

## **Judaism, Christianity, and Partnership After the Twentieth Century**

### **The Challenges of the Holocaust**

Judaism and Christianity tell of God's love for man and stand or fall on their fundamental claim that the human being is, therefore, of ultimate and absolute value ("He who saves one life it is as if he saved an entire world" [B. Sanh. 37a]; "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son" [Jn. 3:16]). The cruelty and the killing in the Holocaust raise the question of whether those who believe after the Holocaust dare talk about a God who loves and cares without making a mockery of those who suffered.

The Christian "Teaching of Contempt" about Jews and Judaism furnished stereotypes that enabled Nazis to focus on the Jews as scapegoat and created a climate of anti-Semitism in Europe. This climate enabled some Christians to feel they were doing God's duty when they either helped kill Jews or did not stop the killing. Even the great Christians who recognized the danger of idolatry and resisted the Nazi government's takeover of the German Evangelical Church at great personal sacrifice and risk did not speak out on the Jewish question. Christianity may be hopelessly and fatally compromised; the penumbra of Christian complicity challenges the credibility of Christianity as a gospel of love.

More generally, the Holocaust challenges the credibility of modern culture. Limits were broken, restraints shattered. Science and technology—the accepted flower and glory of modernity—climaxed in the factories of death. The humanistic revolt for the "liberation" of humankind from centuries of dependence upon God and nature has been shown to sustain a capacity for demonic evil. Twentieth-century Western civilization, in part the product of the Enlightenment and liberal culture, was a Frankenstein that authored the German monster's being. Liberalism and internationalism served as cover beliefs—designed to weaken the victims' perception that they were threatened and to block the kind of action needed to save their lives. The human and moral failure that made such cruel slaughter possible has deeply tarnished the validity of all modern values. Moreover, the fact of the Holocaust and the failure to confront it make a repetition more likely—a limit was broken, a control or awe is gone—and the murder procedure is now better laid out and understood.

The Holocaust's moral challenge also confronts Jews. Organized Jewry felt bound by the principles of national loyalty and national interest and feared to protest when those principles were used to justify the restricted efforts by the national governments to save Jews. Moreover, those Jews who feel no guilt for the Holocaust are tempted to moral apathy, and religious Jews who use the Holocaust to morally impugn every other religious group but their own are tempted thereby into indifference at the Holocaust of others.

### **Responses to the Holocaust**

The Holocaust confronts us with unanswerable questions. But let us agree to one principle: no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.

There are two polar ways in which theologians have correctly grasped the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish thought and faith. One upholds the God of History, the other affirms the death of God and the loss of

all hope. Neither is credible alone, in the presence of the burning children. After Auschwitz, faith means that there are times when faith is overcome. Since faith is a response to the Presence in life and history, this response ebbs and flows. The difference between the skeptic and the believer is frequency of faith, and not certitude of position. The ability to live with what I call "moment faith" is the ability to live with pluralism and without the self-flattering, ethnocentric solutions that warp religion or make it a source of hatred for the other.

There are reasons to keep the life of faith: in the light of Auschwitz, secular twentieth-century civilization is not worthy of ultimate loyalty. The victims ask that we not jump to a conclusion that retrospectively makes the covenant they lived an illusion and their death a gigantic travesty. After the Holocaust it is all the more urgent to resist this absolutization of the secular. The Holocaust experience insists that we best err on the side of the moral necessity of a God who called this people to a sacred, albeit dangerous, mission of testimony rather than surrender to the immediate logic of nonbelief. The moral light shed by the Holocaust validates skepticism toward contemporary claims. To follow this orientation is to be opened again to the possibilities of Exodus and immortality. The capacity to resist and criticize contemporary models is a test of the Holocaust as the new orienting experience of Jews and an indication that a new era of Jewish civilization is under way. This new era will not turn its back on modernity; rather, it will reject some of its elements and take from the past (and future) much more fully. Recognizing that ultimate claims and absolute forces are the seedbed of unlimited Holocausts, this era's religious thinking will seek to live with dialectical theological affirmations, with all claims subject to and tested by contradictions.

There are several theological models for living in contradiction. One such model is that of Job and involves the rejection of easy pieties or denials and the expectation of further revelations of the Presence. Another is the model of the Suffering Servant; here Israel, by focusing on the abuse of the servant, testifies to the suffering God who shares in pain and pleads for ultimate redemption. The treatment of the Suffering Servant is an early warning of the sins intrinsic in the culture but often not seen until later, just as the Holocaust was an advance warning of the demonic potential in modern culture: the pollution is in the liberating technology; the uniformity in the powerful communication and cultural explosion; the mass murder in the efficient bureaucracy. These lurking forces must be checked by God and humanity alike.

Christians and Jews are called upon to preserve their inner community. They are also called by the Holocaust to participate in the new, open civilization. The Holocaust suggests a fundamental skepticism about all human movements, left and right, political and religious — even as we participate in them. Nothing dare evoke our absolute, unquestioning loyalty, not even our God.

In a third theological model for a life of contradiction, that of Lamentations 3, there is only anger and pain checked by the flickering memory of past goodness. But the lamenter does not offer a pious prayer about the Holocaust. Rather, we seek a prayer on the Holocaust that expresses the anger, that blames God. Anger is more compatible with love and involvement than are pleasant niceties and old compliments. The religious task is to justify human beings, not God, a task that requires a total and thoroughgoing self-criticism that purges the emotional dependency and self-abasement of traditional religion and its false crutch of certainty and security. This task involves a willingness to confess and clear up the violations of the image of God (including women, Jews, Blacks, others) in our values, as well as a willingness to overcome the institutionalism that sacrifices God to self-interest. Even the word of God must be held to account for nourishing hatred and for culpability in, or being an accessory to, the fact of genocide. Justifying

people means the fullest willingness, in both Judaism and Christianity, to defend the revolt against God and the faith that grows out of the desire to liberate humanity. Yet here, too, the Holocaust demands a dialectical capacity from us. Rebels are not usually good at conserving; if we simply validate the contemporary, we fall into idolatry and prepare the legitimization of another Holocaust.

Extraordinary catastrophes are not mastered by routine treatment or evasion. Only extraordinary outbursts of life or creativity can overcome them. In the silence of God and of theology, there is one fundamental testimony that can still be given: the testimony of human life itself.

### **The Holocaust as Revelation**

The Holocaust is itself a revelation. It is a model and pedagogy for future generations; it bears the lesson that genocide can be carried out with impunity: evil ones need fear neither God nor man. This revelation has several consequences.

1. There is one supreme response to such overwhelming tragedy: the reaffirmation of meaningfulness, worth, and life through acts of love and life-giving. The act of creating a life or enhancing its dignity is the countertestimony to Auschwitz. This is a critical religious act. Only millions or billions of such acts can begin to right the balance of testimony so drastically shifted by the mass weight of six million dead. To speak of the image of God, which points beyond itself to transcendence, is the only statement about God that one can make. And it is human life itself that makes the statement— words will not help.

It takes enormous faith in ultimate redemption and meaningfulness to choose to create or even enhance life again. In fact, this choice reveals faith as an ontological life force that reaffirms creation and life in the teeth of overwhelming death; having the child makes the statement of redemption. The reborn State of Israel is the fundamental act of life and meaning of the Jewish people after Auschwitz. To fail to grasp that inextricable connection and response is to fail utterly to comprehend the theological significance of Israel.

2. This revelation summons humankind to create and rehabilitate the divine image in a human community. This rehabilitation of the divine image is the ultimate testimony, perhaps the only credible one that can speak of God in a world of burning children. And it is a task that summons humans to co-responsibility with God in an attempt to preserve and nourish this fragile redemption.

We face the challenge of creating the conditions under which human beings will grow as an image of God, of building a world in which wealth and resources are created and distributed to provide the matrix for existence as an image of the divine. We face the urgent call to eliminate every stereotype that reduces—and denies— this image in the other. A vigorous self-critical review of every cultural or religious framework that may sustain denial of the absolute and equal dignity of the other is the overriding command of religious existence. Without this self-critical review, the act of the religious enterprise simply lacks credibility. Religion that justifies evil becomes the devil's testimony. Whoever joins in the work of creating and rehabilitating the image of God participates in "restoring to God his scepter and crown." These must be seen as the central religious acts. The command to create and rehabilitate the divine image sheds a pitiless light on popes who deny birth control to starving millions to uphold the authority of the magisterium, or on rabbis who deny women's dignity out of loyalty to divinely given traditions.

3. The Holocaust teaches that the meaning of "chosenness" in Jewish faith is a "forced option." A Jew's life is on the line, and therefore every kind of Jew gives testimony at all times. When times are difficult, Christians can choose to be merely Gentiles; Jews remain Jews. Were Christians to be like Jews in this way, they would

have to surrender the self-deceiving universalist rhetoric of the church and adopt a conception of themselves as people of God. Christianity could then live and testify in a truly pluralist world while preserving the ultimacy of its message.

4. Jews have a vested interest in Christianity's existence. Modern values created a milieu as dangerous as—more dangerous than— Christianity at its worst. In pure secularity, humans appoint themselves God and thereby become the devil. Glorification of human autonomy contains the potential for mass killing. When Jews and Christians realize this fact, they are liberated to be in tension with, as well as to celebrate, the secular city.

5. There must be a fundamental shift in the ethics of power. We must have a fundamental reorientation away from the traditional Christian and medieval Jewish glorification of suffering passivity. Never again should anyone be exposed to such one-sided power on

the side of evil. There must be a demand for the redistribution of power. Only the transfer of power to potential victims—power enough to defend themselves—can create a new balance of power. But one should not romanticize the moral stature of the victims. With the balance of power restored, victims can all too easily become perpetrators. Thus one must support not only a balance of power but also the unceasing reconciliation and resolution of conflicts. The need for a restoration of the balance of power accounts for the urgency with which Jews proclaimed the State of Israel after the Holocaust and for the overwhelming worldwide shift of Jewry toward Zionism. It equally accounts for the push within a strengthened Israel to make peace with the Palestinians and to assure a balance of power that protects, without endangering, Jewish survival.

6. Governments have obligations to protect people; they cannot do this without some involvement with power. But how can religion meet the challenge of calling for this involvement without blessing bloody arms or supporting an exploitive status quo? Each religion will need the other's norms, strengths, and criticism to save it from failing this challenge and to correct its behavior along the way.

### **Israel as Revelation**

Jerusalem symbolizes that God's promises are being fulfilled and that His people live on, that human dreams are more real than force and facts. Israel's faith in the God of History demands that an unprecedented event of destruction be matched by an unprecedented act of redemption, and this has happened. The whole Jewish people is caught between immersion in nihilism and immersion in redemption— both are present in immediate experience, and not just historical memory. The reestablishment of the physical community of Israel in a physical and political state may inspire new reflection on the religious significance of a physical people and their actual existence.

Faith is a "moment truth," but there are moments when it is not true, and invoking the truth at the wrong moment is a lie. The sense of Presence gives strength to go on living in contradiction. The recreation of Israel is the classic covenantal symbol. The flaws, the difficulties, are part of the fundamental proof that here we have a revelation of the hidden Presence. Judaism's ongoing life and new harvest of revelation undercut the whole Teaching of Contempt in Christianity, if Christianity finds the strength to admit the reappearance of revelation in our time. The bringing forth of new revelation truly affirms that God does not repent of giving gifts. The acknowledgment of persistent Jewish vitality restores God's gift of Christ to Christian Gentiles as an act of

love; it represents a broadening of the covenant, which contradicts the notion that the new revelation in Jesus constituted an act of cruelty that spiritually and physically destroyed the original chosen people. The recognition of revelation in our time removes the shelter of legitimated hatred and allows Christianity to confront the evil in human hearts with the unqualified challenge of the command of love. This recognition does not undercut the validity of the gospel; rather, further revelation clarifies Paul's affirmation that Jewish rejection of Christ paves the way for Gentile acceptance into the covenant: thus later revelations illuminate earlier ones, giving us a new interpretive key to God's unbroken promises.

The reappearance of revelation is an enormous gift in an age when secularism and scientism have all but undercut the sources and credibility of covenant faith, when Holocaust and history have all but overcome hope. The most powerful confirmation of religious hope is that crucifixion and resurrection have occurred in this generation—in the flesh of the covenanted people. This revelation liberates us from the tyranny of modern categories and restores the old religious role of fighting idolatry. Understanding this revelation releases Christianity from timeless spirituality to find its word incarnate in the temporal lives of humans.

If Judaism finds the strength and feeling to admit revelation in this time, then it, too, has the prospect of renewed hope and divine Presence. Paradoxically enough, the security of its own confirmation—the restoration of the land, the covenantal sign—releases Judaism to ponder anew the significance of Christianity. Confirmed now in its resumed redemption and responding to the Holocaust's challenge not to put down others, Judaism must explore the possibility that through the covenant, nurtured and given birth through its body, God has called the Gentiles. By displaying the power of love and concern for Jews and the embattled beginnings of Jewish redemption, the State of Israel can give Jews a new and serious sense of Christianity's own perception that Israel is a vehicle of divine Presence and redemption in the world.

The unqualified Jewish renewed encounter with Christianity is a painful prospect. For Jews to accept the revelation of the Holocaust and Israel leads them to challenge existing denominational lines and to open up to fellow Jews and the world in a new, painful, risky, yet exhilarating, way. The acknowledgment of the Holocaust and Israel as revelation brings with it many gifts: an end to easy Jewish identification of liberation with secularity and liberalism; a much greater Jewish sense of pluralism; an appreciation of Christianity as a moral/religious balance wheel; a recognition of the need to preserve and husband the resources and values of particular traditions in a fast homogenizing world.

If Jews take the risk, later generations will tell of how 4,000 years after the Exodus and 2,000 years after Calvary, Jews and Christians renounced the guarantees and triumphalism. They faced ultimate death, worked together, and overcame that death with renewed life; they overcame extreme hatred with love—which summons the divine Presence in our midst. Truly, if Jews and Christians can accomplish such feats, then Judaism and Christianity are again models for the world, and this is a messianic moment.

### **A New Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity**

The relationship of antagonism between Judaism and Christianity is rooted in the dynamics of the fact that they have grown out of the same covenant and sought to be faithful to differing experiences of messianism, fulfilled and unfulfilled. If this antagonism is to be overcome, Judaism and Christianity must change the inner coherence of their classic relationship. As I have indicated, the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel as revelatory events in Judaism are the key to a new relationship. These events are both the further unfolding of and commentary on a changed self-understanding that includes a new conception of the pluralism of God's choosing. New patterns of understanding are possible alongside the finality of Christ or the absoluteness of the Jewish covenant. After the Holocaust, the relationship of Judaism and Christianity should enable one to

affirm the fullness of the faith claims of the other, to affirm the profound inner relationship between the two, and to recognize and admit how much closer they are to each other than either has been able to say.

One instructive example of a changed self-understanding on the part of both traditions has to do with the other-worldly character of redemption. In the past, both Jewish and Christian conceptions of redemption, in differing ways, have been accompanied by the temptation to abandon this world.

Judaism insists that redemption is going to happen in this world and that this achievement of total perfection of the world will take place as the result of the efforts of both partners, divine and human. In spite of its insistence on this model of redemption, there have been times when Judaism has been tempted to step away from this worldly view. After the Holocaust, this temptation has no place. Rather, the covenant is Israel's commitment to achieve perfection step by step. The model of perfection itself unfolds in history. When evil reigns supreme, the true balance and direction of history have been disturbed. The only event that can correct such imbalance is a major redemptive move on the other side.

From the beginning, the situation was different for Christianity. Christians responded to an event they had not anticipated, the messiah's death, by concluding that true redemption is not in this world. The kingdom of God is within you, and faith leads to a world of spiritual perfection: even though I am a slave, I am free in Christ. Christians responded faithfully to what had transpired, but later history suggests that they made a hermeneutical error when they explained the crucifixion as an indication that redemption is beyond history. Because of this error, Christianity is continually tempted to say: "This vale of tears is not the real world. The world of suffering and oppression does not matter."

Christians went on to make a second error, an error that, in a way, strengthened Judaism's own temptation with other-worldly redemption. In retrospect, a key moment of the division between the two traditions came in their differing responses to the destruction of the Second Temple. The Christians reacted to the destruction as the best proof that the Jews had forfeited their covenant. The Christians were wrong. Judaism did not disappear. And yet at least in part because of Christian claims of triumph, Jews were tempted to step out of history because in that arena, Christianity had won. To reduce the impact of Christianity's triumph among Gentiles, Jews dismissed the significance of this world and of politics and military power. Instead, the rabbis placed emphasis upon a different arena—the arena of the internalized, participatory faith that characterized the rabbinic period. The rabbis responded to the destruction of the Temple with faith in the covenant and trust in God and the goal. God had "pulled back." God was calling the people of Israel to participate more fully in the covenant, but not in history.

To Christian claims that the destruction of the Temple was a sign that God had rejected Jews who did not accept Jesus, the rabbis had another response, as well. The rabbis concluded that Christianity was an alien growth developed by those who followed a false messiah. Perhaps the rabbis erred. Out of defensiveness, the rabbis confused a "failed" messiah and a false messiah. A failed messiah is one who has the right values but did not attain the final goal. The Bar Kochba rebellion was crushed. It turned out that he was a failed messiah. But Akiva did not repudiate him. Moses and Jeremiah were "failures." These "failures" are at the heart of divine and Jewish achievements. The Christian concept of the "second coming" is, in a way, also a tacit admission that if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. The danger, however, as aspects of both Judaism and Christianity attest in different ways, is that such "failures" will be taken as a sign that

redemption lies somewhere beyond history. Indeed, as a result of their differing errors, both the rabbis and the early Christians tended to abandon the world to Caesar or to mammon.

After the Holocaust, such abandonment is no longer an option. In our time, both Judaism and Christianity have been forced to confront their own places in history. Through the Holocaust, Jews discovered that without power, they were dead; in response the Jewish people took responsibility for their fate and reestablished the State of Israel. Christians, for their part, discovered that they had to become more involved with the world, lest evil triumph as they stood by and watched. In short, the Holocaust forced Jews and Christians to see that the attempt to protect faith against history was an error and that both religions can have no credibility in a world in which evil can triumph totally. The overwhelming call for both religions is to stop the crucifixion, not to glorify it. Christians are called to purge themselves of the hatred that made them indifferent to others.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, God became more hidden, about that the rabbis were right. By this logic, after the Holocaust God is even more hidden. Therefore, the sacred is even more present in every "secular" area. When God is hidden after Auschwitz, one must find God in the street, in the hospital, in the bar. The responsibility of holy secularity is the responsibility of all human beings.

The final question for the believer is not: where was God in the Holocaust? The manifest answer is that God was present, being tortured, gassed, shot down relentlessly amidst God's people. Rather the question is: what was God's message when God did not stop the Holocaust? Let us venture to say that God was calling humans to take full responsibility for the achievement of the covenant. Judaism is entering a third stage; the Judaism of both biblical Israel (in which God initiated events) and of the rabbis (in which humans met God halfway) has now led to the understanding that the ultimate logic of covenant is for humans to take full responsibility. As humans take power, they must develop their antenna to perceive God as the Presence everywhere. This perception will moderate the use of power. Still, without taking power, without getting involved in history, one is religiously irresponsible. To pray to God as a substitute for taking power is blasphemous. If there is anything in our own traditions that demeans, or denies, or degrades somebody else, then one cannot answer "it is the Word of God," and so be it. One must answer, "it is my responsibility." We are living in an age of the Jewish reacceptance of the covenant. The religious message is not to accept inequality but to demand its correction. Jews must reaccept the covenant without making God into the convenient one who says what one wants to hear. This is a renewal that will demand that Jews and Christians remain open to each other, that we learn from each other, and that we have respect for the distinctiveness and the ongoing validity of each other's traditions. Such openness puts no religious claim beyond possibility but places the completion of total redemption at the center of the agenda. Nor does this affirmation undercut the belief of each group that it is an elected people of God. There is enough love in God to choose again and again.

This essay was edited and compiled by Tikva Frymer-Kensky from various essays on the relationship of Judaism and Christianity written by Irving Greenberg over the past several decades. The composite essay was then edited further by David Toole. For those who seek a fuller understanding of Greenberg's views, the original essays are: "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV, 1977), 7–55, 441–446; "New Revelation and New Patterns in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16, no. 2 (spring 1979): 249–267; "The Relationship of Judaism and Christianity: Toward a New Organic Model," in *Twenty Years of Jewish/Catholic Relations*, ed. Eugene Fisher, James Rudin, and Marc Tanenbaum (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 191–211; "Judaism and Christianity: Their Respective Roles in the Divine Strategy of Redemption," in *Visions of the Other, Jewish and Christian Theologians*

*Assess the Dialogue*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 7–27; "Covenantal Pluralism," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 3 (summer 1997): 425–436. See also: "Pluralism and Partnership," in *Unity Without Uniformity: The Challenge of Pluralism*, International Council of Christians and Jews: Martin Buber House publication no. 26 (spring 1999): 68–81.