The so-called—it’s become such a tiresome phrase—existential subjects to me are still the only subjects worth dealing with. Any time one deals with other subjects one is not aiming for the highest goal. One can be aiming at some very interesting things, but it’s not the deepest thing for me. I don’t think that one can aim more deeply than at the so-called existential themes, the spiritual themes. . . . I just feel that you must—if you’re operating at the maximum of your capabilities—aim at very, very high material. And that to me would be the spiritual, existential realm. It’s great when it’s done realistically, and it’s great when it’s done poetically. But poetically is more intriguing for me.¹

INTRODUCTION

The biblical book of Job has troubled Jewish thinkers for more than two millennia. The story of the righteous sufferer has resonated even more strongly for its readers since the Holocaust. The book and its title character appear not infrequently in the creative oeuvre of Woody Allen, especially in his 1974 essay “The Scrolls.”² This article explores two issues: first, is there reason to take Allen’s rewritten story of Job seriously, and second, if so, what does Allen’s exegesis of the biblical tale offer the post-Holocaust reader? Not to give away the punch line, but an exploration of his explanation and interpretation of Job demonstrates that his comedy offers a serious theological discourse intended to confront the problem of maintaining the belief that God is just and compassionate in the face of the Holocaust.

TAKING WOODY ALLEN SERIOUSLY

The problem with accepting Woody Allen as a critical thinker on Judaism is exacerbated by the frequent suggestion that he is a self-hating Jew who has done only harm to the perception of Jews in the mind of the movie-viewing public. The argument that Woody Allen is a self-hating Jew is unconvincing. He has admitted to self-hate, but he has denied that this is the result of his religious persuasion: “The reasons lie in totally other areas—like the way I look when I get up in the morning. Or that I can never read a road map.”³ It is certain that more often than not his explicit depictions of Jews in his movies are
less than flattering.\textsuperscript{4} The late Conservative rabbi Samuel Dresner raged: “The accepting Jewish audience of Allen’s writings and films has not only contributed to a betrayal of Jewish values, but to a betrayal of the Jewish people. For no one more than Allen has enabled so many to view the Jew, especially the religious Jew, in so corrupt a manner.”\textsuperscript{5} But does a negative depiction of Jews in the films really make Allen self-hating? Scholars of Jewish humor have, by and large, rejected the idea that Jews who “invent, tell, and enjoy such jokes are masochistically attacking their own group and by extension themselves.”\textsuperscript{6} If not as a self-hating Jew, then, how might Allen’s relationship to Judaism be understood?

Mark E. Bleiweiss has suggested that Allen’s critique of Judaism comes not out of self-hatred but out of ignorance of Judaism and its teachings. Commenting on the depiction of a character committing the double sin of eating a clearly treif [unkosher] pork chop on the fast day of Yom Kippur in Radio Days (1987), Bleiweiss comments: “While pointing to the neighbor’s blind observance of rituals like kashrut and fasting, which he neither believes in [n] or understands, Allen also reveals his own ignorance of the meaning of these Jewish traditions. . . . To people like the neighbor and Allen himself who do not understand the ethical value of such rituals, both fasting and keeping kosher appear foolish and unnecessary.”\textsuperscript{7} Like those who prefer to see Allen as a self-hating Jew, Bleiweiss’s assumption of Allen’s ignorance allows for the all-too-easy dismissal of his critique and avoids serious confrontation with his attempts to deal with issues of religious belief.

By way of contrast, Ivan Kalmar has suggested an alternate way of understanding Allen’s relationship to Jewishness. He has categorized Allen among the “EJIs” (Embarrassed Jewish Individuals). EJIs are outwardly embarrassed by their Jewishness, and “The question that bothers the eji is: ‘Are they thinking of me as a Jew?’”\textsuperscript{8} Among the fundamental characteristics of EJIs is their “intellectual preference for views that negate the Jewish ‘difference.’”\textsuperscript{9} Allen fits quite neatly here. Central to his most serious essay, “Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind,” is a challenge to Jewish distinctiveness and a call for a certain type of universalism.\textsuperscript{10} Readers of the essay were less than thrilled with his views, and the letters to the editor of Tikkun—where the article was first published—most certainly critiqued Allen for these “universalist” views. Although the essay is quite critical of various aspects of Jewish belief and traditions and was written in response to the negative reactions he received for criticizing the actions of Israel during the intifada in the New York Times, it suggests that Allen is invested in his Jewishness and in the well-being of the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{11} This issue of investment is essential to dealing with
Allen’s self-deprecatory humor and avoiding the self-hating Jew trap. In many ways the self-deprecatory nature of Allen’s humor, which leads to accusations of self-hate, is the quintessentially Jewish characteristic of his comedy.

**JEWISH HUMOR AND THE PRESERVATION OF DIGNITY**

Most scholars of Jewish humor trace its origins to the Jews of Eastern Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and carried by their descendants to other lands of the diaspora. This view does not negate that there is evidence of the comic in early Jewish texts including biblical, rabbinic, and medieval literature, but from an American perspective, it is the self-deprecatory sort of humor known from Yiddish literature and the like that has largely shaped the humor audiences have come to know.

Self-criticism was so much a part of Jewish humor that Sigmund Freud concluded in his *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, “This determination of self-criticism may make clear why it is that a number of the most excellent jokes of which we have shown here many specimens should have sprung into existence from the soil of Jewish national life. . . . Incidentally I do not know whether one often finds a people that makes merry so unreservedly over its own shortcomings.” In this particular type of humor, Jewish traits, beliefs, or concerns are treated comically and perhaps even blasphemously for their own sake, but, as Hillel Halkin has noted, the key aspect is that the teller of the joke identifies with and is invested in the person or group being mocked within the joke.

What value, then, is there in laughing, or causing others to laugh, at the foibles and beliefs of one’s own ethnic or religious group? How does mocking themselves benefit the Jews? Sarah Blacher Cohen provides a succinct answer, “Jewish humor, however, is not only based on the masochistic characteristics of the Jews expressed in their self-critical jokes. It has also been a principal source of salvation. By laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. Their humor has been a balance to counter external adversity and internal sadness.” Thus, Jewish humor served to help the community psychologically overcome persecution and suffering and, as Robert Alter suggests, to allow the maintenance of dignity in the face of persecution: “If in the tradition of Jewish humor suffering is understandably imagined as inevitable, it is also conceived as incongruous with dignity. . . . [I]t is not, after all, fitting for a man to be this pitiful creature with a blade of anguish in his heart and both feet entangled in a clanking chain of calamities.”

These two issues—the inevitability of suffering on the one hand and the maintenance of dignity on the other—prove to be at the heart of Allen’s reading of Job. If Allen is writing as an invested member of the Jewish people, it
is valuable to avoid writing off his negative portrayals of Jews and Jewishness as self-hatred and to examine them as a legitimate critique of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness. In exploring the book of Job, even through, or especially through, the mode of comedy, Allen takes direct aim at the core text of Jewish religious life and at traditional Jewish theodicy and raises important questions for understanding the nature of Jewish belief and theology after the Holocaust.

Allen’s retelling of the story of Job is entirely concerned with allowing Job to retain his dignity by challenging God’s integrity. It is most certainly consistent with Alter’s description of Jewish humor in that the idea that Job’s suffering may have meaning is fundamentally rejected: It is not the traditional divine punishment for sin, and it does not improve his character or his relationship with the deity. “Jokes aimed at God,” writes Joseph Telushkin, “tend to be the gentlest in the Jewish tradition—ironic digs, rather than belly laughs. More than any other contemporary comedian, Woody Allen is the master of this genre.” But why joke at God’s expense? In this case, Allen highlights the dissonance between traditional belief and the state of the world and offers a suggestion, if not an entirely satisfying solution, to how to maintain a relationship with God in the wake of the Holocaust. Humor of this sort offers the opportunity to respond to the apparent contradiction between God’s providential role in Jewish life and Jewish suffering. If God acts in history, Jewish persecution does not take place without His knowledge and may even be the result of His actions. Jewish humor was understood as an appropriate response to persecution of Jews by non-Jewish powers, but what about when God appeared responsible for the persecution? In this sense, jokes about God afforded Jews the opportunity to soften blasphemy with wit, to raise serious questions about the nature of belief, and to laugh through the pain.

THE HOLOCAUST IN WOODY ALLEN’S THOUGHT

Allen has repeatedly commented that he writes about what he knows and what he has primarily captured is the life of the twentieth century American Jew who has broken with religious strictures to assimilate into American life, but who has not quite completed the transition. On the way he has attacked hypocrisy in the Jewish clergy; critiqued ritual observance, Israeli military prowess, and Jewish theology; and ultimately distanced himself from the religious institutions of Jewish life. Allen reported to his biographer Eric Lax that he had attended synagogue with his grandfather and Hebrew school until he was bar mitzvahed. Despite this, though, he was unmoved by either. His encounter with friends of other faiths left him unmoved by other organized religions like Catholicism as well.
Despite his disillusionment with the trappings of organized religion, the experience of growing up in a Jewish family, in a largely Jewish neighborhood, attending a school with primarily Jewish classmates, most clearly became fodder for his comedy and moviemaking.\textsuperscript{21} Further, while his parents were born in the United States, Allen’s family helped care for relatives who survived the Holocaust. For Allen, as for many American Jews, the Holocaust became the defining event in the shaping of Jewish identity.\textsuperscript{22} In his 1990 essay “Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind,” Allen, responding to Elie Wiesel’s repeated assurances in \textit{Night} that the survivors did not contemplate revenge, comments that he always found it funny that while the survivors did not contemplate it, someone who had lived in the United States, who always had food on the table and a warm place to sleep, continued to think “of nothing but revenge.”\textsuperscript{23}

It is evident in his movies that the Holocaust was never far from Woody Allen’s mind, and he uses comedy to broach the serious questions the catastrophe raises. Allen biographer Nancy Pogel claims “his films are often haunted by a post-Holocaust sensibility.”\textsuperscript{24} The place of the Holocaust in Allen’s work has been well documented: “Throughout his movies, especially \textit{Shadows and Fog} (1992) and \textit{Crimes and Misdemeanors} (1990), as well as in his seminal essay, ‘Random Reflections of a Second-Rate Mind,’ the comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen has joined the ranks of theologians and Jews in the latter part of the twentieth century who ask troubling questions concerning the Holocaust and its implications.”\textsuperscript{25} More than a decade earlier, Morley T. Feinstein had concluded: “The single most important fact in Woody Allen’s Jewish identity is the Holocaust. It’s his philosophical touchstone, his constant reference point, his favorite metaphor.”\textsuperscript{26} A survey of his work suggests that the “big questions” bothered Allen from the very beginning.

In 1977’s \textit{Annie Hall}, Allen’s character takes his girlfriend to see Max Ophul’s \textit{The Sorrow and the Pity}, which examines French collaboration with the Nazis, and feels triumphant when he meets Annie, after they have broken up, leaving the same film with her date. In 1983’s \textit{Zelig} the issue of assimilation is taken up with a title character who, like a chameleon, takes on the identity of those around him in an effort to fit in. The most poignant scene may be that of Zelig standing on the dais with Hitler at a rally, having joined the Nazi party. In 1986’s \textit{Hannah and Her Sisters} Frederick, the alienated artist, in response to a television show that treated Auschwitz as a historically unique event, comments that he is surprised that such events, given the state of the world, don’t happen more often. Here Frederick is perfectly in line with Allen’s own thoughts. Writing in early 1990, he noted that already in his midteens he had
concluded that Anne Frank’s view that people were basically good was nonsense and had accepted the view that “people were no damned good.” Living inside of people of all creeds and colors is “a worm of self-preservation, of fear, greed, and an animal will to power.” Given this truth, further destruction was inevitable. After all, “History had been filled with unending examples of bestiality, differing only cosmetically.” Allen’s view is echoed again by Harry, in 1997’s Deconstructing Harry, who comments on the inevitability of another genocide more severe than the Holocaust: “Records are made to be broken.”

Allen’s most extensive cinematic treatments of the Holocaust appear in 1989’s Crimes and Misdemeanors and 1991’s Shadows and Fog. In the former Allen’s character Cliff Stern is shooting a documentary about Holocaust survivor and philosophy professor Louis Levy. Throughout his time in the concentration camp and after his liberation, he affirmed life, until one day he inexplicably walked out a window, exemplifying “the long-term emotional damage wrought by the Holocaust.”

In Shadows and Fog the Holocaust is clearly, though never explicitly, referenced. Even the title calls to mind the 1955 French documentary short film, Night and Fog, directed by Alain Resnais, made ten years after the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Allen’s movie describes a world in which the Holocaust can occur: One foggy night, a malevolent evil man terrorizes a city by killing random victims. Various groups take justice into their own hands in an attempt to capture the stalker. Allen’s character, nebbishy accountant Kleinman, is awakened and drafted into a group although he never quite understands what is going on. Various innocents are gathered up because the vigilantes seek a scapegoat. An innocent Jewish family is captured. Kleinman is subject to antisemitic taunts, as when his boss says that he is “a slimy vermin more suited to extermination than life on this planet.”

While Allen’s movies have been studied for Holocaust references, his essays and short stories have received significantly less attention. In his entry on the Holocaust in Woody, From Antz to Zelig, Richard Schwartz notes that Allen’s April 1971 essay in The New Yorker, “The Schmeed Memoirs,” satirized Nazi war criminal Albert Speer’s Inside the Third Reich, telling the story of Hitler’s barber who considered “loosening the Fuhrer’s neck-napkin and allowing some tiny hairs to get down his back,” until he lost his nerve. July 1976’s “Remembering Needleman” (The New Republic), offers an obituary for Sandor Needleman, a composite character melded from mid-twentieth century leftist intellectuals. Attracted to the “Brown Shirts” because the color offset his eyes, he rationalized his amoral behavior by arguing against existence: “the only thing that was real was his IOU to the bank for six million marks.”
From Schwartz’s presentation what becomes manifest is that, if we disregard a few passing remarks on Nazis in his stand-up comedy, it is in his short essays that Allen first began to treat the implications of the Holocaust. With this in mind, Allen’s retelling of the biblical story of Job as found in his 1974 essay “The Scrolls” is worth exploration as a response to the theological questions raised by the Holocaust. As is discussed in more detail below, exploring the book of Job became a common way for Jewish writers to examine the Holocaust by paralleling the experiences of the biblical character with those of the victims. The question under discussion, then, is should Allen’s retold biblical tale be understood as part of the broader trend in contemporary Jewish theology?

THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF JOB

Allen’s essay opens by describing the discovery of ancient scrolls found by a shepherd in a cave in the Gulf of Aqaba. The introduction satirizes the discovery of and controversy surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among the scrolls Allen’s archaeologists discover is a version of the book of Job and an account of the binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1-24). The focus here is on the former, but first a summary of the biblical book of Job may prove helpful for comparison’s sake.

The biblical book of Job tells the story of a pious man of ambiguous ethnic and religious origins, who, because of his piety, is rewarded by God with wealth and a large family. The prologue to the biblical book of Job takes the reader to a royal court scene. On the particular day described, along with the *b’nei ha-’elohim* [often translated as angels, but more appropriately *gods*] who appeared before God, came “the satan”—small “t,” small “s.” God questions the satan as to his previous whereabouts, and the satan indicates he had been out and about on the earth. God asks the satan if he has taken notice of Job, whom he explicitly describes as pious, upright, and blameless. The satan declares that he has seen him and challenges God’s assertion of his piety, declaring that Job serves God only because He regularly rewards him. In the face of such a challenge God allows the satan to take away Job’s wealth and to kill his family to ostensibly test Job.

Despite the tremendous loss, Job remains loyal to God. God declares that the satan made him destroy Job without cause, but the satan convinces God to allow a second test, this time allowing Job’s health to be attacked. As a result of his painful sores, Job covers himself in ash and continues to mourn his losses. Only after this second challenge does he begin to curse. By and large what concerns him is the fact that his suffering seems to come without justice. It does not appear to him to be a punishment, since he is blameless. He demands
that God come forth and explain the situation to him. In the meantime, Job is visited by four friends, each of whom, to varying degrees, suggests that Job is not blameless and that he should repent to bring about an end to the suffering. Job refuses to surrender, and eventually God appears in a whirlwind and blasts Job with a series of questions, each designed to show God’s power and Job’s weakness. In the face of the divine onslaught Job repents, and he is rewarded by God with replacement children and double the wealth he had before—a very happy ending.

JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

For most of the 2,000-year history of Jewish interpretation of the book, interpreters have tended to align themselves with Job’s friends, this despite God’s own explicit declaration of Job’s piety and his chastisement of the friends. In large part the interpreters had little choice but to go this route. Jewish theology was heavily shaped by the book of Deuteronomy, which assured its readers that the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished. The rabbis and their heirs consistently read historical events through this lens. The exile to Babylonia, the destruction of the two Temples, the crusades, the Inquisition and expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, all were punishments for a sinful people.

By contrast, the biblical book of Job suggested an alternate possibility for the cause of suffering—God did what God pleased and he could do so simply because he was God. Although consistent with many depictions of the gods of the Ancient Near East, this was not the message Jewish readers took from the Bible. They preferred a world run with divine justice even while their experience of the world might suggest a certain dissonance between theory and practice. In order to realign the book of Job with the deuteronomistic view of the world, the rabbis read the story of Job extremely carefully to find an explanation. While not all the sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods agreed that Job was a sinner, the vast majority did.

The harshest critique of Job taught that he was one of three servants to the Pharaoh who sought a way to curb the growth of the Israelite population in Egypt. When the Pharaoh recommended the killing of children, Job remained silent and did not oppose the immoral decree. In addition, Job was accused of having come into the world only to receive his reward and of uttering a variety of heresies, including denying the resurrection of the dead and the existence of divine providence. Furthermore, in his dialogues he challenged God’s authority and attempted to place himself on the same level as God, and generally expressed incorrect views of the deity.
As should be clear, it was in Job’s questioning of divine justice in the middle chapters of the book that the early rabbis found cause for Job’s suffering. They were troubled by the harshness of his protest, and to them, at least, his punishment appeared appropriate.

The medieval readers of the text responded similarly. Maimonides, the twelfth century Spanish philosopher, responded to Job by asserting that his sufferings resulted from his own lack of wisdom. He presented Job as an evolving philosopher who hurled baseless accusations at God because he simply did not understand the true nature of the universe.42

The mystical tradition responded likewise to Job’s predicament, asserting that Job’s suffering resulted, in part, from erroneous thought. It blames Job’s suffering primarily on the mystical notion of the transmigration of the souls—that is, reincarnation. Job was, in fact, righteous, but he did not know he was being punished because his soul was faulty. It carried blemishes imposed by earlier users of it; by bearing the suffering, Job could redeem it.43

These interpretative trends, which blamed Job, continued to be perpetuated by Jewish thinkers including Hermann Cohen and others well into the twentieth century. How then, does Woody Allen’s treatment of Job compare to this trend?

WOODY ALLEN INTERPRETS THE BOOK OF JOB

What follows is a commentary on Allen’s retold Job story. To avoid issues of copyright infringement, the original material is infrequently cited. Readers of this article are recommended to read the commentary alongside the original text, “The Scrolls,” as it appears in Without Feathers.44

In the opening paragraph Allen explains that God made a bet with the satan to test Job’s fidelity and caused him harm, including physical punishment and destruction of his property. Job’s immediate reaction is to ask God why He has acted thusly. Here Allen highlights several important issues: (1) God caused Job to suffer as a result of a bet with the satan, not because of anything inherently wrong with Job. (2) God is not omniscient; the outcome of the test is unknown to Him. (3) In contrast to the biblical text, Job immediately begins to protest from the onset of the first test.

In the second paragraph, in response to Job’s question, God snaps the tablets of the commandments closed on Job’s nose. This is followed by a description of Job’s wife crying about what she has witnessed. God then “mercifully” has an angel strike her on the head with a polo mallet and subjects her to the first six of the ten plagues. Job is then described as angry, and his wife tears her garment as a traditional sign of mourning.
The treatment of Job’s wife here is reminiscent of a classic Yiddish proverb: If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that is too tight. Here God mercifully distracts Job’s wife from her tsuris [troubles]. Or so it seems. Allen here has added an interesting twist. In contrast to the biblical text (Job 2:9), where the wife tells Job to “Curse God and die” and Job puts her in her place (“You speak as one of the foolish women”), Allen gives us a sense of her emotions. She is allowed to weep and allowed to be angry about the situation. Allen has elsewhere commented concerning his feelings about Mrs. Job:

So that leaves Job’s wife. My favorite woman in all of literature. Because when her cringing, put-upon husband asked the Lord “Why me?” and the Lord told him to shut up and mind his own business and that he shouldn’t even dare ask, Job accepted it, but the Missus, already in the earth at that point, had previously scored with a quotable line of unusual dignity and one that Job would have been far too obsequious to come up with: “Curse God and die” was the way she put it. And I loved her for it because she was too much of her own person to let herself be shamelessly abused by some vain and sadistic Holy Spirit.

Allen shows an appreciation for her protest and her ability to maintain her dignity in the face of horrendous suffering. In the retelling of the story, though, God distracts her with a polo mallet before she has the opportunity to encourage Job to maintain his dignity by cursing and to defend her own integrity. From Allen’s perspective, she is heroic in the biblical text, Job is not. As a result, in the remainder of Allen’s retold story of Job, Job is unlike his biblical namesake and more like his wife.

But things only get worse for Allen’s Job: his pastures dry up and his tongue cleaves to the roof of his mouth, causing people to laugh when he speaks. And then the story changes direction:

And once the Lord, while wrecking havoc upon his faithful servant, came too close and Job grabbed him around the neck and said, “Aha! Now I got you! Why art thou giving Job a hard time, eh? Eh? Speak up!”

And the Lord said. “Er, look—that’s my neck you have. . . . Could you let me go?”

But Job showed no mercy and said, “I was doing very well ‘til you came along. I had myrrh and fig trees in abundance and a coat of many colors with two pairs of pants of many colors. Now look.”

Note here that Allen’s God does not appear to respond to Job’s question. In contrast to the biblical text, God, not the satan, causes Job’s suffering, and while He causes the trouble He demonstrates His fallibility by getting “too close to Job” and getting caught by him unintentionally. This provides Job
with the opportunity to confront God directly. He gets to ask the questions and to demand answers. The roles are reversed. Job, who had previously been caught by God, now has a hold of God and will not let go. The narrative concludes with God attempting to extract Himself from the situation by demanding, as He does in the biblical text, to know why Job thinks he can ask for answers from the One who created the heavens and the earth and all that are in them. Job will not accept God’s questions as answers, and while he releases God he reminds Him: “Thine is the kingdom and the power and glory. Thou has a good job. Don’t blow it.”

Here Allen has Job reject outright the answer to the quandary posed by the biblical text. “I am God and that’s the way it is” is not just an unsatisfying answer; it is, in Allen’s mind, an unacceptable one. If God is “some vain and sadistic Holy Spirit,” He must be called on it. Job’s final line demands appropriate leadership from God. Given divine power, there must be divine responsibility. Until now, at least according to Allen, God has not been doing his job properly.

In 1975’s Love and Death Woody Allen’s character, Boris Grushenko, comments, “If it turns out that there is a God, I don’t think that he’s evil. I think that the worst you can say about him is that basically he’s an underachiever.” Allen, by contrast, thinks God can be evil, but in doing so He is underachieving, and Allen’s Job boldly calls God’s attention to this fact.

By contrast, in a more recent film, Whatever Works (2009), Allen references Job as well. In this case the mother-in-law of the lead character, Boris Yellnikoff, describes a series of tragedies that have befallen her, including losing her house and divorcing. Boris responds, “Christ, this is like Job. No locusts?” The woman continues describing how she spent all her money on medical bills to cure a case of shingles and how she prayed to God constantly asking for help. Boris again responds, “Let me guess what happened, your shingles got worse.” She explains how all she asked for from God was a sign, “Lord, just give me one sign that all my suffering is for a purpose. . . . Please, God, just say something. Break your silence. I can’t take any more misery!” From Boris she gets, “Nothing, right?” The dialogue encapsulates precisely what should be expected from a Woody Allen character. If there is a God, He makes the situation worse or simply remains silent when needed most. This silence may demonstrate that there is no God, but if there is a God he must be called on to behave justly and compassionately.

Writing about Allen’s theological imagination, Gary Commins has suggested that “Allen comes out of the Jewish tradition which, from its scriptural roots, has poked and prodded the powerful. He turns this protest against
a powerful God, saying ‘Thou hast a good job. Don’t blow it.’ If you are a powerful God, act like it and straighten things up! Again and again, human suffering and the omnipresence of death haunt him. He wants a God who will agonize and act with love in response to the human condition.”

Although Commins may oversimplify the Jewish tradition of protest, the question he raises concerning what Allen wants of God is worthy of discussion.

“The Scrolls” does not describe what Allen wants of God but rather is the logical outcome of Allen’s basic assumptions based on human experience. Given the Holocaust and so many other cases of human suffering, it is implausible that the universe is controlled by a just God. Allen’s essay is descriptive rather than prescriptive. This is not Allen’s wishes but rather an observation. If there is a god, He is falling down on the Job (double entendre intended); but Allen does not assume God’s existence. In fact, it is the absence of God that scares him: “The empty universe is another item that scares me, along with eternal annihilation, aging, terminal illness and the absence of God in a hostile, raging void. I always feel that as long as man is finite he will never truly be relaxed.”

Elsewhere in his oeuvre Allen suggests a more appropriate answer for God to give Job. In the movie Manhattan, Woody Allen and his young lover, played by Mariel Hemmingway, are riding in a horse-drawn carriage through Central Park. She says to him, “You know you’re crazy about me.” He replies, “I am. You’re . . . You’re God’s answer to Job. You would have ended all argument between them. He’d have said, ‘I do a lot of terrible things but I can also make one of these.’ And Job would’ve said ‘OK, you win.’” The response to suffering in the world is to seek out those things that make life worth living—like beauty and love. As Prof. Levy, the Holocaust survivor in Crimes and Misdemeanors, claims,

Events unfold so unpredictably, so unfairly. Human happiness does not seem to be included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet, most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying and even try to find joy from simple things, like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more. Ultimately, human beings have to find a way to go on, even if God is evil or indifferent to them.

On a side note, it is worth pointing out that Allen does not seem entirely convinced of this answer. After all, the professor commits suicide in the film, and in Love and Death Boris comments, “To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering, one must not love. But, then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is
to suffer, not to love is to suffer, to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love, to be happy, then, is to suffer, but suffering makes one unhappy, therefore, to be unhappy one must love, or love to suffer, or suffer from too much happiness—

_**I hope you’re getting this down.**_

Although love can bring suffering, it is among the three responses to suffering that allow it to be transcended, if only for a short while. According to critic Richard A. Blake, Allen suggests a turn to art if love is too elusive. Artists withdraw into the world of the imagination and create their own universe, and thus they “give purpose to the creatures” therein. When this fails, a person might turn to religion. The difficulty with the biblical book of Job is that as a religious text its teachings are unsatisfying. Allen, the artist, has created his own biblical world and given new purpose to Job and his wife: they are the official voice of protest. Allen’s Job, despite being God’s victim, is prepared to give God another chance but does not give up the protest. He releases Him to go back to ruling the universe with the direct assertion that God should not “blow it.”

The protest aspect of the story should not be overlooked. The biblical Job repents in dust and ashes and gives up his protest; Allen’s does not. In this it is consistent with Allen’s turn to a Holocaust metaphor to explain life. In a 1977 interview with *Esquire* Allen remarked, “Life is a concentration camp. You’re stuck here, and there’s no way out, and you can only rage impotently against your persecutors.” While Job’s protest is actual, for Allen, finding love and creating art are likewise a form of protest against a universe that consistently persecutes those who inhabit it. The position is somewhat ambiguous, though. It is unclear if this is an optimistic view—that is, the suffering can be overcome, although not entirely—or a pessimistic view, as Mark T. Conrad has suggested: In “the end Allen seems to tell us that, instead of discovering and creating real meaning and value (through relationship and artistic creativity, for example), all we can ever really hope to do is distract ourselves from, or deceive ourselves about, the meaninglessness of our lives, the terrifying nature of the universe, and the horrible anticipation of our personal annihilation in death.”

A more optimistic view is offered by by Marc S. Reisch. In a thoughtful study of Allen’s first two volumes of collected essays, he concludes, “The direction of Allen’s humor is to create sense where there is no sense and to find hope where there was none.” That Allen continues to go on living suggests that the method, although its sense of the world is hard to evaluate, is effective. In “The Scrolls,” Job protests the meaninglessness of suffering; by writing “The Scrolls,” Allen does.
POST-HOLOCAUST INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF JOB

Throughout history Jewish intellectuals used the book of Job as the jumping-off point for discussions of Jewish individual and communal suffering. Certainly no event of modernity has had the kind of impact on Jewish theological discourse as the Holocaust, and the use of Job as a stand-in for the victims of the Holocaust has become a dominant trope in the writings of Jewish theologians, including J. B. Soloveitchik, Eliezer Berkowicz, Martin Buber, and many others. Given Allen's biography and the significant place of the Holocaust in his work, the question is, how does Allen's retelling of Job compare to other post-Holocaust interpretations of it?

When contrasted with the exegetical tradition, Allen's retelling of the Job story seems blasphemous. The tradition worked hard to defend God, even at the expense of Job. Allen exalts Job at the expense of God. In so doing, though, his comments on the nature of God fit perfectly in the realm of Jewish theology in the wake of the Holocaust. In interpreting Job in this way, he points directly at the difficulty of accepting God as omnipotent, omniscient, and just in the wake of the mass suffering of the Holocaust. Like Allen, most Jewish theologians could not accept a theology that explained the suffering of the Holocaust by blaming the victim. Parallel to the story of Job, post-Holocaust theologians could not accept the traditional interpretation that explained away God's actions in the book of Job by claiming that Job had been worthy of punishment. The closest parallel to Allen's conclusion is found in Elie Wiesel's retelling of the book of Job, where he too sought to maintain the dignity of Job and the Holocaust victims his story represents. It should be noted, however, that Wiesel is only one example of many Jewish writers who respond similarly to Job in their attempts to confront the suffering of the Holocaust.

In Wiesel's 1976 essay, “Job: Our Contemporary,” Job is a stand-in for Wiesel, for Holocaust survivors generally, and for Israel. Wiesel criticized Job for acquiescing when confronted by God. Like Job he continued in his writings to challenge God. He did not deny God, his faith remained, but his relationship with God was built on protest. Wiesel could not forgive Job for recanting and relenting:

God spoke to Job of everything except that which concerned Him. . . . And yet, instead of becoming indignant, Job declared himself satisfied. . . . He asked for nothing more; as far as he was concerned, justice had been done. . . . No sooner had God spoken than Job repented. . . . And so, there was Job, our hero, our standard-bearer, a broken, defeated man. On his knees, having surrendered unconditionally.

Wiesel could not accept this conclusion. Using the argument of biblical critics
that the epilogue may be a later addition to the text, Wiesel offers an alternative ending: “I prefer to think that the Book’s true ending was lost. That Job died without having repented, without having humiliated himself; that he succumbed to his grief an uncompromising and whole man.” Wiesel, like Allen, rejects the undignified and repentant Job. Both prefer a Job who continued to protest divine injustice, what Wiesel calls Job’s “desperate act of courage.” Wiesel’s protest against Job’s end resulted as well from his encounter with other survivors. He noted that he was “preoccupied with Job, especially in the years after the war. In those days he could be seen on every road of Europe. Wounded, robbed, mutilated. Certainly not happy or resigned.”

While Allen’s tone might appear blasphemous, certainly his depiction of God and his demand that God behave justly are not. His Job, like Wiesel’s, challenges God but preserves his own dignity. This is consistent with a Jewish post-Holocaust theology that does not relieve God of His responsibility for His role in the Holocaust but encourages renewing the relationship. For context’s sake it is worth noting, for example, Irving Greenberg, who has argued that the divine covenant must be voluntarily renewed in the wake of the Holocaust because with the Holocaust God invalidated the contract: “I submit that the covenant was broken but the Jewish people, released from its obligations, chose voluntary to take it on again and renew it. God was in no position to command anymore [after the Holocaust] but the Jewish people was so in love with the dream of redemption that it volunteered to carry on with its mission.”

Note that Allen’s comment concerning God being a sadistic Holy Spirit does not appear in the comedic essay, but in a “serious” article intended to respond to the charge of Jewish self-hatred. While it is clear that he sees God in the book of Job in this way, the material in “The Scrolls” is somewhat softer. What we are left with, though, is Allen’s description: God is fallible and callous and apparently indifferent. In this he is not alone among modern Jewish thinkers. In Martin Buber’s third lecture, The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth, the philosopher evoked a cruel God. He suggested that religious thinkers could not make demands on survivors of the Holocaust: “Dare we recommend to the survivors of Auschwitz, the Job of the gas chambers: ‘Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endureth forever?’ The only answer that the biblical Job received was God’s nearness, that he know God again. “Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness.” Responding to his own question, Buber suggested that the time would come when he and other survivors would “recognize again our cruel and merciful God.”
CONCLUSION

Allen’s Job, the innocent victim, heroically catches God by the neck and takes advantage of the moment to put God in his place. In this, the victim retains his dignity while confronting a powerful persecutor. The text, as humor often is, is shocking in its depictions and in its inversion of roles: God becomes laughable in his actions as the classic depiction of Him, as omnipotent, omniscient, and just, is thrown out the window but Job, in his protest, becomes heroic. In Allen’s retelling, Job behaves the way God should: protesting injustice and acting compassionately (it is Allen’s Job, after all, who releases God unharmed while God did not behave this way to him).

Allen’s depiction of God as having acted capriciously with Job stems from the same set of questions asked in explicit works of post-Holocaust thought and comes to similar conclusions. In the movie *Stardust Memories*, Allen’s character utters the oft-repeated line “To you, I’m an atheist. To God, I’m the loyal opposition.” In this, he places himself on a team with many modern Jewish writers. There is no doubt that Allen’s Job, perhaps as a stand-in for Allen himself, exemplifies this role quite exceptionally. In Plato’s *Cratylus* Socrates tells us that “Even the gods like jokes.” One only hopes, for Allen’s sake, that this is true of the Jewish God too.

NOTES

4. Noted film critic Pauline Kael commented concerning Allen’s *Stardust Memories*, “The Jewish self-hatred that spills out in this movie could be a great subject, but all it does is spill out.” Quoted in Marion Meade, *The Unruly Life of Woody Allen* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 154.
7. Mark E. Bleiweiss, “Self-Deprecation and the Jewish Humor of Woody Allen,” originally published in *Jewish Spectator* (Winter 1989) and reprinted in Curry, *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, 207-08. Bleiweiss’s argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Bleiweiss’s turn to the ethical value of the rituals in actuality misses Allen’s critique of them and even the key issue regarding them in the first place. These are not only rituals that
need to be enacted but are, more importantly, Divine commands that must be fulfilled. Allen's concern as framed in this part of Radio Days is one to which he consistently returns: Is there a Commander who rewards andpunishes those who fulfill the commands or sin by transgressing them? Allen commented in an interview with filmmaker Stig Björkman concerning the murderer Judah in the Allen film Crimes and Misdemeanors: "We live in a world where there's nobody to punish you, if you don't punish yourself. . . . If he doesn't choose to punish himself then he's gotten away with it." Björkman, Woody Allen on Woody Allen, 212. In Radio Days the question is not about whether the rituals make a person more or less ethical but about the fact that that the neighbor has broken the connection between God and the rituals. In the words of the neighbor, "the problem is not between man . . . and some imaginary super being." The neighbor does not believe in God, so the need to fulfill the commandments, to repent of sins, is muted. Bleiweiss, offering apologetics in place of explanations for the commandments, leaves God out entirely.


9 See note 2 above.


11 That is the self-deprecatory humor often identified as "Jewish humor."


Commenting on the character of Judah in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Allen offered, “Well, Judah’s problem and its relation to religious teachings and religious belief is significant, and the only religion that I feel I can write about with any kind of accuracy is the Jewish religion.” Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, 213.

By way of contrast, Allen has not distanced himself entirely from institutions important to the American Jewish community. He was, for example, among the signatories to the list of major supporters of the National Political Action Committee at its founding in 1982 by businessman Marvin Josephson. NatPAC was intended to support American political candidates who supported Israel.

The extensive “list” of Jewish topics and issues Allen has discussed in his movies, essays, and stand-up are treated approvingly in Morley T. Feinstein, “Woody Allen and Jewish Experience,” *Jewish Spectator* (Spring 1984): 47-48. Canadian-Jewish novelist Mordecai Richler concluded that it is “fair to say that just about everything Woody Allen has produced has been enriched by his experience of having been born and raised as an urban Jew in America.” “Woody,” originally published in *Playboy* (December 1991) and reprinted in Richler’s *Belling The Cat: Essays, Reports and Opinions* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998), 62.

The broader events of the Second World War certainly left scars on Allen. In *Radio Days* the character Biff Baxter warns people to keep an eye out for German planes or submarines off the coast of New York. This theme appeared more than twenty years earlier as part of Allen’s stand-up routines where he noted that the German submarines had been destroyed by the pollution in the bathing area at Coney Island. This latter material is included in the routine “Brooklyn” available on side 1, track 2 of the recording “Woody Allen: Standup Comic, 1964-1968,” (New York: Rhino, 1999). In an interview concerning the autobiographical nature *Radio Days* Allen pointed out that he explicitly remembered going to the beach to look for German aircraft and boats (Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen*, 158).


Ibid.
Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust

30 For discussion of the “memoir,” see Maurice Yacowar, Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1979), 83-84.
31 Ibid., 89-90.
32 References to Nazis, Hitler, Himmler, and Eichmann are common in Allen’s stand-up comedy from the latter half of the 1960s. Bernstein correctly suggests: “For Allen, the Holocaust serves two purposes. On the one hand, more than any other historical event, it is his most ongoing referent. He often uses it, without further musings, as the punch line for jokes or to make a point about a character. On the other hand, and on a far more significant level, it provides him with the lens through which he can examine society and God in the latter part of the twentieth century.” Bernstein, “My Worst Fears Realized,” 218-19.
35 b. Sotah 11a; b. Sanh. 106a; Ex. Rab. 1:12, 12:3; p. Sotah 5:8/20c.
37 b. B. Bat. 15a and 16a.
38 b. B. Bat. 16a.
40 b. B. Bat. 16a.
43 Zohar 3:216b.
44 The text can also be found in multiple anthologies online as part of the collected materials in Google Books.
45 This is Allen’s error. The reader of the biblical text is never told that the wife dies; she simply disappears from the narrative.
47 Similarly in the subsequent retelling of the story of the binding of Isaac, in contrast to the biblical narrative, Abraham’s wife Sarah has a speaking role and acts as the voice of reason.
49 While the biblical patriarch Abraham is noted for protesting God’s destruction of innocents in Sodom and Gomorrah, by and large the tradition has seen protesting one’s own personal or communal suffering as inappropriate. First and foremost, suffering was understood as a punishment for sin; as a result, introspection and correction were
required, not protest against God. This explains why the traditional interpreters of Job, as discussed above, described Job as a sinner who deserved his punishment rather than the innocent victim of a callous or capricious deity.

50 Allen, “Am I Reading the Papers Correctly,” A27.


55 In contrast to Conrad, Ian Jarvie suggests that the fact that Allen continues to produce art makes him a “pragmatic optimist,” for he is affirming his optimism through action. See Jarvie, “Arguing Interpretation: The Pragmatic Optimism of Woody Allen,” in Conrad and Skoble, *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, 48.


57 Ibid., 205.

58 Ibid., 233.

59 Ibid., 233-34.


62 Ibid.