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Judaism After the Holocaust

A quarter of a century ago, the leading Jewish theological journal, *Judaism*, published a symposium entitled, "Jewish Values in the Post Holocaust Future."¹ One participant was Emil Fackenheim, at the time, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto. His contribution to the symposium is best remembered for the startling assertion that Auschwitz, in all its horror and tragedy, has, almost like a second Sinai, given us an additional commandment. Sometimes called the 11th commandment, after the biblical 10; sometimes the 614th, after the rabbinic 613: the commandment is to survive and, thus, deprive Hitler of a posthumous victory. The Nazis wanted to exterminate the Jews; by its continued existence, the Jewish people defeats the Nazis' monstrous purpose.

Fackenheim's formula has had an enormous impact on contemporary Jewish thought, but, as will become evident, I do not necessarily share his views.

The title of the book I published in England in 1982, *Beyond Survival*,² is an implied challenge to Fackenheim's commandment. The book argues that survival may have been the appropriate message for the generation that witnessed the Holocaust, but it is not sufficient for their children and grandchildren. For them, mere survival is not enough; they want to know the purpose of survival. And that has to be formulated in positive terms, not as an act of defiance against Hitler's determination to destroy us.

From the outset, I questioned Fackenheim's formula for post-Holocaust Judaism, and I continue to do so today. My 1991 book, *The Star of Return*,³ tries to carry on the quest begun in *Beyond Survival*. Although Fackenheim is only mentioned by name five times, the book owes much to him, whether it agrees with him or not.

It agrees with him about the centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life, but it disagrees on *why* Israel is central. Fackenheim's stress on survival brings him to affirm the State of Israel as the surest guarantor that Hitler will not get his posthumous victory. The theme of my book stresses the centrality of Israel, not because it guarantees Jewish survival but because it defines Jewish purpose. By inference, this also guarantees survival yet goes beyond it. This leads us to different conclusions and different politics.

The starting point of *The Star of Return* is the understanding of Judaism as a triangle, the sides of which are faith, people and land. Had Judaism been only a faith, like Christianity, we would have been only the disciples of Moses *rabbenu*, our teacher, through whom the Torah became our possession. But we are also the descendants of Abraham *avinu*, our father (and, I hasten to add, Sarah, our mother). The faith of Abraham and our other patriarchs and matriarchs — from whom we originate — and the faith of Moses — the teacher of our people — was grounded in a covenant with God. The subject of that covenant was the land of Israel. God said to Israel: If you obey My commands, I will bring you to the Promised Land. Since biblical times, therefore, we must speak — in one breath — of Israel as faith, people and land, for the covenant links them and thus defines our spiritual heritage.

Those who disagree with this understanding of the nature of Judaism say that, for most of our history, the vast majority of Jews have resided outside the land of Israel and yet fully lived their Judaism. Therefore, they conclude, it is inappropriate to regard land as central; it is the text of the covenant and its history that stand in the centre of Israel.

My contention is the opposite. Look how strong the attachment to the land of Israel has been! Even after millennia of dispersion, we still fix our gaze on it when we pray, and we mark time according to the seasons there, no matter in which country we live. The land has been so important that it has been an integral part of Judaism, even when it was physically inaccessible. Even the most pious and observant Diaspora Jews believe they could only live their Judaism to the full in the land of Israel. Their need for the land was so strong that they linked its repossession to messianic times.

True, it has always been very difficult — and after the Holocaust, which totally destabilized Jewish life, it became even more so — to position ourselves in a balanced fashion within the triangle of faith, people and land. Therefore, many have tended to confine themselves to one side or another. Thus, pre-Holocaust, classical Reform tended to define Judaism primarily in terms of faith — symmetrical to Christian faith, and with little allegiance to the people or the land of Israel. Similarly, secularists have understood Judaism primarily as people — an approach well suited to a country such as Canada, where ethnicity is much stronger than religiosity. Finally, many Israelis, and some non-Israeli Zionists, centre their Judaism on the quest for land. Each of these approaches is partially right, but each is also totally wrong. To understand Judaism in terms of one of its components, while ignoring the others, distorts its true nature. To separate Judaism into its alleged components is to dismember it.

If, for much of its history, Judaism has existed, even flourished, without access to land, it is because the faith and the people have been so strong that Jews could imagine the land without being there. What is nonsense in geometry — a two sided triangle — has been a Jewish reality for some 2,000 years.

Modernity has challenged all that. The European Enlightenment, which reached Jews at different times depending on when and where they emerged from the ghetto, devastated their Jewish faith. Even those who continued to affirm Judaism — as classical Reform did — as a counterpart to Christian faith could usually only muster lukewarm allegiance. And this often became progressively weaker with successive generations, just as in Christianity. Simultaneously, modern anti-Semitism, the devastating by-product of emancipation, weakened the Jewish people, culminating in the Holocaust when a third of all Jews were physically exterminated and the rest were deeply shattered. Because of the dual onslaught of Enlightenment and anti-Semitism, Jews could no longer maintain the triangle and, consequently, Judaism was in danger.

The simultaneous erosion from within — in the form of loss of faith — and attack from without — in the form of persecution — was too much to withstand. When Hitler was finally defeated, Judaism was so weakened that Hitler may have been close to his posthumous victory. One dare not speculate what would have happened to Judaism had there not been a Zionist movement to point camp survivors towards Israel.

Judaism was saved when the remnants of the people of Israel returned to the land of Israel. Of course, the process began with the early Zionists more than half a century before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. But it was only Jewish sovereignty, three years after the end of the Holocaust, that made possible the renewal of Judaism that we are now witnessing. The return to the land of Israel has led to a revival of the faith of Israel and the restoration of the people of Israel. It has affected every movement and reached every country where Jews live by enabling them to locate their spiritual heritage in the triangle. The revival of religious faith and the renewal of the Jewish people are the direct results of the return to the land of our ancestors.

The restoration of Judaism in our time can best be described in terms of a paradigm shift. A characteristic feature of a new paradigm is that it is really not that new at all. It is merely a novel restatement of old truths that, for one reason or another, were left out or ignored in the old paradigm. Unlike political revolutionaries, scientific innovators are not usually iconoclasts, but classicists: men and women who find new meanings in old truths. This is the model that I wish to apply in order to try to understand the revival and the renewal following the return. It explains the shift from a Judaism centred on survival — the ghetto — to a Judaism centred on purpose — the land.

However, although most Jews are supporters of Israel and even speak of its centrality, the nature of that support must be questioned for at least two reasons.

First, most Jews living outside Israel do not believe they should even contemplate living in Israel. As far as they are concerned, the Jewish state is there for hapless refugees who have nowhere else to go. That is why American Jews — which means most non-Israeli Jews do not even see themselves as living in the Diaspora. When they speak of the centrality of Israel, they do not mean that, because of its existence, their own Jewish focus has in any way shifted. Though they are mouthing the language of the new paradigm, they are living by the principles of the old. *Aliyah*, emigration to Israel, is not an option for most Jews living in the free world; it is only a necessity for those who have nowhere else to go. Zionist ideology has led to Jewish philanthropy, and contemporary Judaism has become subject to market forces.

Second, and more significant, Jewish life is still organized on the principle that its greatest threat is anti-Semitism. Of course, there is much anti-Semitism about, and, of course, it has to be fought resolutely. But anti-Semitism does not threaten the core of Jewish existence today, although it may threaten the existence of individual Jews and some Jewish communities. And anti-Semitism has become less threatening precisely because Israel exists. The new paradigm makes the old arguments — and the old defences — obsolete, although many neurotically still hold on to them. While refusing to contemplate *aliyah* and the opportunity to live in the sovereign Jewish state where there is no anti-Semitism, we live as if anti-Semitism threatens us with extinction. It is an attitude that made sense before Israel existed; it does not make sense today.

Neither does it make sense to regard the existence of Israel as under the constant threat of anti-Semitism, and to view every critic of Israeli government policies as a Jew-hater. A fundamental mistake of Diaspora Jewry is to defend Israel on the grounds that it is a victim. It is nothing of the kind, and thank God for that! Those who are prepared to take the step beyond survival and move towards purpose become less concerned with strategy — fighting enemies — and more with the content of Judaism — being witnesses to the presence of God in history. A growing number of Jews today want to know how to lead Jewish lives more than how to fight anti-Semitism because they know that living as Jews will, by definition, protect them against extinction.

It is worth observing in this context that secular Jews are usually much more preoccupied with anti-Semitism than religious Jews. Fighting anti-Semitism is the only Judaism secularists know, and in their secular self-contradiction, they celebrate Fackenheim for having elevated their neurosis to a divine commandment. They may also have a personal interest in combatting anti-Semitism as it so often impedes their efforts to be accepted by the non-Jewish world. Jews of every religious denomination who practice their Judaism are much more concerned to do God's will than to fight enemies. They know that, to the extent that they succeed in obeying God, they will also survive as Jews.

In this light, let us look again at our understanding of the Holocaust. The conventional view of contemporary Jewish history sees the Holocaust as a prelude to the creation of the State of Israel. This is the myth of Holocaust and redemption. We all recoil from implying that the Holocaust is the price the Jewish people had to pay for Israel. We know that even the triumph of statehood could not have warranted the tragedy that preceded it. But most of us, nevertheless, connect the two events.

When United Jewish Appeal missions stop in Auschwitz on their way to Israel and the March of the Living takes Jewish children to Poland for *Yom Ha'shoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day, and then on to Israel for *Yom Ha'atsmaut*, Israel Independence Day, the message is that the Holocaust is a prelude to Israel and that the two must be understood together.

By contrast, I believe that the Holocaust is the last and most gruesome manifestation of the old paradigm, the one that left Jews to the mercy of others. I view Israel as the celebration of the new paradigm, the one that enables Jews to have as much say in their own destiny as any other free people. The conventional view regards Israel as a potential victim and equates anti-Zionism with the old anti-Semitism. My approach celebrates Israel as the victor and views Zionism as the liberation movement of the Jewish people. This means the Holocaust and Israel belong to different categories.

I base this contention on the fact that the new paradigm — modern Zionism that created Israel — was born 50 years before Hitler came to power. However, then its proponents were no more than a few conspirators. Only after the Holocaust, and even more so after the Six Day War, has it become clear — but, alas, still not to the majority — that the old paradigm is dead and the return to the land, as formulated by Zionism, is the new paradigm. The difference between the two approaches is fundamental. To view the Holocaust as a prelude to Israel leads to a very different perception of the Jewish state than to see Israel as an old new beginning. The former sees Israel as a refuge for persecuted Jews and an avenue of escape in case life becomes difficult in the Diaspora. The latter sees the land of Israel as a place where the Jewish people, at last, can testify to the Jewish faith — just as the Bible has charged us to do, and as we have been unable to do because we have been persecuted. It is the difference between a Judaism based on survival and a Judaism based on purpose and continuity.

Purpose points to solidarity. When we stress survival above all else, we see no reason to try to “mend the world.” Instead, we argue that, since the world has not been prepared to protect us, we have to look after ourselves, whether the world likes it or not. It is a manifestation of a ghetto mentality, for it decides moral issues based on if they are good or bad for the Jews, not whether they are right or wrong by universal standards. Instead of making us act to make a good impression on non-Jews, which is the criterion of the old, the new paradigm demands that we do the right thing in the eyes of God, according to the standards laid down in the Torah.

When we stress solidarity, we reformulate the biblical doctrine that we must be kind to strangers and support the helpless because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Because we have been the victims of evil, we are called upon to fight evil wherever we find it. The Jewish state can never be less than a refuge for all Jews, but it cannot be only that. It must also be an exponent of Judaism, and thus a force for justice and goodness in the world. The return of the people to the land is validated by the faith.

David Hartman — a Canadian, now living in Israel, who has enriched post-Holocaust Jewish thought — said (in a lecture delivered in Toronto some time ago) that when he moved to Israel, he became much more of a universalist than when he was a rabbi in Montreal. Living in the old paradigm ghettoizes us by forcing us to fight for our survival, while ignoring our purpose. Living in the new paradigm liberates us to do God's work and lets survival take care of itself.

Notes

1. *Judaism* 16:3 (Summer 1967).
2. *Beyond Survival* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1982).
3. *The Star of Return* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

Editorial remarks

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