

The Hiddenness of God: Eliezer Berkovits

Human dignity and the death camps

Like Maza, Maybaum and Fackenheim, the Orthodox theologian Eliezer Berkovits in *Faith After the Holocaust* argues that religious belief is possible after the nightmare of the crematoria. In considering the theological dilemmas raised by the Holocaust, Berkovits maintains that the problem of faith must be confronted in the agony of one's soul. Whoever approaches the issue of Jewish suffering dispassionately, using the Holocaust as proof against God's existence, vulgarises the significance of the death camps. After the Holocaust Jews have religious responsibility to reason with God, and if need be to wrestle with Him. Such a stance is not blasphemous; it is simply impossible to pass by such horror in silence. Such a questioning of God stands out as a guidepost at the very beginning of Jewish history – Abraham wrestled with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly, Job struggled with God over his misfortune. The attempt to understand God's providence in the death camps is thus consonant with the biblical tradition.

One way of resolving the crisis of faith engendered by the Jewish concentration camp experience is to meet the problem with a resolutely negative attitude. The declaration that there is neither justice nor judge is a Jewish version of radical theology. On this view, the universe is indifferent toward human destiny. Life is absurd, without meaning; the only values are those created by human beings. Such a view leaves no room for the transcendent. It is the very essence of this position that there is no personal God who is concerned with justice or human suffering. Yet after the Holocaust, meaning in the universe cannot be dismissed so simply.

At Auschwitz and Treblinka, man sank to the lowest level, but he was also exalted to the highest dignity. Many Jews faced death with heroism; as martyrs they affirmed their belief in God despite His terrible silence.

In the Warsaw ghetto, for example, Jews experienced the nobility of existence in the reign of terror. One of the survivors tells the story of how he and a woman were sought by the Gestapo. They were chased for weeks, living in the shadow of death. Finally they were trapped behind the accumulated garbage of a ghetto attic. As a policeman advanced, the man seized him by the throat but the Jewish woman ran from her hiding place and shouted: "Don't kill him. Don't kill him." According to Berkovits, this manifestation of human dignity in the face of the Nazi threat is an awe-inspiring testimony of the nobility of human life: "At that moment there was no place on earth holier than the dark and dusty corner in that attic in the Warsaw ghetto. It was the Holy of Holies on earth, sharing in the very majesty of Sinai, when God descended upon it and proclaimed His 'Thou shalt not kill'."

Another survivor reported, "I saw death many times in the ghetto and in the concentration camps, I looked into its eyes often. Yet always the way out would come suddenly as if by a miracle. Always a fellow-sufferer would appear to help out in a dangerous situation, by giving a hand."

Such cases of self-sacrifice were common, as is evidenced by a letter from a member of the Jewish Council of the Warsaw ghetto to a young woman who was his helper in the attempt to feed starving children. Because this individual was rich, he could have escaped from Poland but instead was determined to stay with his people. "I wish you a safe journey," he wrote. "I am not sorry that I remain here. Of all the decisions of a life which has not been a short one. . . I consider the one to stay here among my brothers and sisters the wisest."

Again, other Jews preserved their dignity by sanctifying God's name as they went to their deaths. Thousands of Jews proclaimed their love of God in the dark hour when it seemed as though He had abandoned them. In *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Emmanuel Ringelbaum writes:

I marvel at the pious Jews who sacrifice themselves by wearing beards and the traditional frock coats. They are subjected to physical abuse. . . . An elderly Jew passed the guards on Twanda

Street and did not – for reasons of piety – take off his hat in salute though the Jewish guards warned him. So they tortured him a long time. An hour later, he acted in the same way.

Such determination to fulfil religious obligations in the face of degradation and misery is a manifestation of the value and meaning of human life. For Berkovits such acts confirm the transcendental meaning of existence.

Death of God theologians pass over the faith of these Jewish martyrs in silence, yet what such writers ignore is that in the death camps God was present with His holy people. As *El Misiater* – the Hidden God – He was manifest in their agony. Those Jews who died in the camps with God's name on their lips glimpsed His presence in their suffering. In the impenetrable darkness they remained firm in their faith in the living God. Jews today must model their response to the Holocaust on their example. Though the inexplicable cannot be explained, it can become a positive influence in the formulation of what is to be acknowledged. The sorrow will stay, but it can be blessed with the promise of God's faithfulness despite the miseries of this life.

The Hiding God

The history of the Jewish people has been continuously marred by disaster: the Temple was destroyed twice; the Jewish people were dispersed among the nations; Spanish Jewry was decimated; mass murder took place during the Crusades as well as at the time of the Black Death and during the Chmelnicki massacre. The problem of faith for the survivors of these catastrophes was no different from the issues that confront post-Holocaust Jewry. Although the horrors of the death camps surpassed anything that preceded it, the subjective impact of previous tragedies was no less intense. The Holocaust was unique only in the objective magnitude of its inhumanity – it was not singular as an obstacle to faith resulting from Jewish historical experience. The problem, Berkovits writes, is as old as Judaism itself.

A number of the sages of the Talmud attempted to resolve the dilemma of Jewish suffering by appealing to God's silence. In a discussion of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, they quoted Psalm 89, "Who is a mighty one, like unto Thee, O

Eternal", interpreting this verse in accordance with Abba Hanan's explanation that God is mighty and strong since "He is able to listen to the tormentings and insults of the vile man and remain silent". In biblical terminology this concept of divine silence is expressed by the Hebrew phrase *Hester Panim* (the Hiding of the Face): when suffering occurs, God hides his face from human evil. Berkovits cites an example of *Hester Panim* in Psalm 44:

All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten Thee,
Neither have we been false to Thy covenant.
Our heart is not turned back,
Neither have our steps declined from Thy path;
Though thou hast crushed us into a place of jackals,
If we had forgotten the name of our God,
And covered us with the shadow of death.
Or spread forth our hands to a strange god;
Would not God search this out?
For He knoweth the secrets of the heart.
Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord?
Arouse Thyself, cast not off for ever.
Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face,
And forgettest our affliction and our oppression?
For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
Our belly cleaveth to the earth.
Arise for our help,
And redeem us for Thy mercy's sake.

Here God is portrayed as distant from human tribulation – He hides Himself mysteriously from the cry of the innocent.

Through the centuries Jews struggled against God's seeming indifference to tragedy, yet rabbinic Judaism insisted that God is present in His silence. God's hiding His face is not due to divine indifference; rather His intention is to create space for human freedom. God did not will that one person be righteous and another evil – instead He created the possibility for each person to be a moral agent. As Berkovits writes: "He created evil by creating the possibility for evil; He made peace by creating the possibility for it. He had to create the possibility for evil, if He was to create the possibility for its opposite, peace, goodness, love." God is all-good, but

human beings have the capacity to strive for the good; this means that freedom of choice is a necessity and man's freedom must not be restricted even by God Himself.

According to Berkovits, if God did not respect human freedom, not only would morality be abolished, but men and women would cease to be human. Freedom and responsibility are the very essence of humanity – if human beings are to exist, they must be allowed to sin. This is an inescapable paradox of divine providence. Where God tolerates the sinner, He must abandon the victim. While He shows forbearance with the wicked, he must turn a deaf ear to the anguished cries of those who suffer. For Berkovits this is the tragedy of existence: "God's very mercy and forbearance, His very love for man, necessitates the abandonment of some men to a fate they may well experience as indifference to justice and human suffering."

While God is longsuffering, the wicked will go about their dark business on earth. Yet there is no alternative. If human beings are to act freely without continually being overwhelmed by divine supremacy, God must absent Himself. The God of history is thus both absent and present concurrently. He is present without being manifest; He is absent without being hopelessly inaccessible. Many find Him in His absence while others miss Him in His presence. As Berkovits writes: "Because of the necessity of His absence, there is the 'Hiding of the Face' and the suffering of the innocent; because of the necessity of His presence, evil will not ultimately triumph; because of it, there is hope for man."

God's presence and the Jewish people

Human beings can only have free will because God renounces the use of His power in history. The mightiness of God consists in shackling His omnipotence. Yet God has revealed His presence in the survival of Israel, His chosen people. Berkovits contends that there is no other witness that God is present in history than the endurance of this small, beleaguered nation. Great empires do not testify to the divine presence – whatever they have accomplished is fully explicable in terms of their material resources. The world's great religions have all functioned in power history, but this is not the case with the Jewish nation. Only this small community whose very existence is forever assailed by external threat but nevertheless endures can prove the validity of a divine dimension of reality. This is the ultimate significance of the idea of

choseness. God's relation to human history is such that He needs His own special people to witness to His presence. In the words of Isaiah:

You are my witness, saith the Eternal,
And my servant whom I have chosen;
That you may know and believe me, and understand
That I am He;
Before me there was no God formed,
Neither shall any be after me.

Jewish survival has confounded Israel's enemies – it is the great mystery of history. The endurance of this persecuted people is inexplicable in a world that lives essentially by reliance on power. It has had no country, organised government or material resources, yet it has preserved its identity. In the Middle Ages the mystery of the continuing presence of the Jews was explained as the work of the devil. In modern times the Satan of Christendom was replaced by the idea of a secret international conspiracy of the elders of Zion. Such a vision led to the Nazis' attempt to eliminate the Jewish people. According to Berkovits, the Germans were motivated by a metaphysical fear of the true mystery of God's presence in history as revealed in the continued survival of Israel. This, he writes, was a well-founded concern since the presence of God spelled doom for the Nazi German rebellion against all human values.

According to Berkovits, the Jewish people who bear witness to the presence of God are His suffering servant – Israel's martyrology is described in chapter 53 of Isaiah. In the suffering of His chosen people, God is not indifferent; rather He has simply allowed scope for human decision-making. The question after the Holocaust should thus be not how God could have tolerated so much evil, but whether the Jewish people can still testify to His elusive presence. For Berkovits, Jewish survival through the ages and in the ingathering of the exiles into the land of their fathers proclaims God's presence at the very heart of His inscrutable hiddenness. Broken and shattered in spirit, Jews required a vindication of the belief that the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. The state of Israel emerged when it was most needed. The Jew of faith is therefore left with a perplexing duality of his knowledge of God. He is aware of the numerous revelations of the divine presence in the past as well as the long phases of God's absence. Auschwitz is perhaps the

most horrifying manifestation of divine silence, but he is aware that God's absence is not absolute. In the modern world the establishment of a Jewish state is the culminating triumph of Jewish survival through the darkest experience of human history.

Given the centrality of Israel in the fulfilment of God's divine plan, it is impossible to sever Zion from the Jewish tradition. Through the centuries Jews struggled, prayed, lived and died in the belief that their function in history would ultimately be revealed through their return to the Promised Land. These pious individuals believed that in the course of the unfolding of the divine purpose in history the Jewish people would return to Jerusalem. After the death camp experience, Jewry has now found its way back to Israel – it is here that God's presence is revealed in contemporary society. As Berkovits writes:

Examining the world scene, a Jew can see nowhere the presence of God in the history of the nations or religions – unless it be in the history of Israel and only through it also in the history of man. Eliminate Israel from history and there is no need for any reference to God. . . Only the reality of Israel resists explanation on the level of man-made history alone. Because of Israel the Jew knows that history is messianism, that God's guidance – however impenetrably wrapt in mystery – is never absent from the life of the nations.

The Holocaust and Jewish witness

In a later book, *With God in Hell*, Berkovits returns to the theme of Jewish witness to God in the concentration camps. In this work he illustrates the faith that sustained Jews as they faced torture and death. Thousands of Jews walked to the mass graves and gas chambers with the dignity of an all-conquering and all-pervading trust in the God of Israel. Through their deaths they testified to God's hidden presence. In Auschwitz, for example, there were many religious Jews who attempted to fulfil the commandments. One of those who survived tells of a Jew who stubbornly refused to work on the Sabbath and Festivals:

At first we thought he was mentally disturbed. In the course of years, however, we learned to appreciate that his "madness" was a manifestation of a strong personality and an exalted faith.

Prayer services were frequent occurrences in the camps. Jews usually prayed by heart, but occasionally individual prayers or complete prayer books would be written by hand. Some Jews were even able to use *tefillin*. Frequently Jews were determined to continue to study Torah. Though there were no volumes of the Talmud in the camps, many Jews knew large passages by heart. The best opportunity for this type of study was on the way from the camps to the place of work. In the camp of Dautmergen in southern Germany, for example, a group of *yeshivah* students assembled to study *mishnayot* together after an exhausting day of slave labour. Though they had no texts, a young man recited portions from memory so they could study together. Again, at Auschwitz, Rabbi Eisenstein recited intricate Talmudic passages from memory during the hours of slave labour.

Such faithfulness to the Jewish tradition also applied to the dietary laws. Though starved for food, many Jews rose above their deprivation by placing the requirements of Jewish religious law above the demands of their bodies. Yet the problem of halachically permitted food was particularly acute at the time of Passover. In normal circumstances all unleavened bread was forbidden – but what was one to do in the concentration camps? Pious Jews who ate the leavened bread offered to them prayed that God would understand what they were forced to do and give them strength.

Our Father in Heaven! It is open and known before You that it is our will to do Your will to celebrate the festival of Pesach by eating matzah and refraining from leavened bread. With aching heart we must realise that our slavery prevents us from such celebration. Since we find ourselves in a situation of danger to our lives, we are prepared and ready to fulfil Your commandment, "And thou shalt live by them, but not die by them." Therefore we pray to You that You maintain us in life and hasten to redeem us that we may observe Your statutes and do Your will and serve You with a perfect heart. Amen!

These religious Jews were sustained by the belief in a providential God when they experienced the terror of the camps. Berkovits cites the example of Rabbi Mendele Alter of Pabianice whose march to the gas chambers in Treblinka became a legend. As he was taken to the gas chamber, he pleaded for some water. Rather than drink it, he

used it to wash his hands before saying the customary confession of sins before death. Along the way a badly wounded child was tossed in his path. He picked up the bleeding baby whose little body quivered in his hands. Holding the child he turned to the others and said:

... This is holiness, purer than all purity, a Jewish child. This little Jewish child is sick, weak like a fly... how come that the Satan, in possession of the most advanced weapons of war and destruction, has to wage war and vent his cruelty on little children? These "defiled ones", when they see a Jewish child in the arms of his mother are immediately filled with the urge to murder... the forces of *tumah*, demonic defilement, cannot endure the sight of holiness, the spirit of purity that hovers over the face of a Jewish child.

Another holy figure of the camps was Rabbi Shalom Eliezer, the Ratzfister Rebbe. Defiantly an SS officer approached him and said: "I see your lips are moving in prayer. Do you still believe that your God will help you? Don't you realise in what situations Jews find themselves? They are all being led to die and no one helps them? Do you still believe in divine providence?"

In reply the rebbe stated, "With all my heart and all my soul I believe that there is a creator and that there is a supreme providence."

Similarly, Rabbi Nissan Scheinberg, a *dayyan* in Baranowicz, displayed devout loyalty to God and the Jewish tradition. On *Suslan Purim* the Germans prepared a bloodbath in the town at which thousands of Jews were murdered. According to an eyewitness:

A group of Slonim hasidim, who were caught in the "selection", stood together, preparing themselves for the moment of *Kiddush Hashem* ("the sanctification of the Divine Name") in death. In the midst of the group stood the Dayyan, Rabbi Nissan, who called to the others: "Jews! Let us not forget that today is Purim. Let us drink 'L'hayyim, to life.'" He poured out a cupful and said again: "L'hayyim!" He got hold of a few other Jews and started dancing. His face was shining as he sang the traditional Purim song, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* ("Rose of Jacob") and he shouted with joy until a German bullet silenced him.

These Jews who remained steadfast in their faith glimpsed God's abiding presence in the camps. They marched to mass graves and

gas chambers trusting in the God of Israel and the future of the Jewish people. With complete assurance they were convinced that the Nazis would ultimately be defeated. Despite the nightmare of the death camps, they rose early in the morning to put on *tefillin*, sought opportunities to pray and study, celebrated the festivals, and guarded the divine image. In spite of the monstrosities of what they endured, they lived by the covenant. Standing in the presence of God with all previous generations of Israel, they heard God's voice in the midst of His silence. Modern Jews, Berkovits believes, can gain some notion of the mystery of the Jewish faith and the destiny of God's chosen people by establishing empathetic contact with these heroic figures of the Nazi era.

Critique

A major difficulty with Berkovits' interpretation of the Holocaust concerns his view that God's hiddenness is necessary for human beings to act as moral agents. By absencing Himself from history, he believes, God created the reality of human freedom which is necessary for moral decision-making. While there is no doubt that Jewish heroism was exhibited as a result of such freedom, God theoretically could have allowed such bravery to take place without the barbarism of the Nazi onslaught. If God is omniscient, omnipotent and all-good, He could have created a world in which there was human freedom without such evils. It is conceivable, for example, that God could have created human beings who possessed free will but nonetheless had an inclination for good rather than evil. Alternatively, it is arguable that it would have been preferable to have a world in which monstrosities such as the crematoria were eliminated altogether even if it meant doing without heroic accomplishments. From a moral point of view, there are good reasons why freedom should have been subordinated to the prevention of suffering; in respect of the Holocaust such a limitation of free will would surely have been preferable to the destruction of six million innocent victims.

A further problem with Berkovits' position is related to his belief that God withdraws from history. God's very love for human beings, he argues, necessitates their abandonment; to intervene when the innocent are victimised would violate the principle of human freedom. The difficulty with this explanation is that Berkovits does not take into account the depiction of God as

Redeemer and Saviour in biblical and rabbinic literature. In the Torah God is described as an abiding presence in the redemptive history of His chosen people. The Hebrew slaves were liberated from Egypt by divine intervention; they were saved at the Red Sea through God's action; on Mount Sinai they received His commands; at God's behest and with His assistance they captured the Promised Land. Throughout their history the Jewish nation has repeatedly turned to God to help them – this traditional understanding of God's activity contradicts Berkovits' claim that in Judaism God is present but withdrawn. The Jewish faith has always insisted that God can and often does act on behalf of His chosen people. There is thus no sense in asserting that God felt bound to allow freedom to Hitler and the Nazis when He is continually depicted in the Jewish tradition as intervening to save those whom He loves.

Berkovits' defence of free will is an attempt to account for the existence of evil in the world despite God's omnipotence and benevolence. Evil is explained as a consequence of human freedom; God permits human suffering because it is a necessary condition for the possibility of good. Yet this explanation does not account for suffering which is due to natural causes. Many of the evils of the Holocaust resulted from the wickedness of the Nazis, but the Holocaust victims also suffered from natural causes such as disease. Although the Nazis can be blamed for the lack of hygiene in the camps, bitter cold and illness are part of the natural lot of humanity. For Berkovits human sinfulness appears to be the ultimate cause of misery, but this is clearly not the case with all ills. Natural evil in the world is not a direct consequence of free will; thus Berkovits' defence fails to explain every element of human suffering.

The belief that only the Jewish people bear witness to God's presence in history is also problematic. According to Berkovits, the true and enduring witness to God's power over history is the Jewish nation – in the saga of the Jewish people we see both God's presence and hiddenness. While the survival of the Jews is astonishing in the face of the hostility that they have experienced through the centuries, it does not logically follow that their existence alone testifies to God's abiding presence. Arguably in the other major religions of the world it is possible to glimpse divine presence and activity. Berkovits' judgment about the centrality of the Jewish people in the unfolding of God's plan is based on a prior religious commitment rather than a reasoned argument. This same point applies to

Berkovits' claim that the Jewish people exhibit a qualitatively different type of historical existence from other nations. Here too there is no evidence to support such a contention. While it is true that Jews endured without a country of their own, this does not in any way diminish their involvement with the social, economic, cultural and political factors of the countries in which they have lived.

A final weakness of Berkovits' view concerns his belief that God's presence was manifest in His absence. There is no doubt that many Jews in the camps went to their deaths fervently committed to the Jewish faith. For these believers God was with them in their pain and misery. But what of the victims whose faith was extinguished? Confronted by the bestiality of the Nazis, they abandoned belief in a providential divine power. Watching the clouds of smoke over the crematoria, their faith was extinguished. For these inmates there was no *Heset Panim* – only darkness and a void. If God was present in the nightmare of the Holocaust, what purpose could be served by His deafening silence? Surely in some manner God could have revealed Himself to His chosen people without violating human freedom. Instead hundreds of thousands of Jews went to their deaths believing that there is neither justice nor a judge in the universe.