

Revelation or the Uplifting of Emotions at Sinai



Abraham and Three Angels by Gaspare Diziani da Belluno, circa 1735-1740

by [Friedrich Hansen](#) (February 2022)

Bari Weiss, the gifted Jewish writer, was recently fired by the *New York Times* for insisting that truth is a “process of collective discovery, but not an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else.” Weiss’s argument is a fairly timely update of the Jewish concept of equitable and positive revelation. It emerged long ago in Antiquity, namely in the context of guilt culture at Sinai and stands opposed to negative “revelatory” shaming. The latter is rather new and a common feature of woke cancel culture, today

cultivated sadly by the “paper of record” (NYT). Looking back on western history, it reflects the millennia-old difference between Hellenistic visual shame and auditive Jewish guilt culture. For the Jewish genius consists in the evolution of auditive particularism that started at Sinai.

Surely the revelation at Sinai was a respite after the long and troubled journey of the Israelites following the Exodus from Egypt. Most of all it involved an uplifting of consciousness from the visual to the auditive sense by which animal appetites were curbed and emotions refined by creating genuine sensibilities attached to language. It also provided a sense of belonging capable of being extended to strangers. The divine exhortation to include strangers appears about 36 times in the Torah and with it, Judaism very early on transcended any narrow tribalism. Thus, Jewish exceptionalism depends wholly on the sublime features of conflict settlement preserved to the auditive paradigm. Delivered in two complementary forms, written and oral, revelation remains the unmatched heritage of the Torah. In addition, it is the revelatory power of the Hebrew language that made possible the miracle of the Zionist revival of the Holy Land: the mass return of diaspora Jews to Palestine even after 2000 years of exile. It also enabled the stunning renaissance of authentic Jewish worship after the Holocaust in the diaspora and in Israel. [\[1\]](#)

What do we make of this? Apparently in the rough patriarchal environment, the tribes of Avraham, Isaac and Jacob still immersed in pride-shame-and-revenge culture were often overwhelmed by conflicts calling for divine oversight. Their fate heavily dependent on divine interventions had been perceived, for better or worse, as predetermined and providential, meaning only God saw it coming. However, the growth of the tribes and the frequency of violence calling for higher intervention stretched divine crisis management to breaking point. It also became transparent that the premier

source of internecine violence had been the polygamous arrangements of patriarchal times which among other things denied women an equal say. In this sense the resources for peaceful conflict resolution were not utilized in full. At this juncture the devolution of divine jealousy, providence and punishment made sense. It came about through the internalization of shame and its transformation into personal guilt and was implemented through the Exodus from Egypt. Finally, the divine revelation at Sinai delivered Israel from pusillanimity and God from micromanagement.

All the difference was made by the unique fusion of monotheism with monogamy in the Torah. The sophisticated rules on marriage, given at Sinai, were exclusively communicated via the auditive paradigm.[\[2\]](#) They involved a massive unburdening of divine duties. Large tribes controlled by the visual paradigm would be replaced by smaller families at ease with sharing divine oversight by handing it down to the bride in the home. In this way a fair portion of the respect, if not trembling fear, previously reserved for the irate divine in visual shame culture came to be redirected, even diluted or democratised. The God of love emerged from family love, a new resource that flowed abundantly from the female half of the population thanks to monogamy alone. This is the symbolism of the *shekinah* in Judaism. By attributing equal and mutual recognition between bride and bridegroom guilt culture is behind the flourishing of family life. For based on the conjugal promise of fidelity the monogamous dyad of husband and wife became the closest realisation of the divinatory powers of monotheism incarnated in the netherworld.

The shame-cultural symbolism of bridegroom and bride finalised the incarnation of the chosen people in the promised land that had been prefigured in the betrothal of God with the Israel. It created a people of priests and a light to all other nations. Equally important was the elevation of the family through the Sabbath. It turned the Jewish home into a

sanctuary with rituals presided over by the priestly Jewess. If we remind ourselves that Abraham embraced monotheism upon turning his back on Sodom & Gomorrah the formation of hereditary families raising genuine offspring created a competitive advantage of sorts. In return for the cohesion of the family both partners were required to relinquish any tribal loyalties whatsoever. Also, the conjugal couple is asked to sacrifice any idolatrous inclinations including any visible identities. It was sufficient for the sake of personal growth to adherence to the divine law. Only under those arrangements would husband and wife be regarded as equally sanctified through anticipation or foresight, also known in English as the original meaning of "divining." Its role would be to ease the burden of divine oversight and punishment *ex post*.

Only with this additional sublimity in guilt culture the old institution of animal sacrifice could be permanently dropped. In archaic Near Eastern shame cultures the compensation for unidentified tribal sins took the form of generic "scapegoating", the animal sacrifice of visibly throwing a goat from a precipice in the wilderness. Unfortunately, this has re-emerged in postmodernity with its abandonment of the traditional family, a feature of primitivism, as the woke shame culture is resorting to "cancelling" of the alien other.



The Woke return of the Scapegoat, abolished by Rabbinic internalisation of shame as guilt

No doubt, the ascent from shame to guilt required the cancellation of feelings of pride, shame and revenge as well as scapegoating others. Those archaic emotions had been sublimated into drivers of spiritual excellence and ritual performances by immersing the self into empathy for others. All this enables the pious intellect to focus on the study of Torah and learn from mistakes in order to exercise forgiveness with others, the lifeblood of guilt culture. Guilt culture comes with the demand to take on responsibility for one's errors and familiarize the self with changes in response to different circumstances. In this sense an immutable personal identity is counterproductive. It has always been a dependable Hellenistic fancy for it works much better backwards than forward.

By contrast Jewish guilt culture is built on forgiveness and hope for the future. It has proven itself to be far superior to the archaic and backward shame cultures: Persian, Babylonian, Egyptian or Greek alike. It works simply by cutting unforgiving clan loyalties with their interminable

cycles of violent revenge, and replaced them by repentance, forgiveness and peaceful conflict resolution including the compensating of damages. An important step to accomplish this was the rabbinical internalization of animal sacrifices, which preserved the religious experience of the Temple service. Its core was and remains the submission of the inner animal. What had been visible rituals, however, became internalized into memorable rituals for mitigating human appetites. This had the welcome side effect, analysed by Soren Kierkegaard, of transforming free floating anxiety into focused fear of God. This is just the prime example for turning raw emotions into the energy for sublimation or uplifting emotions as the drivers for conscience and morality. For not only in antiquity have emotions been the source of violence and revenge.

It is well known that the visual paradigm lends itself to repetitive habits and circular thinking. This is what we learned from Nietzsche's mania and from the experience with various addictions. It is the stuff that underlies the dynamics of revenge in shame cultures, preserved in today's Italian Mafia. As emotions in primitive societies attach themselves to the visual paradigm, they are tied, in Nietzsche's words, "like animals to the felicitous feelings of the moment."[\[3\]](#) Yet ignored by Nietzsche, Judaism invented long ago the "postponement of pleasure" by lifting up emotions to the sublime auditive sense creating the energy for remembrance and intellectual reflection. By this innate human conscience had been refined to moral agency, as we understand it in the West. In the 19th century the philosopher of existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, labelled this "a leap of faith". Already half a century earlier, Edmund Burke had anticipated this uplift with his concept of the (auditive) "sublime" – standing above and in contrast to the merely (visible) beautiful.[\[4\]](#)

In my own conceptualisation this uplifting of emotions involves a shift from the visual to the auditive sense

facilitated by the evolution of language and religion with their respective mental representations to which I am referring as paradigms (visual and auditive). Simply speaking, the visual paradigm processes mental images building up imagination and the auditive paradigm processes words and feeds memory. Dreams in my understanding do little more than connecting both. During sleep in the night with the eyes closed but moving fast, our brain seems to be busy with dismantling clunky images into associated words in order to save storage space.

Dream works kept Sigmund Freud sleepless while he was basically unwinding the matriarchal Renaissance spin on Christology in his psychoanalysis. After all, Pauline theology of incarnated (immanent) salvation had transgressed the monotheist image ban. It can be said therefore that Freud aimed at dutifully busying himself at repairing the persona damage caused by this transgression, in effect upholding the Jewish image ban with his therapeutic sessions. Or quoting the great medieval philosopher Maimonides, he removed the "metaphysical clutter" from the ailing Christian minds of his clients. For the secular repercussions of Christian metaphysics unnecessarily furthered *visualization* namely since the decadent *fin de siecle*. By even engendering the sense of touch or sex it would, eventually in our age, effectively slow down thinking and impede intellectualisation. In this light, it seems safe to claim that the sexual revolution diminished or at least weakened the competitive performance of the West.

Answering the all-too-human demands for visual proofs, however, Christianity propelled science but ultimately failed in the moral understanding of mankind evidenced in the Protestant Reformation that ended up backing the Nazi regime. All more or less decorative renderings of Jesus Christ resembled more Greek gods than the invisible divinity of Mosaic Judaism. In my view, this can be put down to its tampering with the superior qualities of the auditive

paradigm. It became a major source of virulent antisemitism and denominational secessionism. In hindsight, much of the benighted metaphysics of Christianity had to do with the policing of religion by the clergy made even worse by the Reformation. And quite literally the prize for the Christian Hellenisation of Judaism would be the limited access to the sublime and the need to make do with the mere beautiful. The descent to the visual paradigm not only generated dismal sectarian heresies but culminated in the embrace of secular sexual identities with a notoriety for intolerance.

As a vehicle for setting moral limits to human appetites the auditive paradigm has proven far superior than the visual. Immanuel Kant taught us, that vision is centrifugal and turns our attention outward. It gives us but a slice of reality and naturally is prone to various cravings for things and fancies, among them, the longing for the unlimited whole and for spatial dominance or possessions. By contrast, hearing is panoramic and centripetal, sustains families, and narratives. It turns our attention inside to ourselves, giving us pause and prompting reflection. It also connects easily to memory and kindles our attraction to other people. This is one of the reasons why hearing serves best for education as well as for teaching fidelity and certain indispensable truths. Since vision is limited it tends to be concerned with detail and is thus easily deceived, inspiring people to resort to lies and tricks. That the digital age has upended Burke's aesthetic hierarchy does not bode well.

It is for this reason that we now return to the story of the Jewish Exodus. The divine being is said to have carried the Israelites on wings out of Egypt. This offered the Jewish people a rare glimpse from high on: the birds view which the Greeks had reserved for their gods. Once they had been arriving at Sinai the Israelites were familiarized with the transition from visual shame to auditive guilt. Here we can say with confidence Jewish exceptionalism is born, for this

sensory uplift has been observed in different ways by several Jewish thinkers, among them Heinrich Graetz, Eric Voegelin and Joseph B. Soloveitchick. But most prominently, it was the late Jonathan Sacks who said: while the Greeks and others saw their gods, the Jews hear his voice of the One and only.

Let us therefore bother with the auditive paradigm a little more. The Wasp (White Anglosaxon Protestant) is expected not to raise his voice, indicating that his emotions are not in the place where they should be: at the disposal of the inner moral self. Hence the English self suppression, being facilitated mostly by aesthetics and the visual paradigm, goes a bit too far and giving rise to scurrility. The mortification of the English soul through common sense has been immortalized by a *Scottish Times* journalist with a fable for the intricacies of shame and formalism.[\[5\]](#) And yet any modern civilisation, in order to control egregious appetites, requires its citizenry would be well advised to distance itself from the closed, dualist paradigm of vision and instead embrace the open and much broader perspective provided by the auditive paradigm. For it is preferable to being engulfed by dialectical reasoning or the contradictory pull of the visual paradigm which lands us in emotional bipolarity. The latter makes us vulnerable to mania and conspiratorial theories all pouring out of the cognitive outer self.

By contrast in the traditional Jewish community, as amply demonstrated in Jewish humour, emotions remained at the disposal of the inner, ethical self which is why Christians of the Protestant persuasion with their incarnated outer self, often find it too cerebral. During the 500 years of the modern age beginning in the Renaissance, Western emotions were still to various degrees situated in what remained of the religious inner self. This changed dramatically, as I have shown elsewhere, in the era of "fin de siecle" decadence, which sunk them to our incarnated "id", as Freud has called it. It is at this moment, I came to believe, the era of postmodernity made

its unmistakable appearance at the end of the 19th century and not as it is often claimed in the 1940s. For it was feminism and sexual identity politics which brought up the notion of moral relativism at the end of the 19th century with the shift of agency from the inner to the outer self.

As a result, the average person gradually lost its individual bearings to group affiliation. Walter Benjamin blamed this collapse of the Judaeo-Christian person in his "Paris Passages" on the visual shocks arising from consumerism, which was materializing itself in new department stores. His concept of shocks denotes the opposite experience of an emotional uplift, namely de-sublimation and all sorts of cathartic experiences and emotional expressionism. The shopping spree, as well as the term "fancy" addressed the new experience of being overwhelmed by one's own emotions. It was occurring on a mass scale after the turn of the century and set Europe on the path of "sleepwalking" into the Great War.

Here the moral gap between Hellenism and Judaism, due to the difference between shame and guilt culture, open up in its most fatal dimensions. The dramatic implications had been detected well before the French Revolution by Edmund Burke. It is central to his essay on aesthetics dealing with the specifics of the sublime and the beautiful. In my reading, his brilliant observations focus our attention to the uplifting of emotions, necessary for the advance from ancient tribalism to the Jewish family and personality. Only in the exemplary Jewish personality, human conscience manifested itself in deeds and to the degree that we internalise God's promise enabling us to keep our word or make things happen. This foundational institution of ethical deed and liturgical ritual in Judaism represents the key to advancing from situational shame to toward evidential guilt culture.

Ultimately Judaism had transcended archaic visual divination with auditive experience enabling the institution of personal

promise becoming true. Divination and promise are serving the same purpose of making things happen. The difference between them concerns reliability: Greek divination is probabilistic and tied to the felicitous moment, while Jewish promise is dedicated to long term reliability and enduring purpose. It is for this reason that emotions have to be sublimated or lifted up for the disposal of our inner, auditive self. While the visual paradigm has a fast exchange with imagination, the auditive connects closely with memory and conscience. While the aggregate fate in Athens had been presaged in vague imagery by the oracle of Delphi, in Jerusalem until today, the personal future is being shaped by divine revelation manifest in accountable deeds based on remembrance.

[1] The miraculous surge of Haredi-Judaism: https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/jewish-world/2022/01/the-haredi-moment-has-arrived/?utm_source=Active%20Paid%20Subscribers&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Spitzer%20Haredi%20Sociology%20Last%20Call%20%28subs%29%20%28Y6VTpG%29&_kx=PNKfgVAGqtpz7krMRHjUrJvDf6oenErPx9yqkI87_3s%3D.L87CGh;

[2] Jonathan Sacks on modern marriage; <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/politics-current-affairs/2020/08/why-free-societies-need-healthy-families/>;

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche "Utility and Harm of History for Mankind" 1874.

[4] Edmund Burke "A philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful", London: 1757.

[5] A.A. Gill "The Angry Island – Hunting the English" London 2005, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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