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Blackstar Symbol, Withdrawal and the Refusal of Consolation

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Abstract

David Bowie's *Blackstar* represents far more than a farewell album; it constitutes a profound meditation on mortality that resonates with the deepest currents of Jewish mystical theology. This analysis examines Bowie's final work through the interpretive frameworks of Lurianic Kabbalah, post-Holocaust thought, and the phenomenology of sacred presence-in-absence. The album's refusal of consolation, its staging of ritual without guarantee, and its insistence on the dignity of opacity all echo theological traditions that have grappled with divine concealment (*hester panim*) and the presence of the sacred within suffering. Drawing on the *tzimtzum* doctrine of divine self-contraction, the Shekhinah theology of divine presence in exile, and contemporary frameworks of hermeneutic medicine, this essay argues that *Blackstar* offers a model for confronting mortality that neither falsifies death's opacity nor abandons the human need for meaning. The work emerges as a form of sacred art that creates space for what we might call 'Being-With-Nonbeing' a discipline of presence that transforms existential terror into embodied reverence.

Keywords: Blackstar, tzimtzum, divine concealment, post-Holocaust theology, Shekhinah, presence-in-absence, ritual, mortality, hermeneutic medicine, embodied theology.

Introduction: The Theological Dimensions of a Final Work

David Bowie's *Blackstar*, released two days before his death from liver cancer on January 10, 2016, occupies a unique position in the canon of artistic final statements. Unlike the confessional farewells of many terminal artists, *Blackstar* refuses the consolations of testimony, reconciliation, or legacy-building. It is not a memoir set to music. It is something far more unsettling: a work that stages death's opacity rather than explaining it, that dwells with mortality's terrors rather than resolving them, that offers presence without promise.

This refusal of easy comfort positions *Blackstar* within theological traditions that have long grappled with the ethics of consolation in the face of radical suffering. From the prophetic tradition of divine hiddenness to post-Holocaust anti-theodicy, from Kabbalistic doctrines of divine self-contraction to

Hasidic teachings on the holiness of broken vessels, Jewish mystical thought has developed sophisticated frameworks for understanding how absence can be a form of presence, how concealment can enable revelation, and how the refusal of false comfort can itself become a sacred act.

This analysis situates *Blackstar* within these theological currents, arguing that Bowie's final work achieves something remarkable: it creates a secular sacred space where mortality can be confronted without falsification. The album neither denies death's terror nor offers false transcendence. Instead, it models what might be called the 'dignity of opacity' the ethical stance that refuses to explain away what must be carried, that insists on presence within suffering rather than presence instead of suffering.

The theological frameworks employed in this analysis draw on my broader work on the sacred dimensions of healing encounters, the tzimtzum model for understanding therapeutic relationships, and the phenomenology of divine presence-in-concealment. What emerges is an understanding of Blackstar not merely as autobiography or artistic statement but as a form of practical theology a discipline for accompanying the dying that refuses both premature meaning-making and nihilistic despair.

Part I: The Black Star as Anti-Symbol and the Theology of Tzimtzum

The Negation of Celestial Guidance

A star is ordinarily a bearer of guidance Abraham's promise of descendants beyond counting, the star of Bethlehem announcing messianic arrival, the navigational heavens that have oriented travelers since antiquity. Stars shine; they emit light; they guide. The black star negates this function entirely. It does not guide; it absorbs. It emits no light, only gravity. It is visible only through the distortion it creates in surrounding space a presence known primarily through its effects on what surrounds it.

This is not nihilism. It is anti-teleology. The black star is not the end of meaning but the refusal of its legibility. It is a symbol that declares itself opaque that simultaneously signifies and withholds its signification. In theological terms, this is closer to *tzimtzum* than apocalypse: not revelation but withdrawal.

Tzimtzum: The Theology of Divine Self-Contraction

The concept of *tzimtzum* emerged from the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), who revolutionized Kabbalistic thought by proposing that God's first creative act was not expansion but contraction. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, before creation, the infinite divine presence (*Ein Sof*) filled all reality. For creation to occur, God needed to withdraw or contract His infinite light to create a conceptual 'empty space' (*challal panui*) where finite reality could exist.

As Gershom Scholem observes, 'God's retreat into himself is the deepest meaning of an act which, as a work of limitation, and not in Neoplatonic terms, as a work of emanation, must be understood as beginning of creation.' This paradoxical formulation suggests that divine absence is not merely the negation of presence but its very precondition. The act of divine withdrawal becomes the foundational creative gesture that makes all subsequent revelation possible. Absence and presence exist in a dialectical relationship: divine concealment does not contradict revelation but enables it.

The black star of Bowie's vision operates according to similar logic. It creates a field of gravitational influence a space where symbols remain but their referents are suspended. What Bowie offers is not the God who speaks but the God who recedes, leaving behind a field in which meaning-making continues but without the guarantee of arrival. The black star is not absence but withdrawal the creation of a vacated space (*makom panui*) within which finite beings can exist, struggle, and search.

Literal Versus Non-Literal Tzimtzum: The Space for Relationship

A significant theological debate centers on whether divine contraction should be understood literally (*tzimtzum kipeshuto*) or metaphorically (*tzimtzum she-lo ki-peshuto*). The literal interpretation suggests that God's essence is actually removed from the created realm, creating genuine ontological separation between the divine and the world. The non-literal interpretation argues that divine contraction is not an actual absence but rather a concealment God's essence remains fully present throughout creation but is hidden from human perception.

Rabbi Tamar Ross illustrates this through the metaphor of a teacher concealing the full scope of knowledge so that a limited portion may be revealed to students. Just as the teacher's wisdom is unaffected by this concealment, so too all forms of existence gain a sense of their selfhood as a result of the hiding of God's all-pervasive presence. The concealment is for the sake of relationship, not its negation.

This distinction proves crucial for understanding *Blackstar*. The album's opacity is not emptiness but concealment-for-the-sake-of-encounter. Bowie creates a space where listeners must bring their own meaning-making capacities, where interpretation becomes participatory rather than receptive. The withdrawal of clear signification creates the conditions for genuine engagement just as the divine *tzimtzum* creates the space within which creatures can exercise freedom and enter into relationship.

Part II: The Dead Astronaut and the Collapse of Modern Soteriologies

Major Tom's Return as Corpse

The *Blackstar* video opens with a skull-helmeted astronaut recognizably post-Apollo, post-progress, post-salvation. This is not simply Bowie's Major Tom returned as corpse, though that biographical resonance clearly operates. More fundamentally, it is the death of a particular modern faith: the belief that transcendence is achieved through mastery, technology, or ascent. The space program represented humanity's most ambitious attempt at vertical escape leaving behind earthly constraints through scientific achievement. The dead astronaut declares this project finished.

The astronaut is buried, ritualized, venerated yet unmistakably dead. This is crucial: the ritual does not resurrect him. It acknowledges loss without repair. In biblical terms, this is not Elijah ascending in a whirlwind, nor Moses disappearing into cloud and glory. It is closer to the wilderness grave of Aaron: a death that marks the end of an epoch without supplying a successor narrative. The high priest dies; the people mourn; they move on but something has ended that will not return in the same form.

The Failure of Technological Transcendence

Modern medicine operates according to the same soteriological grammar as the space program: transcendence through

mastery. The mechanistic reductionism of contemporary healthcare promises salvation through technical intervention if we can only understand the body sufficiently, map its processes completely, intervene precisely enough, death itself might be defeated or at least indefinitely postponed. This is the hidden theology of medical materialism: salvation through ascending beyond biological constraint.

The dead astronaut challenges this faith at its root. The most advanced technology available spacecraft capable of escaping earth's gravity has produced only a decorated corpse. Technical mastery has not achieved transcendence; it has merely relocated the site of death. The astronaut dies not on earth but in orbit, which means that the project of escape has failed while succeeding at its proximate goals. This is the peculiar tragedy of modern medicine as well: we have achieved remarkable technical capacities while often losing the wisdom traditions that could help us confront what technology cannot fix.

What I have termed 'hermeneutic medicine' begins precisely where technical mastery ends in the recognition that patients are not problems to be solved but sacred texts requiring interpretation. The dead astronaut represents the failure of medicine-as-engineering; his ritualized burial represents the possibility of medicine-as-accompaniment. The technology that launched him into space cannot bring him back or give his death meaning. Only ritual, symbol, and presence can do that work and they do it not by explaining but by dwelling.

Shevirat HaKelim: The Breaking of the Vessels

Scholem's analysis of *Shevirat HaKelim* (the breaking of the vessels) provides further theological context. In Lurianic myth, the divine light of creation was too powerful for its containing vessels, causing them to shatter. This cosmic catastrophe scattered divine sparks throughout creation, embedding sacred potential within the material world even within its darkest corners. As Scholem explains, this mythic structure 'transformed exile from a punishment into a mission,' reframing divine absence as a purposeful dispersion that requires human participation in its resolution.

The dead astronaut can be understood as a shattered vessel a container that could not hold the light of its aspirations. But in Kabbalistic logic, this shattering is not simply tragedy. It scatters sparks that can be gathered, redeemed, integrated. The women who venerate the astronaut's skull, the rituals that surround his remains these represent the work of *tikkun* (repair), not by restoring the astronaut to life but by honoring the sacred dimensions of his broken journey.

Part III: Blindness, Vision, and the Collapse of Epistemological Confidence

The Systematic Undermining of Vision

Repeatedly throughout *Blackstar*'s visual vocabulary, figures appear with blindfolds, button eyes, hollow gazes. This is not accidental. Vision the dominant metaphor of Western epistemology is systematically undermined. We speak of 'insight,' 'illumination,' 'enlightenment'; we 'see' the truth; we

possess 'vision.' The entire structure of Western knowledge-seeking assumes that adequate seeing produces adequate knowing, which produces adequate action.

Bowie's blinded figures challenge this assumption. They cannot see, yet they move purposefully. They perform rituals, make gestures, participate in ceremonies all without visual access to their environment or each other. This is not disability as deprivation but blindness as a different mode of being-in-the-world, one that does not depend on the mastery-through-vision that characterizes modern rationality.

Choshekh: Darkness as the Collapse of Relation

In the language of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin), the darkness (*choshekh*) of Egypt was not merely the absence of light but the collapse of relation. One can look but not see; one can watch but not recognize. This is darkness as breakdown of the communicative fabric that makes social life possible each person isolated in their own sphere, unable to connect with others even when physically proximate.

The blindfolded figures of *Blackstar* inhabit this kind of darkness. Yet remarkably, they do not cease to function. They continue to move, to gesture, to participate. This suggests something crucial about the human capacity for meaning-making under conditions of radical uncertainty. We do not require full sight to act. We do not need complete understanding to participate in ritual. We can dwell in darkness without abandoning the practices that make us human.

Vision Does Not Save: The Limits of Insight

Much of religious thought assumes that if one sees clearly enough, redemption follows. The mystical traditions speak of unveiling, of removing the obstacles to clear perception, of achieving states of consciousness where truth becomes transparent. This is the promise of gnosis: that knowledge particularly experiential knowledge of divine realities saves.

Blackstar dismantles this assumption. Vision does not save. Insight does not heal. Awareness does not resolve mortality. The dying person who achieves clarity about their condition is no less dying; the physician who understands the mechanism of disease is no less helpless before its final progression. This is not anti-intellectualism but the recognition that certain human predicaments cannot be resolved through better understanding.

And yet the figures continue to move. Meaning has not disappeared; it has lost its guarantee. This is precisely the situation of post-Holocaust theology, of clinical practice at the limits of medicine, of spiritual accompaniment in the face of terminal diagnosis. We continue the practices of meaning-making without the assurance that they will 'work' in any instrumental sense. We light candles, recite prayers, maintain presence not because these actions will change the outcome but because not doing them would be worse.

Part IV: Hester Panim and the Phenomenology of Divine Concealment

The Double Concealment: Rebbe Nachman's Contribution

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) offers one of the most psychologically nuanced approaches to divine concealment in Hasidic thought through his concept of the 'double concealment' (*hester shebetoch hester*). In Likutei Moharan I:56, he distinguishes between two levels of divine hiding:

In the first level of concealment (*hester panim*), God's face is hidden, but the person is aware that it is God who is concealing Himself. This represents a painful but still spiritually productive state where one recognizes divine absence as a form of relationship the hiding itself testifies to a Hider.

In the second, deeper concealment (*hester shebetoch hester*), the very fact of concealment becomes concealed. The person no longer recognizes that God is hiding but experiences a world where divine absence appears as mere emptiness or meaninglessness. Rebbe Nachman considered this the most spiritually dangerous state when one no longer even perceives the absence as absence.

Blackstar operates at this second level of concealment. It presents a world where transcendence has not merely withdrawn but has left behind only artifacts of its former presence rituals that continue without guaranteed efficacy, symbols that signify without clear referents, gestures toward meaning that may or may not connect. This is the contemporary spiritual condition: not atheism (*which is still a position on the question of God*) but a deeper opacity where the question itself has become obscured.

Finding God in Absence: The Breslov Path

What makes Rebbe Nachman's approach particularly powerful is his insistence that divine presence can be found within this very experience of absence. In Likutei Moharan II:12, he teaches that 'there is no place devoid of Him' even in the darkest concealment, God is present in the form of absence. The void (*challal panui*) becomes both the greatest spiritual danger and the site of the most profound faith.

Rebbe Nachman developed specific spiritual practices for navigating divine concealment. Central among these is *hitbodedut* intimate, spontaneous personal prayer conducted in one's native language. This practice involves crying out to God from within the experience of absence, transforming the void itself into a space for encounter. The form of address continues even when the addressee seems absent.

This leads to a radical understanding of faith (*emunah*) not as cognitive belief but as existential trust maintained despite the absence of evidence or feeling. For Rebbe Nachman, the highest faith is that which persists in the face of divine withdrawal faith that does not require certainty, presence, or consolation to maintain its fidelity.

Descent for the Purpose of Ascent

Rebbe Nachman integrates divine concealment into a broader

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spiritual pattern he calls 'descent for the purpose of ascent' (*yeridah tzorech aliyah*). Spiritual growth does not proceed in a straight line upward but involves necessary descents into darkness, doubt, and apparent abandonment. These descents are not failures but prerequisites for deeper ascent one cannot rise to new heights without first plunging into new depths.

His famous teaching that 'the whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid' speaks to this experience of traversing the void of divine concealment. The bridge does not eliminate the abyss; it spans it. Faith does not remove the darkness; it provides passage through it. This is not triumphalist spirituality that promises escape from difficulty but a wisdom tradition that teaches how to dwell in difficulty without being destroyed by it.

Blackstar embodies this descent. It does not promise ascent; it refuses premature consolation; it insists on dwelling in the darkness of mortality. Yet this very dwelling this refusal to escape—constitutes a form of fidelity that Rebbe Nachman would recognize as authentic spiritual practice.

Part V: 'Something Happened on the Day He Died'—The Refusal of Narrative Closure

The Temptation of Autobiographical Reading

'Something happened on the day he died' this line is the song's fulcrum and its most dangerous temptation. Many listeners rush to read it autobiographically, as Bowie narrating his own death in advance. That reading is emotionally compelling: the dying artist using the last of his energy to document his passage, leaving behind a testament for those who will survive him.

Yet this autobiographical reading is theologically thin. It domesticates the line's radical indeterminacy by anchoring it to a specific biographical referent. 'He' becomes Bowie; 'the day' becomes January 10, 2016; 'something happened' becomes the transition from life to death. All true, perhaps, but reductive. The line's power lies precisely in its refusal to specify who died, what happened, or why it matters.

Death without Frame: A Post-Biblical Move

What matters is not who died but what happens when death is acknowledged without redemption. 'Something happened' is radically indeterminate. No claim is made about salvation, continuity, or legacy. The line names an event without interpreting it. This is a profoundly post-biblical move. In Scripture, death is almost always framed burial, mourning, covenant, judgment. The patriarchs are 'gathered to their people'; the righteous 'sleep with their fathers'; the wicked are 'cut off.' Biblical death carries narrative weight, connects to larger structures of meaning, participates in covenantal history.

Here, death is allowed to remain unframed. 'Something happened' but what? The line refuses to say. This is not despair; it is restraint. It is the recognition that death exceeds our interpretive capacities, that attempts to explain it too quickly become forms of violence against the dying and the dead.

Post-Holocaust Anti-Theodicy and the Ethics of Restraint

Post-Holocaust Jewish theology has been characterized by what Zachary Braiterman identifies as ‘anti-theodicy’ the refusal to justify God in the face of overwhelming evil. This is not atheism but a principled rejection of explanatory frameworks that would make radical suffering intelligible, manageable, meaningful. To explain Auschwitz is to domesticate it; to find meaning in the murder of children is to participate in that murder’s logic.

Bowie’s restraint in ‘Something happened on the day he died’ participates in this anti-theodic tradition. It refuses to tell us what death means, what happens after, whether there is continuity or cessation. This refusal is itself an ethical act a recognition that the dying person’s experience exceeds our capacity to interpret it, that attempts to provide meaning can become violations of the mystery they pretend to honor.

Hans Jonas, in his post-Holocaust theology, envisions a God who ‘for a time the time of the ongoing world process has divested Himself of any power to interfere with the physical course of things.’ This self-limiting God finds precedent in ‘the old Jewish idea’ within the mystical tradition of *tzimtzum*. Divine absence is not abandonment but the precondition for creaturely freedom and the terrible events that creaturely freedom makes possible.

‘Something happened’ operates according to similar logic. It creates space for the event of death without determining its meaning. It acknowledges that something of ultimate significance has occurred while refusing to specify what that significance is. This is neither nihilism nor faith but something more difficult: fidelity to the limits of knowledge in the face of death.

Part VI: Ritual Without Guarantee—The Post-Temple Condition

The Saturation of Ritual

The *Blackstar* video is saturated with ritual: chanting, gestures, procession, symbolic objects, carefully choreographed movements. Religious imagery proliferates cruciform poses, priestly vestments, sacrificial offerings, ecstatic worship. Yet these rituals do not culminate in transformation. They do not open heaven. They do not heal the wound they circle.

This is where *Blackstar* becomes quietly theological. It stages what ritual looks like after the collapse of metaphysical assurance. Ritual remains not as magic, not as promise, but as presence. People gather not because something will be fixed but because not gathering would be worse. The practices continue without the guarantee that they connect to transcendent efficacy.

Post-Temple Judaism and Practice Without Sacrifice

In this sense, Bowie’s ritual world resembles post-Temple Judaism more than Christianity. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the central mechanisms of Jewish religious life sacrifice, priestly mediation, direct access to the divine presence in the Holy of Holies were rendered impossible. What

remained was practice without sacrifice, memory without restoration, fidelity without closure.

Rabbinic Judaism developed elaborate ritual structures that simultaneously commemorate what was lost and maintain connection to it. The Passover Seder concludes with ‘Next year in Jerusalem’ an expression of hope that has been repeated for two millennia without fulfillment. The daily prayers include requests for the restoration of Temple service that show no sign of being answered. This is not despair but discipline: the practice of longing, maintained generationally, without guarantee of resolution.

The rituals in *Blackstar* operate similarly. They do not promise resurrection or transcendence. They mark, honor, accompany. The dead astronaut remains dead; the jeweled skull does not come to life; the blind worshippers do not receive their sight. What the rituals provide is not transformation but presence the insistence that even in the face of unredeemed death, certain forms of attention, honor, and community remain possible and necessary.

The Shekhinah in Exile: Divine Presence in the Absence of the Temple

The Kabbalistic doctrine of the Shekhinah the feminine aspect of divinity dwelling with Israel in exile provides another framework for understanding ritual without guarantee. In classical Kabbalistic thought, particularly in the Zohar and Lurianic texts, the Shekhinah represents not merely an attribute but a distinct persona within the divine structure, one who has become separated from upper divine realms and wanders in exile alongside the Jewish people.

Peter Schäfer’s comprehensive study traces how this concept evolved from biblical references to divine presence into a full theology of divine immanence and vulnerability. The Shekhinah doctrine represents Judaism’s most daring theological move: the assertion that God suffers with creation, that divine presence participates in creaturely pain, that the infinite God chooses radical solidarity with finite, suffering existence.

The maternal dimensions of Shekhinah prove particularly significant. The Zohar describes her in terms drawn from human motherhood: nursing her children, mourning over them, interceding on their behalf, refusing to abandon them even in waywardness. This maternal imagery transforms understanding of divine power: the Shekhinah’s strength lies not in dominating force but in persistent presence, not in preventing suffering but in refusing to leave the sufferer alone.

For post-Holocaust theology, the Shekhinah’s presence at Auschwitz becomes crucial. If the Shekhinah goes into exile with Israel, then at Auschwitz she was present in the camps, suffering with victims, sharing their dehumanization. This is not theodicy it does not make evil good or necessary. Rather, it refuses to separate God from the abyss, insisting that if God is anywhere, God is in hell’s depths itself.

Part VII: The Refusal of Consolation as Ethical Act

The Violence of Premature Comfort

What *Blackstar* refuses almost aggressively is consolation. There is no redemptive arc. No final harmony. No reassuring synthesis. The album ends not with resolution but with the words 'I can't give everything away' a declaration of irreducible opacity that mirrors the album's opening image of the black star.

This refusal is not cruelty. It is ethical. Consolation too quickly offered becomes violence. It closes what should remain open. It explains away what must be carried. When a grieving person is told that their loved one is 'in a better place,' the statement may technically be a theological claim, but its function is often to end a conversation that the speaker finds uncomfortable. The mourner's grief is managed, contained, redirected toward acceptable conclusions.

My work on the therapeutic encounter has emphasized how the desire to console can become a form of abandonment. When clinicians rush to provide meaning, explanation, or hope, they often communicate their own discomfort with the patient's suffering rather than genuine presence to that suffering. The patient learns that their distress is too much for the caregiver to bear and withdraws into isolation.

Presence Without Explanation: The Tzimtzum Model for Therapeutic Relationships

The *tzimtzum* model provides an alternative framework for understanding what authentic presence might look like. Just as God withdraws to create space for creation, the clinician withdraws interpretive mastery to create space for the patient's experience. This is not absence but purposive self-limitation—the discipline of not explaining, not fixing, not resolving, in order to allow the patient's own meaning-making processes to emerge.

This requires what I have called 'sacred listening' an approach that recognizes the clinical encounter as a form of sacred text requiring interpretation with the same reverence accorded to Scripture. The patient is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be accompanied. Their suffering is not a malfunction requiring repair but a dimension of their humanity requiring witness.

Blackstar models this kind of presence. It accompanies the listener through death's territory without explaining the landscape or promising arrival at a destination. It refuses the violence of premature meaning while maintaining the discipline of aesthetic attention. It is present without being consoling which is to say, it is present in a way that honors the magnitude of what it accompanies.

The God Who Remains in Exile

In this sense, *Blackstar* aligns with a theology that insists on presence without explanation the God who remains with Israel in exile, not by ending it but by not abandoning those who inhabit it. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: 'God is in exile.

The prophets do not speak of the hidden God but of the hiding God. His hiding is a function not His essence, an act not a permanent state.'

This is the crucial distinction: hiding as function, not essence. The divine concealment is purposive, relational, responsive to human action. It is not that God has ceased to exist or care but that God has withdrawn active intervention to create space for human freedom and responsibility. The result is a world where terrible things can happen but also a world where human action matters, where ethical choice is genuine, where the response to suffering is not predetermined by divine fiat.

The Shekhinah who dwells in exile does not resolve the pain of exile; she shares it. The God who hides face does not explain the hiding; he waits within it. *Blackstar* offers similar presence: it does not explain death or console the dying but accompanies them through territory that remains dark, mysterious, and unredeemed.

Part VIII: Legacy as Withdrawal—Humility in the Face of Interpretation

The Artist's Self-Erasure

If *Blackstar* is a final work, its finality lies not in summary but in self-erasure. Bowie does not leave a message; he leaves a field of symbols that resist mastery. The album refuses to explain itself, to anchor its meanings, to provide interpretive keys. It is generous with images and miserly with explanations.

This is not abdication. It is humility. Bowie does not claim to have understood death. He claims only to have stood near it without falsifying it. The album is not a report from the other side but a record of dwelling at the threshold seeing what can be seen from the border, saying what can be said from that vantage point, and refusing to pretend to more knowledge than the position affords.

The Patient as Sacred Text

My framework of 'hermeneutic medicine' proposes treating the patient as a sacred text requiring interpretation. Like sacred texts that require multiple readings, contextual understanding, and spiritual receptivity, patients present themselves as complex hermeneutic challenges that resist reduction to purely technical problems. The physician's task is not to decode the patient but to dwell with them to read and reread, to attend and reattend, to remain present to meanings that emerge gradually and often resist clear articulation.

This framework recognizes the irreducible subjectivity of the patient and the interpretive complexity of the clinical encounter. It challenges the Cartesian assumption that adequate analysis produces adequate understanding, which produces adequate intervention. Some dimensions of human suffering cannot be analyzed into components, understood through causal models, or addressed through technical fixes. They can only be accompanied—witnessed, honored, held without being resolved.

Blackstar treats its audience the way hermeneutic medicine treats the patient: as capable of meaning-making that exceeds the artist's intentions, as possessing interpretive capacities that will generate readings unforeseen by the creator, as partners in a process of meaning-generation rather than passive recipients of encoded messages. Bowie's withdrawal—his refusal to explain, his insistence on opacity creates the space within which this partnership can occur.

Three Modes of Listening

The clinical framework I have developed identifies three modes of therapeutic listening that illuminate how *Blackstar* might be received:

Incarnational listening attends to the patient's (or artwork's) language as embodied presence, where symptoms are not merely signs pointing to absent pathology but manifestations of lived suffering. Applied to *Blackstar*, this means dwelling within the album's sonic textures, visual images, and emotional atmosphere without immediately translating them into biographical or theological categories.

Transcendent listening interprets patient narratives (or artistic statements) as signifiers of underlying conditions, where language functions primarily to reference realities beyond the immediate encounter. Applied to *Blackstar*, this means reading the album as testimony about death, mortality, and transcendence seeking the truth beyond the text of Bowie's final artistic speech.

Dialectical listening navigates between presence and absence, simultaneously honoring the embodied reality of suffering while seeking its correlates in larger structures of meaning. As I have noted, 'The most effective healing occurs in the space between dwelling in the patient's world and accessing knowledge that transcends it.' Applied to *Blackstar*, this means holding both the immediate aesthetic experience and the theological/philosophical frameworks that illuminate it neither collapsing into pure sensation nor escaping into pure abstraction.

Part IX: Being-With-Nonbeing—An Embodied Theology for Mortality

The Clinical Crisis of Dying

In the sterile corridors of modern hospitals, a profound theological crisis unfolds daily. Patients facing terminal diagnoses often express a fear that transcends their physical symptoms a primal terror of ceasing to exist that no amount of medical explanation can soothe. 'I am afraid of not being,' they whisper, their words carrying the weight of existential dread that has haunted humanity since consciousness first contemplated its own extinction.

This fear typically manifests not as abstract philosophical anxiety but as embodied terror: breath constricted, chest tight, mind circling in endless loops of rumination. While prognostic clarity, effective analgesia, and assurances of non-abandonment provide essential comfort, they often fail to address the deeper theological crisis at the heart of dying the confrontation with what appears to be absolute negation.

The Being-With-Nonbeing Protocol

What emerges from extensive clinical experience and theological reflection is a recognition that the traditional medical response to death anxiety treats nonbeing as the enemy to be defeated rather than as a dimension of existence to be embraced. The framework I have developed—'Being-With-Nonbeing' draws on Kabbalistic insights about the nature of divine nothingness (*ayin*) to create an embodied theology for dying that transforms terror into grace.

This approach recognizes that nonbeing is not simply what lies beyond death but is woven into the fabric of lived experience. Every breath involves micro-deaths and micro-births. Every moment of consciousness emerges from and returns to the unconscious. Sleep, forgetting, the spaces between thoughts—these are all encounters with forms of nonbeing that we navigate continuously without terror. The goal is not to eliminate fear of death but to expand the patient's capacity to include nonbeing within the texture of living.

Blackstar can be understood as an artistic realization of this protocol. It does not promise escape from death or transcendence beyond mortality. It practices dwelling with nonbeing—inhabiting the space of death's approach without fleeing into false comfort or collapsing into despair. The album teaches, through aesthetic means, the discipline of presence that the Being-With-Nonbeing protocol teaches through clinical practice.

Ayin and Atzmut: The Nothingness That Is Everything

Kabbalistic tradition provides profound resources for understanding nothingness not as mere negation but as the source of all being. The concept of *ayin* (nothingness) in Jewish mysticism refers not to empty absence but to the infinite potential that precedes and underlies all finite existence. The nothing from which God creates is not vacuous but pregnant—a no-thing that contains all things in potential.

Similarly, *atzmut* (divine essence) in Chabad theology refers to the level of divinity that transcends all attributes, all categories, all determinations. It is not that God lacks qualities but that God's essence exceeds any quality that could be ascribed. This is the 'no-thing' that is simultaneously 'every-thing' the ground of being that appears as absence only because it transcends the categories through which presence is normally recognized.

For dying patients, this theological framework offers a radical reframe. The nothingness they fear is not mere negation but return to source participation in the same creative ground from which they emerged. Death is not annihilation but transformation, not ending but return. This is not denial of death's reality but a different understanding of what that reality entails.

The black star of Bowie's vision can be understood through this lens. It appears as absence a star that emits no light but its gravitational presence shapes everything around it. Like *ayin*, like *atzmut*, it is a nothingness that is not nothing: a presence

known through effects rather than direct perception, a source of order and meaning that cannot be directly apprehended but cannot be ignored.

Part X: Conclusion The Black Star as Ethical Night

Not About Death But About What Remains

Blackstar is not about death. It is about what remains when death refuses to become meaningful. It offers no theodicy no explanation of why mortality exists or what purpose it serves. It offers no consolation no promise that death is not what it appears to be, that something better awaits, that the loss is not as total as it seems. It offers no promise no guarantee that meaning will emerge, that suffering will prove redemptive, that the darkness will give way to light.

What it offers instead is fidelity: to ambiguity, to symbol, to the dignity of not knowing. In a world that demands meaning too quickly, *Blackstar* insists on waiting in the dark eyes open, rituals intact, speech restrained.

Reverence as Alternative to Nihilism

And that, finally, is not nihilism. Nihilism would be easier the conclusion that since death cannot be made meaningful, nothing means anything, and we might as well abandon the pretense of significance. *Blackstar* refuses this escape. It maintains the rituals, continues the symbols, insists on aesthetic attention even when meaning has withdrawn its guarantees.

This is reverence. Not reverence for a particular deity or doctrine but reverence for the human condition of meaning-making under conditions of radical uncertainty. It is the reverence of the post-Temple worshipper who continues to pray without sacrifice, of the post-Holocaust theologian who refuses both easy faith and easy despair, of the clinician who accompanies dying patients without pretending to master death.

The Shekhinah's Witness

Theology of divine pain achieves its most urgent contemporary relevance in works like *Blackstar*. How does one speak of mortality after the collapse of traditional religious frameworks? How does one make art about death in a world where death has been simultaneously medicalized and denied, managed and ignored?

The answer that *Blackstar* offers the answer that resonates with the deepest currents of Jewish mystical thought is not to speak about death but to speak from within it. Not to explain mortality but to inhabit its approach. Not to console but to accompany. The Shekhinah's presence in suffering does not make suffering meaningful or redemptive the Holocaust remains radically evil, unjustifiable, irredeemable. But it means that sufferers are not alone, that even in ultimate negation there remains a thread of relationship, a divine witness who suffers what they suffer.

Bowie offers something similar: not meaning but witness, not explanation but presence, not consolation but the dignity of aesthetic attention maintained in the face of death. *Blackstar* is the Shekhinah's artwork made from within exile, addressed to

those who dwell in darkness, refusing false light while insisting that darkness itself can be inhabited with grace.

The Broken Vav: Wholeness Through Acknowledged Fracture

The Kotzker Rebbe taught that 'there is nothing more whole than a broken heart.' This paradox—that wholeness can emerge through acknowledged brokenness rather than despite it—captures something essential about *Blackstar*'s achievement. The album does not pretend to wholeness. It does not offer resolution, synthesis, or harmony. It is broken and in its brokenness, it achieves a kind of integrity that more polished, more consoling works cannot reach.

The broken *vav* in the word *shalom* (peace) in Numbers 25:12 provides a graphic image of this paradox. Peace itself is marked by fracture; wholeness incorporates brokenness; the covenant of peace carries within it the trace of violence. There can be no restoration of innocent wholeness, no return to prelapsarian perfection. Only possible peace is one incorporating brokenness, refusing to pretend the fracture can be made seamless.

Blackstar is marked by the broken *vav*. It offers peace but a peace that incorporates mortality's fracture. It offers wholeness but a wholeness achieved through acknowledged incompleteness. It offers meaning but a meaning that does not pretend to resolve the fundamental opacity of death.

Final Words: The Discipline of Presence

What *Blackstar* ultimately offers is not a message but a discipline: the discipline of remaining present to mortality without falsifying it, of dwelling in darkness without pretending to light, of maintaining ritual without guaranteeing efficacy, of creating beauty without promising redemption.

This discipline is what the best theology has always taught. It is the discipline of Job, who refuses false comfort from his friends while maintaining his address to God. It is the discipline of the prophets, who speak truth to power without guarantee of being heard. It is the discipline of the mystics, who seek the divine face while knowing that face is hidden. It is the discipline of post-Holocaust thought, which refuses both easy faith and easy despair.

And it is the discipline that dying patients need from their caregivers not explanation, not false hope, not premature meaning, but presence. The presence of those who will not abandon them. The presence of those who will witness their suffering without looking away. The presence of those who honor the magnitude of what is occurring without pretending to understand it.

Blackstar teaches this discipline through aesthetic means. It is a work of art that is also a work of practical theology a meditation on mortality that is also a model for accompanying the dying. In this convergence of aesthetic and spiritual practice, Bowie achieved something rare: a final work that does not merely

express an individual's confrontation with death but offers resources for all who face that confrontation.

The black star does not guide. But in its gravitational field, in the space it creates through its withdrawal, something like meaning continues to be possible. Not guaranteed. Not promised. But possible.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kszLwBaC4Sw&list=RDkszLwBaC4Sw&start_radio=1

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