



Kelvin Open Science Publishers
Connect with Research Community

Research Article

Volume 1 / Issue 2

KOS Journal of Public Health and Integrated Medicine

<https://kelvinpublishers.com/journals/public-health-and-integrated-medicine.php>

Between Crisis and Renewal in the 21st Century

Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD*

*Corresponding author: Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD, Borra College of Health Science, Dominican University, USA

Received: September 26, 2025; Accepted: October 05, 2025; Published: October 07, 2025

Citation: Julian US. (2025) Between Crisis and Renewal in the 21st Century. *KOS J Pub Health Int Med*. 1(2): 1-10.

Copyright: © 2025 Julian US. This is an open-access article published in *KOS J Pub Health Int Med* and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

1. Abstract



This article examines the contemporary challenges and opportunities facing Judaism as it navigates the complexities of the 21st century. Drawing on recent warnings from public intellectuals like Yuval Noah Harari about a potential "spiritual catastrophe" in Judaism, this study integrates perspectives from modern Jewish philosophy, mystical theology, demographic trends, and emerging forms of Jewish identity. The analysis reveals that Judaism stands at a critical juncture where traditional categories of belonging are being redefined while core ethical and spiritual commitments face both internal and external pressures. Through examination of diaspora-sovereignty tensions, technological disruption, generational shifts, and theological innovation, this article argues that Judaism's future depends on its capacity to maintain creative tension between tradition and transformation, presence and absence, particularity and universality. A special addendum examines the crisis of moral injury among Israeli soldiers in contemporary warfare, analyzing how this phenomenon both reflects and contributes to Judaism's broader spiritual challenges.

2. Keywords

Judaism, Jewish identity, Religious future, Diaspora, Sovereignty, Jewish philosophy, Mystical theology, Secularization, Demographic change, Moral injury

3. Introduction

Judaism in the 21st century confronts what historian Yuval Noah Harari has characterized as "perhaps the greatest turning point since the destruction of the Second Temple" a moment of potential "spiritual catastrophe" in which the tradition's ethical core risks being severed from its institutional and cultural forms. This assessment, while provocative, reflects deeper anxieties about Judaism's trajectory that extend beyond any single political crisis to encompass fundamental questions about identity, meaning, and continuity in an era of unprecedented change.

The challenges facing contemporary Judaism are multifaceted and interconnected. Demographic shifts threaten traditional community structures, technological disruption alters the transmission of knowledge and practice, political polarization strains communal unity, and philosophical questions about particularity versus universalism create theological tensions. Simultaneously, new forms of Jewish identity are emerging that challenge conventional boundaries while innovative approaches to tradition offer possibilities for renewal.

This article argues that Judaism's future will be determined not by any single factor but by its capacity to navigate creative tensions that have long characterized Jewish existence: between tradition and innovation, diaspora and sovereignty, particularism and universalism, presence and absence. The tradition's survival and flourishing depend on maintaining these dialectical relationships rather than resolving them into static formulations.

4. Patterns of Crisis and Renewal

Jewish history reveals a recurring pattern of crisis followed by creative adaptation. The destruction of the First and Second Temples, the expulsion from Spain, the Holocaust, and the establishment of Israel each represented moments when traditional frameworks were shattered and new forms of Jewish life emerged from the ruins. These historical precedents suggest that what appears as catastrophe may actually be prologue to transformation.

The current moment bears striking resemblances to previous turning points. Like the post-Temple period that gave birth to Rabbinic Judaism, contemporary Jews face the challenge of reimagining their tradition in radically altered circumstances. The emergence of Jewish sovereignty after two millennia of diaspora existence has created new possibilities and new dangers, echoing ancient debates about the relationship between political power and spiritual integrity.

Gershom Scholem's analysis of Jewish messianism provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. Scholem argued that Jewish history is characterized by the creative tension between conservative and revolutionary impulses, with mystical movements often serving as catalysts for renewal. The current crisis may similarly require radical reimagining of fundamental categories, even as it draws on deep wells of traditional wisdom.

5. Contemporary Challenges

The establishment of Israel fundamentally altered the structure of Jewish existence by introducing the possibility of Jewish sovereignty for the first time since antiquity. This development has created what Daniel Boyarin calls the "diaspora-sovereignty dialectic" a tension between traditional diasporic virtues of adaptability, ethical critique, and cultural synthesis, and the necessities of statecraft, security, and political power.

Harari's warning about spiritual catastrophe emerges primarily from this tension. He argues that Jewish power divorced from Jewish ethics represents a fundamental betrayal of the tradition's core commitments. This critique echoes Hannah Arendt's earlier warnings about the dangers of Jewish nationalism becoming a mirror image of its oppressors, as well as Emmanuel Levinas's insistence that Jewish identity is fundamentally defined by responsibility to the Other.

The challenge is not to resolve this tension by choosing either diaspora or sovereignty, but to maintain both poles in creative relationship. This requires what we might call "sovereign diaspora consciousness" an ability to exercise power while retaining the ethical sensibilities traditionally associated with powerlessness.

6. Demographic and Sociological Transformations

Contemporary Judaism faces significant demographic challenges that threaten traditional community structures. Declining birth rates in many Jewish communities, high rates of intermarriage, and generational drift from religious practice have led some demographers to predict the eventual disappearance of non-Orthodox Jewish populations.

These trends reflect broader patterns of secularization and individualization that characterize modern societies. Young Jews increasingly approach their identity as a matter of personal choice rather than inherited obligation, leading to what Shaul Magid calls "postethnic Judaism" forms of Jewish identity that transcend traditional ethnic and religious boundaries.

However, demographic decline in traditional categories coincides with the emergence of new forms of Jewish identity and practice. Online communities, neo-Hasidic movements, Jewish meditation groups, and various forms of cultural Judaism suggest that reports of Judaism's demographic demise may be premature. The question is whether these emerging forms can maintain sufficient coherence and continuity to constitute genuine tradition.

7. Technological Disruption and Knowledge Transmission

Digital technology fundamentally alters how Jewish knowledge is transmitted and Jewish community is experienced. Traditional models of learning based on direct teacher-student relationships and communal study are supplemented or replaced by online resources, virtual communities, and algorithmic curation of content.

These changes offer unprecedented access to Jewish texts and learning opportunities while potentially undermining the intimate, embodied relationships that have historically

sustained Jewish culture. The question is whether virtual Jewish communities can generate the depth of commitment and mutual responsibility that physical communities have traditionally provided.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning may further transform Jewish learning by making vast textual databases searchable and interpretable in new ways. However, these technologies also raise questions about the nature of religious authority and the role of human interpretation in Jewish tradition.

8. Political Polarization and Communal Unity

Contemporary Judaism is increasingly fractured along political lines that mirror broader societal divisions. Disagreements about Israel, social justice, religious practice, and communal priorities have created what some observers describe as separate "Jewish tribes" with minimal common ground.

This polarization threatens the traditional Jewish emphasis on communal responsibility and shared destiny. It also complicates efforts to articulate coherent responses to external challenges or to maintain institutions that serve the broader Jewish community.

The fracturing of Jewish unity reflects deeper questions about the boundaries of legitimate Jewish discourse and the authority structures that maintain communal norms. Traditional models of rabbinic authority compete with academic scholarship, popular media, and social media influencers in shaping Jewish opinion and practice.

9. Theological and Philosophical Dimensions

Jewish mystical theology has long grappled with the paradox of divine presence and absence the idea that God is simultaneously being and non-being, fullness and void. This theological framework, which I have explored extensively in my essays on jyungar.com, provides crucial resources for understanding contemporary Jewish experience, which similarly navigates presence and absence, continuity and rupture.

The kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction) exemplifies this dialectical tension. As I have argued in my theological work, *tzimtzum* represents not merely divine withdrawal but a paradoxical form of presence-through-absence that enables finite existence while maintaining divine immanence (Ungar-Sargon, 2025a). This theological framework challenges conventional theodicy by suggesting that divine concealment itself constitutes a form of revelation.

Elliot Wolfson's work on Jewish mysticism demonstrates how this paradox operates in Jewish textual interpretation and religious experience. Building on Wolfson's insights, my own research has shown how the therapeutic encounter functions as a contemporary manifestation of this divine dialectic, where healing occurs precisely within the space of concealment and apparent absence (Ungar-Sargon, 2025b).

Applied to contemporary circumstances, this theological framework suggests that Judaism's current crisis may be understood not as simple decline but as a moment of creative concealment. The apparent absence of traditional forms of Jewish life may prepare the ground for new manifestations of

Jewish presence what we might call "Shekhinah consciousness in exile," where divine presence dwells precisely within the experience of displacement and uncertainty (Ungar-Sargon, 2025c).

10. Heresy as Renewal and Therapeutic Innovation

Shaul Magid's rehabilitation of Jewish heresy as a source of renewal offers another theological resource for navigating contemporary challenges. Magid argues that movements traditionally dismissed as heretical from Sabbatianism to contemporary forms of Jewish Buddhism may actually represent necessary adaptations that preserve the tradition's vitality.

This perspective intersects significantly with my own work on theological heresy in medical and therapeutic contexts. My research demonstrates how medical orthodoxy functions as secularized religious heresy, with professional institutions employing similar control mechanisms to those historically used by ecclesiastical authorities (Ungar-Sargon, 2024a). This analysis reveals systematic parallels between religious and medical orthodoxy enforcement, including definitional control over truth claims, institutional training systems, economic sanctions, and ideological hegemony maintenance. Applied to contemporary Judaism, this framework suggests that the tradition's future may depend precisely on its willingness to embrace seemingly heretical innovations. Contemporary developments like Jewish feminism, LGBTQ+ inclusion, interfaith dialogue, and environmental activism might be understood not as departures from tradition but as necessary expressions of core Jewish values in new circumstances.

My therapeutic work further demonstrates how heretical approaches to healing those that acknowledge divine presence within suffering and concealment within revelation may prove more therapeutically effective than conventional medical models that separate the sacred from the secular (Ungar-Sargon, 2025d). The therapeutic space emerges as a contemporary locus of divine indwelling, where the dynamics of *tzimtzum*, *tikkun*, and *dirah betachtonim* (divine dwelling in the lower worlds) converge in healing encounters.

The challenge is to distinguish between heretical innovations that strengthen the tradition and those that undermine it a discernment that requires deep engagement with both traditional sources and contemporary realities, including the recognition that healing itself may require embracing rather than eliminating shadow material (Ungar-Sargon, 2025e).

11. Universalism and Particularism

One of the most persistent tensions in Jewish thought concerns the relationship between Jewish particularity and universal human values. This tension manifests in debates about Jewish chosenness, the relationship between Judaism and other religions, and the proper scope of Jewish ethical concern.

Contemporary circumstances intensify this tension. Global interconnectedness makes purely particularist approaches seem parochial, while the persistence of antisemitism and threats to Jewish survival suggest the ongoing necessity of Jewish distinctiveness. Climate change, technological disruption, and other global challenges require responses that transcend particular communities while particular

communities provide the rootedness necessary for sustained ethical action.

The future of Judaism may depend on developing what we might call "rooted cosmopolitanism" forms of Jewish identity that maintain deep particular commitments while engaging seriously with universal human concerns.

12. Emerging Forms and Future Possibilities

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development of digital Jewish communities and practices that may permanently alter how Judaism is experienced and transmitted. Virtual Shabbat services, online study groups, and digital ritual innovations demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of technologically mediated Jewish life.

These developments raise fundamental questions about the nature of Jewish community and practice. Can virtual communities generate the depth of relationship that sustains Jewish commitment? Do digital ritual innovations maintain sufficient connection to traditional forms to constitute authentic Jewish practice? How do online Jewish identities relate to offline Jewish institutions and communities?

Early evidence suggests that digital Judaism serves primarily as a supplement to rather than replacement for physical Jewish community, though it may lower barriers to Jewish engagement for geographically isolated or otherwise marginalized populations.

13. Neo-Hasidic and Spiritual Renewal Movements

Contemporary spiritual renewal movements within Judaism represent attempts to recover mystical and experiential dimensions of the tradition that were marginalized during the modern period. These movements draw selectively on Hasidic sources, kabbalistic texts, and meditation practices while adapting them to contemporary sensibilities and circumstances.

Neo-Hasidic communities like those associated with Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Arthur Green, and others demonstrate the possibility of maintaining traditional spiritual practices while embracing progressive social values. These communities often emphasize experiential over dogmatic approaches to Judaism, focusing on cultivating spiritual awareness and ethical sensitivity rather than conformity to halakhic norms.

The success of these movements suggests significant hunger for authentic spiritual experience within contemporary Judaism, though questions remain about their capacity to sustain themselves across generations and their relationship to more traditional Jewish communities.

14. Cultural and Secular Judaism

Non-religious forms of Jewish identity continue to evolve in ways that challenge traditional religious-secular distinctions. Contemporary cultural Judaism encompasses everything from Jewish food and music to Jewish approaches to social justice and environmental activism.

These forms of Jewish identity often emphasize Jewish values and sensibilities rather than Jewish beliefs or practices. They may draw on Jewish texts and traditions while interpreting them in non-literal or non-theistic ways.

They typically embrace Jewish particularity while rejecting claims about Jewish chosenness or divine command.

The viability of cultural Judaism as a long-term form of Jewish identity remains uncertain. Critics argue that cultural Judaism lacks the depth and coherence necessary to sustain itself across generations, while defenders contend that it represents an authentic expression of Jewish values adapted to contemporary circumstances.

15. Interfaith and Multicultural Judaism

Increasing rates of intermarriage and cultural diversity within Jewish communities have created new forms of multicultural Jewish identity. Families that combine Jewish with other religious, ethnic, or cultural traditions challenge traditional assumptions about Jewish boundary maintenance while potentially enriching Jewish culture through creative synthesis.

These developments force questions about the boundaries of Jewish identity and community. Traditional approaches that define Judaism through matrilineal descent or formal conversion increasingly compete with more inclusive definitions based on cultural identification or active participation in Jewish life.

The emergence of Jews of color, interfaith families, and converts from diverse backgrounds also challenges assumptions about what Jewish identity looks like and requires attention to previously marginalized voices within Jewish communities.

16. Institutional Adaptations and Innovations

Traditional models of rabbinical authority face significant challenges in contemporary circumstances. The democratization of knowledge through digital access to Jewish texts, the rise of academic Jewish studies, and generational changes in attitudes toward authority all contribute to the erosion of traditional rabbinic gatekeeping functions.

Simultaneously, new forms of Jewish leadership emerge that may not fit traditional rabbinical models. Jewish educators, activists, artists, and public intellectuals increasingly shape Jewish discourse and practice in ways that bypass traditional religious hierarchies.

The future of Jewish leadership may require integration of traditional textual expertise with contemporary skills in communication, community organizing, and cultural analysis. It may also require more collaborative and less hierarchical models of religious authority.

Jewish education faces the challenge of transmitting traditional knowledge and values while preparing students for rapidly changing circumstances. Traditional models of Jewish education based on textual study and ritual practice compete with experiential, project-based, and technology-enhanced approaches.

Innovations in Jewish education include immersive learning experiences, social justice internships, environmental education programs, and arts-based curricula. These approaches often emphasize applied Jewish values over textual knowledge and seek to make Jewish learning relevant to contemporary concerns.

The success of these educational innovations depends on their ability to maintain connection to traditional Jewish sources while engaging contemporary realities in meaningful ways.

Traditional synagogue models face declining membership and engagement, particularly among younger generations. This has led to experimentation with alternative forms of Jewish community that may be less institutional and more flexible.

Emerging models include house churches, co-working spaces with Jewish programming, pop-up communities, and activity-based groups organized around shared interests rather than geographical proximity. These alternatives often emphasize community building and social action over traditional worship and study formats.

The question is whether these alternative communities can provide the stability and continuity that traditional synagogues have offered while meeting contemporary needs for flexibility and authenticity.

17. American Judaism and Its Discontents

American Judaism represents the largest Jewish community outside of Israel and has historically served as a model for Jewish adaptation to modernity. However, American Judaism faces particular challenges related to assimilation, political polarization, and generational change.

The American model of denominational Judaism Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements increasingly gives way to more fluid and individualized approaches to Jewish identity. This reflects broader American trends toward religious switching and hybrid identities while raising questions about the sustainability of traditional Jewish institutions.

American Jewish communities also grapple with their relationship to Israel, antisemitism, and their role in broader American society. These challenges are complicated by the diversity of American Jewish experiences across geographical regions, socioeconomic classes, and cultural backgrounds.

18. The Therapeutic Paradigm and Sacred Encounter

One of the most significant yet underexplored developments in contemporary Jewish life is the emergence of therapeutic spirituality as a bridge between traditional religious categories and secular healing practices. My extensive work on the intersection of Jewish mystical theology and therapeutic encounter reveals how ancient kabbalistic concepts provide frameworks for understanding contemporary healing relationships (Ungar-Sargon, 2025b, 2025c).

The therapeutic space functions as what I call a "contemporary Mishkan" (dwelling place) a locus where divine presence manifests through the dynamics of concealment and revelation. Drawing on Lurianic Kabbalah's understanding of *tzimtzum*, I argue that effective healing occurs not through the elimination of suffering but through the recognition of divine presence within darkness itself (Ungar-Sargon, 2025f).

This therapeutic paradigm has profound implications for Judaism's future. As traditional synagogue attendance declines and conventional religious authority weakens, therapeutic encounters increasingly serve as spaces of sacred encounter for many Jews. These settings provide opportunities for what I term "incarnational text engagement" where Jewish wisdom texts function not merely as objects of study but as living frameworks for understanding and transforming lived experience.

My clinical work with patients experiencing chronic illness, addiction, and existential crisis demonstrates how Jewish theological concepts like *shevirat ha-kelim* (breaking of the vessels) and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) offer resources for integrating traumatic experience and finding meaning within suffering. The recognition that God dwells precisely within exile and concealment provides a theological foundation for therapeutic approaches that embrace rather than pathologize difficult emotional and spiritual states.

This development suggests that Judaism's future may involve a fundamental expansion of what constitutes "religious" space and practice. The therapeutic encounter, when informed by Jewish mystical wisdom, becomes a form of contemporary *tikkun* not only personal healing but cosmic repair that contributes to the ongoing redemption of divine sparks scattered throughout the world.

19. Israeli Judaism and the Question of Normalcy

Israeli Judaism confronts the challenge of being both a majority culture and a Jewish culture a situation unprecedented in Jewish history. This creates opportunities for Jewish cultural creativity while raising questions about the relationship between Jewish identity and citizenship, religious and secular authority, and Israeli and diaspora Jewish communities.

The tension between religious and secular Jews in Israel reflects broader questions about the role of Jewish tradition in a modern state. Ultra-Orthodox communities maintain traditional Jewish life while remaining largely separate from mainstream Israeli society, while secular Israelis often maintain Jewish cultural identity while rejecting religious observance.

Recent political developments in Israel have intensified these tensions and raised questions about the relationship between Jewish values and Israeli policies, particularly regarding treatment of Palestinian populations and the balance between security and human rights.

20. European Judaism and Memory

European Jewish communities confront the legacy of the Holocaust while building new forms of Jewish life in societies where Jewish populations were largely destroyed. This creates unique challenges related to memory, reconstruction, and the relationship between Jewish communities and their non-Jewish neighbors.

The growth of Muslim populations in Europe has created new dynamics of religious pluralism while sometimes rekindling antisemitic sentiments. European Jewish communities must navigate these challenges while contributing to broader conversations about multiculturalism, immigration, and religious freedom.

European Judaism often emphasizes cultural and intellectual dimensions of Jewish identity over religious practice, reflecting both the influence of secular European values and the particular history of European Jewish integration and persecution.

Jewish communities in places like Latin America, Asia, and Africa represent growing portions of world Jewry while often remaining peripheral to mainstream Jewish discourse. These communities offer alternative models of Jewish life that may provide insights for Judaism's global future.

For example, Jewish communities in countries like India, Ethiopia, and Argentina have developed distinctive syntheses of Jewish and local traditions that challenge assumptions about Jewish cultural uniformity. Their experiences may offer resources for thinking about Jewish identity in increasingly multicultural contexts.

21. Strategic Considerations

Thinking seriously about Judaism's future requires considering multiple possible scenarios rather than predicting a single outcome. Different combinations of demographic, technological, political, and cultural trends could produce vastly different futures for Jewish communities worldwide.

Scenario 1: Demographic Decline and Consolidation In this scenario, intermarriage, assimilation, and low birth rates lead to significant decline in Jewish populations outside of Orthodox communities. Jewish life becomes increasingly concentrated in a few major centers while maintaining strong internal cohesion and commitment.

Scenario 2: Cultural Transformation and Expansion In this scenario, new forms of Jewish identity and practice emerge that prove attractive to both Jews and non-Jews. Judaism becomes more culturally diverse and geographically distributed while maintaining core commitments to learning, social justice, and community.

Scenario 3: Political Crisis and Diaspora Revival In this scenario, political crises in Israel or other Jewish population centers lead to renewed diaspora migration and the emergence of new models of Jewish life that synthesize traditional diaspora values with contemporary global consciousness.

Scenario 4: Technological Integration and Virtual Community In this scenario, digital technologies enable new forms of Jewish community and learning that transcend geographical boundaries. Virtual Jewish communities become primary sources of Jewish identity and practice for many Jews worldwide.

22. Strategic Priorities

Regardless of which scenario develops, certain strategic priorities appear crucial for Judaism's future vitality:

Investment in Education: Jewish communities must develop educational approaches that transmit traditional knowledge while preparing students for rapidly changing circumstances. This requires both preservation of classical Jewish learning and innovation in pedagogical methods.

Community Building: Jewish communities must create institutions and practices that generate deep commitment and

mutual responsibility while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. This may require moving beyond traditional synagogue models toward more diverse forms of community organization.

Dialogue and Coalition Building: Jewish communities must engage constructively with other religious and cultural communities while maintaining Jewish distinctiveness. This requires developing sophisticated approaches to interfaith dialogue and multicultural cooperation.

Ethical Leadership: Jewish communities must demonstrate that Jewish values provide resources for addressing contemporary challenges like climate change, economic inequality, and political polarization. This requires moving beyond purely defensive postures toward proactive ethical engagement.

Judaism's future depends on maintaining creative tension between innovation and tradition rather than choosing one over the other. Historical precedents suggest that Judaism thrives when it adapts traditional forms to new circumstances while maintaining connection to core values and practices.

This requires what we might call "creative fidelity" an approach that takes traditional sources seriously while remaining open to new interpretations and applications. It also requires sophisticated discernment about which innovations strengthen the tradition and which undermine it.

The development of such discernment requires broad Jewish literacy, ongoing dialogue between traditional and modern perspectives, and experimentation with new forms of Jewish life that can be evaluated over time.

23. Implications and Recommendations

Jewish communities should invest in developing institutional flexibility and cultural creativity while maintaining connection to traditional sources and practices. This requires:

- *Diversifying leadership to include voices that have been historically marginalized*
- *Experimenting with new forms of community organization and engagement*
- *Creating educational programs that integrate traditional learning with contemporary concerns*
- *Building coalitions with other communities around shared values and interests*
- *Developing approaches to conflict resolution that can address internal disagreements constructively*
- *Scholars and intellectuals should contribute to Jewish renewal by:*
- *Conducting research that illuminates both historical precedents and contemporary innovations in Jewish life*
- *Facilitating dialogue between traditional religious authorities and contemporary cultural creators*
- *Developing theoretical frameworks that can help Jewish communities navigate complex contemporary challenges*
- *Creating accessible resources that make Jewish learning available to diverse audiences*
- *Engaging in public discourse about Judaism's contributions to broader cultural and political conversations*
- *Individual Jews can contribute to Judaism's future by:*
- *Taking responsibility for their own Jewish education and development*
- *Participating actively in Jewish community life while*

remaining open to innovation

- *Engaging constructively with Jews who hold different perspectives and practice different forms of Judaism*
- *Applying Jewish values to contemporary challenges in their personal and professional lives*
- *Supporting institutions and initiatives that strengthen Jewish life while addressing contemporary needs*

Judaism stands at a critical juncture that requires neither panic nor complacency but rather thoughtful engagement with both crisis and opportunity. Harari's warning about spiritual catastrophe reflects real dangers the possibility that Jewish institutions may persist while Jewish values atrophy, that Jewish identity may become purely ethnic or political while losing its ethical and spiritual dimensions, that Jewish communities may fragment beyond the possibility of meaningful dialogue and cooperation.

However, Jewish history suggests that such moments of apparent crisis often precede periods of renewal and creativity. The current challenges facing Judaism demographic change, technological disruption, political polarization, theological uncertainty echo previous turning points that ultimately strengthened rather than weakened Jewish life.

The future of Judaism will be determined by its capacity to maintain creative tensions rather than resolving them into static formulations. The tradition must remain both particular and universal, both rooted in specific practices and open to new insights, both committed to Jewish survival and engaged with broader human concerns.

This requires what we have called "creative fidelity" an approach that takes traditional sources seriously while remaining open to new interpretations and applications. It requires sophisticated discernment about which innovations strengthen the tradition and which undermine it. It requires broad Jewish literacy, ongoing dialogue between different Jewish perspectives, and experimentation with new forms of Jewish life.

Most fundamentally, Judaism's future depends on its ability to demonstrate that Jewish values and practices provide resources for addressing the challenges facing all human communities in the 21st century. This is not merely a matter of Jewish survival but of Jewish contribution the ways in which Jewish wisdom can help address climate change, economic inequality, political polarization, technological disruption, and other global challenges.

The tradition that has survived the destruction of temples, expulsions, pogroms, and genocide possesses resources for navigating contemporary challenges. However, survival is not automatic it requires conscious effort, strategic thinking, and willingness to adapt traditional forms to new circumstances while maintaining connection to core values and commitments.

My own work on the therapeutic applications of Jewish mystical theology demonstrates one pathway forward: the recognition that Jewish wisdom provides frameworks not only for Jewish survival but for addressing universal human challenges of suffering, meaning, and healing (Ungar-Sargon, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). The kabbalistic understanding of divine presence manifesting through concealment offers

resources for engaging with contemporary crises from mental health challenges to ecological destruction that conventional religious and secular approaches often fail to address adequately.

The therapeutic encounter, informed by Jewish mystical insight, becomes a form of contemporary tikkun that contributes to both personal healing and cosmic repair. This expansion of what constitutes "religious" practice suggests that Judaism's future may depend not on maintaining traditional institutional boundaries but on recognizing the sacred potential within all forms of genuine encounter and healing.

Judaism's future is neither predetermined nor entirely uncertain. It will be shaped by the choices that Jewish communities, leaders, and individuals make in response to current challenges and opportunities. The tradition provides resources for making these choices wisely, but it does not make them automatically. The future of Judaism depends on Jews who understand both the depth of the tradition and the urgency of contemporary circumstances, who can maintain creative tension between preservation and innovation, who can honor the past while taking responsibility for the future.

In this sense, Judaism's current turning point represents not only danger but opportunity the possibility of renewal that has repeatedly emerged from apparent catastrophe throughout Jewish history. Whether this possibility is realized depends on the wisdom, courage, and commitment of contemporary Jews who understand that they are writing the next chapter of an ancient story whose ending remains unwritten.



Addendum: The Ethics of Warfare, Moral Injury, and the Israeli Soldier - A Crisis within the Crisis.

The contemporary crisis facing Judaism extends beyond demographic decline and institutional challenges to encompass fundamental questions about Jewish ethical conduct in situations of power and conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in the phenomenon of moral injury among Israeli soldiers, which represents both a microcosm of Judaism's broader spiritual crisis and a unique manifestation of the tensions between Jewish values and the necessities of modern warfare.

Moral injury, as defined by pioneering researchers Jonathan Shay and Brett Litz, occurs when individuals "perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" in high-stakes situations. Unlike Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which stems primarily from fear-based responses to life-threatening situations, moral injury represents a wound to the soul a shattering of one's fundamental moral framework that can persist long after physical dangers have passed.

24. The Israeli Context: Unprecedented Moral Challenges

The current Gaza conflict has created conditions particularly conducive to moral injury among Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) personnel. Recent reports indicate that over 50 Israeli soldiers have died by suicide since October 2023, compared to 14 in 2022 and 11 in 2021 an unprecedented spike directly correlated with the moral complexities of urban warfare against Palestinian civilians. Approximately 12% of reserve soldiers who participated in the Gaza war report severe PTSD symptoms, with over 1,100 soldiers discharged for combat-related mental health conditions.

The nature of contemporary asymmetric warfare, where combatants operate among civilian populations, creates what researchers call "potentially morally injurious events" (PMIEs) with unprecedented frequency. Israeli soldiers describe experiences ranging from being unable to distinguish combatants from civilians to witnessing civilian casualties from their own forces' actions, creating profound conflicts between military duty and moral conscience. As one soldier reported: "His view of his duty to his brother Marines and his job description was to take the shot...He took the shot and it did its work and he's going to live with that for the rest of his life".

25. Theological Framework

My work on the therapeutic applications of Jewish mystical theology provides a framework for understanding moral injury as a manifestation of *tzimtzum* divine concealment that creates space for both moral agency and moral failure (Ungar-Sargon, 2025b, 2025c). The kabbalistic concept that God must withdraw divine presence to allow for finite existence mirrors the soldier's experience of moral abandonment in combat situations where traditional ethical frameworks collapse.

Israeli soldiers experience unique forms of betrayal that extend beyond typical military contexts not only from commanders or comrades but from civilian populations both domestic and international who criticize their actions. This creates what I term "theological betrayal" a rupture in the soldier's understanding of divine justice and protection that parallels the theological challenges facing contemporary Judaism more broadly.

The therapeutic encounter with morally injured soldiers reveals how divine presence manifests precisely within concealment and absence. My clinical work demonstrates that healing occurs not through eliminating guilt or shame but through recognizing these experiences as sacred encounters with the reality of human moral limitation (Ungar-Sargon, 2025d, 2025f).

26. The Dialectic of Sacred Violence and

Jewish Ethics

The phenomenon of moral injury among Israeli soldiers illuminates fundamental tensions within Jewish thought about the ethics of warfare. Traditional halakhic literature acknowledges the necessity of defensive warfare while maintaining stringent ethical constraints on conduct. However, contemporary Israeli military culture has increasingly adopted rhetoric that dehumanizes Palestinian populations, with policies that "undermine the IDF's code of conduct, support atrocities and increase the risk of moral injury".

This represents precisely the kind of spiritual catastrophe that Harari warned against the hollowing out of Jewish ethical content while maintaining Jewish institutional forms. When Israeli soldiers report feeling like "God" in Gaza, this reflects not authentic Jewish understanding of power but its corruption (Haaretz, 2024). The Jewish concept of being chosen carries with it heightened moral responsibility, not diminished ethical constraints.

Drawing on my research into the theological origins of evil through *tzimtzum*, we can understand moral injury as emerging from the very structure of divine presence-in-concealment (Ungar-Sargon, 2025e). The soldier's moral confusion reflects the cosmic condition of existing in a world where divine presence is hidden, requiring human moral agency in situations of radical uncertainty.

27. Clinical and Therapeutic Implications

Current IDF mental health approaches attempt to "normalize" soldiers' experiences by reminding them of October 7th atrocities, but this strategy often fails to address the deeper moral injuries that stem from participating in actions that contradict deeply held values. My therapeutic framework suggests that moral injury requires not normalization but sacred witnessing the recognition that moral wounding is an inevitable consequence of participating in necessary but tragic actions.

The healing of moral injury requires what I call "incarnational text engagement" approaching the soldier's traumatic experience as a sacred text requiring interpretation rather than elimination. Traditional approaches that focus on "moral repair" through cognitive-behavioral therapy miss the deeper spiritual dimensions of moral injury, which require integration rather than resolution.

My clinical model applies kabbalistic concepts of *shevirat ha-kelim* (breaking of vessels) and *tikkun* (repair) to understand moral injury as a form of necessary brokenness that precedes authentic healing (Ungar-Sargon, 2025c). The therapeutic space becomes a contemporary *Mishkan* where divine presence dwells precisely within the experience of moral uncertainty and guilt.

28. Implications for Future

The crisis of moral injury among Israeli soldiers represents a concrete manifestation of Judaism's broader spiritual challenges. The tradition's emphasis on ethical behavior, codified in concepts like *pikuach nefesh* (preservation of life) and prevention of suffering, creates psychological frameworks that make moral injury particularly devastating for Jewish soldiers.

However, this same tradition provides resources for healing that secular therapeutic approaches often lack. The Jewish understanding of teshuvah (return/repentance) offers a framework for integrating moral failure without denying moral agency. The mystical concept of divine sparks hidden within darkness suggests that moral injury may serve redemptive purposes when properly understood and integrated.

Research indicates that some Israeli soldiers cope with moral injury through political activism and social engagement, channeling their moral distress into efforts at systemic change. This reflects the Jewish tradition's emphasis on tikkun olam repair of the world through human action guided by divine ethics.

29. Toward Moral Repair

My therapeutic work with trauma suggests a three-phase approach to moral injury that integrates Jewish mystical theology with contemporary clinical practice:

1. **Sacred Witnessing** (Hester Panim): Recognizing moral injury as divine concealment rather than divine absence, creating space for the soldier's experience without judgment or premature repair.
2. **Incarnational Integration** (Dirah Betachtonim): Understanding traumatic experience as divine presence dwelling within darkness, requiring interpretation rather than elimination.
3. **Redemptive Action** (Tikkun): Channeling moral injury into constructive action that serves broader healing and justice.

This approach acknowledges that moral injury among Israeli soldiers reflects broader failures of Jewish institutions to maintain the creative tension between particular survival needs and universal ethical commitments. The future of Judaism depends partially on its ability to develop therapeutic and spiritual resources that can help soldiers and society integrate the moral complexities of necessary but tragic actions.

30. Conclusion

The phenomenon of moral injury among Israeli soldiers serves as a microcosm of Judaism's broader spiritual crisis while offering unique opportunities for theological and therapeutic innovation. The tradition's resources for understanding divine concealment, moral agency, and redemptive suffering provide frameworks for addressing moral injury that secular approaches often lack.

However, this requires Jewish communities to resist the temptation to simply normalize morally injurious actions or deny their moral significance. The healing of moral injury both individual and collective depends on Judaism's capacity to maintain its ethical vision while developing more sophisticated approaches to the moral complexities of power, conflict, and survival.

The soldiers returning from Gaza carry within their moral injuries both the crisis and the potential renewal of Jewish ethical consciousness. How Jewish communities respond to their moral distress will significantly determine whether Judaism's encounter with sovereignty results in spiritual catastrophe or spiritual transformation. The tradition that has survived by maintaining creative tension between competing

values must now learn to hold together the realities of necessary violence and the demands of moral integrity a task that may define Judaism's future in an age of unavoidable moral complexity.

31. References

1. Griffin B J, Purcell N, Burkman K, et al. (2019) Moral injury: An integrative review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 32(3): 350-362.
2. Haaretz. (2024) When you enter Gaza, you are God: Inside the minds of IDF soldiers who commit war crimes. Haaretz.
3. Haaretz. (2024) I saw the bodies of children: Moral injury and mental strain breaking IDF soldiers. Haaretz.
4. Harari YN. (2025) Interview on Unholy podcast. Reported in: Jewish News. Harari warns of "spiritual catastrophe" for Judaism. Jewish News Online.
5. Heschel AJ. (1962) *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row.
6. Levinas E. (1969) *Totality and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
7. Litz BT, Stein N, Delaney E, et al. (2009) Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 29(8): 695-706.
8. Magid S. (2013) *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
9. Magid S. (2018) *The Bible, the Talmud, and the New Testament: Elijah Zvi Soloveitchik's Commentary to the Gospels*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
10. Roof WC. (1999) *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
11. Sarna JD. (2004) *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
12. Scholem G. (1961) *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken.
13. Shay J. (1994) *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Atheneum.
14. Shay J. (2002) *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner.
15. Shay J. (2014) Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. 31(2): 182-191.
16. TRT Global. (2025) Israeli soldiers are killing themselves. And their deaths are linked to horrors of Gaza war. TRT Global.
17. Ungar-Sargon J. (2024) Medical heresy as secularized religious heresy: Mechanisms of orthodoxy enforcement in contemporary healthcare. *Theological Essays*.
18. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) Divine absence and presence: Dialectical tensions in kabbalistic thought II. *AJMCRR*. 4(4): 1-8.
19. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) Divine presence and concealment in the therapeutic space. *EC Neurology* 17(5): 01-13.
20. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) Shekhinah consciousness in the therapeutic space: From incarnation to redemption in the sacred space of healing. *HSOA Journal of Psychiatry Depression & Anxiety*. 11: 059.
21. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) Sacred and profane space in the therapeutic encounter: Moving beyond rigid distinctions. *American Journal of Neurology Research*. 4(2): 1-9.
22. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) The theological origins of evil and human suffering through the lens of tzimtzum. *Theological Essays*.

23. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025f) Questioning divine absence: Interpretations of Exodus 17:7 through contemporary theological discourse implications for therapeutic language. *International Journal of Psychiatry Research*. 8(1): 1-7.
24. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) Bridging the divide: Neurophysiological signatures and holistic treatment models for PTSD and complex PTSD. *American Academic & Scholarly Research Journal*. 17(3): 1-21.
25. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025h) The integrative PTSD healing center: A novel three-tier treatment model bridging neuroscience, spirituality, and alternative medicine. *Journal of Behavioral Health*. 14(2): 50-62.
26. Wertheimer J. (2018) *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
27. Wolfson E. (2005) *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*. New York: Fordham University Press.
28. Woocher JS. (1986) *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
29. Zerach G, Levi-Belz Y. (2018) Moral injury, exposure to potentially morally injurious events, and PTSD clusters among Israeli veterans: A network approach. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*. 9(1): 1478709.