989).[[1]](#endnote-1) The implications of this change for American Jewish culture is profound. Where the first edition subtitle focused on Judaism and chosenness (*Judaism as Corporeal Election*), the second edition emphasized God’s presence in a particular nation (*God in the People of Israel*). With Judaism as corporeal election (the first edition), the word “body” in the title (*The Body of Faith*) defers to a theological statement about belief. “Body” reads more as metaphor, such that corporeal election becomes the “body” of faith. The point here seems to be that chosenness is Judaism’s central theological principle, and this implies that Jewish culture protects a people apart, one chosen and committed to divine instruction. If Judaism is the body of faith, then American Jewish culture ought to enrich and preserve that faith

But with the second edition phrasing—God in the People Israel—the word “body” is less referent to a theological claim and far more a descriptive statement about the physical indwelling of God’s presence. And that presence resides in the people Israel—really, truly, in *that* body. Judaism is neither some kind of chosen religion, nor a theological construct. Indeed, God displaces Judaism altogether in the subtitle and chooses to dwell “in” a particular national group.

The body of faith is a real, material, and visual body in which we can see God’s presence. This is a claim about visual and cultural authenticity in a corporeal body. Wyschogrod tethers ocular metaphors to physical bodies, and thereby directs visual discourse into carnal Israel. Faith has a body, so Wyschogrod argues, and we can see it in the Jewish people. American Jewish culture is thereby transformed into the physical location of God’s presence; we can see God there, in Abraham’s Jewish descendants. In *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*, Michael Wyschogrod envisions God’s presence in an embodied people as an authentic and corporeal display of divine chosenness.

This account of God’s presence in the people Israel raises the problem of Jewish converts, and whether they too count as Abraham’s descendants. If culture is less the maintenance of practices or beliefs (as “the body of faith”), and instead the visible exposure of God’s presence, then Jewish culture is primarily a visual medium of divine revelation. When Jews do Jewish things as Jews, God is embodied therein. Wyschogrod recognizes, and accepts, “the incarnational direction of my thinking,”[[2]](#endnote-2) and has been an energetic participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue.[[3]](#endnote-3) Indeed, he acknowledges his debt to such Christian thinkers as Karl Barth, and has been read as “a Jewish Barthian.”[[4]](#endnote-4) He unashamedly discusses God’s love for the Jewish people, even calling it a “falling in love,” asserting that God loves some children more than others.[[5]](#endnote-5) Wyschogrod tells his readers what God desires, how God feels, and why Jews cannot escape their chosen heritage. But just how welcoming is Wyschogrod’s conception of the Jewish people? He sharply criticizes the insular security of his own Orthodox community, even as he resolutely believes it to be the most authentic Jewish practice and the “core” of Jewish identity.[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet only some Jews make up this “core”; others are left on the periphery. This is the central tension in Wyschogrod’s *The Body of Faith*: Although Judaism is the authentic exposure of God’s presence, God appears to dwell more fully in *some* Jews rather than others, and so *some* Jews become more authentic, more enlightened, more Jewish. This is the cultural politics lurking within Wyschogrod’s theological debate.

Such a visible presence of God in the people Israel draws together notions of cultural authenticity, vision, and chosenness in ways unique to Wyschogrod’s theological text. I want to explore how Wyschogrod employs visual discourse to see an embodied Israel as God’s chosen people, and draw out the implications of his thought for American Jewish culture. Israel is the proper, authentic body within which God dwells, and this indwelling is a visual event. Wyschogrod’s theology attempts to capture this visual certainty by exposing a distinctively Jewish way of seeing that recognizes God’s indwelling in the people Israel. These claims to authentic certainty are, to be sure, powerful and controversial. Even David Novak, perhaps the contemporary Jewish theologian who shares most with him, resists Wyschogrod’s emphasis on God’s indwelling in the Jewish people.[[7]](#endnote-7) But Wyschogrod’s peculiar argument for Jewish election deserves our attention because he interweaves claims to authenticity with a visual discourse that is both embodied and carnal, and this physical attraction potentially limits who counts as authentic Jews in America. Jews can see their election in the embodied people of Israel as a form of visual knowledge that binds sight to authenticity. But what about those who come to Judaism from without as converts, or those who fail to make up the “core”? Are they equal members of this covenant, and so radiate God’s presence? Since Wyschogrod’s account is so visual in temperament and scope, what of those Jews who “look” different? Does God dwell in those people too?

I want to explore these questions through Wyschogrod’s rhetorical use of vision to reaffirm God’s falling in love with the people Israel. To establish this divine link to a national group, Wyschogrod discusses the nature of human finitude by employing ocular metaphors that, so he claims, function less as symbolic speech and more as an embodied dialectic between light and darkness. Human beings are the kind of beings who oscillate between clear enlightened visions and darker, more obscure musings. Judaism adequately renders this condition as worthy of divine love, for God creates a person both carnal and spiritual. Wyschogrod describes Judaism as the most authentic visual expression of the embodied and enlightened human condition. This sense of Judaism’s authenticity—that it adequately portrays the human existential situation—confirms Jewish chosenness. Wyschogrod’s fleshly Judaism reveals God’s choice as appropriate and good; Israel turns out to be precisely the kind of people with whom God *should* fall in love. But this love story must end with the death of particular bodies, for it is both a human and divine narrative. If God establishes a visual presence in the people Israel, what happens to this God when one of Israel dies, and the corpse lies inert before a gazing spectator? This is the limit case for Wyschogrod’s sensual and visual account of Jewish election, and one that ties him to Christian incarnational theology. If persons can still recognize God’s presence in a dead, chosen body, then even God feels the pain and terror of a dark mortality. God’s visual presence in the chosen people is permanent heritage and authentic indwelling where death loses its mortal sting.

But death fails to lose its sting for those who seek entrance from outside. Wyschogrod exposes a profound mistrust of converts to Judaism, and he seeks to limit their numbers. I take this to be a visual problem of cultural authenticity: Jews must look like God to be like God. Visual knowledge translates into cultural power, for Wyschogrod limits the convert’s access to Jewish goods. The body of faith as divine presence is recognized by some, but not by all the people Israel.

<a>Situating Vision in the Self</a>

Structurally, Wyschogrod’s *The Body of Faith* mimics Abraham Joshua Heschel’s well-known rhetorical strategy: reveal the nature of human finitude and existence, and then show how Judaism adequately responds to the human situation. Like Heschel, Wyschogrod talks about God’s pathos and suffering, divine sympathy and jealousy, and seeks a God who yearns for human companionship. Wyschogrod’s God is not an unmoved mover, but an empathetic personality—sometimes mature, but other times vicious—who falls in love with the people Israel. This Jewish God is known as Hashem, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who abandons the more abstract concept God to take on distinctly human characteristics. Hashem is “the one who is related to the people of Israel”; to Hashem Israel speaks freely and openly. Here is a God who remains familiar, close at hand, and trustworthy.[[8]](#endnote-8) This intimacy between a people and their God sustains both a spiritual and material presence. Hashem offers neither metaphysical grounds nor ethical foundations, but reveals a physical, visual presence among Israel. This is but one meaning of Wyschogrod’s title: God as Hashem *is* the body of Israel’s faith. This God acts, feels, and reflects in ways that human beings recognize as their own. Hashem’s jealousy is a human emotion; his loneliness—and Wyschogrod always genders Hashem as male—provokes human empathy. God hurts like we do; he scolds his children like human parents do theirs. To be sure, Wyschogrod still upholds God’s invincibility and supremacy: though vulnerable, this God still commands, creates, reveals, and controls darker forces. Even so, Hashem reveals himself in material bodies, and like those bodies he travels within the spiritual moods and physical boundaries, both hopeful and tragic, of the people Israel.

Wyschogrod’s account of Hashem as the body of Israel’s faith underscores how God’s personality authenticates human existence. This is a God who condones rather than judges human desires and fears. If God loves some more than others, this only confirms how a human father “will find himself more compatible with some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he love some more than others.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Certainly fathers love all their children, as does God. But Hashem’s love arrives not to confront and challenge human love as partial. Israel’s God accepts fragmentary and particular love as fundamentally human and good. After all, this God created beings in this way, in his image, and so their sensibilities are in part his as well. Clearly Wyschogrod’s Hashem does not force submission to categorical ethical demands. If ethics channel an is to an ought, such that persons aspire to what they ought to be and do, then Wyschogrod’s Hashem vindicates a more limited, flawed, and scarred human existence. This God meets human beings where they are, acknowledges their faults, and comforts them in the hope for a brighter future. Though Hashem may expect more, he still receives less. Wyschogrod’s God acts as a compassionate father who accepts his children as they are, even if he wishes they could be much more.

So Wyschogrod begins his text with an account of human finitude to better situate Judaism as a fitting response to it. And from the beginning Wyschogrod establishes the visual as a critical feature of human activity and identity: “Man is a being who prefers light over darkness. The day is the normal time for human activity, the night for sleeping, for the suspension of consciousness. . . . But human being is being in the light because vision, the primary human sense, functions only in the presence of light.”[[10]](#endnote-10) This dichotomy between light and darkness extends throughout Wyschogrod’s text and becomes its central motif. Though persons gravitate toward the light, they cannot escape darker corners. Perception and philosophical scrutiny work in the light, but human beings must sleep too. This ever-present fluctuation between illumination and concealment defines the human condition. Yet persons yearn for brighter enlightenment, argues Wyschogrod, and this because vision is the preeminent human sense. Light enables persons to actively engage a world rather than to passively receive it. Vision opens up a horizon of possibility in ways that other senses conceal out of sight:

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To some degree, the world reveals itself in smell and touch, hearing and tasting. But a dark world in which odors are smelled, surfaces touched, sounds heard, and flavors tasted but nothing is seen, remains a world that crowds man, that does not open itself but impinges upon him and turns man into a recipient of what the world wishes to deliver to him. Only the seen world, the illuminated world stretches off into the horizon.[[11]](#endnote-11)

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A person visually impaired cannot lead a flourishing human life, so Wyschogrod implies here. Such a visual deficit impedes human productivity, for an unseen world “crowds” and “impinges” human expression. Note how Wyschogrod appropriates the long-standing reverence for sight as the master sense,[[12]](#endnote-12) and does so by turning against the efficacy of other modes of engagement. Touch, smell, and taste are passive responses to a world that seeks more active feedback. Through these less vigorous senses, persons become mere recipients of experience and not purveyors of and actors in a world. To be human is to stretch beyond a “dark world” and to engage the illuminated space of a distant horizon.

This visual perspective drives human beings toward an enlightened future. A prospective gaze, as a fundamental human directionality, positions Judaism as a religion of the future. For Jewish thought to adequately respond to the human condition, it must seek out an intended future without always looking back. This yields important consequences for Wyschogrod’s critique of Christianity and some forms of Orthodox Judaism. Religions that look backwards to a glorious past (some Orthodox Judaisms) or to a fulfilled prophecy (Christianity) reverse the natural human gaze toward the future. These perspectives, so Wyschogrod argues, are ill-suited to fully account for the inevitable darkness, insecurity, and ignorance of a future not-yet born into the light. Here we get a glimpse at those outsiders who fail to see well, who misdirect their gaze in one way or another. They do not envision a more earthy, bounded humanity that still looks ahead. As Wyschogrod’s anthropology would have it, human beings oscillate between reflective light and obscure darkness, and so live in the present with the inheritance of a past and a yearning for a brighter future. Here too, we can see why vision is so crucial to Wyschogrod’s account of human being-in-the-world, for the light of day “releases man from its [the world’s] tight embrace and reveals to him vistas in all directions, toward which he can move and which he perceives long before he sets out toward them.” Vision propels human beings forward, opening up a world of possibility and freedom. On one reading of the Biblical text Israel promises to perform the commandments before actually hearing about them (Exodus 24:7); in Wyschogrod’s visual depiction, human beings see before doing. Physical sight liberates the human to expand toward objects of desire. Indeed, Wyschogrod tightly binds vision with desire in ways that activate directional and purposeful activity. Light then becomes “the great liberator that bestows power because it transfers the inititative [sic] to man.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Human beings lean toward a future brightness illumined by the master sense of sight. With this visual perspective, the world no longer “crowds” but instead draws closer to human control. Vision allows persons to master the world.

Animals too have eyes to see, and compared to inanimate things, they also illumine a world before them. But to these other creatures resides a “darkness of consciousness”[[14]](#endnote-14) that forever remains obscure to human perception. Persons ascend toward the light, and this determined movement toward the beyond contrasts with the instinctual pursuits that mark other animals. Wyschogrod associates critical thinking, consciousness, philosophy, and knowledge with the light; embodiment, emotions, and partial knowledge belong to darkness. Persons instinctively gravitate toward philosophical knowledge and the brilliant illumination it promises, but they are embodied beings who come up against dark limits. A reason true to the human condition would be a dark one that acknowledges obscurity, ambivalence, and finitude as inescapable features of human existence. Persons exist somewhere between the light as high and beyond, and a darkness as low and behind. And this positionality between light and darkness is a physical reality.

When Wyschogrod claims that persons meet God in “the realm of light,” he recognizes this as metaphorical speech. It is a peculiar human mode of talking about the sacred. But he also believes such appeals to visual images are more, or perhaps less, than metaphorical leaps:

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Viewed mundanely, the language of light when applied to the sacred is metaphorical language, applying an aspect of the material world to the divine domain. But after a while, we find ourselves less certain about our ability to distinguish the literal from the metaphorical. Does “seeing” literally refer to what we perceive with our eyes and only metaphorically to understanding or is it the other way around?[[15]](#endnote-15)

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What would “the other way around” look like in Wyschogrod’s visual anthropology? He asks us to consider a mode of understanding that is a literal and physical seeing. Appealing to “the other way around,” Wyschogrod suggests neither an analogical nor a metaphorical account of knowledge, but rather a physical mode of understanding. Can we see knowledge in this way? Is epistemology a visual practice? Wyschogrod raises but does not fully come to terms with these questions (in this too he shares much with Heschel). But it does seem clear that Wyschogrod wants his readers to think and see materially, and to consider light and darkness as physical attributes that make human knowledge possible. It is as if Wyschogrod fears that his readers will too easily escape darkness through metaphorical flights to the light. Reason may observe and enlighten a future, but it is still an embodied reason that bumps up against darker forces.

The human experiential wavering between light and darkness shapes Wyschogrod’s account of knowledge. To see an object requires both a radiance to illumine and an opaqueness to delimit it among other things. Something must reflect back the light of vision for the object to come into view. Wyschogrod offers something close to a phenomenological account of vision in which, “seeing requires the opaque because without it there is nothing to reflect back the light, thus making something visible since light travels until it reaches that which it cannot penetrate and only then does it return to the observer, carrying the image of that which refused it passage.”[[16]](#endnote-16) My concern here is not with the scientific accuracy of Wyschogrod’s claims, but rather the work such claims do to structure his account of reason. Wyschogrod believes that in the visual act of seeing, a ray of light projects toward an object. That object reflects the light back to the observer, and the light now carries with it an image of the material thing. This visual structure reveals how talk of rational light and embodied darkness is not merely metaphorical language. Knowledge of things is a physical seeing that requires both obscure things and brilliant rays of light. Understanding in this empirical, “other way around” sense is a seeing that requires both light and darkness. As Wyschogrod would have it, “without meeting such opacity, reason would lose its contact with being and its light would become invisible.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Wyschogrod stands firmly in the dark soil of being and the visible, illumined objects stretched out before the human gaze.

God created Adam and Eve as physical, embodied beings. Turning to the Biblical terms in Genesis for image and likeness (*tselem* and *demut*), Wyschogrod offers this provocative reading:

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These are basically visual terms, and were it not for the long-standing resistance to anthropomorphism, we would interpret them in physical terms to refer to the kind of resemblance children have to their parents. It may therefore be the case that the Bible would find it difficult to focus on reason as the defining essence of man because reason is a mental capacity that does not take into account the physical uniqueness of man.[[18]](#endnote-18)

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There are more than a few significant claims lurking in this reading of the creation story in Genesis, and not least among them is Wyschogrod’s personification of the Bible—a rhetorical gesture that positions his own voice as a more authentic revelation of Biblical intentions. For if the “Bible would find it difficult to focus on reason,” should not we as intelligent readers do so as well? This is less a motivated reading than a discovery of an authentic, revealed voice. Biblical interpretation recovers the voice of God’s intentions: “The meaning of the Torah is the intention of the divine lawgiver, who is its author. It therefore follows that the only fully satisfactory way of determining what the law is in any specific case is to ask God.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Of course this we can no longer do, so instead persons “must ask Hashem to guide them to the discovery of his will.” In this “prayerful dialogue,” the interpreter “transmits the will of Hashem to those who inquire.”[[20]](#endnote-20) In his own attempt at Biblical transmission, Wyschogrod shows how the text could not have envisioned a meaning for “image” beyond a biological analogy. To be created in the image of God means to be physically akin to an embodied God, as a child appears similar to his/her biological parents. As visual knowledge, persons come to know and recognize God in physical bodies. But Wyschogrod distinguishes between God’s image and God’s dwelling in a people. All persons reflect the image of God, but only Israel reveals God’s presence. This too is part of what Wyschogrod means by the subtitle to his work: God in the People Israel. Though all persons reflect the divine image, God chooses to dwell only among the body Israel after his initial creation. Persons physically see God in those bodies. This is no metaphor: it is a visual recognition of God’s chosen people. Physical presence confers knowledge. To know God is to see him in the people Israel.

Yet even for Wyschogrod, to be in the image of God conveys more than physical resemblance. He emphasizes Adam’s “creatureliness” and the psychological dimensions of the parent/child relationship.[[21]](#endnote-21) Much of his book seeks to dissolve “a resistance to anthropomorphism,” and often Wyschogrod leans heavy on the body in order to realign a perceived imbalance toward abstract reason. Here again Wyschogrod reasserts another long-standing dichotomy: the distinction between Greek philosophy and Jewish Biblical religion. The Greeks could easily define “man without reference to his body,” but not so the Bible. Wyschogrod’s appeal to “the physical uniqueness of man” is meant to curtail this Greek bias. Yet a dark “creatureliness,” one without reflective capacities, would fail as an authentic human life, for it could not stretch forward toward an enlightened future. Embodiment without intelligence would be a tragic darkness resembling non-human animals. Yet Greek notions of reason, so argues Wyschogrod, are too abstract for embodied persons, for they seek only “philosophical theory” and “the rationality of the universe.” Wyschogrod desires a more balanced account of enlightened reason and embodied image, and he discovers it in a Biblical reason as radiating intelligence: a form of “working endowment rather than a theory” that remains “a quality of brightness.”[[22]](#endnote-22) This Biblical intelligence, in contrast to Greek reason, adequately responds “to the inherent ambiguity of the human situation,” and “is so deeply rooted in human existence and its limitations.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Similar to Buber’s appeal to Biblical knowledge that Akiba Lerner discusses in this volume, Wyschogrod desires a more intimate form of knowledge. But where Buber distances this knowing from “the visual sense,” Wyschogrod highlights it. In this more graphic picture of the human image, Wyschogrod portrays authentic selves as those carnal beings who perceive human frontiers through a radiant vision.

The radiant light of Biblical intelligence is infinite enough to perceive and move toward future possibilities, but finite still as an embodied reasoning that struggles with indecision and partial knowledge. Yet the limits to this directive capacity of human intellect lie not only within the self, but also outside it “before the power of God.” All human reasoning confronts an opaqueness that reflects its projected light. In this way human beings perceive physical objects. But it is also the mode by which human intelligence becomes aware of God’s presence. Like those inanimate objects that project back the light directed to it, so too God functions as the opaque limit to an enlightened human intelligence: “In its direct encounter with the holy, intelligence is calmed, brought up against its limits, and at least temporarily silenced. It is not destroyed, as man is not destroyed. But it is endangered, as man is endangered.”[[24]](#endnote-24) The picture conjured here is one of intelligence striving to move beyond its legitimate borders, only to confront the holy who polices and delimits them. But only temporarily: weakened but not destroyed, endangered but not subdued, intelligence will soon rise again to challenge those imposed limits.

This phenomenological account captures the dialectic movement of light (intelligence racing forward) and darkness (intelligence calmed and in retreat), one that mirrors Joseph Soloveitchik’s portrayal of the lonely man of faith.[[25]](#endnote-25) Wyschogrod, like his teacher and mentor Soloveitchik, directs religious experience away from both self-annihilation and complete unification with God. When finite intelligence confronts God’s holiness, in this *mysterium tremendum* of fear and wonder, it addresses that unintelligible but very real limit to its own pursuits. Intelligible light cannot project higher or farther, but like those objects that reflect back its rays, the human gaze directly confronts the divine body as visual limit. This is what Wyschogrod labels a dark reason: “a reason that remains entangled in the dark soil in which the roots of reason must remain implanted if it is not to drift off into the atmosphere.” The basic dyad of light and darkness, one that delimits the nature of perceptual knowledge and the human condition, also works in Wyschogrod’s text to locate God’s relationship to humanity. An authentic encounter with God’s holiness adequately restricts human aspirations to be less in spirit than what they are in body.

Wyschogrod maintains that some religious traditions encourage a spiritual drifting to higher pursuits in ways that remain distinctly ill-suited to the human condition, and Christianity is his primary target for such ethereal flights. Even a cursory reading of *The Body of Faith* reveals how the Christian tradition functions as Wyschogrod’s conversational other. At times he deflects typical criticisms against Judaism onto Jesus or Christianity; but more often he opposes Christian spirituality to Jewish material humanism. Christianity appears in Wyschogrod’s text as closely aligned to Greek philosophy and its fondness for clarity, philosophical truth, and total exposure. Judaism accords with the human condition, but Christianity, with its unencumbered brilliance, rejects that finite, embodied condition:

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Jesus’ relative lack of interest in the political order, his absolutist and uncompromising ethical demands, the absence of law (which embeds the moral vision into the soil of the created order) in the New Testament are among the symptoms of Christianity’s liberation from the darker side of reality. Christianity therefore shuns the darkness, from which it attempts to escape into the light of redemption and sinlessness.[[26]](#endnote-26)

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Note, to begin, how Wyschogrod typically personifies Christian practice (“Christianity therefore shuns”), and this effectively silences the multiple and complex voices within that tradition. Readers do not know who shuns, but only that Christianity does so. And one can sense too how Wyschogrod closely aligns “Christianity” with more liberal forms of Judaism that stress ethics over law. His essentialist rhetoric positions Christianity (or a more liberal Judaism) as the distorted foil to Wyschogrod’s Judaism: where Judaism is rooted in physical beings, Christianity seeks to escape them; if Judaism is an embodied politics, Christianity has little interest in those mundane proceedings; when Judaism creates law to inhibit darker forces, Christianity liberates persons from that darkness to a grander light. Judaism, in the end, “will not be unfaithful to the darkness of human existence.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Christianity misrepresents the human condition before God; Judaism, in contrast, delivers an authentic humanism. There are clear insiders and outsiders to a visual authenticity that adheres “to the darkness of human existence.” Christians remain on the fringes, but so do more liberal Jews who, like Wyschogrod’s Jesus, are absolute in their ethical demands.

Light and darkness are more than visual metaphors; they are for Wyschogrod constitutive features of human embodiment. Judaism can justifiably claim allegiance from finite beings because it recognizes both intelligent striving and embodied vulnerability: “Human existence is possible only in the shade of the divine light as that light comes up against its limit and the solidity of matter. . . . We see it in terms of a darkness that is required by human existence which Judaism preserves in its very fabric.” While Christianity arises out of Greek reason, Judaism is rooted in human existence. A finite existence is one in which knowledge is an embodied vision—a physical seeing that distinguishes human beings from other animals. Wyschogrod ties vision to personal identity in order to ground intelligence in embodied beings. Though persons still prefer light over darkness, as Wyschogrod claims they do in the opening sentence of his text, that preference resides within the limits of a darkened order. The nighttime remains and even makes possible the presence of daylight. Knowledge as a form of physical seeing and as “the other way around” to metaphor suggests a more concentrated gaze at the embodied life of a people. Seeing “requires the opaque,” as Wyschogrod claims, and both the human and God’s body function to limit a radiant intelligence. Only a Judaism faithful to this human condition can be a body of faith.

<a>Judaism, Authenticity, and Chosenness</a>

Wyschogrod maps Judaism onto his visual anthropology of light and darkness. He articulates a vision of the human condition, and then suggests how certain forms of Judaism fittingly address human experience. God too, as Hashem, confronts human beings as they are: embodied, enlightened, and so hovering between light and darkness. Wyschogrod’s Judaism, and the Jews who practice it, expose a visionary and carnal humanism that stretches beyond toward a vague future, but they do so forever tethered to the soil of a created and constraining world. Human beings are not gods, Wyschogrod warns throughout his text, but neither are they physical beasts. Authentic Judaism captures these expressive features of the human condition, and reveals them to be features of God’s intended creation. Wyschogrod employs ocular models to expose Judaism as authentic vision, and I want to look at three moments in which he does so. In his discussion of the sacrificial ritual, Karl Marx as alienated Jew, and Jewish art, Wyschogrod articulates a mode of being Jewish-in-the-world that appears as right, fitting, and just. A Judaism that resonates with a darkened but illuminated experience teaches Jews how to see well, but it also marks others as visually inauthentic.

The cultic life of the Temple sacrifices is above all “concrete and incarnated.” In these physical, bloodied acts, “the holy appears with predictability.”[[28]](#endnote-28) This is both a physical and visual security: God is present before Israel (“the holy appears”) and dwells with Israel in the Temple. Wyschogrod is all too aware that Jewish prayer eventually supplants this sacrificial system. Still, the destruction of the Temple that brought an end to the daily ritual slaughters was a human tragedy. That sense of predictability, security, and holy presence in the ritual act would no longer be available. Unlike the Jewish commandments, in which Jews can only obey in part, “the obligatory sacrifices of the day either have or have not been brought.” There is no middle ground here: either the ritual has been performed or it has not. The “mixture” that Wyschogrod finds in the commandments yields to a stark either/or of ritual obedience or disobedience. Prayer is a “contemplative” gesture,[[29]](#endnote-29) Wyschogrod tells his readers, but sacrifices are performative acts that persons see, feel, touch, and smell. Perhaps God can be thought; but Hashem resides in the physical acts of sacrificial worship. Without the Temple as physical site for God’s dwelling, Jews are deprived of that physical closeness offered by the sacrificial system. God’s residence among Israel partially compensates for this loss of the Temple as physical abode.

That loss should neither be forgotten nor ignored, for it exposes a darkness at the heart of human experience. In sacrifice, human beings see themselves as they really are. Wyschogrod highlights this visual experience, and attends to the corporeal movements of this deathly ritual. Indeed, he vibrantly portrays the bloody scene:

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The priestly slaughterer approaches the animal with the lethally sharp knife in his hand, yet the animal does not emit a sound of terror because it does not understand the significance of the instrument. It is then swiftly cut, the blood gushes forth, the bruiting begins as the struggle with death begins, as the animal’s eyes lose their living sheen. The blood is sprinkled on the alter, the animal dismembered, portions of it burned, and portions eaten by the priests who minister before God in the holiness of the Temple. This horror is brought into the house of God.[[30]](#endnote-30)

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Holiness resides here—in the dismembering of animal limbs, in the dullness of the physical eyes, in the flow of blood. The priest functions as God’s minister, but he is a slaughterer before a dumb animal. The killing yields neither conceptual ideal nor symbolic import, but simply witnesses to a struggle with impending death. The terror lies not in the loss of meaning, but in a failure to recognize the function of a physical instrument. Wyschogrod portrays the scene as the base act that it is: “a dumb animal is to be slaughtered.” When the knife approaches, the animal remains calm: it simply “does not understand the significance of the instrument.” Yet that significance lies solely in its use value; it is there to slaughter by means of the priestly slaughterer. The horror, then, is ours alone. Wyschogrod’s use of the passive voice (“this horror is brought”) underscores this sense of observed terror. It is not the brute that emits a sound of terror; we do.

The focal point of the sacrificial service resides in the visual observance of it. God sees the killing because “the bruiting, bleeding, dying animal is brought and shown to God.” But so too every person who witnesses this event stands before “the truth of human existence”:

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This is what our fate is. It is not so much, as it is usually said, that we deserved the fate of the dying animal and that we have been permitted to escape this fate by transferring it to the animal. It is rather that our fate and the animal’s are the same because its end awaits us since our eyes, too, will soon gaze as blindly as his and be fixated in deathly attention on what only the dead seem to see and never the living.[[31]](#endnote-31)

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In the Temple sacrifice, we see the darkness that is ours alone. We do not escape death, nor mitigate its horror, but actually see it executed. Yet Wyschogrod channels a passive observance into an active performance as “our eyes” take the place of the animal’s stare. But this gaze cannot enlighten: it “blindly” attends to an anticipated death. Wyschogrod stresses the sensual and visual features of this fate, and denies conceptual or symbolic meaning. A sacrificial act yields only a visionless death. There is no light in this kind of darkness.

Wyschogrod imagines the sacrificial scene as a kind of bodily transference effected by a visual apparition: we come to see ourselves as that dying animal, and position our gaze from within the physical eyes of the brute. In this way, the animal sacrifice becomes a vision of human experience: “In the Temple, therefore, it is man who stands before God, not man as he would like to be or as he hopes he will be, but as he truly is now, in the realization that he is the object that is his body and that his blood will soon enough flow from his body as well. The subject thus sees himself as dying object.”[[32]](#endnote-32) The animal “brought and shown to God” is really the human individual as embodied victim. Wyschogrod uses the term “man” to designate the positioned gaze, but he appeals to an “I” that confronts a personal death. The sacrificial system in Judaism shows that “I” precisely what it is: embodied existence as a dying object. The subject cannot escape to some incorporeal essence, but must see personhood as “the object that is his body.” Sacrificial Judaism, as Wyschogrod calls this event, enables persons to see as God sees. It is a divine vision in which human beings are “brought and shown to God” as dying objects. It is to see the “I” as truly embodied object before God. This is the authentic vision at the core of the Jewish sacrificial system.

Wyschogrod’s rhetoric turns decidedly apologetic in his account of the prayer service, for he recognizes that much has been lost within it. Although the rabbis structure sacrificial worship within prayer, they too “share some of the prophets’ ambivalence to sacrifice.” This wistful tone from Wyschogrod appears to acknowledge that some features within Judaism are less authentic than others. Prayer comes to supplant the sacrificial system, but it has not done away with it altogether, and even seems inferior to it. The visual horror of sacrificial worship has dimmed, both in prayer and in other sacrificial acts. Wyschogrod notes how circumcision is “the vestigial remains of human sacrifice in Judaism. The knife that cuts into the flesh of the animal in sacrifice cuts into the flesh of man in circumcision.” Despite the prophetic ambivalence toward Temple sacrifices, circumcision remains “holy to the Jewish people.” That people is decidedly gendered, such that holiness travels from the bloody knife to male bodies to expose “the sacrifice of man before God.” Women appear on the outside of this sacrificial cult. The knife that sacrifices animals, and that turns male bodies into holy ones, also appears in Abraham’s hand to slaughter his son Isaac. In the Jewish *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac narrative of Genesis 22), Jews learn “that to be loved by God requires the willingness to accept death at the hand of God.” Wyschogrod reads the binding of Isaac story as a parent/child narrative in which “continuation of the Jewish people” is the most precious good. But he has structured this continuity as a gendered one in which only males bear the marks of their forbears. The test before Abraham, then, appears as a conflict of values: his trust in God struggles against the yearning for his male descendants through Isaac to accept his inheritance. Sacrificing Isaac becomes a self-sacrifice, and Abraham’s test becomes Israel’s own: “Israel’s acceptance of the law is such a sacrifice of the uncurbed biological appetites that are at the service of the species’ life-force.”[[33]](#endnote-33) The law arrives, sometimes through a cut of the knife, to restrict passions such as the biological desire for children.

But note how different that bloody knife is from the one set to slaughter the dumb brute. Sacrifice has changed from a stark physicality to a vague “life-force” that delivers a weakened security and predictability. Within the sacrificial system, Jews recognized their condition in the objectified eyes of the dying animal; but the Genesis account shows how they must curb their love for a son, the one they love, for an Isaac, and replace him with a hope for “the continuation of the Jewish people.” Though he does not intend to lessen the drama of the *Akedah*, I think it crucial to read Wyschogrod against Wyschogrod on this point: the kind of visual physicality that he traces in the Jewish sacrificial system has exposed a form of sacrifice far less authentic. Wyschogrod mitigates against this loss by tethering it to male heirs, but a Judaism forgetful of its sacrificial roots will too quickly abandon terror for hope, despite what Akiba Lerner argues in this volume. Certainly hope, as Lerner argues, is a critical Jewish yearning toward the future, but Wyschogrod seeks to recover a past darkness before too much light seeps in. For Wyschogrod, authentic Judaism shows us that “there is darkness in which there are occasional clearings but much of which the sun never penetrates.”[[34]](#endnote-34) A Judaism that mediates this kind of light in a darkened world speaks to the human experience revealed in the sacrificial system.

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A fully illumined human condition, one in which the sunlight really does penetrate every finite experience, is an alienated life. It may comprise the messianic future; but here and now human beings undergo partially bright and dark lives. That yearning for total exposure and enlightenment, however, overwhelmed many European Jews who dreamed of “a neutral society” that would renounce religious affiliation in favor of individual citizenry. With a promised social emancipation in which Jews could enter once closed professional trades and occupations, European society appeared to value rational beings and productive citizens. That liberation, of course, proved all too elusive, but Wyschogrod understands the motivations that might compel what he calls “Marrano philosophers” to hide their Jewish convictions and translate them into universal claims of science. Marrano experience included “Jews who were not steadfast enough to resist conversion . . . but who nevertheless were loyal Jews,”[[35]](#endnote-35) and included those Jewish types who criticized society in the name of science or nature, but still appealed to Jewish visual knowledge of light and darkness to level that critique. Philosophers hid their Judaism and Jewish sensibilities, only to expose them as universal, “neutral” claims. Wyschogrod considers this kind of mutation a form of Jewish alienation, for it marginalizes the authentic source (Jewish knowledge) from the public perception (scientific critique).

Both Sigmund Freud and Baruch Spinoza count as Marrano philosophers in Wyschogrod’s analysis, but I want to focus on his depiction of Karl Marx as that alienated Jew who nonetheless draws upon Jewish sensibilities to attack modern capitalism. To Wyschogrod, Marx is not a Jewish philosopher who “struggles with basic Jewish ideas,” but is instead one “who was born Jewish and then proceeds to philosophize without any apparent reference to his origins.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Yet Marx cannot escape his Jewish heritage, for even without the struggle with Jewish concepts, he still levels a Jewish critique upon economic value. That one discovers no “apparent reference” to his Jewish analysis only confirms his Marrano status as one who conceals what is essentially his all along.

Marx represses his Jewish identity by attacking Jews as the modern symbol of capitalist excess. Associated with finance and portable wealth, the Jew embodies the values of translatability, fluidity, and uprootedness that capitalism requires for ever expanding markets. Marx assails this unholy business in which “everything has a price” unrelated to productive labor. With a monetary value assigned to each object, exchange among incommensurable goods now becomes possible. Wyschogrod argues that speed and fluidity of exchange come to dominate trade with this new sense of translatability: “The money system brings into play a permanent system of translation that monitors relations continuously and, what is more important, makes it unnecessary to confront individual essences but enables the monetary system to perform the translation without an encounter between individual objects being necessary.” Financial capital undermines individual differences and essences, and produces universal translations among what use to be distinct objects. Now that “the value of everything else can be translated,”[[37]](#endnote-37) notions of Jewish difference, chosenness, or authentic rootedness lose their distinctive qualities and become part of a monetary algorithm of quantitative value. From a “total absence of comparability,” in which claims to authentic culture and a chosen people made sense, European Jews now symbolize the tyranny of money as the universal arbiter of value.

Wyschogrod embarks on his own translation of value, associating Marx’s critique of capitalism with the method of modern science. Both Marx’s critique and science tend “to minimize the ultimacy of qualities in favor of quantitative relations.” Science, so Wyschogrod argues, “seeks the quantifiable regularities behind the confusing qualitative world.” It searches for pure enlightenment, and conceals all that cannot fall under its purview. Marx associates the capitalist order with these scientific values: quantifiable regularity, translatability, and clear and repeatable use. Yet Marx revolts against this process, in Wyschogrod’s reading of him, because he recognizes the fundamental dehumanization of assigning market value to everything. In his disgust, Marx reveals his Jewish sensibility and preference for qualitative uniqueness over and against quantitative uniformity:

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He [Marx] is appalled by a system that is able to assign a monetary value to anything, no matter how unique, noble, or precious. His experience resembles that of the homeowner who attends an auction at which the objects with which he has been living all his life are on the block. He is pained as each object is auctioned off and a number is called out for which it is sold. He learns that the objects that are an extension of him have a market value . . . which tears away his precious belongings and hurls them into a public world in which he, along with his belongings, becomes an object alienated from himself because perceived through the eyes of others.[[38]](#endnote-38)

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Like the homeowner, Marx stands aghast at the loss of personal value, a forfeiture of individual love for neutral exchange. But Marx does not attend the auction; he criticizes it with his weighty tools of economic theory that draw upon scientific method. He fights back, as it were, in the name of the “unique, noble, or precious.” In other words, Marx plays the scientific game in order to undermine it. He utilizes techniques of science to expose the empty value of quantifiable things. Persons are not objects but subjects with unique qualities. Yet all this gets lost in market translatability where personal value transforms into the worth “perceived through the eyes of others.” Marx is a humanist disguised as a European enlightened scientist.[[39]](#endnote-39)

But he is also a Marrano philosopher whose humanism belies a Jewish consciousness. As an alienated Jew, Marx fails to recognize his humanist critique as a Jewish one. But Wyschogrod does see this, and his supple reading suggests how Marx could both yearn for the neutral values of the market economy and be repulsed by them. Marx too dreams of the “neutral society” in which he casts off his Jewish heritage for an “equal identity as rational beings.”[[40]](#endnote-40) He could value and be valued like all other intelligent persons. This is a false mythology, one that captures his passions but ultimately destroys Marx’s unique personhood. Wyschogrod sympathizes with Marx’s devotion to a neutral society, however illusory, for this had been a coveted goal of “modern Jewish consciousness.” In some sense this is an estranged Jewish consciousness, but Wyschogrod suggests that Marx’s Jewish alienation runs deeper:

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We have shown that the seeds of a critique of modern science can be discovered in Marx and that his theory of money implies a critique of the consciousness of quantification. But all this is presented under the rubric of science. The moral passion, the messianic imagination so active in Marx, is repressed, thereby turning him into a paradigmatic example of Jewish alienation. He must objectify his concerned advocacy, which is moral in nature, and pass it off as a force of nature, a law that operates in society as the laws of nature do in the realm of the natural. . . . We interpret this as an expression of Jewish alienation. The prophetic role is externalized by converting it into science, perceived by the assimilated Jew as the vehicle of Jewish liberation.[[41]](#endnote-41)

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Marx’s alienation is two-fold: on the one hand, he passes off a Jewish prophetic critique as modern science, but then as alienated Jew, he perceives this science as his liberation from Judaism. But even more, a Jewish critique rooted in the “unique, noble, or precious” becomes, in its alienated form, a science of quantifiable objects. Marx’s humanism *is* a Jewish prophetic call to qualitative uniqueness, but he represses that heritage, and in doing so translates it into a quantifiable science of exchange. It is not the Jew who symbolizes the abstract form of money, as Marx would have it; instead it is Marx himself who appears as the alienated object now at auction, displaced from its Jewish home.

Appeals to authenticity as prophetic Jewish heritage run throughout Wyschogrod’s reading of Marx. He defends Marx’s prophetic critique against a misguided scientific method that sheds a universal light on the darkest corners of human experience, and so alienates persons from it. For Wyschogrod, there are features of a human life that defy quantification, and so must remain opaque to rational analysis. He fears a universal translatability of essentially distinct and unique objects. But with such ubiquitous exchange arises the idea of a universal subject, one neither embodied nor chosen. Judaism is a bad fit to this modern sensibility of quantity, exchange, and use value. It is more at home where the “unique, noble, or precious” reign as valued ideals. Yet as the discussion of sacrificial worship suggests, there are more and less authentic forms of Jewish practice. A modern Judaism content with enlightened order and rational exchange is less humane because it misses essential features of the human condition. It is therefore less authentic as well, for only the Jewish prophetic voice perceives the noble as a unique encounter with embodied radiance.

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Wyschogrod carries over this language of authenticity, rooted in the dichotomy between the unique and the commodity, to his analysis of Jewish art. He echoes both the distorted consensus that “Judaism has not made a great contribution to art and music,” and appeals to the distinction made famous by Clement Greenberg between kitsch and the avant-garde.[[42]](#endnote-42) Yet Wyschogrod’s concern for “the level of taste” among contemporary Jewish communities has less to do with aesthetic preferences, and more to do with authentic Jewish culture. For Clement’s kitsch Wyschogrod inserts “bourgeois mentality,” and the “bohemian” takes the place of the avant-garde. Judaism has succumbed to a bourgeois sensibility, and this because “the rabbinic mind is, to a large extent, a bourgeois mind.” Their Judaism, so Wyschogrod contends, is structured, orderly, static, “in short, bourgeois and not bohemian.” To counter this stultifying logic, Wyschogrod’s modern Jews should cultivate “the free play of the imagination” and “its antibourgeois clientele.” And to integrate the bohemian sense of creative play, Judaism must return to its authentic sources:

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The great souls of Judaism, as of any religion, are not cautious members of the middle class. They do not calculate their actions from the point of view of prudence. They do not hesitate to stick out, to be different, to risk everything on their mission. A bourgeois Judaism is dead because it is out of contact with the explosive ferment of the religious spirit.[[43]](#endnote-43)

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Authentic Judaism is more prophetic than rabbinic, less rational than imaginative. Jewish art can help cultivate this volatility only if contemporary Judaism opens itself to this instability. This is sharp critique from Wyschogrod, especially for his own Orthodox community that produces more scientists than artists. He suspects that Orthodoxy is compatible with scientific careers because it easily distinguishes light from darkness, and sees only quantifiable objects rather than qualitative disruption. While Orthodox Jews can live “parallel lives” in which their Jewish and scientific selves rarely conflict, Wyschogrod believes “this is far less possible for a poet.” He desires more Jewish poets because with “bad taste goes an inauthenticity of its spiritual life.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Good art reveals authentic religious culture. The bohemian artist, like the prophets of old, force us to see “the unpredictable and the noninstitutional” as constitutive features of a religious life. This “explosive ferment” can neither be measured nor translated into exchange value. It resonates instead with the qualitative distinctions that generate objects of the “unique, noble, or precious.”

But appeals to uniqueness also belie a fear of the outsider and the stain of mixtures. The kind of compromises made by the bourgeois Jewish middle class sullies the purity of bohemian visions. Sacrificial worship was pure vision in which Jews were marked as dying objects before God. Prayer is no substitute, for it lacks the finality, the clear demarcation of the ritual act. And Marx was that alienated Jew who reveals how assimilation is a form of Jewish alienation. To mix with others is to lose what is truly one’s own. But there is one mixture that Wyschogrod believes categorically defines the human condition. Authentic human experience, Wyschogrod argues throughout *The Body of Faith*, is one of hopeful brilliance and embodied darkness. In a universe of pure light (the world of Christianity, in Wyschogrod’s theology), the qualitative dimensions of human existence would be concealed under the majestic allure of transparent enlightenment. But finite beings do not live in that world of illumination, and neither should Judaism. Authentic Judaism is faithful to beings as they are: not as the bourgeois middle-class, but as avant-garde bohemians who recognize there is more to see than order, logic, and quantity. That seeing is a muddied one, obscured by a darkness that Wyschogrod associates with the body. And God does not abolish the night, nor denigrate the body, but determines their fitting place within a created world. In that world God takes hold of the Jewish people as the chosen body of divine dwelling:

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Were God to have entered this world in the fullness of his being, he would have destroyed it because the thinning out or the darkening we have spoken of would disappear and with it the possibility of human existence. He therefore entered that world through a people who he chose as his habitation. There thus came about a visible presence of God in the universe, first in the person of Abraham and later his descendants, as the people Israel.[[45]](#endnote-45)

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God encounters human beings as they are in a world of light and darkness. But to discover God as he is in the world we must see Hashem in the people Israel. Chosenness confers visual authenticity of God’s presence in these biological descendants of Abraham. So even as Wyschogrod allows for the visual hybrid of light and darkness, he still confines it within a biological inheritance of purity.

<a>Vision and Chosenness</a>

David Novak worries that Wyschogrod subordinates the Torah to the Jewish people, such that God’s choice is both biological and unconditional.[[46]](#endnote-46) Wyschogrod does indeed bind vision to chosenness such that one can see God in and through the body of Israel. Seeing God is a form of bodily recognition; God chooses to dwell among Israel, and so Israel’s body reveals God’s presence. Wyschogrod makes this a visual knowledge for both God and human beings. God continues to love the people Israel, as Wyschogrod tells it, “because he sees the face of his beloved Abraham in each and every one of his children.”[[47]](#endnote-47) This is a physical, biological awareness. God creates physical beings in his likeness, such that the body “cannot be excluded from this resemblance”: “Man is created by God as a physical being and if there is a human resemblance to God then his body also resembles God.”[[48]](#endnote-48) The Biblical term *tselem* (image) is a visual one, according to Wyschogrod, “related to the concept of shadow, a naturally occurring drawing of physical likeness.”[[49]](#endnote-49) This physical correspondence with Adam only intensifies in the people Israel. God recognizes Abraham in his Jewish descendants, and human beings see God in and through Israel’s body. Wyschogrod continually asserts this natural or biological relationship between Israel and God. With the diversity of Jewish faces, one might remain puzzled by what Abraham’s countenance actually looks like to God. But Wyschogrod contends that this obscurity of vision is a finite one: in some mysterious way God recognizes his beloved Abraham in Israel’s bodily appearance. And by dwelling among that people, God reveals himself in and through these material bodies.

But does God’s presence disappear with the inevitable disintegration of the body? Or does the divine countenance remain even in death? These questions haunt Wyschogrod, as they would any theologian who so profoundly ties God’s visual presence to embodiment. That God’s presence may surrender or succumb to human mortality also raises constructive links between Wyschogrod’s work and Christian incarnational theology, as I briefly explore below. Even so, bodily death raises distinctive problems for Wyschogrod, in part because he continually reasserts the physical and biological features of visual knowledge. We have already confronted this carnal recognition in his discussion of Jewish sacrificial worship. There it was a vision of the self as dying object in place of the sacrificial animal. Here it is the possibility of divine death, in which God can neither be seen nor discovered in the people Israel. Wyschogrod understands well the horror of bodily decay, and how death impairs a more hopeful vision of meaning. Yet in the midst of this despair he also reasserts God’s presence in death *because* God’s dwelling has always been a physical embodiment. In death, the divine image “is no longer mediated by the invisibility of thought and speech,” but is revealed instead within the stark visibility of the motionless body:

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The dignity that is bestowed on man by the divine image does not cease with death, which would be the case if only the spirit of man had the divine stamp. Instead, a corpse remains holy or perhaps becomes more holy than ever. . . . In death, the illusion of spiritual eternity is shattered, and yet the image of Hashem does not flee but remains sharply impressed in the human body.

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With death, a morbid darkness overwhelms the lightness of being. If Hashem were to flee the body at that moment, “human encounter would be driven to despair and murder.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Here Wyschogrod reclaims God as the great protector against meaningless existence; God is the one who will preserve hope amid death. Yet the dead body terrifies the self in much the same way as the sacrificial animal: *that* death could be *my* death. To restrain this terror, Judaism inhibits a public gaze on a dead corpse, and in particular a look at the “eyes of the dead,” for they “are the organs by means of which man thrusts himself ahead.” Recall that Wyschogrod had recovered vision as “the great liberator” that “transfers the initiative to man” by extending the human gaze “into the far distance.”[[51]](#endnote-51) But a dead man’s gaze is “fearfully empty, an impotent thrust into the beyond that returns into itself and only emphasizes the deadness of the corpse.”[[52]](#endnote-52) This vacuity moves us to close the eyes of the dead in order to limit their darkness from absorbing our own light. Fearful that we might succumb to complete darkness and despair before death, Jewish tradition councils a withdrawal of the human gaze from dead bodies; by closing their eyes, we prevent a mutual gaze of incoherence. Yet death mysteriously intensifies God’s presence such that the body “becomes more holy than ever.” This reveals, as Wyschogrod powerfully asserts, the human attraction and repulsion to death: God more assertively dwells in the dead body, yet the inert eyes and blank stare reveal only an “impotent thrust into the beyond.” Even in death, the delicate balance between light and darkness remains a deeply human visual experience where enlightened hope mingles uneasily with a darkened morbidity. We see this in death, Wyschogrod asserts, even if we cannot really see it at all.

The darkening insecurity of death raises the specter that nonbeing will overwhelm the more luminous quality of being. Wyschogrod devotes a lengthy and somewhat tortuous chapter to an exploration of nonbeing in the Western philosophical tradition.[[53]](#endnote-53) While much of his analysis extends his earlier work on Kierkegaard and Heidegger,[[54]](#endnote-54) I find that R. Kendall Soulen summarizes quite well Wyschogrod’s critical interest in nonbeing:

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So long as non-being is embraced only in thought, the final result falls short of the actual embrace of nonbeing. Real nonbeing can be embraced only outside of discourse, by the act. But the act that affirms being and is at the same time the pure embrace of non-being is the act of destruction, the act of reducing another living being to death.[[55]](#endnote-55)

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For Wyschogrod, nonbeing cannot be thought but only enacted. Yet nonbeing as physical act is embodied violence, as it was for Heidegger in his support for the Nazi regime.[[56]](#endnote-56) Wyschogrod’s God is “the Lord of being,” and as such exists “beyond being and nonbeing.”[[57]](#endnote-57) God guarantees that nonbeing will not win out, that violence will not prevail, and that death can be outflanked:

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As the Lord of being, he [God] circumscribes being, not in the mode of nonbeing that must translate itself into violence but in the mode of the trustworthy promise, which is the power of nonbeing transformed into the principle of hope. . . .

In spite of these similarities between nonbeing and Hashem, the difference between the two is the difference between death and hope.[[58]](#endnote-58)

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The delicate balance between light and darkness plays out here too between nonbeing and being. Nonbeing (darkness) limits being (light), but Hashem is the God who contains both without destroying either, and in doing so radiates hope in a meaningful life of embodied existence. The being of light still radiates in death, for God dwells among even the dead bodies of his chosen people. Hope really does spring eternal.

This sense of hope in the midst of death conveys Wyschogrod’s incarnational reasoning and the influence of Christian theology. Wyschogrod has readily acknowledged Karl Barth’s impact on his own Jewish theology, but he has also confessed to a form of incarnational thought akin to Christian doctrine. Jewish thinkers of the past have often evaded discussions of God’s corporality, Wyschogrod surmises, because they feared such topics would draw them too close to Christian theology. Not so for Wyschogrod: “The incarnational direction of my thinking became possible for me only after I succeeded in freeing myself from the need to be as different from Christianity as possible.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Yet Wyschogrod wishes to avoid the term “incarnation” to describe God’s embodiment in the people Israel. Instead, he develops the notion of indwelling to account for God’s presence. This evades, so Wyschogrod hopes, any misunderstanding that God actually becomes one with a particular group. The Christian incarnation, in Wyschogrod’s view, yields pure presence and light that destroy the darkness of human existence. A God who dwells among his people, however, chooses to intensify their uncleanness and their darker moods, and so accepts them as they are. As “the dwelling place of Hashem,” Israel appears not as sinless but as more authentic, for this people exposes the true nature of human experience steeped in light and darkness.[[60]](#endnote-60) Christianity, with its appeal to a “sinless Christ,” denies that experience and so becomes, in Wyschogrod’s critique, a dehumanizing religious tradition. Walter Lowe has written eloquently about an abiding darkness that permeates Christian thought as well, suggesting that Wyschogrod has misread the Christian tradition or has accounted only for one strain within it.[[61]](#endnote-61) Wyschogrod certainly limits a more diverse Christianity to one monolithic culture, but he does so to play the foil to an equally homogeneous reading of Jewish theology. In Wyschogrod’s taxonomy, Judaism and Christianity offer two competing accounts of God’s relation with finite existence. Where Hashem associates with a people, the Christian God becomes human in one man; if Hashem accepts human beings as they are, Jesus too often condemns them as sinners; and where Judaism imparts an embodied visual knowledge of light and darkness, Christianity only sees the light, and so must deny the body and its darkened physicality. Wyschogrod’s incarnational theology, however tied to reductive versions of competing religions, seeks to reassert God’s presence in a people without thereby undermining its corporeality.

So Judaism is incarnational, but in a form distinctive from and critical of Christian traditions that assert God’s unity with a singular person. At times, Wyschogrod stresses this distinction, noting how Judaism is “a less concentrated incarnation, an incarnation into a people spread out in time and place.” In this sense, “the presence of the Jewish people in the world is a kind of continuing incarnation.” In these texts, Judaism differs from Christianity only in God’s adoption of an entire people. One may witness God’s presence in Christ, but “he who touches this [Jewish] people, touches God and perhaps not altogether symbolically.”[[62]](#endnote-62) In this case, Israel functions much like a Christ figure who embodies God’s presence.

Yet in other texts Wyschogrod asserts the deeply humanizing force of Jewish incarnational theology, in which Israel reveals God’s acceptance of human weakness and corporeality. To be sure, both Wyschogrod and his imagined Christian theologians confront the horror of a divine death, either in Jesus Christ or in the people Israel. Christian thinkers have developed robust theologies to mitigate against and even rejoice in this fear and trembling. But if Wyschogrod appropriates features of Christian incarnational thought, he does not appeal to a resurrection, to the trinity, to Marian theology, or to the many other ways of situating a divine death in a larger narrative of salvation. Instead, he appeals to the people Israel, “a less concentrated incarnation,” one “spread out in time and place,” such that any one death among Israel will not engender a divine death. Indeed, the very opposite is true: God appears more fully present in corporeal death, and strengthens that bond between Hashem and his chosen people. By spreading out God’s presence among the people Israel, Wyschogrod expands God’s body through time and place, and this not altogether symbolically. The authentically chosen people of Israel are a permanent visual presence of God’s love. Their visual and material body is their faith.

<a>Conclusion: The Convert and Jewish Authenticity</a>

In the preface to the second edition of *The Body of Faith*, Wyschogrod admits that he barely touched on notions of conversion in the original publication, and poses this query: “if the primary identity of the Jewish people is based on its descent from the patriarchs, then how is conversion to Judaism possible?” Indeed it should not be possible, for this chosen people constitutes “a priestly class into which one either is or is not born.” The kind of honest confrontation that Wyschogrod takes on throughout his book is on display here as well, for he forthrightly acknowledges the theological dilemma: his focus on the visual and carnal body precludes conversion, and yet clearly persons convert to Judaism. Such a rebirth can only occur “by means of a miracle,” and this because the convert “miraculously becomes part of the body of Israel.” The convert “must become seed,” and she does so “quasi-physically, miraculously.” This is a genuine rebirth, according to Wyschogrod, for a male son who converts does not violate the Biblical law against incest were he to marry his mother (although the rabbis banned such marriages). Through some miraculous occurrence the gentile body transforms into a Jewish one. But we cannot see it:

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Conversion is thus not just a spiritual event. It has biological or quasi-biological consequences. This does not, of course, imply that the biological miracle that accompanies a conversion can be observed under the microscope as changes in the DNA of the convert. It is a theological-biological miracle. It severs the mother-son and brother-sister relationship in some real way that we cannot physically observe but that must be very real.[[63]](#endnote-63)

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The miracle consists in a real event taking place beyond visual assurance. This is why Wyschogrod must qualify his embodied language with phrases like “quasi-biological” and “theological-biological” miracle. Since marvels such as these should not occur, and yet they do, Wyschogrod insists that “converts are therefore accepted but not encouraged.”[[64]](#endnote-64) The problem here lies in a physical change beyond discernment. We can see God in the chosen people Israel, and yet we cannot perceive this same God in the body of the convert. God can miraculously envision the face of his beloved Abraham in the gentile become Jew, but Israel cannot do so.

Wyschogrod is clearly uncomfortable with conversion to Judaism, and even more uneasy with Jewish proselytizing activities. He avoids saying too much about DNA, and yet he appeals to some kind of biological change for the convert. This anxiety is a visual one, for Wyschogrod defends a “theological-biological miracle” that “we cannot physically observe.” God’s visual presence in the dead body delivers hope over a final death. But what of this visual absence in the quasi-physical conversion of the gentile? The convert elicits anxiety because she neither displays visual authenticity of this hope, nor reveals God’s chosen indwelling with the people Israel. We can only infer a miraculous presence of light, but the convert remains uncannily obscure to human vision. Hers is not a body of faith but a quasi-biological miracle. And this mystery shadows Wyschogrod’s embodied triumphalism. Conversion narratives undermine the visual authenticity of Israel’s status as God’s chosen people. Chosenness is not a miracle but a result of God’s loving choice. Wyschogrod avoids discussions of conversion in his text because gentile bodies, even converted ones, do not fully expose God’s presence to human vision.

I read Wyschogrod’s account of conversion as anxious apologetic, and this because vision plays such a decisive role in his account of chosenness and authenticity. Conversions ought not be possible because only Israel portrays the human condition in its existential light and darkness; only Israel displays God’s presence as embodied in its people; and only Israel sees as God sees the I as sacrificial, dying object. This is authentic vision, and it is Israel’s alone. By means of miraculous conversion, the non-Jew takes on these responsibilities and powers, but is forever regulated by a “quasi” status of embodiment and, because conversion should not be encouraged, inauthenticity.

This mark of inauthenticity always shadows claims to authenticity. They are both present and articulated, even when (especially when) the other cannot be seen. When Wyschogrod defends bohemian creativity, he also denounces bourgeois conformism; the authentic marks its unstated (inauthentic) opposite. And this has profound consequences for the cultural politics underlying and implied by Wyschogrod’s Jewish theology. If Jews, or only some Jews, are authentic carriers of the divine countenance, if God dwells with them and not others, then culture also reflects this hierarchy of value, as it did among the bohemian and bourgeois. In other words, not all of Jewish culture reveals God’s presence; God dwells in some places but not in others. So God dwells in more than a people; God also dwells *somewhere* within a cultural landscape. Part of Wyschogrod’s unease with converts, I want to suggest, is a cultural one of absorption. It is one thing to commit to God’s commandments, but it is quite another to be accepted within a culture. Their “quasi” status is both metaphysical and geographical. They do not reside in the right place.

When Wyschogrod claims that “the majority of Jews must remain the descendants of the patriarchs and the matriarchs,”[[65]](#endnote-65) then the minority of converts—who, it seems, really do not become full descendants—are a bit less chosen, somewhat less insightful, and far more obscure and opaque. This is so because Wyschogrod ties chosenness to visual authenticity, and he employs a visual rhetoric to expose God’s love for the people Israel. But vision has its limits, and not only in the agitated body of the convert. It is, as Wyschogrod repeatedly reminds us, an obscure and partial perspective. Total exposure lies beyond the human realm, and certainly beyond the Jewish gaze. So perhaps conversion is no miracle at all, but rather a partial revelation that Jewish cultural identity is far more mysterious, and darker, than any one people could hope to perceive.

<a>Notes</a>

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<notes>

1. . Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), xiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Ibid., xxxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . See the collected essays in Michael Wyschogrod and R. Kendall Soulen, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004); and note as well the essays on Wyschogrod in the special issue of *Modern Theology* 22/4 (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . See Wyschogrod, “Why Was and Is the Theology of Karl Barth of Interest to a Jewish Theologian?” in *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, 211-24; Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 75-79; and Shai Held, “The Promise and Peril of Jewish Barthianism: The Theology of Michael Wyschogrod,” *Modern Judaism* 25/3 (2005), 316-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 64-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Ibid., 185-90, 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Ibid., 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Ibid., 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Ibid., 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Ibid., 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Ibid., 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Ibid., 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Ibid., 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Ibid., 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Ibid., 104-08. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Ibid., 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Ibid., 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . See Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1965). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . Ibid., 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . Ibid., 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Ibid., 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . Ibid., 20-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . Ibid., 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . Ibid., 44-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . Ibid., 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . Ibid., 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . Ibid., 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . Wyschogrod draws heavily from the interpretive tradition that reads Marx as a modern humanist. See the influential work from Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. . Ibid., 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. . Ibid., 248. See Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. . Ibid., 249-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. . Ibid., 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. . Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People*, 246. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. . Wyschogrod and Soulen, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. . Ibid., 115-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. . Ibid., 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. . Ibid., 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. . Even Wyschogrod admits to the arduous nature of this section: “This chapter is somewhat more difficult than the others, though it should not be beyond the attentive, nontechnically trained reader” (*The Body of Faith*, xxxv). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. . Michael Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1954). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. . R. Kendall Soulen, “The Achievement of Michael Wyschogrod,” *Modern Theology* 22/4 (2006), 677-85, especially page 681. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. . Ibid., 163 and 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. . Ibid., 171-72. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. . Ibid., xxxiii-xxxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. . Ibid., 10 and 212-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. . Walter James Lowe, “The Intensification of Time: Michael Wyschogrod and the Task of Christian Theology,” *Modern Theology* 22/4 (2006), 693-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. . Michael Wyschogrod, “A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation,” *Modern Theology* 12/2 (1996), 195-209, especially page 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. . Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, xvi-xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. . Ibid., xxi. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. . Ibid.

    </notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-65)