

Covenant and Divinity

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE PROBLEMATICS OF RELIGIOUS FAITH, PART 1

In the aftermath of the *Shoah*, the question whether God, as traditionally understood in biblical and rabbinic Judaism, was the ultimate Actor in the catastrophic events is inescapable for religious Jews. From the perspective of biblical and rabbinic Judaism, neither the justice nor the power of God can ever be denied. Within Judaism God has been traditionally understood to be the infinitely righteous, radically transcendent, and absolutely omnipotent Creator of all things. At a very early stage in its development Judaism rejected moral and theological dualism as a way of solving the problem of theodicy. Deutero-Isaiah rejected the Persian idea that there are two equally potent divine powers in the cosmos, insisting that God alone is the creator of both good and evil.¹ Insofar as God is regarded as uniquely involved in the history and destiny of Israel, as indeed He is in Scripture and rabbinic literature, there is absolutely no way of avoiding the exceedingly painful conclusion that He is the ultimate Author of all that has happened to the people of Israel, including the Holocaust. Before such a God humanity must forever be in the wrong.

Nevertheless, men and women have found it difficult to accept so harsh and uncompromising a view of the divine-human relationship. One of the most influential philosophical attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction between the justice and the power of Divinity has been to interpret particular suffering as indispensable to the fulfillment of universal ends. In Hegelian terms, particular evil can be said to be overcome in the life of the Absolute. In contemplating the course of world history,

with its record of crime, suffering, and slaughter, Hegel was able to write in utter calm and philosophical detachment: "In order to justify the course of history, we must try to understand the role of evil in the light of the absolute sovereignty of reason. We are dealing here with the category of the negative . . . and we cannot fail to notice how all that is finest and noblest in history is immolated on its altar. Reason cannot stop to consider the injuries sustained by *single individuals*, for *particular ends* are *submerged in the universal ends*" (italics added).²

For Hegel individual injury is overcome in universal ends. However, Hegel never faced a situation of universal injury, such as the Holocaust, or the threat of universal extinction in a nuclear Holocaust. When the universal order is itself threatened with extinction, the idea that a particular misfortune can be overcome in the universal loses its credibility. There is a profound difference between a situation in which some persons suffer and perish unjustly but the group survives and one in which an entire group or even all of humanity is obliterated.

The inappropriateness of the Hegelian reconciliation to the human condition after Auschwitz has been expressed by another philosopher, Theodor Adorno:

We cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory in appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable even with the bold Hegelian explanation that temporal existence, by virtue of the destruction inherent in its concept, serves the eternal represented by the eternity of destruction. . . . After Auschwitz . . . events make a mockery of the construction of immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence. . . . The administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one never had to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individual's empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession of the individual is appropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who dies, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure.³

Some modern philosophers have regarded the *Shoah* as presenting a problem unworthy of their reflection. For example, although François Fedier, a French disciple of Martin Heidegger, has characterized Victor Farías's book, *Heidegger et le nazisme*, as "a big media attack," Fedier did not regard Auschwitz as important enough to discuss with Heidegger. Fedier has been quoted as saying, "I never thought of posing questions except those about philosophy."⁴ Nor did Heidegger believe that the Holocaust

merited reflection or explanation. In response to a letter from his former student, Herbert Marcuse, asking why he had remained silent concerning the extermination of six million Jews, Heidegger equated postwar Soviet treatment of East Germans with the Nazi treatment of the Jews. Heidegger implied that the Soviet treatment was worse since it was done openly, whereas "the bloody terror of the Nazis was in fact kept secret from the German people."⁵

Traditional Religious Thought and the Holocaust

The question of God and the Holocaust has been of far greater interest to religious thinkers than to philosophers. Elsewhere I have argued that a principal function of theology is to foster dissonance reduction where significant items of information are perceived to be inconsistent with established beliefs, values, and collectively sanctioned modes of behavior.⁶ At first glance, the Holocaust would appear to be such an item of information and one that would naturally concern religious thinkers. Nevertheless, as we shall see, many important Jewish religious authorities have emphatically rejected the idea that the occurrence of the Holocaust is in any way inconsistent with the traditional Jewish conception of divinity. In spite of the fact that the *Shoah* has been characterized by Rabbi Yitzhak (Irving) Greenberg, a leading Jewish Holocaust theologian, as "the most radical counter testimony to religious faith, both Jewish and Christian," some of the most faithful and observant Jewish religious leaders have offered a contrary opinion.⁷ These leaders have asserted that their faith in God has been confirmed by the catastrophe. The views of Rabbi Elchonon Wassermann of Baranovitch (1875-1941) are representative of Orthodox Jewish thought during the Holocaust years.⁸ Writing between *Kristallnacht* and the beginning of the war, Wassermann interpreted the Nazi onslaught as due to three Jewish "evils": secular nationalism, assimilation, especially through Reform Judaism; and the alleged contempt for the Torah in the scientific study of Judaism. For Wassermann, the Nazi assault was ultimately God's appropriate response against those who had proven unfaithful to His Torah. Wassermann also saw the promise of redemption in the misfortunes. Indeed, he argued that the more intense the suffering of the people, the closer the advent of the Messiah, a theme that has been taken up once again in contemporary Israel.⁹

Wassermann's life was fully consistent with his faith. When taken to be killed by four Latvian murderers in July 1941, he spoke of his own death, as well as the death of others like him, as a *korban*, a sacrificial

offering, for the Jewish people: "Let us go with raised heads. God forbid that any thought should enter the mind of anybody to make the sacrifice (*korban*) unfit. We now carry out the greatest Mitzvah, *Kiddish Hashem* (sanctification of God's name). The fire which will burn our bodies is the fire which will resurrect the Jewish people."¹⁰ Wassermann's response to the Holocaust was typical of that of the Orthodox rabbinate of the period in both eastern Europe and North America. Far from being a "radical counterestimony to religious faith," the events were widely regarded as confirming the tradition and the fulfillment of God's plan.

The opinions of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, were another example of the same tendency. According to Schneersohn, Hitler is but God's instrument for chastising the Jews, who had abandoned the ways of Torah; Nazism is divine punishment visited upon the Jews for rejecting the Torah and choosing assimilation.¹¹

The Orthodox interpretation of the Holocaust as divinely inflicted punishment or the sacrificial precondition for the coming of the Messiah rests upon the biblical doctrines of covenant and election. As we have noted, whenever Israel experienced *radical communal misfortune*, her religious teachers almost always interpreted the event as did Wassermann and Schneersohn, that is, as divine punishment. This was the case in 586 B.C.E., when Jeremiah prophesied concerning the impending fate of Jerusalem, which was then threatened by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon:

These are the words of the Lord to Jeremiah: I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything impossible for me? Therefore these are the words of the Lord: I will deliver this city into the hands of the Chaldeans and of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he shall take it. The Chaldeans who are fighting against this city will enter it, set it on fire and burn it down, with the houses on whose roofs sacrifices have been burnt to Baal and drink-offerings poured out to the other gods, by which I was provoked to anger. From their earliest days Israel and Judah have been doing what is wrong in my eyes, provoking me to anger by their actions, says the Lord (Jer. 32:26-30).

Given Jeremiah's belief in the election of Israel, it was impossible for him to view the Fall of Jerusalem as an event devoid of profound religious significance. The prophet understood that divine election placed an awesome responsibility on Israel. Undoubtedly, he was mindful of the terrible warning the prophet Amos had pronounced upon his own people: "Listen, Israelites, to these words that the Lord addresses to you, to the nation that he brought up from Egypt: *For you alone have I cared among all the*

nations of the world; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:1-2, italics added).

Jerusalem fell yet again at the end of the Judeo-Roman War of 66-70 C.E. At the time, the rabbis, who had succeeded the prophets and the priests as the religious authorities within Judaism, interpreted their people's misfortunes as had their predecessors. A characteristic example of the rabbinic response is to be found in the liturgy for the Holy Days and Festivals still used by traditional Jews: "Thou hast chosen us from among all peoples; thou hast loved us and taken pleasure in us, and hast exalted us above all tongues; thou hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and brought us near unto thy service, O our King, and thou hast called us by thy great and holy Name. . . . But on account of our sins we were exiled from our land and removed far from our country."¹²

To the extent that Judaism and Christianity affirm the election of Israel, both traditions must consider the Holocaust as more than a random occurrence. Indeed, contemporary Orthodox Jews in Israel affiliated with Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful) consider the Holocaust to be an indispensable event in God's redemptive plan for human history. Unable to accept the Holocaust as a purely punitive event, they tend to interpret it as the catastrophic precondition for the final messianic redemption of Jewish and world history, the "birth pangs of the Messiah." For almost two thousand years traditional Judaism sought to restrain the messianic impulse within the Jewish people. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and the wars of the State of Israel, a highly influential segment of contemporary Orthodoxy has become overtly messianic.¹³

Historians have long debated the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. They have noted similarities between it and the massacre of the Armenians in World War I, Stalin's mass destruction of classes and groups he regarded as objectively antagonistic, and the Pol Pot regime's genocide of Kampuchea's urban population.¹⁴ As noted above, there is one aspect of the Holocaust which is absolutely different from all other programs of extermination and mass destruction in the modern period: *The fate of the Jews is a matter of decisive religious/mythic significance in both Judaism and Christianity.* No example of mass murder other than the Holocaust has raised so directly or so insistently the question of whether it was an expression of *Heiligeschichte*, that is, God's providential involvement in history.

An important example of the mythic importance of Jewish misfortune, in this case as proof of Christian truth, is to be found in Martin Luther's "On the Jews and Their Lies": "Well, let the Jews regard our Lord Jesus as they will. We behold the fulfillment of the words spoken

by him in Luke 21:20, 22f.: 'But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near . . . for these are days of vengeance. For great distress shall be upon the earth and wrath upon this people.'¹⁵

I have also noted that R. Johanan ben Zakkai also regarded the Fall of Jerusalem as a consequence of God's chastisement of a sinful Israel.¹⁶ The terrible curses enunciated in Deuteronomy are part of the theological and religious basis for R. Johanan's interpretation of Jewish suffering. I cannot cite the entire text in this context; nevertheless, the following verses capture its spirit and intent: 'If you do not observe and fulfill all the law written down in this book . . . then the Lord will strike you and your descendants with unimaginable plagues, malignant and persistent . . . Just as the Lord took delight in you . . . so now it will be his delight to destroy and exterminate you . . . The Lord will scatter you among all peoples from one end of the earth to the other' (Deut. 28:58-64).¹⁷

As noted, Jewish and Christian authorities had no disagreement concerning the belief that God is the ultimate Author of Israel's misfortunes. They disagreed only in identifying the nature of Israel's sin.

Given the classical theological positions of both Judaism and Christianity, the fundamental question posed by the Holocaust is not whether the existence of a just, omnipotent God can be reconciled with radical evil. That is a philosophical question. The religious question is the following:

Did God use Adolf Hitler and the Nazis as his agents to inflict terrible sufferings and death upon six million Jews, including more than one million children?

Even if God is seen as the ultimate Author of the death camps, it does not follow that His actions at Auschwitz were necessarily punitive. Both Judaism and Christianity allow for the possibility that the innocent may be called upon to suffer sacrificially for the guilty. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Christian Scriptures interpret every misfortune as divine punishment. For example, in the Book of Job the protagonist is depicted as having experienced the worst misfortunes without having offended God. Similarly, the 'Suffering Servant' of Isaiah 53 appears to have been an innocent victim. As we shall see, an important theological interpretation of the Holocaust depicts the victims as sacrificial offerings. As we have noted, the Holocaust has also been interpreted as the 'birth pangs of the Messiah.'

Nevertheless, until the 1967 war, whenever Israel experienced radical communal misfortune, her traditional religious teachers almost always interpreted the event as divine punishment. Of all the misfortunes expe-

rienced by the Jewish people, only three can be reckoned as major communal disasters that irrevocably altered the character of the Jewish world: Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Judea in 586 B.C.E., the Fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E., and the *Shoah*. Not since 70 C.E. had world Jewry experienced a catastrophe remotely like what was endured between 1939 and 1945. In reality, never before in history had Jews experienced so overwhelming a disaster.

Nontraditional Interpretation of the Holocaust: Ignaz Maybaum

Two radical theological interpretations of the Holocaust were among the first to appear. They were *The Face of God after Auschwitz* by Ignaz Maybaum (b. 1897) and the first edition of *After Auschwitz*.¹⁸ Both appeared in 1966. Maybaum was a Viennese-born Reform rabbi who emigrated to England in 1937 and served in that country for many years. Although written in English, Maybaum's book was published in the Netherlands. For many years it was almost totally unknown in the United States. The first edition of *After Auschwitz* received far more attention from both scholars and the media. No two works of Holocaust theology are in such total disagreement. However, their disagreements illumine many of the crucial issues confronting Jewish religious faith after Auschwitz.

In *The Face of God after Auschwitz* Maybaum affirmed the continuing validity of God's covenant with Israel. He insisted without qualification that God continues to intervene in history, especially in the history of His Chosen People, the Holocaust being one of His most important interventions. Maybaum also held that Israel has a divinely ordained mission to bring knowledge of the true God and His Law to the nations of the world. This idea was strongly affirmed in the nineteenth century by Reform Jewish thinkers in both Germany and the United States and is crucial to Maybaum's interpretation of the Holocaust. It met with little favor among traditional Jews or Zionists.

Although Maybaum saw the Holocaust as God's deliberate intervention, he categorically rejected the idea that it was in any sense divine punishment. Having rejected the punitive interpretation, Maybaum offered a sacrificial interpretation of the *Shoah*, using the Crucifixion as his model. Maybaum asserted that, just as Jesus was the innocent victim whose death made possible the salvation of humanity, so too the millions of Holocaust victims must be seen as divinely chosen sacrificial offerings.

The use of the Crucifixion as a theological model by a rabbi may seem

strange, perhaps even bizarre, but Maybaum argued that God's purposes can only be understood if God addresses the nations of the world in the kind of language they understand. Maybaum contended that the nations of the world can only hear and respond to God's call when that call is expressed in the language of death and destruction. Hence, the use of the Crucifixion, which is the only model by which the Christian world can comprehend God's activity. According to Maybaum, it was the awesome fate of six million Jews, *precisely because they were God's Chosen People*, to become sacrificial victims at Auschwitz and the other camps so that God's purposes for the modern world might be understood and fulfilled: "The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz. The cross, the Roman gallows, was replaced by the gas chamber."¹⁹

Maybaum concurred in the view that the Jewish world has experienced three decisive communal disasters in its long history. He referred to each disaster as a *Churban*, an event of utter destruction which, according to Maybaum, is world-historical in its scope and significance. Each *Churban* is a divine intervention whose purpose is a decisive alteration of the course of history. Nevertheless, there is a creative element in the destruction. A *Churban* marks the end of one era and the beginning of a new and better one, both for the Jews and the world as a whole. However, the new era can only come into being if the old is destroyed.

Maybaum held that the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., which initiated the Diaspora of the Jews, was the first *Churban*. In keeping with the Reform Jewish idea of "the mission of Israel," Maybaum argued that the first *Churban* had the fortunate consequence of enabling the Jews to bring knowledge of the true God and his Law to the pagan nations beyond Judea's borders. Had not Israel suffered the pain of exile, knowledge of God's word might have remained confined to one small community. Thus, the first *Churban* was an example of God's "creative destructiveness."

Maybaum also saw the second *Churban*, the Roman destruction of Judea and Jerusalem, as yet another example of God's creative destruction. He regarded the shift of religious emphasis from animal sacrifice to prayer and study as a spiritual improvement and held that only by means of the destruction of the older, more "primitive" religious life could the newer, more "spiritual" type come to predominate.²⁰ Maybaum also saw the dispersion of the Jews among the nations of the Roman world as progress. Although the Jews lost their political independence, they were, in Maybaum's view, enabled to fulfill their mission by spreading knowledge of God throughout the Roman Empire. By contrast, traditional Judaism

has never regarded the Diaspora as a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fall, through which God in His mercy bestowed a messianic Redeemer.²¹

Maybaum argued that the third *Churban*, or the Holocaust, was yet another example of God's use of the Jewish people as sacrificial victims in an act of creative destruction. According to Maybaum, God used the *Shoah* to accomplish the final overcoming of the Middle Ages and the full transition of the peoples of the world into the modern world. Humanity's "sin," for which the Jews are alleged to have had to perish, was the retention in Europe of old remnants of the medieval feudal world in an age in which these structures were no longer appropriate. It was Maybaum's view that after World War I the West could have brought "freedom, land reform and the blessings of the industrial revolution to the East European countries."²² Instead, they did nothing. As a result, the slaughter of that war was in vain and Hitler was sent by God to do what "the progressives" should have done but failed to do. This meant that the work of creative destruction had to be carried out at an infinitely greater cost in human suffering.

Maybaum regarded the Holocaust as God's terrible means of bringing the world fully into the modern age. He argued that this transition could not have occurred without the destruction of all that was medieval in Europe. Maybaum pointed out that the vast majority of Jewish victims were eastern Europeans who, he argued, still lived in a medieval, feudal way, more or less as their ancestors had, ritually and culturally isolated from their neighbors. In spite of the fact that it took a Hitler to destroy this allegedly outmoded way of life, Maybaum interpreted the extermination of eastern European Jews as an ultimately beneficent act of creative destruction. Unfortunately, so too did the National Socialists, though for very different reasons. With the passing of the eastern European Jewish community, which had been the most faithful to the ancient beliefs and traditions of rabbinic Judaism, the world's Jews were concentrated in countries such as the United States, western Europe, Russia, and Israel, in which they were free to participate fully in an era of enlightenment, progress, rationality, and modernity.

It would appear that Maybaum was surprisingly uninformed concerning the actual character of the eastern European Jewish community in the period immediately preceding World War II. While it is true that many of eastern Europe's Jews lived self-contained, ghettoized lives, Maybaum ignores the fact that a very large proportion of the Jews of Poland, Lithuania, and Rumania had fully entered the modern world, as indeed had many Orthodox Jews.²³ Maybaum naively equated religious

traditionalism with medievalism. If that identification were valid, we would have to regard millions of Orthodox Jews, conservative Christians, and Muslims as somehow not a part of the modern world. In reality, there have been many legitimate ways of responding to modernity, among which participation in or return to traditional religion is by no means the least important. There is also reason for astonishment at Maybaum's inclusion of Stalinist Russia among the countries in which Jews were free to participate fully in an era of enlightenment, progress, rationality, and modernity.

Maybaum also expressed a quasi-messianic enthusiasm for the place and role of the Jews in the post-Holocaust world. Maybaum's enthusiasm for the destruction of the allegedly medieval elements in Jewish life was such that he equated the modernized, post-Holocaust Judaism of the "enlightened" Western world with the "first fruits" of redemption: "The Jewish people is, here and now, mankind at its goal. We have arrived. We are the first fruits of God's harvest."²⁴ As we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the messianic theme has a powerful hold over many Orthodox Jews in contemporary Israel, especially among those who have settled on the West Bank.²⁵

Nor did Maybaum flinch from carrying his theological argument to its shocking but logical conclusion: When Nebuchadnezzar sought to destroy Jerusalem, Jeremiah referred to him as "my servant Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon" (Jer. 27:6). In a deliberate allusion to Jeremiah, Maybaum depicted God as declaring, "Hitler, My Servant!"²⁶ Insisting that Hitler was God's instrument, Maybaum continues: "God used this instrument to cleanse, to purify, to punish a sinful world; the six million Jews, they died an innocent death; they died because of the sins of others."²⁷

It should be obvious that there are enormous problems with Maybaum's defense of the biblical God of history and the election of Israel. No matter what "higher" purposes were, in Maybaum's view, served by the Holocaust, Maybaum's image of God was of one who was quite willing to subject millions of innocent people to the most degrading and obscene suffering and death ever experienced by a human collectivity. Moreover, there is the question of whether the "higher purpose," namely, the definitive onset of modernity, for which the victims were alleged to have sacrificed their lives, was worth even a single life. In the nineteenth century, German and American Reform Jews greeted the onset of the modern world, with its removal of ghetto restrictions, as a divinely bestowed, protomessianic redemption. It is not difficult to understand why those who for centuries had been restricted to a ghettoized existence were filled with enthusiasm for the Enlightenment and

its promise of civil emancipation. It is, however, difficult to understand how an historically informed thinker can retain that kind of optimism now that the night side of modernity stands fully revealed. This is not the occasion to detail the horrors the world has experienced precisely because we have entered into the modern age. Nor do I suggest that modernity could or should be abandoned. Nevertheless, when we turn to the problems of environmental pollution, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the worldwide phenomenon of technologically induced mass unemployment and poverty, we see that there is reason for skepticism concerning Maybaum's unreserved, messianic enthusiasm for modernity.

Nor can the Crucifixion be used as an appropriate model for the Holocaust. In the Crucifixion, God is depicted as descending to the world, taking human form, and voluntarily giving up his human life to save a world of undeserving sinners. In the Crucifixion, God causes himself to suffer for the sake of others. In Maybaum's version of the Holocaust, God inflicts hideous involuntary suffering upon millions of frail, frightened, and undeserving human beings.

In fairness to Maybaum it must be stated that his interpretation of the Holocaust is motivated by a desire to defend the doctrine of covenant and election as that doctrine was understood in classical Reform Judaism. Maybaum understood the nature of the theological vocation and was prepared to fulfill it on behalf of his community. He grasped the logical entailments of the faith he defended. Most non-Orthodox religious thinkers affirm the God-who-acts-in-history but deny that he acted in history at Auschwitz. By asserting that God's ways are "mysterious," such thinkers seek to affirm traditional faith while evading the negative consequences of so doing. *What distinguished thinkers like Bernard Wasserstein, Joseph Schwersohn, and Ignaz Maybaum was their refusal to take the easy escape route of liberal evasion.* They understood that, absent the affirmation of some version of the traditional biblical view of God, Torah, and covenant, Judaism becomes a socially constructed ethnic religion. Such a faith cannot fulfill one of religion's most important functions, the defense of men and women against anonymity.²⁸ That which is recognized as humanly produced can be humanly altered to suit whim or impulse. For Judaism, the religious defense against anonymity requires the grounding of beliefs, values, and norms in Torah as divine revelation and Israel's history as the theater of purposeful divine action. Regrettably, the defense against anonymity is not easily purchased.

It is not surprising that many religious thinkers prefer to gloss over or ignore this issue. Life must go on. Members of any community minimally require life-cycle rituals consistent with their historic identity, even

when they are skeptical about the literal meaning of the words of the liturgy. Civil ceremonies are a poor and unsatisfying substitute for religious rituals. There are some very good reasons for not pushing agonizing theological questions too far.

It is to Maybaum's credit that he confronted the theological question of God and the Holocaust forthrightly. At the very least, his position indicates the kind of affirmations that are logically entailed in the theological defense of the biblical image of God in the light of that event. This does not mean that Maybaum has provided the only logical defense. Maybaum has, however, shown that it is impossible to affirm the existence of the biblical God of covenant and election without also affirming some sort of purposeful divine involvement at Auschwitz. Usually, such a position involves affirming God's omnipotence at the cost of denying his justice, love, and mercy. Maybaum attempts to avoid this split by insisting that Auschwitz does not constitute evidence of the absence of God's love and mercy since (a) two-thirds of the world's Jews survived, (b) the Holocaust was of brief duration, and (c) it was followed by the "promised land" of the fully realized modern age. Maybaum cites the prophet Isaiah to make his point.

For a small moment have I forsaken thee,
But with great compassion will I gather thee,
In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment,
But with everlasting kindness will I have compassion on thee,
Saieth the Lord, thy Redeemer (Isa. 54:7, 8).

It is doubtful that many will concur in Maybaum's implicit characterization of the events of 1933-45 as "a small moment" or of the contemporary world as an example of God's "everlasting kindness." Many students of the Holocaust regard the catastrophe as a consequence rather than a cause of the modernization of Europe's economy and society.²⁹ In contrast to Maybaum, who interprets the Holocaust as the last gasp of medievalism, they maintain that the *Shoah* was a thoroughly modern, albeit demonic, enterprise in both spirit and method. One can credit Maybaum with courage for following his theological position to its logical conclusion without finding his position credible.

Non-Orthodox Interpretation of the Holocaust: The First Edition of After Auschwitz

I did not hear of Maybaum until many years after the 1966 publication of the first edition of *After Auschwitz*. Had I read Maybaum before writing

the first edition, I would certainly have referred to him in explaining my reasons for rejecting the traditional biblical theology of covenant and election. Such a theologically controversial position was not initially triggered by intellectual speculation but by a crucial encounter with Dean Heinrich Grüber in Berlin on August 17, 1961, as I explain elsewhere in this volume.³⁰

As we have seen, Grüber was also convinced that the Holocaust was God's work. However, where Maybaum likened Hitler to Nebuchadnezzar as God's "servant," Grüber likened Hitler to Nebuchadnezzar as the "rod of God's anger." In effect, Grüber asserted that God sent Hitler to punish the Jews at Auschwitz because Israel, God's chosen people, had sinned and nothing can happen to the Jews save that which God intended. As stated above, Grüber had no doubt that Hitler would be punished and that his actions, humanly speaking, were immoral. He also had no doubt that those actions ceased to be immoral when God was the ultimate perpetrator. Although Grüber did not identify the offense for which Israel had been punished, there is little reason to doubt that he regarded Jewish misfortune as Christian thinkers have throughout most of history. In fact, Grüber's colleagues in the German Evangelical Church meeting in Darmstadt in 1948, three years after the *Shoah*, asserted that the Holocaust was a divine punishment visited upon the Jews and, in a spirit of brotherhood, called upon the Jews to cease their rejection and continuing crucifixion of Jesus Christ.³¹ In effect, the leaders of the Evangelical Church were telling the Jews that their only hope was to cease to be Jews and become Christians. While some of the document's signatories may have been motivated by malice, it is very likely that others were genuinely moved by the Jewish tragedy. Given their view of the role of the Jews in *Heilsgeschichte*, they were incapable of seeing any other way for Jews to escape the continuing wrath of Divinity.

Since the extraordinary encounter with Dean Grüber, I have often asked myself whether my views on God and the Holocaust would have changed as radically if Grüber had not been German and if he had offered his opinion in a less crisis-laden historical moment and a less apocalyptic setting than the former capital of the Third Reich during the week the Berlin Wall was erected. The dramatic encounter with Grüber strongly influenced the change in my views. Above all, the Berlin setting dramatized the fact that the question of Holocaust and Divinity transcends academic speculation and is fraught with consequences in people's lives. This is certainly the case in contemporary Israel, where radical messianists see the Holocaust as a divinely ordained prelude to the settlement of the whole land of Israel, the destruction of the mosques on the Temple

Mount, the rebuilding of the Holy Temple, and the climax of Jewish and world history with the coming of the Messiah.²²

I have never had any doubt that Grüber was a man with an uncompromising sense of religious vocation. When his theological colleagues met at Darmstadt in 1948, some may have been motivated by anti-Jewish hostility and residual sympathy for National Socialism. That was not the case with Grüber. Like Maybaum, Grüber took his faith in the God-who-acts-in-history with the utmost seriousness, knowing full well what such a faith entailed. He did not attempt to avoid its painful, logical consequences. If God acts in history, it was clear to Grüber that He alone was the ultimate Author of the Holocaust. Grüber had the courage of his convictions, whether he was expressing his opposition to National Socialism during the Third Reich or affirming his belief in the God of the Bible.

There was, however, an important difference between Grüber and Maybaum. Ironically, the rabbi had used the Crucifixion as his model for interpreting the Holocaust, whereas Grüber had based his interpretation on the theology of covenant and election. Grüber saw the Jews as guilty offenders against God's Law. In fairness to the Dean, he had a similar view of his own people. By contrast, Maybaum could neither challenge God's sovereignty nor imagine any crime that would justify extermination at the hands of the Nazis. He had no doubt about the innocence of the victims. This compelled him to turn either to the model of the Suffering Servant or to the Crucifixion. Given his commitment to faith in the God of covenant and election, Maybaum had no option save to regard the Jews as innocent sacrificial victims.

When I left Grüber's home, something within me had changed irrevocably. Undoubtedly, the change had been gestating for a very long time. As a doctoral candidate at Harvard, I had attended Paul Tillich's illuminating lectures on classical German philosophy and I had been reading Freud, Hegel, Nietzsche, Alexandre Kojève, Sartre, and Camus, in addition to the Aggadic literature that was to become the subject matter of *The Religious Imagination*.²³ Nevertheless, the encounter with Grüber convinced me that I could no longer avoid the issue of God and the Holocaust. There was little Grüber had said about Jewish misfortune that had not been spoken by the prophets and rabbis in the past. Grüber was a man of courage who, because of his beliefs, could not have offered any other opinion. Since Grüber's position was essentially in harmony with Scripture, I finally acknowledged that an inescapable difficulty was involved in the position of both Grüber and traditional Judaism. I expressed these new convictions in March 1966 in the symposium, "The State of

Jewish Belief," published in *Commentary* and included them in the first edition of *After Auschwitz*:

I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps. I am amazed at the silence of contemporary Jewish theologians on this most crucial and agonizing of all Jewish issues. How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion of all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes.²⁴

This statement has been interpreted as an expression of atheism. On the contrary, it contains no denial of the existence of God, although it rejects the biblical image of the God who elected Israel. After my encounter with Dean Grüber, I became convinced that Jews were confronted by an inescapable either/or: *One can either affirm the innocence of Israel or the justice of God at Auschwitz.*

Today, I understand that there can be other alternatives. We can, for example, say with Maybaum that the Holocaust victims died a sacrificial death for the sake of the coming of the messianic era *precisely because they were innocent*. We can affirm with Jewish messianists that the Holocaust was an indispensable aspect of the "birthpangs of the Messiah"; we can also affirm with American premillennial dispensationalists that the Holocaust was part of the divine timetable leading up to Christ's Second Coming, the Rapture, Armageddon, and the Millennium. Nevertheless, Jewish messianists must face the fact that millions of innocent victims died horribly for the sake of the Lord's plan. For Christian dispensationalists there is no problem of the victims' innocence since those who perished were not faithful Christians. Apart from the question of whether any utopia is worth the bloody price of a Holocaust, the messianic views justify the real death of millions for the sake of an imaginary glorious future.

Those of us who prefer to wait until the arrival of the glorious messianic future before taking it into account have yet to find a credible alternative to the dilemma mentioned above: we can either affirm the innocence of Israel or the justice of God but not both. If the innocence of

Israel at Auschwitz is affirmed, whatever God may be. He/She is not distinctively and uniquely the sovereign Lord of covenant and election. If one wishes to avoid any suggestion, however remote, that at Auschwitz Israel was with justice the object of divine punishment, one must reject any view of God to which such an idea can plausibly be ascribed. Although not an atheist, I did assert that "we live in the time of the death of God." The meaning of that statement is summarized in the following passage:

No man can really say that God is dead. How can we know that? Nevertheless, I am compelled to say that we live in the time of the "death of God." *This is more a statement about man and his culture than about God.* The death of God is a cultural fact. . . . Buber felt this. He spoke of the eclipse of God. I can understand his reluctance to use the more explicitly Christian terminology. I am compelled to use it because of my conviction that the time which Nietzsche's madman said was too far off has come upon us. There is no way around Nietzsche. Had I lived in another time or another culture, I might have found some other vocabulary to express my meanings. . . . When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God? (Italics added.)³⁵

Today, I no longer regard the cosmos as "cold, silent, unfeeling." At the very least, insofar as man is a part of the cosmos and is capable of love as well as hate, the cosmos cannot be said to be entirely cold and silent. My earlier position can be seen as the expression of an assimilated Jew who had returned to Judaism because of the *Shoah*, devoted a quarter of a century to Jewish learning, committed himself to the defense of his people and its inherited religious traditions, and then found that he could no longer believe in the God of that tradition or in the crucial doctrines of covenant and election *without regarding Auschwitz as divine punishment*. Given both the loss of faith this entailed and the events of World War II which brought it about, my view of the divine-human relationship was, at the time, understandably bleak. Today, I would balance the elements of creation and love in the cosmos more evenly with those of destruction and hate than was possible in 1966. What has not changed is a view of God quite different from the biblical and rabbinic mainstream, as well as an unqualified rejection of the notion that the Jews are in any sense a people either chosen or rejected by God. On the contrary, Jews are a people like any other whose religion and culture were shaped so as to make it possible for them to cope with their very distinctive history and

location among the peoples of the world. Put differently, I have consistently rejected the idea that the existence of the Jewish people has any superordinate significance whatsoever.

Rejection of the biblical God and the doctrine of the Chosen People was a step of extraordinary seriousness for a rabbi and Jewish theologian. These views understandably elicited the question whether anyone who accepted such views had any reason for remaining Jewish. For millennia the literature and the liturgy of normative Judaism have been saturated with the idea that God had chosen Israel and that the obligation to obey the laws and traditions of the Torah was divinely legitimated. Why, it was asked, should anyone keep the Sabbath, circumcise male offspring, marry within the Jewish community, or obey the dietary laws if the God of the Bible did not exist?

From one point of view there is considerable merit to these questions. From another there is none. Without a credible affirmation of the existence of the God of the prophets and the rabbis, Judaism becomes a matter of personal preference, a preference some may be tempted to abandon. Immediately after World War II the argument was advanced that racism prevents any escape from Jewish identity. In reality, intermarriage provides an escape route for the grandchildren, if not the children, of mixed marriages. Those who desire to abandon Jewish identity can begin the process even if they cannot complete it. Nevertheless, a knowledge of the negative consequences of unbelief does nothing to enhance the credibility of a belief system.

In the 1960s and 1970s, I responded to the question of whether Judaism can be maintained without traditional faith by arguing that the demise of theological legitimations did not entail an end to the psychological or sociological functions fulfilled by Judaism. Save for the case of conversion, entrance into Judaism is a matter of birth rather than choice. Even conversion to Christianity does not entirely cancel Jewish identity. There is an ethnic component to Jewish identity, intensified by recent historical experience, which persists long after the loss of faith. Every Jew says of the *Shoah*, "It happened to us." For non-Jews, the *Shoah* is something that happened to another people. Just as no Armenian can ever forget the Armenian genocide during World War I, Holocaust consciousness has become an ineradicable component of the Jewish psyche.³⁶ Religion is more than a system of beliefs; it is also a system of shared rituals, customs, and historical memories by which members of a community cope with or celebrate the moments of crisis in their own lives and the life of their inherited community.

Religion is not so much dependent upon belief as upon practices re-