It is intriguing to reflect on and to write about Michael Bernard-Donals’ compelling essay during what, as it happens, are the Days of Awe, or the High Holy Days, in the Jewish tradition. This time of contemplation and reconciliation provides an appropriate and appropriately complex set of contexts for Bernard-Donals’ thinking; it also serves as the context for my own particular and highly vested interest in his subject. As the only child of survivors of the Shoah (who were the only members of their respective families to have survived), I am compelled not only by the tragic history of my family and people but also by my religious tradition to be concerned with issues of justice and ethics. My work in rhetoric and composition echoes this commitment, with my professional involvement in the field having accorded this privilege of a more public forum than I might otherwise have deserved.

Bernard-Donals’ well-argued and useful essay raises any number of considerations regarding the ethos of testimony—about the Holocaust or any other ultimately unthinkable, indescribable series of events. But it also raises an interesting question about the term ethos itself. I am first struck, in fact, by the necessary irony—or perhaps the paradox—of our describing any form of experience related to the Holocaust through the otherwise rhetorically appropriate yet evocative term ethos. Isn’t it ironic that we have only a Greek term by which to discuss a Jewish or Hebraic context for ethos? Certainly, ethos can represent qualities we as rhetori-
cians hold in the most positive sense. Yet, this term—an all-important and productive cornerstone of our work as rhetoricians, a term that bears the connotative weight of morality and personal responsibility—takes on a vexed, charged context and meaning once juxtaposed with Judaism or the Jewish people. In addition to the irony of this juxtaposition, it is ironic that the term *ethos* itself becomes contested.

As Victor Tcherikover writes in *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, “Very few phenomena of human history have a history of approximately two thousand years. Anti-Semitism is one of them” (358). Tcherikover documents the anti-Semitism of ancient Greece, concurrent with the rise of Christianity and the hegemony of Greek over Hebrew thought, and notes that “the anti-Semitic literature . . . flourished in the late Hellenistic period and . . . the Roman period” in the move to bring the dominance of Christianity over Judaism, and ultimately Latin and Greek over ancient Hebrew and Aramaic:

First, the religious question. All agreed in viewing the Jewish religion as nothing but a “barbarous superstition” (*barbara superstition*), to use Cicero’s definition. The respect awakened among the Greeks by the first report of Jewish “philosophy” was swiftly dissipated . . . [Based on the theories of the Greeks] Judaism had undergone a long development from a lofty philosophical doctrine, worthy of acceptance by every thinking person, to a form of popular faith that was merely a superstition. (364)

Indeed, despite the certain dominance of Christianity, the Hebrews and the Greeks enjoyed something of a love-hate relationship, with Hellenistic thought having stimulated ongoing rabbinic thought in a variety of ways. Yet, as part of the process to bring dominance to Christianity, Hebraic thought and religious practice were alternatively dismissed or commodified.

Yet, a variety of sources document wide and valid differences between the Hellenic and the Hebraic, among them Thorleif Boman’s *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*. Boman uses the hegemonic terms “Old” Testament and “New” Testament (suggesting, of course, the solely Christian view that one book is superseded by the next) but nonetheless describes succinctly the shift from Hebrew to Greek:

Christianity arose on Jewish soil; Jesus and the Apostles spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew . . . . As the New Testament writings show, they were firmly rooted in the Old Testament and lived in its world of
images. Shortly after the death of the Founder, however, the new religious community shifted into the Greek-speaking, Hellenistic world... and Christianity has been the religion of Europeans ever since. (17)

Boman argues, however, that despite the words of Jesus having “absolute authority” (presumably in their original Aramaic, again, a language closely related to Hebrew and still invoked when Jews recite the Kaddish, or prayer for the dead), “the words of Jesus were preserved by the Church in only the Greek language.” These languages are essentially different—as are the “images and thinking involved in them” (17; emphasis added).

It is intriguing and appropriate, therefore, that despite a wealth of ancient and modern Jewish thinking about justice, ethics, the behavior of moral persons and the qualities of good character, there is no one authoritative word to represent the breadth suggested by the dominant term, ethos, a word that, when viewed in a Jewish context, becomes a symbol contradicting its ideologically dominant connotation. Indeed, the closest words in Hebrew (among others) might be ba’al ofi chazak, “man of good character,” or ruach ha kodesh, someone who acts “with the spirit of God.” While Boman warns that Greek thought is anything but formulaic, he nonetheless suggests that there is something of a finite term to define the Greeks and a set of terms for the Hebrews. This is not surprising, as Boman notes, since “the Jews themselves defined their spiritual predisposition as anti-Hellenic,” with the “genius of the people... directed not toward the fashioning of form... but toward the legitimacy of moral activity,” with complex language reflecting complex philosophical purposes. Moreover, “It can surely be regarded as generally recognized that Hebrew thinking is dynamic and Greek static,” a thesis through which Boman begins a complex discussion in which the “Greek way” is typed by rest and composure, while the “Hebrew way” is typed by movement and power (19).

I have no doubt exceeded both my scholarly reach and grasp at this point. I want to suggest, however, that in addition to the dominance of ancient Greece and the accompanying rise and dominance of Christianity—and our ideological formation as rhetoricians in that tradition—there is good reason for a variety of words in Hebrew to describe the qualities we easily summarize through the single word ethos.

Additional qualities of Jewish thought have been given prominence by recent Biblical literary critics such as Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (as distinguished from those Biblical historians who solely affirmed
Greco-Christian authority). For instance, postmodern writing and modernist fiction that come out of Freud’s view of trauma—jump cuts, gaps, metanarratives, silences, disjointed narratives—are qualities we now celebrate as very deliberate ways to structure identity and experience. Yet, Biblical historians in the Christian tradition use the same qualities as fuel for dismissal—and for one religion or one set of religious groups to attain and retain dominance over others. Aristotelian rhetoric makes problematic the notion of multiple points of view; traditional Biblical historians, by extension, dismiss Hebrew versions of texts as having gaps—silences, one might say—that allow for varieties of interpretation. Critics such as Alter and Kermode affirm that these gaps, these silences, are what, indeed, make the Bible so useful.

In Alter and Kermode’s *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, critics such as Helen Elsom reveal this co-opting of Jewish religion and thought by noting that “The New Testament . . . reorganized traditional material, reworking Jewish texts in forms accessible to Greco-Roman readers” (561-62). As the editors affirm, the “idea of the Hebrew Bible as a sprawling, unruly anthology is no more than a partial truth, for the retrospective act of canonization has created a unity among the disparate texts that we as later readers can scarcely ignore” (13). With this and other analyses in Alter’s extensive introduction, however, the editors do more than suggest that the conception of the “Old” Testament (a term that Jews “collectively reject”) as one superseded by the “New” has influenced the conception of Hebraic texts “from Augustine to Dante to Donne to Eliot” and even figures centrally in Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code: The Bible as Literature*. Alter evokes Harold Bloom’s witty testament to this hegemony and codification: Bloom speaks of “the Christian triumph over the Hebrew Bible, a triumph which produced that captive work, the Old Testament” (11).

Alter argues further that the “evidence of the texts suggests that the literary impulse in ancient Israel was quite as powerful as the religious impulse, or to put it more accurately, that the two were inextricable, so that in order to understand the latter, you have to take full account of the former” (17). The Hebrew Bible delights in “an art of indirection,” the possibilities of depths “through the mere hint of a surface feature” (23).

Consider the Biblical passage documenting the birth of Moses, a passage that became the subject of a D’var Torah (an interpretive discussion, a type of sermon) I gave during the Sabbath service on New Year’s Eve before the so-called millennium, which perhaps serves as
another ironic counterpoint. I will discuss only a small portion of that
d’var here. The passage involves Moses’ mother’s effort to hide him to
save his life by placing him in a basket among the reeds so that he might
escape the enslavement to which the Jewish people were condemned.
Moses then survives this peril and is discovered on the banks of the Nile
by Pharaoh’s daughter. We know that in the preceding passage the King
of Egypt had ordered that every girl would live, while every Hebrew boy
would be killed. Moses’ mother, Jochebed, therefore did what any good
mother (indeed, any good parent) would do.

This passage might seem to be a fairly straightforward story of a
mother’s selfless devotion and sacrifice. It might also, on the surface,
seem to be a fairly straightforward story about adoption. And despite the
fact that the narrative seems to be in quite a rush to get to the adult Moses
who will lead Israel from bondage, the absence of discussion of Moses’
infancy and the women who set in motion the wheels of his fate is equally
compelling. As both a parent and an adoptive parent, I’m not comfortable
with any surface story about adoption, because, at its simplest level, this
portion could suggest that one is cast adrift, albeit protectively, and then
one is destined to return to one’s place of origin. The description, “The
woman conceived and bore a son” seems to suggest in its brevity—the
complete sentence on the left side of the semi-colon, and no more—that
for some women, it’s no great trick to give birth. What Moses’ mother
does that is more significant—beyond the “mere hint of surface
feature,” as Alter suggests, with the gaps and silences of postmodern
narrative that Bernard-Donals evokes—is not merely to give birth, but
to give life.

The brief selection offers ample opportunity for analysis, but particu-
larly for its omissions. When it is said, “and when she saw how beautiful
he was,” this is not merely the emotional response of the good Jewish
mother, since, as indicated in Midrash, “The Mother knew that this was
an extraordinary child”—in other words, a boy of fine character and
potential leadership (emphasis added). Consequently, the story of Moses’
birth and adoption potentially becomes an even more profound type of
adoption narrative, with silences involving, for instance, the sister,
Miriam, “stationed at a distance,” waiting, seeing, determining how she
might intervene to steer destiny. Indeed, as Erich Auerbach suggests, the
Hebrew narrative is a text “fraught with background” (qtd. in Alter and
Kermode 23).

The historical de-emphasis and commodification of Hebraic thought
and philosophy—even of the value of texts “fraught with background,” as
above—prove consistent with similar events surrounding the Holocaust and the issues delineated by Bernard-Donals. In her most recent collection of essays, Quarrel and Quandary, Cynthia Ozick condemns what she calls the Anne Frank "industry," one in which her literary achievement has "been infantalized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized, falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied." The result? Anne Frank has been made "an all-American girl" (Ozick 77). As Ozick argues, "The diary is taken to be a Holocaust document; that is overriding what it is not. Nearly every edition—and there have been innumerable editions—is emblazoned with words such as "a song to life," "a poignant delight in the infinite human spirit." To Ozick, these characterizations mock the events of the Shoah, and even mock the end of Frank's own life. She notes, "The diary is incomplete, truncated, broken off; or, rather it is completed by Westerbork (the hellish transit camp in Holland from which Dutch Jews were deported), and by Auschwitz, and by the fatal winds of Bergen-Belsen. . . . A survivor recalled that . . . Anne, heartbroken and skeletal, naked under a bit of rag, died a day or two [after her sister's death]" (78, 79). Of course, I suppose that without the strength of Bernard-Donals' argument, one could examine and wonder about the ethos of the survivor who recalled Anne Frank's death and thereby ensure that Frank's legacy is "happy."

Where have I led us from the question of ethos and testimonies of the Holocaust? To the realization, perhaps, that even our most valorized term to describe the inherent character of the speaker, ethos, is not in itself ideologically neutral, that the great minds of the rhetorical tradition brought to it their own problematic ethos or lack of it—with limitations, prejudices, and ideological purposes. Tcherikover links the anti-Semitism of ancient Greece to the "uninterrupted evolution of hatred for Jews and Judaism from the moment that Jews quit, or were forcibly ejected from, their country, down to our day" (358). He adds the following:

On its long historical journey, anti-Semitism has assumed various forms, sometimes upholding political or racialist ideals, sometimes disguising itself in the habit of economic and social hatred, most frequently appearing under the mask of religious faith. . . . Its activities have varied, from literary polemics conducted with spurious . . . objectivity, to the perpetration of pogroms and the installation of gas-chambers. (358)
At the origins of rhetoric (even in Cicero's work), there is a hatred and a politics of exclusion that troubles "our" rhetorical tradition. Indeed, the concept of ethos is even more "troubled" and evocative than Bernard-Donals' thoroughgoing analysis indicates—the "elusiveness of the traumatic experience," in his words, embracing as well the complex elusiveness of the otherwise brave tradition that we in rhetoric call our own.  

*Governor's State University*
*University Park, Illinois*

**Notes**

1. I want to thank Roger W. Gilman, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Northeastern Illinois University, for his comments on this essay, which are based, in part, on his manuscript in progress concerning the moral theory of Abraham. My thanks as well to Rabbi Gary Gerson of Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion in Oak Park, Illinois, for several useful telephone conversations.

**Works Cited**


