

HOLOCAUST THEOLOGY A READER

compiled and edited by
Dan Cohn-Sherbok



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For Lavinia

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<i>Talmud</i>	Records of discussions of Jewish law from the second to the fifth century
<i>Tefillin</i>	Phylacteries
<i>Tehilim</i>	Psalms
<i>Teshuvah</i>	Repentance
<i>Tikkun</i>	Divine Repair
<i>Tishah B'Av</i>	Ninth of Av
<i>Torah</i>	Five Books of Moses
<i>Yeshivah</i>	Rabbinical Academy
<i>Yom ha-Atzmaut</i>	Israel Independence Day
<i>Yom ha-Shoah</i>	Holocaust Day
<i>Yom Kippur</i>	Day of Atonement
<i>Yom Yerushalayim</i>	Jerusalem Day
<i>Zaddik</i>	Righteous individual; also <i>Rebbe</i>

Introduction

Several years ago I wrote a study of contemporary Jewish Holocaust thinkers entitled *Holocaust Theology*. This work discussed the views of eight major thinkers who in different ways have wrestled with the religious problems presented by the Holocaust: Bernard Maza, Ignaz Maybaum, Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Arthur A. Cohen, Richard Rubenstein, Elie Wiesel and Marc Ellis. Throughout this book I attempted to demonstrate that all these attempts to come to terms with the Holocaust suffer from numerous defects. In the bibliography I listed the major works published by these writers as well as other books and articles dealing with the Holocaust. Subsequently, this study was republished as *God and the Holocaust*, and the bibliography was expanded to include important works by a range of Christian thinkers.

Increasingly I came to see that there is a need for a more comprehensive introduction to both Jewish and Christian writers who have discussed the religious issues connected with the Nazi onslaught against the Jews. Although there is a wide range of single works as well as collections of essays dealing with this subject, there is no single volume which contains readings which survey these varieties of responses. This book is thus designed to provide a panoramic survey of Holocaust theology—throughout I have selected representative passages from over one hundred important Jewish and Christian thinkers. While this study is not exhaustive, it nonetheless aims to offer a representative sample of material drawn from over fifty years of religious reflection. After each reading I have included several questions to stimulate discussion and debate.

The Challenge

The book begins in Part I with an exploration of the religious challenge posed by the Holocaust. The first reading is from *After Auschwitz*

published in the 1960s by the Jewish scholar Richard Rubenstein. In this controversial work he argues that the most important issue for the Jewish community arises out of the question of God and the destruction of six million Jews at the hands of the Nazis. According to Rubenstein, it is no longer possible to believe in a supernatural Deity who acts in history. Rather, the Holocaust has demonstrated that such a belief has no foundation. Jews today, he contends, live in the time of the death of God.

Such disenchantment permeates the writings of the Jewish novelist Elie Wiesel. In his autobiographical novel *Night*, Wiesel describes his despair in the camps. As he explains, religious doubt set in as he experienced the horrors of the Nazi regime. Describing scenes of terror, he portrays the evolution of his religious protest. Such rebellion was heightened during the High Holy Days. Unable to pray, Wiesel became the accuser. On the Day of Atonement, he refused to fast. He no longer accepted God's silence in the face of suffering and murder.

In the camps themselves, Jews were frequently overwhelmed with despair. In 'Camp Music and Camp Songs', the Jewish scholar David H. Hirsch discusses the collection of songs recorded by Aleksander Kulisiewicz. In a song composed anonymously, Birkenau is compared to Hell. It is an evil kingdom without God. There crematoria consume human carcasses; it is the journey's end. All will become ashes. An accursed place devoid of God's presence, Birkenau is a thorny path where millions of victims are buried in a common grave.

Such despair is reflected by the survivor Alexander Donat in 'The Holocaust Kingdom'. Here Donat describes the terrors of the siege of the Warsaw ghetto. As news of the deportations spread, the inhabitants of the ghetto became aware of their eventual destination. Amidst suffering and death, they questioned why they had been abandoned by both God and fellow human beings. Why had they been singled out to die in the most grotesque way? They waited for deliverance, but to no end.

In *Judaism Beyond God*, the founder of Humanistic Judaism Sherwin Wine argues that Jews today must abandon their belief in a supernatural Deity. In his opinion, all theistic interpretations of God's involvement in history should be replaced by a naturalistic perspective. The world of reason has revealed that it has been a mistake for Jews to expect God to save them from disaster. Hence, there can be no adequate theological solution to the problem of human suffering.

According to the Jewish scholar Michael Oppenheim, it is still

possible to use religious language in a post-Holocaust world. Such a recognition of a transcendent dimension to Jewish life is recognized by both Jewish thinkers and the community as a whole. Such religious commemorations as *Yom Ha-Shoah* (Holocaust Day), *Yom Ha-Atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day) and *Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem Day) symbolically express such commitment. Yet in Oppenheim's view, Jews must grapple with the religious perplexities raised by the horrors of the Nazi era.

The Jewish scholar Steven T. Katz similarly stresses the importance of further theological exploration of the Holocaust. In his view, the Nazi assault against the Jewish nation was a unique event in human history. Killing Jews, he argues, is not a new phenomenon; however, the Nazi quest to eliminate Jews was singularly different from any previous form of evil. Reviewing the theologies of a number of major Holocaust theologians, Katz stresses that the events of the Nazi era are amenable to a variety of interpretations. However, this does not mean that such theological investigations are pointless; rather, there remains enormous scope for future study.

In a similar vein the Christian writer Jakob Jocz stresses that a number of Jewish theologians are currently wrestling with some of the most vexing dilemmas posed by the Holocaust. Regarding religious belief after Auschwitz, he points out that Jewish thinkers from across the religious spectrum have struggled to make sense of God's seeming absence during the Nazi era. In addition, they have been compelled to ask fundamental questions about the nature of humanity in light of the events of the Holocaust.

In *Shadows of Auschwitz: A Christian Response to the Holocaust*, the Christian scholar Harry James Cargas emphasizes that the *Shoah* (Holocaust) raises important questions for Christians. Given the legacy of Christian anti-Semitism, Christians today must acknowledge the atrocities they have unleashed upon the Jewish population. Not only should anti-Jewish attitudes be eliminated from the Christian community: Christians are obliged to reconsider some of the central tenets of their faith which have brought about Jewish suffering in the past. What is now required is a reassessment of a number of central religious beliefs.

Describing his development as a Christian thinker, John Roth stresses that theological reflection must be related to real events. In his view, if one is to understand the Holocaust, it is necessary to study the details of the Nazi era. Reckoning with particularity is not generally

what philosophers do. Yet, the big questions cannot be answered without such immersion in the history of the Third Reich. This is an urgent task for both Jewish and Christian theologians.

Religious Faith

These readings set the stage for a variety of affirmations of faith in Part II. Here the Jewish scholar Yaffa Eliach in her anthology of Hasidic tales of the Holocaust witnesses to the piety of believers who faced death with confidence. As she explains, Hasidim expressed courage in ghettos, hiding places and camps. According to Eliach, religious faith sustained these individuals, providing the inner strength necessary to endure the horrors of the Nazi era. In her view, these tales of heroism can offer solace to those whose faith has been undermined by the murder of millions of innocent victims.

An example of such religious conviction is found in the Jewish scholar Pesach Schindler's study of Hasidic responses to the Holocaust. In this work Schindler depicts the faith of Hasidic Jews as they faced persecution and suffering in the concentration camps. According to Schindler, the tragedy of the Nazi onslaught gave rise to a range of reactions. Some Hasidim attempted to justify God's providential plan for the chosen people. Other thinkers related the Holocaust to the suffering prior to the coming of the Messiah. Another response focused on the sanctification of God in life in defiance of the Nazi aim to exterminate the Jewish people.

Another example of such religious conviction is expressed in the Jewish writer Zvi Kolitz's description of Yassel Rakover's last moments in the Warsaw ghetto. This fictional account symbolizes the faith of those who were confronted by death. Despite his despair over the fate of the Jewish people, Yassel Rakover remains convinced of the promise of eternal life. As the Nazis surround the ghetto, he writes his final testimony: God, he believes, will reunite him with his loved ones for all eternity.

A parallel response to the Holocaust was recorded in the Reform Jewish leader Leo Baeck's prayer which he composed during the Nazi era. Determined to stand firm against the German assault on the Jewish people, Baeck turned to God on the Day of Atonement. 'In this hour', he writes, 'all Israel stands before God, the judge and the forgiver. In his presence let us examine our ways, our deeds, and what we have failed to do... God has led our fathers from generation to generation.

He will guide us and our children through these days.' According to Baeck, God's ways are ultimately incomprehensible.

In 'The Lights of Faith and Heroism in the Darkness of the Holocaust', the Jewish writer Nissim Nadav acknowledges the religious challenge of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, he stresses that the faith of Jews in the camps illustrates the power of belief to overcome all obstacles. In his view, it is not possible to explain why the Holocaust occurred; the pious must simply accept the inscrutability of God's direction of the history of the Jewish nation. Unquestioning accepting of God's providence, however, does not exempt one from learning from the facts of the Holocaust. What was apparent during the Nazi era was that numerous Jews remained faithful to the tradition despite their suffering.

Such heroism is further demonstrated by the Jewish writer Dror Schwartz in 'The Heroism of Masada and the Martyrs of the Holocaust'. As he explains, Jews in the ghettos and the concentration camps were determined to survive in order to defeat the Nazis' plan of exterminating the Jewish nation. Stressing the concept of *Kiddush ha-Hayim* (sanctification of life), he explains how the belief that one should live rather than die as a martyr became a central feature of Jewish existence. Here he cites the example of Rabbi Yitzhak Nissenbaum, who encouraged the faithful to overcome Hitler's evil designs.

In 'Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust', the Jewish theologian Irving Greenberg emphasizes that Jews must re-examine their faith in the light of the Holocaust. Yet, he stresses that the image of Job is of central importance in attempting to make sense of this tragedy. Modern Jews, he argues, should attempt to model themselves on Job's example. Like Job, they should recognize that there are no easy pieties which explain away the perplexities posed by the Holocaust. What is important about the biblical account is that Job demonstrates that God's presence is manifest in the whirlwind and that contact with God can be restored despite suffering and death.

The Holocaust and Divine Providence

For these writers religious faith is of fundamental importance: no attempt is made to offer a theological explanation for the events of the Nazi regime. Other thinkers, however, have sought to formulate a wide range of theodicies. In the view of some theologians, the

Holocaust should be understood as part of God's providential plan for his people. In *With Fury Poured Out*, the Jewish writer Bernard Mazza contends that God brought about the Holocaust in order to revive Jewish life in a post-Enlightenment world.

An alternative approach is outlined in *The Face of God after Auschwitz* by the Jewish theologian Ignaz Maybaum. In his view, the Holocaust was part of God's providential plan. According to Maybaum, it served as a means whereby the medieval institutions of Jewish life were eliminated in the Nazi onslaught against European Jewry. Hitler thus served as a divine instrument for the reconstruction of Jewish existence in the twentieth century. Jewish progress, therefore, is the direct result of this modern catastrophe.

Arguing along different lines, a number of Orthodox thinkers have attempted to make sense of the Holocaust in terms of God's aim for the Jewish nation. In *Hesler Panim* in the Holocaust versus the Manifest Miracles in our Generation, Sha'ar Yashuv Cohen maintains that it is a mistake to believe that the Holocaust is a punishment for sin. Rather, the murder of millions of Jews in the camps should be understood as part of God's plan. The suffering of Jewry, he argues, should be seen as the last phase of the birth pangs of the Messiah. Those who walked to the gas chambers singing 'I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah' were aware that they were living in the last days prior to divine deliverance.

In a similar vein Hayyim Kanfo contends in 'Manifestation of Divine Providence in the Gloom of the Holocaust' that God was present in the death camps. The horrors of the Nazi era were part of a divine process of redemption. The function of the Holocaust was to prepare the way for God's deliverance of the Jewish nation. In his opinion, the Holocaust constitutes the darkness before salvation. Out of agony and travail a new birth will take place. The Jewish people will go from destruction to national revival, from exile to redemption.

Again, Yosef Roth states in 'The Jewish Fate and the Holocaust' that the events of the Nazi period should be understood as part of the unfolding of God's providential plan for the Jewish people. Understandably a significant portion of the Jewish community were deeply troubled by the Holocaust: how, they asked, could the God of Israel allow six million victims to die in the most tragic conditions? This searching question, however, cannot be answered. God's direction of the world is unfathomable. Nonetheless, faithful Jews believe that within the hidden there are manifestations of the divine scheme.

INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust and Mystery

This mysterious aspect of the Holocaust is central for other thinkers who have wrestled with the implications of the murder of millions of Jews under the Nazis. In *What Do Jews Believe?*, the Jewish writer David Ariel maintains that there is simply no way that the Holocaust can be explained. God's will is unfathomable. In this regard he refers to God's response to Job. Although we can empathize with Job's suffering, it is impossible to understand God's will. The mystery how God could have permitted the murder of millions of innocent victims remains inexplicable. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the depth of evil perpetrated by the Nazis and ensure that such atrocities are prevented in the future.

Arguing along similar lines, the Jewish theologian Neil Gillman writes that all theodicies proposed by Jewish scholars fail to answer the problem posed by the events of the Nazi regime. After surveying a range of solutions, he affirms that there can be no resolution of the religious perplexities posed by the onslaught against European Jewry. Today we should stop trying to explain what is beyond comprehension.

Faithfulness and Suffering

Other writers, however, stress that some sense can be made of the events of the Nazi era. In the view of the Jewish scholar Irving Rosenbaum, the halakhic tradition enabled many Jews to face death in the camps. In *The Holocaust and Halakhah*, he notes that hundreds of thousands of Jews caught up in the Holocaust observed the *mitzvot*. This commitment to the legal tradition, he insists, enabled pious Jews to remain loyal to God. By observing the commandments, these individuals were able to bring some semblance of meaning and sanctity into their lives. In his estimation, the *halakhah* provided a means whereby Jews could transcend the chaos of their lives.

A parallel account of the importance of the Jewish tradition in sustaining faith is found in *Judaism and World Religion* by the Jewish scholar Norman Solomon. In his opinion, there is no need for a new Jewish theology to confront the horrors of the Nazi era. Suffering, he points out, has been a central feature of Jewish existence through the centuries. Despite persecution and murder Jews have been able to survive. Today, it is still possible to have confidence in a God who acts

in history. What is required is dedication to God and his commandments.

Arguing along similar lines, the Jewish scholar David Patterson asserts in *Sun Turned to Darkness* that Jewish recovery is dependent on faithfulness to God. In a survey of Holocaust memoirs, he points out that the recovery of the Divine can sanctify human life even in the face of terror and tragedy. It is the promise of God and the divine covenant that makes recovery possible. The desire for God is without end even when God reveals himself as absence rather than presence.

Such religious dedication is echoed in the Christian theologian Ulrich Simon's discussion of the Holocaust. In *A Theology of Auschwitz*, he contends that the Holocaust was a sacrifice to God. In the light of Christ's death, the murder of millions of Jews should be perceived as an act of sacrificial offering. Many of those who died never doubted the providential nature of the Nazi onslaught. Such a heroic vision was exemplified by those martyrs who substituted themselves for others. The cross and Auschwitz thus serve as a framework for making sense of human degradation and misery.

The Suffering of God

Drawing on the theme of human suffering, other theologians have focused on the nature of divine suffering in the Holocaust. In *The Creative Suffering of God*, the Christian theologian Paul Fiddes states that the key to understanding the events of the Nazi period is to accept that God suffers with humanity. Here he presents a conception of a suffering God who empathizes with those who are victimized. In discussing the existence of evil, Fiddes contends that God freely chooses to limit himself, endure change, and experience death while remaining the living God.

Such divine pain is the topic of the Christian theologian Dorothy Solle's treatment of the Nazi era. In 'God's Pain and Our Pain', she argues that the traditional doctrine of a benevolent and omnipotent Deity must be modified in the light of the Holocaust. In her view, it is no longer possible to accept that God possesses such attributes. Instead, we must acknowledge that God is all-loving, but not omnipotent. Hence, he suffers along with those who are victimized. God experiences our pain, and thereby consoles the afflicted.

In 'The Power of Suffering Love', the Christian theologian Marcus Braybrooke similarly affirms that the religious dilemmas posed by the

Holocaust can be resolved solely by appealing to the concept of suffering love. In his view, only a suffering God is credible in the light of the events of the Nazi era. Here the image of Jesus dying on the cross serves as the basis for understanding God's presence in the concentration camps. The cross, he maintains, discloses the nature of God and the way to life.

For the Reform Jewish writer Colin Eimer, the image of divine suffering is of similar significance. Although he is unable to accept the doctrine of the incarnation, he alleges that the Jewish tradition speaks of a God who suffers with his chosen people. As a hidden God, he suffers in silence when innocent human beings are victimized. Jewish theology therefore parallels the emphasis on divine suffering in Christian sources.

The Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas argues along similar lines in 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz'. In his opinion, the traditional concept of divine impassibility should be set aside in the post-Holocaust period. Today it should be acknowledged that God is not omnipotent. Rather, he is limited and suffers when human beings are overwhelmed by evil. In Jonas's view, God was present in the camps and suffered along with those who endured pain and death. It is a mistake to think that he was detached from the tragedies that took place during the Nazi reign of terror.

Again, the Christian theologian Franklin Sherman contends that the various solutions to the religious perplexities of the Holocaust are flawed in various ways. The Holocaust was not God's judgment upon the Jews, nor did the suffering in the camps serve some purpose. Further, it is insufficient to regard the events of the Nazi era as a mystery. Rather, it must be accepted that God participates in human suffering. Within the Christian tradition, the symbol of the agonizing God is the cross of Christ.

The same outlook is found in the Christian theologian Marcel Jacques Dubois's 'Christian Reflection on the Holocaust'. Here he discusses the piety of religious Jews in the camps. In his estimation these individuals were sustained by a belief in God's abiding presence. In the very abyss of anguish, he writes, believers turned to God in hope. Rather than being overwhelmed by despair, they found in their faith the strength to cry out to God. According to Dubois, Jews and Christians can be united in accepting the mystery of divine suffering. If we believe in Christ's victory over death, then there is hope for all. The cross of Christ is a sacrament that permeates all human existence.