

Wrestling with God

Jewish Theological Responses during
and after the Holocaust

GENERAL EDITOR

Steven T. Katz

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Shlomo Biderman
Gershon Greenberg

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2007

INTRODUCTION

Steven T. Katz

I

The selections included in this section are drawn from European and American authors. The views expressed range across the entire theological spectrum from those that are very traditional to those that conclude that the Holocaust proves God's nonexistence. Each position is thoughtful and, in its own way, provocative. But all are open to critical interrogation and various forms of rebuttal.

The responses come mainly in two forms. The first set primarily draws upon and recycles explanatory models that have their roots in the Bible. That is, they employ explanations that were first offered in the Bible in response to the perennial questions of theodicy and human suffering. Now, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, these accounts are again appealed to, with modifications, to provide an understanding of the interaction of God and man and God and Israel. The second set of responses is composed of new answers that attempt to reconfigure the theological landscape in various original ways in light of the profound theological difficulties engendered by the existence of *Einsatzgruppen* (Hitler's murder squads in Eastern Europe) and the death camps.

Given the importance of these positions, some old, some new, it will be of help to readers, especially those just beginning their study of these issues, if each is described individually with its main conceptual features highlighted.

Let us begin with an examination of the six biblical models, starting with the famous event of the *Akedah*, "the binding of Isaac."

1. The *Akedah*: The Binding of Isaac

The biblical narrative that begins in Genesis 22:2, which reports the "binding of Isaac" by his father, Abraham, in anticipation of his being sacrificed in fulfillment of God's command, is often appealed to as a possible paradigm for treating the Holocaust. Such a theological move is well grounded in Jewish tradition, especially given its use in the medieval Hebrew martyrologies of the Crusader and post-Crusader period (late eleventh and twelfth centuries), during which the biblical event of the *Akedah* became the prism through which the horrific Jewish medieval experience became refracted and was made "intelligible" to Jews of that era. In these medieval narratives, the Jewish children of medieval Europe, and more generally all the Jews slaughtered by the Crusaders, were perceived, like Isaac of old, as martyrs to God who willingly sacrificed themselves and their loved ones in order to prove beyond all doubt their faithfulness to the Almighty.¹

Now again, after the Holocaust, this religious model is used to describe the victims of Hitler's crusade to make the world *Judenrein*, free of Jews. The great appeal

of this decipherment lies in its imputation to the dead of heroism and unwavering religious faith. Their deaths are not due to sin or to any imperfection on their part, nor are they the consequence of any violation of the covenant. Rather, they are the climactic evidence of the Jews' unwavering devotion to the faith of their fathers. Just as the Jews of medieval Europe, confronted by the Crusader bands, chose to kill their children and die themselves² rather than convert to Christianity and save their lives, thus affirming their belief in the truth of Judaism in the most dramatic and absolute way, so, too, the Jewish people—confronted by the satanic forces of Nazism—died as martyrs for their God. Thus, piety, not sin, is the key factor in accounting for the Holocaust. God makes unique demands upon those who love Him and whom He loves, and as with Abraham and Isaac, so too the Jewish people in our time responded with fidelity and selflessness. As such, the dreadful events become a test, the occasion for the maximal religious service "even unto death."

This response to the Holocaust is not without its intellectual and emotional appeal. Yet readers should carefully evaluate its claims, and the analogies upon which it rests, before concluding that it supplies a full "answer" to Auschwitz and Treblinka. Students need to think hard about just how exact the parallel between the *Akedah* and the Holocaust is. For example, in the *Akedah*, it is Abraham who is commanded to kill the son he loves. In the Holocaust, Hitler kills the Jews he hates. This murder creates no emotional or ethical "problem" for him; he is more than happy to carry it out.

2. Job

The biblical Book of *Job*, the best-known treatment of theodicy in the Hebrew Bible, naturally presents itself as a second possible model for decoding the Holocaust. For example, Martin Buber, Eliezer Berkovits, and Robert Gordis, all represented in this anthology, have all discussed its relevance in the context of post-Holocaust Jewish theology. That this should be the case is not surprising for *Job* provides an inviting paradigm in that *Job's* suffering is caused not by his sinfulness but rather by his righteousness—perceived by Satan as a cause for jealousy. Moreover, the tale ends on a "happy" note: *Job* is rewarded by God for his faithfulness with a double blessing. On a deeper level, of course, the issues are far more problematic and their meaning ambiguous. Consider that the resolution of *Job's* doubts is never really clear, that God's reply through the whirlwind (ch. 38) is, in important ways, no answer to his questions, and perhaps most telling, that his first wife and family are still dead through no fault of their own. It is, therefore, not surprising that the ultimate meaning of the book is unclear and much argued about and that its applicability to the Holocaust is much contested.

3. The "Suffering Servant"

One of the most influential biblical doctrines framed in response to the "problem of evil" is that of the "suffering servant."³ Given its classic presentation in the *Book of Isaiah* (especially ch. 53), the suffering servant doctrine suggests that the righteous vicariously suffer and atone for the wicked and hence, in some mysterious way, allay God's wrath and judgment, thus making the continuation of history possible.

According to the majority of traditional *Jewish* interpreters, the suffering servant is the nation of Israel,⁴ the people of the covenant, who suffer with and for God in the midst of the evil of creation. As God is long suffering with His creation, so Israel, God's people, must be long suffering. In this, they mirror the divine in their own

reality and, while suffering for others, make it possible for creation to endure. Moreover, through this act of faithfulness the guiltless establish a unique bond with the Almighty. As they suffer for and with Him, He suffers their suffering, shares their agony, and comes to love them in a special way for loving Him with such fortitude and without limit.

This theme, as already evidenced in Parts I and II of this anthology, has been enunciated in Jewish theological writings emanating from the Holocaust era itself, as well as in post-Holocaust sources. One finds it in the teachings of ḥasidic rebbes as well as Conservative thinkers, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Orthodox thinkers, such as Eliezer Berkovits—both of whom are represented in this anthology. In these modern sources it receives a classical exposition. For example, Berkovits writes: "God's servant carries upon his shoulders God's dilemma with man through history. God's people share in all the fortunes of God's dilemma as man is bungling his way through toward messianic realization."⁵

It should also be noted that one contemporary Jewish theologian in particular has gone beyond the traditional framework and used the suffering servant idea to construct an elaborate, very novel, reading of the Holocaust. For Ignaz Maybaum, a German Reform rabbi who survived the war in London (and whose position is represented in the selection of his writing below), the pattern of the suffering servant is the paradigm of Israel's way in history. First in the "servant of God" in *Isaiah*, then in the Jew Jesus, and now at Treblinka and Auschwitz, God uses the Jewish people to address the world and to save it: "They died though innocent so that others might live." According to this decipherment of the Holocaust, the perennial dialectic of history is God's desire that the gentile nations come close to Him, while they resist this call. Therefore, the special God-given task, the "mission" of Israel, is to foster and facilitate this relationship between God and the nations. It is they who must make God's message accessible in terms that the gentile nations will understand and respond to. But what language, what symbols, will speak to the nations? Not that of the *Akedah* in which Isaac is spared and no blood is shed but rather, and only, that of the crucifixion, i.e., a sacrifice in which the innocent die for the guilty, where some die vicariously so that others might live.

Accordingly, modern Israel repeats collectively the single crucifixion of one Jew two millennia ago, and by so doing again reveals to humankind its weaknesses, as well as the need for man to turn to Heaven for instruction and salvation. In a daring parallelism, Maybaum writes:

The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz. The cross, the Roman gallows, was replaced by the gas chamber. The gentiles, it seems, must first be terrified by the blood of the sacrificed scapegoat to have the mercy of God revealed to them and become converted, become baptized gentiles, become Christians.⁶

For Maybaum, through the Holocaust, the world again moves morally and theologically forward and upward finally transcending the last vestiges of medieval obscurantism and intolerance, the very phenomena that produced the *Shoah*.

The theological deconstruction of the Holocaust using the suffering servant model can thus be seen to be interesting as well as challenging. Readers, however, must pause and carefully examine the plausibility of this response—and in particular Maybaum's unique rendering of this doctrine—before concluding that it supplies the needed explanation for the murder of European Jewry. And this not least because they need to ask questions about the logic of the suffering servant thesis itself. That is, they must carefully examine the notion of vicarious suffering and the issues it raises

concerning God's activity in history. Would God really cause the deaths of six million people in order to make a point?

4. *Hester Panim*: "God Hides His Face"

The Bible, in wrestling with the problem of human suffering, appeals in a number of places to the notion of *Hester Panim*: "the hiding of the face of God." This concept has two meanings. The first, in Deuteronomy 31:17–18 and later in Micah 3:4, is a causal one that links God's "absence" from the unfolding historical events to human sin: God turns away from the sinner. The second sense, found particularly in a number of psalms (e.g., Psalms 44, 69, 88, and variants in, e.g., Psalms 9, 10, 13; see also Job 13:24), does not relate God's absence to sin but, instead, suggests human despair and confusion—and even protest—over His "disappearance" for no reason that can be discerned. Here mankind stands "abandoned" for reasons that are unknown and unfathomable. Thus the repetitive theme of lament sounded in the psalms: "Why" or "how long," God, will You be absent? And the putting of the bewildering question: Is it possible for God to be continually indifferent to human affairs, to be passive in the struggle between good and evil, to be unmoved by suffering and its overcoming?

In applying this unusual doctrine to the Holocaust, modern theologians—for example, Martin Buber, Joseph Soloveitchik, Zvi Kolitz, and Eliezer Berkovits, all of whom are represented in the selections that follow this introduction—are attempting to do three things: (a) to vindicate the Jewish people, i.e., the death camps are not the consequence of sin and do not represent Divine punishment; (b) to remove God as the direct cause of the evil, i.e., the Holocaust is something men did to other men, women, and children; and (c) to affirm the reality and even saving nature of the Divine despite the empirical evidence to the contrary. The first two points need no further explanation; the third does. With regard to this line of reasoning, one must understand that the notion of *Hester Panim* is not merely or only about the absence of God but rather, at least in specific contexts, entails a more complex exegesis of Divine Providence stemming from an analysis of the ontological nature of the Divine. In such instances God's absence, *Hester Panim*, is a necessary, active condition of His saving mercy. His "hiddenness" is the obverse of His "long-suffering" patience with sinners, that is, being patient with sinners means allowing sin. As Eliezer Berkovits has argued: "One may call it the divine dilemma that God's *Erek Apayim*, His patiently waiting countenance to some is, of necessity, identical with His *Hester Panim*, His hiding of the countenance, to others."⁷

Then too, within the larger mosaic of human purpose, *Hester Panim* is dialectically related to the fundamental character of human freedom without which human beings would not be the potentially majestic beings Judaism envisions them to be. (I shall return in detail to this doctrine of the absolute need for human freedom in point 6, "The Burden of Human Freedom," below.) It needs also to be recognized that this challenging notion is, at one and the same time, a proclamation of a deep religious faith. The lament addressed to God—even while He seems absent—is a sign that God is and that His manifest presence is still possible. It is an affirmation that one believes that ultimately evil will not triumph for God will not always "hide His face." In this connection, it is relevant to note that for some contemporary Jewish theologians like Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg, and Martin Buber—all of whom are represented in the selections below—the creation of the State of

Israel following so closely upon the Holocaust is proof of this. In the State of Israel, God again openly reveals His saving presence.

The theological claim that God hides His face undoubtedly speaks eloquently to the religious confusion of the post-Holocaust situation. But students should beware of accepting it too easily as an answer to the horror of the Nazi period for, among other reasons, it appeals to a mystery, God's hiddenness, to solve the mystery represented by the evil of the *Shoah*.

5. *Mipnei Chataaynu*: "Because of Our Sins We Are Punished"

In biblical and later Jewish (rabbinic) sources, the principal explanation for human suffering was sin. According to this view, there was a balance—established by God—in the universal order that was inescapable: Good brought forth blessing; sin brought retribution (see, for example, Deuteronomy 28). Both on the individual and the national level, the law of cause and effect, sin and grief, operated. In our time, given its undoubted theological pedigree, a number of theologians, especially those of a more traditional bent, and certain rabbinic sages, have employed this explanation to account for the Holocaust. The ḥasidic (Satmar) Rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum, for example, puts this claim forward clearly and with certitude: "[S]in is the cause of all suffering."⁸

Harsh as it is, the argument that Teitelbaum (and others who share this view) make is that Israel sinned "grievously" and God, after much patience and hope of "return," finally "cut off" the generation of the wicked. It needs to be noted explicitly that the majority of Jewish thinkers who have wrestled with the theological implications of the *Shoah* have rejected this line of analysis. Still, an important, if small, segment of the traditional religious community has consistently advanced it.

Two critical questions immediately arise in pursuing the application of this millennia-old doctrine to the contemporary tragedy of the Holocaust. The first is: What kind of God would exact such retribution? This crucial theological issue requires close and careful reflection. Second, of what sin could Israel be guilty to warrant such retribution? Here the explanations vary depending on one's perspective. For some, such as Rabbi Isaac Hutner and the aforementioned Satmar Rebbe, Yoel Teitelbaum, and his small circle of ḥasidic and extreme right-wing, anti-Zionist followers, the sin that precipitated the Holocaust was Zionism. In Zionism, Teitelbaum argued (based on a nonbinding talmudic tradition recorded in B. T. *Ketubot* 110^a),⁹ the Jewish people broke their covenant with God, which demanded that they not try to end their exile and thereby hasten the coming of the Messiah through their own means. In consequence, "we have witnessed the immense manifestation of God's anger [the Holocaust]." Rabbi Hutner, in the selection reproduced below, holding a similar theological position, links the Holocaust to the instigations of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who, in his view, persuaded Hitler to undertake the destruction of European Jewry. For others on the extreme right edge of the religious spectrum, the primary crime was not Zionism but Reform Judaism or, again, assimilation. In this equation, the centrality of Germany as the land that gave birth to the "Jewish Enlightenment," i.e., the movement for modernizing Jewish belief and practice, to Reform Judaism, and to Nazism is undeniable proof of this causal connection.¹⁰ All these justifications and explanations, however, must be treated with great suspicion. Readers need to reflect on the two fundamental questions posed above when deciding whether or not this response, which blames the victims for their own destruction, is plausible.

6. The Burden of Human Freedom: The "Free-Will Defense"

Among the theological and philosophical traditions that have been concerned to uphold God's justice despite the manifest evil in the world, none has an older or more distinguished lineage than that known as the "free-will defense." According to this argument, human evil is the ever-present possibility entailed by the reality of human freedom. If human beings are to have the potential for majesty they must, conversely, have an equal potential for corruption; if they are to be capable of acts of authentic morality, they must be capable of acts of authentic immorality. Freedom is a two-edged sword, hence its challenge and its cost. Applying this consideration to the events of the Nazi epoch, the *Shoah* becomes a case of man's inhumanity to man, the extreme misuse of human freedom. At the same time, such a position with its emphasis on human actions does not call into question God's goodness and solicitude for it is man, not God, who perpetrates genocide. God observes these events with his unique Divine pathos, but in order to allow human morality to be a substantively real thing, He refrains from intercession. Thus, at the same time that He respects human freedom and is long suffering with an evil humanity, His patience results in the suffering of others.

This defense has been advocated by a number of post-Holocaust thinkers. The two most notable presentations of this theme are found in Eliezer Berkovits's *Faith after the Holocaust* and Arthur A. Cohen's *The Tremendum*; sections from both works are excerpted below. Berkovits has employed it to defend a traditional Jewish theological position, while Cohen has utilized it to develop a Jewish "process theology" (for more on Cohen's view see part II, point 3, of this introduction, below). And in both cases—as well as in the work of other thinkers, for example, the argument of Robert Gordis in his selection below—it advances a powerful theological position. But, for all its significance, it does not fully answer the problem, for God is, in some ultimate sense, still responsible for creation. Thus, in the past He is said to have intervened in history, e.g., at the Exodus from Egypt, but this type of intervention seems altogether absent in the case of the Holocaust. (Yet, having said this, one needs to consider that Hitler was defeated; his plan totally to annihilate the Jewish people did not succeed; and after the war the State of Israel was, after 1,900 years, recreated. There are those for whom any one of these outcomes, and all of them together, may/do indicate God's active participation in history. But this is a very complex matter that requires careful and sustained theological reflection.) Again, insofar as human beings are His creation, He could have given us a stronger inclination for the good. In other words, there are many possibilities, Divine and human, that must be examined with great care before deciding to adopt this theological position as definitive.

II

The first six theological positions that have been analyzed have all been predicated upon, and are the extension of, classical Jewish responses to national tragedy. In the last four decades, however, a number of innovative, more radical responses have been proposed by contemporary post-Holocaust thinkers. Six, in particular, merit serious attention.

1. Auschwitz: A New Revelation

The first of these emerges from the work of Emil Fackenheim, who has contended that the Holocaust represents a new revelation. Rejecting any account that analyzes Auschwitz as *mipnei chataeynu* (because of our sins), Fackenheim, employing a Buberian model of dialogical revelation¹¹—i.e., revelation as the personal encounter of an I with the Eternal Thou (God)—urges Israel to continue to believe despite the moral outrage of the *Shoah*. God, on this view, is always present in Jewish history, even at Auschwitz. We do not, and cannot, understand what He was doing at Auschwitz, nor why He allowed it, but we must insist that He was there. Equally, if not more significant, God commands Israel from the death camps as He did from Sinai. The essence of this commanding voice, what Fackenheim has called the “614th commandment” (there are 613 commandments in traditional Judaism) is “Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories.” That is, Jews are under a sacred obligation to survive. After the death camps, Jewish existence itself is a holy act. Moreover, Jews are now forbidden to become cynical about the world and man, for to submit to cynicism is to abdicate responsibility for the future and to deliver the world into the hands of the luciferian forces of Nazism. And most important, Jews are “forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish.” The voice that speaks from Auschwitz demands that no one assist Hitler to win posthumous victories. The Jewish will for survival is natural enough, but Fackenheim invests it with transcendental significance. Precisely because others would eradicate Jews from the earth, Jews are commanded to resist annihilation. Paradoxically, Hitler makes Judaism a necessity after Auschwitz. To say no to Hitler is to say yes to the God of Sinai; to say no to the God of Sinai is to say yes to Hitler.

To fully evaluate this interesting, highly influential response to the *Shoah* (reprinted below), a detailed analysis of a sort that is beyond our present possibilities is required. Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed that the main line of critical inquiry into Fackenheim’s position—as well as that of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who draws his main theological argument from Fackenheim’s views (see his selections below)—must center on the dialogical (Buberian) notion of revelation and the related idea of commandment, as that traditional notion is here employed. One needs to ask Fackenheim: (a) How do historical events like the Holocaust become “revelatory”? (b) What exactly does he mean by the term “commandment”? And, as a related question, one needs to ask whether one wants to make reaction to Hitler the main reason for continued Jewish existence. This latter topic is pursued, in particular, by Michael Wyschograd (see his selection below), who is highly critical of Fackenheim’s attempt to respond to the Holocaust and to justify continued collective Jewish existence on grounds other than the classical doctrines of covenant and Torah.

2. The Covenant Broken: A New Age

A second contemporary thinker who has urged continued belief in the God of Israel, though on new terms, is Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg. For Greenberg, all the old truths and certainties, all the old commitments and obligations, have been destroyed by the Holocaust. Moreover, any simple faith is now impossible. The Holocaust ends the old era of Jewish covenantal existence and ushers in a new and different one. Greenberg explains his radical view in this way. There have been three major periods in the covenantal history of Israel. The first is the biblical era. What

characterizes this first covenantal stage is the asymmetry of the relationship between God and Israel. The biblical encounter may be a covenant but it is clearly a covenant in which "God is the initiator, the senior partner, who punishes, rewards, and enforces the punishment if the Jews slacken."¹² This type of understanding of the relationship between God and Israel is displayed in the crisis engendered by the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. To this tragedy, Israel, through the biblical prophets and in keeping with the logic of this position, responded primarily by falling back on the doctrine of self-chastisement: The destruction of the Temple and the consequent exile of the nation were divine punishments for Israel's sinful ways.

The second phase¹³ in the transformation of the covenant idea is marked by the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome in 70 CE. The meaning adduced from this event by the rabbinical sages of the era was that now Jews must take a more equal role in the covenant and become true partners with the Almighty. "The manifest divine presence and activity [were] being reduced, but the covenant was actually being renewed."¹⁴ The destruction of 70 CE signaled the initiation of an age in which God would be less manifest though still present.

This brings us to what is decisive and radical in Greenberg's ruminations, what he has termed the "third great cycle in Jewish history," which has come about as a consequence of the Holocaust. The *Shoah* marks a new era in which the Sinaitic covenantal relationship has been shattered, and thus a new and unprecedented form of covenantal relationship—if there is to be any covenantal relationship at all—must now come into being to take its place:

In retrospect, it is now clear that the divine assignment to the Jews was untenable. After the Holocaust, it is obvious that this role opened the Jews to a total murderous fury from which there was no escape. Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the covenant.¹⁵

What this means, Greenberg argues, is that the covenant

can no longer be commanded and subject to a serious external enforcement. It cannot be commanded because morally speaking—covenantally speaking—one cannot order another to step forward to die. One can give an order like this to an enemy, but in a moral relationship I cannot demand the giving up of one's life. I can ask for it or plead for it—but I cannot order it.

Out of this interconnected set of considerations, Greenberg pronounces the fateful judgment: The Jewish covenant with God is now voluntary! Jews have, quite miraculously, chosen to continue to live Jewish lives and collectively to build a Jewish state, the ultimate symbol of Jewish continuity, but these acts are, after Auschwitz, the result of the free choice of the Jewish people. "I submit," writes Greenberg, "that the covenant was broken. God was in no position to command any more, but the Jewish people [were] so in love with the dream of redemption that [they] volunteered to carry on with [their] mission."¹⁶ The consequence of this voluntary action transforms the existing covenantal order. First, Israel was a junior partner, then an equal partner. Finally, after Auschwitz, it becomes "the senior partner in action."

In turn, Israel's voluntary acceptance of the covenant and continued will to survive suggest three corollaries. First, this acceptance points, if obliquely, to the continued existence of the God of Israel. By creating the State of Israel, by having

Jewish children, the Jewish people show that "covenantal hope is not in vain."¹⁷ Second, and very important, in an age of voluntarism rather than coercion, living Jewishly under the covenant can no longer be interpreted monolithically, i.e., only in strict *halakhi* (traditional rabbinic) fashion. Third, any aspect of religious behavior that demeans the image of the divine or of people, for example, prejudice, sexism, and oppression of all sorts, must be purged.

Greenberg's reconstruction of Jewish theology after the Holocaust (represented in his selection below) presents a fascinating, creative reaction to the unprecedented evil manifest in the death camps. Whether his position is, finally, theologically convincing turns, however, on (a) the correctness of his theological reading of Jewish history; and (b) the meaning and status of key concepts, such as "covenant," "revelation," "commandment," and the like, in his radically revisionist theological system. For example, can the covenant made at Sinai be broken? And can a new "voluntary covenant" really take its place? Readers will have to think carefully about these issues before accepting or rejecting Greenberg's position.

3. A Redefinition of God

An influential school in modern theological circles known as "process theology," inspired by the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, has argued that the classical understanding of God has to be dramatically revised—not least in terms of our conception of His power and direct, causal involvement in human affairs—if we are to construct a coherent theological position. According to those who advance this thesis (represented in this collection by the thoughtful work of Hans Jonas, Arthur A. Cohen, and Melissa Raphael), God certainly exists, but the old-new difficulties raised by the problem of theodicy for classical theistic positions arise precisely because of an inadequate description of the Divine, i.e., one that misascribes to Him attributes of omnipotence and omniscience that He does not possess.

Jewish theologian Arthur A. Cohen, in his *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*,¹⁸ has advanced the fullest, most detailed version of this redefinitional strategy as the most appropriate way to respond to the theological challenges posed by the Holocaust. After arguing for the enormity of the *Shoah*, i.e., its uniqueness and its transcendence of any "meaning," Cohen suggests that the way out of the theological dilemma posed by the death camps for classical Jewish thought is to rethink whether "national catastrophes are compatible with our traditional notions of a beneficent and providential God."¹⁹

For Cohen, the answer is that they are not. Against the traditional view that asks, given its understanding of God's action in history, "How could it be that God witnessed the Holocaust and remained silent?" Cohen would pose the contrary "dipolar" thesis that "what is taken as God's speech is really always man's hearing, that God is not the strategist of our particularities or of our historical condition, but rather the mystery of our futurity, always our posse, never our acts." This means that, "if we begin to see God less as an interferer whose insertion is welcome (when it accords with our needs) and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration . . . we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honor, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand."²⁰ This redescription of God that denies that God is a direct causal agent in human affairs, coupled with a form of the free will defense (as seen in Cohen's selection below), appears to resolve much of the theological tension created by the *Tremendum*.

But this deconstruction of classical theism and its substitution by what Cohen terms theological dipolarity creates its own theological difficulties. For example, one needs to ask: Is "God" still God if He is no longer the providential agency in history? Is "God" still God if He lacks the power to enter history vertically to perform the miraculous? Is such a "dipolar" God still the God to whom one prays, the God of salvation? Students have to think through these and other religious issues raised by Cohen's redefinition of God and His role in human affairs before deciding whether to opt for or against his provocative theological revisions.

Hans Jonas's suggested redefinition of the concept of God (see his selection below) emphasizes, in contradistinction to classical theological claims that the Divine is perfect and unchanging, both that God suffers along with humankind and that through His relation with men and women He "becomes." That is, "the relation of God to the world from the moment of creation, and certainly from the creation of man on, involves suffering on the part of God." And, at the same time: "God emerges in time instead of possessing a completed being that remains identical with itself throughout eternity." God has been altered by—"temporalized" by—His relationship with others and, in the process, has become open to human suffering, which causes Him to suffer and to care. Moreover, insofar as God is not omnipotent, Jonas contends that human action is required to perfect the world. "God has no more to give: It is man's now to give to Him."

As with the ruminations of Arthur A. Cohen, Jonas's revised conception of the Divine is imaginative and provocative. Whether it sacrifices too much in its attempt to make metaphysical and ontological sense of the Holocaust is the essential question for readers to ponder.

The third redefinition of God represented in this collection is advanced by Melissa Raphael who, in an intriguing argument, suggests that during and after the Holocaust the correct way to decipher the action of the Divine is through the model of "God as mother" rather than through the inherited traditional idea of "God as father." The patriarchal notion of God as almighty and omniscient is simply incompatible with what happened in the death camps. Yet, faced with this jarring fact, one need not give up belief in God altogether. Rather, one should refashion one's understanding of God in the image of a caring, suffering, loving—but not omnipotent—mother. Calling into use the traditional rabbinic notion of God's presence in the world as being associated with feminine attributes—this divine presence being known among the rabbis and Jewish mystics as the *Shekhinah*—Raphael advances the proposal that we should continue to believe in a God who "all the while secretly sustains the world by Her care."

Raphael's proposed revision is undoubtedly suggestive, even profoundly appealing in many ways, but there remains the fundamental theological question: Will the concept of "God as mother" be able to answer all the problematic metaphysical and ethical conundrums produced by the "final solution" better, i.e., both more inclusively and more conclusively, than prior patriarchal accounts of the Divine? Or, like Cohen's and Jonas's views, does her revisionist position sacrifice too much theologically and metaphysically in order to retain some very much reduced role for God in human affairs?

4. God Is Dead

It is natural that many should have responded to the horror of the Holocaust with unbelief. How, such individuals quite legitimately ask, can one continue to believe

in God when God did nothing to halt the demonic fury of Hitler and his minions? Such skepticism usually takes a nonsystematic, almost intuitive form: "I can no longer believe." However, one contemporary Jewish theologian, Richard Rubenstein, has provided a formally structured "death of God" theology as a response to the *Shoah*.

In Rubenstein's view (represented in the selections below), the only honest response to the death camps is the rejection of God, "God is dead," and the open recognition of the meaninglessness of existence. Our life is neither planned nor purposeful. History reflects no Divine will, and human affairs reveal no Divine concern. In light of the Holocaust, human beings must now reject their illusions and recognize the truth: that life is not intrinsically valuable and that the human condition reflects no transcendental purpose. All theological "rationalizations" of the Holocaust pale before its enormity and, for Rubenstein, the only reaction that is worthy is the rejection of the entire inherited Jewish theological framework: There is no God and no covenant with Israel.

Humankind must, after Auschwitz, turn away from transcendental myths and face its actual existential situation honestly. Drawing heavily upon the atheistic existentialists, Rubenstein interprets this to mean that in the face of the world's inherent nihilism, if there are to be any values, individuals must fashion and assert these values; in response to history's meaninglessness, human beings must create and project what meaning there is to be.

Had Rubenstein merely asserted the death of God, his would not be a Jewish theology. What makes it "Jewish" are the implications he draws from his radical negation with respect to the people of Israel. It might be expected that the denial of God's covenantal relation with Israel would entail the end of Judaism and so the end of the Jewish people as a meaningful collective. From the perspective of traditional Jewish theology, this would certainly be the case. Rubenstein, however, again inverts our ordinary perception and argues that with the death of God, the existence of "peoplehood," of the community of Israel, is all the more important. Now that there is nowhere else to turn for meaning, Jews need each other all the more in order to create meaning: "[I]t is precisely because human existence is tragic, ultimately hopeless, and without meaning that we treasure our religious community."²¹ Though Judaism has to be "demythologized," i.e., it has to renounce all of its traditional metaphysical doctrines as well as its normative claim to a unique "chosen status," at the same time it paradoxically gains heightened importance in the process.

Rubenstein's position is certainly challenging, however it is not free of philosophical and theological difficulties. Students need, for example, to evaluate his criteria and method. That is, they have to ask whether the question of God's existence or nonexistence is subject to empirical confirmation, as Rubenstein believes. Again, if historical events like the Holocaust count against God's existence, do positive events like the creation of the State of Israel count as evidence for God's existence? (Compare, for example, the argument linking the Holocaust and the State of Israel made in the readings by Joseph Soloveitchik and Irving Greenberg.) Asking these questions, we begin to see that judging God's existence or nonexistence is no simple matter. Then, too, are Rubenstein's proposals for the need for a Jewish community in a world without God reasonable? Why, for example, should Jews not find the now-constructed meaning of their lives outside the confines of Jewish peoplehood and community?

5. An Ethical Demand

Two thinkers represented in this collection, Emmanuel Levinas and Amos Funkenstein, reject, in different ways and for different metaphysical reasons, the

classical theologies and theodicies that would defend God and His justice despite the gas chambers and crematoriums. And both urge that rather than upholding theological doctrines that have been rendered "indefensible" by the Holocaust—what Levinas in a telling phrase describes as "useless suffering"²²—the primary, absolute demand of our post-Holocaust era is the defense of the ethical obligation that human beings owe to one another. As Levinas explains:

[T]he suffering for the useless suffering of the other person, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens upon the suffering the ethical perspective of the interhuman. . . . It is this attention to the other which, across the cruelties of our century—despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties—can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle—the only one which it is not possible to contest—a principle which can go so far as to command the hopes and practical discipline of vast human groups.

Levinas, while not denying the existence of God, stresses the obligations that one human being has *a priori* to another human being, i.e., simply by virtue of being human. Whether one is a theist or not, the fundamental human requirement after Auschwitz is caring for the other. Likewise, Funkenstein advances the primacy of the ethical as the appropriate response to the *Shoah* while arguing for a more negative theological position that denies the existence of God.

This position, i.e., the requirement that we first pay attention to ethics for, at Auschwitz, we saw what the disregard of the ethical permits, is appealing but raises, in turn, a number of deep, interrelated questions: What is the ground of the ethical? What is the source of ethical obligation? Who or what is the guarantor of the value of the ethical? Can there be truly binding ethical obligations without religious sanctions? These are very profound questions that cannot ultimately be evaded. To propound *a priori* the primacy of the ethical is merely to stipulate the conclusion, not to prove it.

6. Mystery and Silence

In the face of the abyss, the devouring of the Jewish people by the dark forces of evil incarnate, recourse to the God of mystery and the endorsement of human silence are not unworthy options. There are, however, two kinds of silence, two kinds of employment of the God of mystery. The first is closer to the attitude of the agnostic: "I cannot know," and hence all deeply grounded existential and intellectual wrestling with the enormous problems raised by the *Shoah* are avoided. The second is the silence and mystery to which the Bible points in its recognition of God's elemental otherness. This is the silence that comes after struggling with God, after reproaching God, after feeling His closeness or His painful absence. This silence, this mystery, does not attempt to diminish the tragedy by a too quick, too gauche answer, yet having followed reason to its limits, it recognizes the limits of reason. One finds this attitude more commonly expressed in the literary and personal responses to Auschwitz by survivors than in technical works of theology. For example, it is preeminent in the work of Elie Wiesel (see the final selection in this volume) and Andre Schwarzbart, as well as in the poetry of Nellie Sachs. Assuredly, there is great difficulty in ascertaining when thought has reached its limit and silence and mystery become the proper position to adopt, but, at one and the same time, there is the need to know when to speak in silence.

Still, it should be acknowledged that silence, too, can be problematic for if employed incorrectly, or too casually, or too universally, as a—or the—theological response to the *Shoah*, it removes the Holocaust from history and all post-Holocaust human experience. And by doing so, it may produce the unintended consequence of making the Holocaust irrelevant. If the generations that come after Auschwitz cannot speak of it, and thus cannot raise probing questions as a consequence of it, then it becomes literally meaningless to them.

III

One additional independent issue that should be briefly explored in an introduction to post-Holocaust Jewish theology is that of the “uniqueness” of the Holocaust. This topic, this claim (and the denial of this claim) has played a considerable role in the theological debate concerning the implications of the destruction of European Jewry. In this connection, two different concerns arise. First, there is the historical-philosophical question: Is the Holocaust unique? Second, there is the related, but separate, question: If the Holocaust is unique what, if any, theological implication(s) does this have? To answer the first question—“Is the Holocaust unique?”—we have, of necessity, to delineate the conditions that we hold make this event singular. Thus, we have to be able to show that the Holocaust is unique with respect to specific and identifiable conditions. Unless we can do this, the claim that the Holocaust is unique is either just a rhetorical assertion or a historical claim that no one need accept and which may even be false.

Having considered this issue elsewhere in detail,²³ I suggest the following way of proceeding. First, I would argue that the required individuating criteria, if there are such criteria, are not moral or metaphysical. That is, it is not the case that the Holocaust is more evil than certain other events, or that God caused the destruction in some special way. I would also eschew all questions that raise the issue of “who suffered most.” There is no way to quantify and compare the suffering of, for example, Africans enslaved in the enterprise of New World slavery, Native Americans subjugated and brutally mistreated by their European conquerors and colonizers, Armenians murdered in World War I by the Turks, inmates of the Gulag, and victims in Nazi death camps. Instead, I propose that the criteria of uniqueness that we employ be phenomenological. And, on the basis of such criteria, I would argue that, in fact, “The Holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people.”²⁴ This conclusion entails that the Holocaust would not be the Holocaust if the property of “intentionally pursuing the physical annihilation of a people without remainder” were not present. Likewise, other occasions of mass death that lack this necessary intent (to murder an entire people without remainder) are not comparable to the Holocaust, at least not as regards this property. Certainly a full description and analysis of the Holocaust would include consideration of such elements as technology, bureaucracy, dehumanization, and the like in the destruction of European Jewry. But the presence of these complementary phenomena without the property of genocidal intent would not, in my view, be sufficient to establish either the character of the *Shoah* as such nor, in particular, its uniqueness. One might wish to argue with this conclusion and the criteria used to reach it but to do so one must have detailed knowledge of the historical cases to which the Holocaust is being compared, as well

as sound philosophical reasons for proposing other criteria by which to measure and decide this matter.

Now I turn to our second interrelated query: Does this matter theologically? Given how I have defined the concept of "uniqueness," it is not at all clear to me that there is a direct, and preferred, theological meaning to be drawn from the exceptionality of this event. In dealing with and responding to the multiple epistemological and metaphysical issues that are here relevant, both the theological radicals, e.g., Richard Rubenstein, Arthur A. Cohen, and Irving Greenberg, and the theological conservatives, e.g., Eliezer Berkovits, Joseph Soloveitchik, Isaac Hutner, and the Satmar Rebbe, have all run ahead of the available evidence to reach conclusions that are neither epistemologically nor intellectually persuasive.

At present, almost any responsible theological position appears to me to be compatible with the singularity of the *Shoah*. Religious conservatives, who intuitively reject claims for the uniqueness of the Holocaust on the usually implicit grounds that such an unequivocal conclusion would necessarily entail ominous alterations in the inherited normative *Weltanschauung*, are simply mistaken. The fact is that the theological radicals who hold that the singularity of the *Shoah* necessarily entails religious transformations, and within Jewish parameters *halakhic* (religious-legal) changes, have not shown this to be the case. They have merely assumed it to be so, positing the "required changes" they take to be obligatory without providing either *halakhic* or philosophical justification for such innovations. The matter of whether the *Shoah* necessarily entails any religious changes regarding Jewish practices and behaviors remains an open one.

Conclusion

The death camps and *Einsatzgruppen* do challenge—even while they do not necessarily falsify—traditional Jewish theological claims. However, just what this challenge ultimately means remains undecided.

Notes

1. For more on these medieval texts, see Shlomo Eidelberg, trans., *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades* (Madison, Wis., 1977). For further discussion, see Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (London, 1961), pp. 82–92; and Moses Shulvass, "Crusaders, Martyrs, and the Marranos of Ashkenaz," in his *Between the Rhine and the Bosphorus: Studies and Essays in European Jewish History* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 1–14. For a later medieval source, see Marc Saperstein, "A Sermon on the *Akedah* from the Generation of the Expulsion and Its Implications for 1391," in *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of the Jewish People Presented to Professor Haim Beinart*, edited by Aharon Mirsky et al. (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 103–124.

2. See, for more details, Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1967), and the medieval religious poems collected in A. M. Habermann, *Séfer Gezerot Ashkenaz Ve-Tzarfat* (Jerusalem, 1945). The Hebrew martyrologies of the Crusades era have also been translated into English by Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*.

3. In Christian tradition, the "suffering servant" is Jesus.

4. For more on the different classical Jewish interpretations of the theme of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, see Samuel R. Driver and Adolf Neubauer, eds., *The 53rd Chapter of Isaiah according to Jewish Authors*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1876–1877; reprint, New York, 1969).

5. *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York, 1973), p. 127.

6. *The Face of God after Auschwitz* (Amsterdam, 1965), p. 36.

7. *Faith after the Holocaust*, p. 107.

8. *1 a'Yoel Moshe*, 3 vols. (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1959, 1960, 1961), Introduction, vol. 1, p. 5 [Hebrew]. I would also note that Christian thinkers also need to reflect carefully on this question when they attribute the Holocaust to God's continuing punishment of the Jewish people for the putative crime of deicide. In a tradition that stresses divine love, is it theologically reasonable to envision a loving God punishing one million Jewish children—and six million Jews altogether—with a horrible death two thousand years after the crucifixion?

9. The text in B. T. *Ketubot* reports: "God said to the people of Israel: 'If you keep my oaths, well and good; if not I will allow your flesh to become [prey] like that of the gazelles and the hinds of the field.'" Teitelbaum interprets this text to apply to the Zionists who did not keep their "oath" to be passive in the exile that came about, in the first place, because of Israel's sins. Instead, they committed the most grievous sin of attempting to end their suffering in the lands of their dispersion through Zionism, and the Holocaust is God's punishing reply thereto. *Sefer 1 a'Yoel Moshe* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 5721/1961), p. 5 [Hebrew]. For a critique of Teitelbaum's views, see Norman Lamm, "The Ideology of *Natunei Karta* according to the Satmarer Version," *Tradition* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1971): 38–53; Allan L. Nadler, "Piety and Politics: The Case of the Satmar Rebbe," *Judaism* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 135–152; and Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 2 (May 2004): 165–178. See also the critique of Rav Isaac Hutner's explanation of the Holocaust as due to Zionism offered by Lawrence Kaplan, "Rabbi Isaac Hutner's *Da'at Torah* Perspective on the Holocaust," *Tradition* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 235–248. The essay by R. Hutner to which Kaplan is replying is reprinted in this collection, pp. 557–564 below.

10. For the presentation of this position, see Elhanan Wasserman, *In the Footsteps of the Messiah* (Tel Aviv, 5702/1942), p. 6 [Hebrew]; Haim Ozer Grodzinsky, *Ahiezzer* (Vilna, 5699/1939) [Hebrew]; Jacob Israel Kanyevisky, *Hayyhai Olam* (Rishon Le Zion, 5732/1972) [Hebrew]. Readers should also consult the relevant material reprinted in part I of this collection.

11. This refers to Martin Buber's theory of revelation most famously presented in his classic work *I and Thou*, first published in German in 1923. For more on this, see Buber's own discussion in part 3 of *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York, 1970).

12. *The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History* (New York, 1981), p. 6. Hereafter abbreviated as *TGC*.

13. To be dated approximately 150 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.

14. *TGC*, p. 7.

15. *Voluntary Covenant* (New York, 1982), p. 34.

16. *TGC*, p. 23.

17. *TGC*, p. 25.

18. (New York, 1981).

19. *The Tremendum*, p. 50.

20. Cohen, *The Tremendum*, p. 97.

21. *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 68.

22. "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, edited by Robert Berlasconi and David Wood (London, 1988), p. 159.

23. See my full argument in Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, vol. 1 (New York, 1994).

24. *Ibid.*, p. 28.