Post-Holocaust Theology. An overview

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The Shoah (Holocaust) has raised a number of questions to which Jewish philosophers, theologians, and historians have given different answers. This article offers a survey of how Jewish thinkers have shaped the memory of the Shoah and how they reimagined Judaism after the catastrophe. In the post-Auschwitz period, Jews reflected anew on God, on the divine (non-)intervention in history, on the relation between God and evil, and on the role of Christianity in the history of antisemitism that culminated in the Shoah. They pondered what made the Shoah possible. In view of the vast range of reflections on the Shoah, it is not this article's intention to treat all these questions exhaustively. It rather endeavours to point out the main directions in which these questions were answered by well-known Jewish thinkers (Meir 2006b).

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1 Ethnocentric or universal memory

On a wall in Yad va-Shem, the memorial of the Shoah in Jerusalem, an utterance of the Baal Shem Tov reminds us that remembering is the way to redemption. Knowing the past is the condition for shaping the future. Memory is indeed central and of crucial importance in the history of the Jewish people, as it is for any other group. Memory, *zikkaron*, characterizes the Jewish experience of the ages.

The question arises: how to remember the Shoah? Different religious and non-religious answers are given, and may even compete. During the Adolf Eichmann trial that took place between April and August 1961, answers to the question of how to remember clashed. These answers can be roughly categorized as more ethnocentric or more universal. The judges in the Eichmann trial had an ethnocentric view; they focused on Eichmann's antisemitism, and were first of all concerned about the Jewish victims. Philosopher Hannah Arendt's narrative, on the contrary, was less ethnocentric. In her view, totalitarian regimes produced victims, and although once the victims were Jews, at other times other groups were marginalized, oppressed, and killed. From her vantage point, Arendt thought that the Shoah was an instance of totalitarianism.

Arendt thus focused upon totalitarianism, of which the Shoah was an episode. The Nazis refused plurality and strived for a monolithic society. In her thought-provoking book *Eichmann in*

Jerusalem, she wrote that Adolf Eichmann was not first of all a rabid antisemite but someone who functioned perfectly in a totalitarian-bureaucratic system (Arendt 1964). Her narrative was less about antisemitism than about totalitarianism. The Shoah was not merely a crime of war; it was a crime against humanity, a specific crime already known as such during the processes of Nuremberg.

In her lucid analysis of the Eichmann trial, Arendt emphasized that blind obedience became the highest norm in Germany. In this way, Eichmann could argue during his trial that he did not do anything wrong: he had only followed orders. However, his defence – that he was a mere cog in the Nazi war machine – made him no less guilty. In Arendt's view, he was a non-diabolic figure, a grey civil servant who obeyed orders. In Nazi Germany, totalitarianism suppressed public opinion in favour of a political ideology. The public space, interconnectedness, and communication between people were systematically destroyed.

For Arendt, evil in Eichmann's case was 'banal', without foundation. It was characterized by an absence of thought and an incapacity to judge. Eichmann was a bureaucratic desk-murderer. His deeds were monstruous, but he was an ordinary person, neither demonic nor monstruous. Eichmann was incapable of casting doubt on his acts; he could not resist evil. He represented a new type of criminal, who thought of himself as a professional, normal person. He defined himself as a specialist in transport and functioned well in the totalitarian system. His guilt was that of a functionary. Arendt concluded that the Shoah had to be remembered as a crime against humanity, not merely against Jews.

Arendt's understanding of the Shoah during the Eichmann process differed substantially from that of Prosecutor and Attorney General Gideon Hausner, who compared Eichmann with Haman from the book of Esther. To him, the trial was mainly a trial against antisemitism and the Shoah primarily concerned Jews.

Arendt offered an alternative version with her approach to the Shoah as the result of a bureaucratic totalitarianism. Her report in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is not a historical account but a thought-provoking analysis of the process of Eichmann. She paid attention to how judges functioned in the murderous bureaucracy of Nazi Germany. She insisted that Eichmann was not a war criminal, but one who committed a crime against humanity. She protested against acosmism and defended politics as a between-space of different people. Jews were victims of a totalitarian system. In her provocative report, she linked the Eichmann process with the attempt of Rudolf Kastner to negotiate the price for Jewish lives with the SS officers Kurt Becher and Adolf Eichmann. In her sharp political analysis, she also showed how then-prime minister Ben Gurion fulminated against the Arabs and not against the Germans.

Deputy Prosecutor Gabriel Bach called Arendt's view 'perverse'. He referred to Jacob Robinson, who had attacked Arendt's viewpoint (Robinson 1965). For Bach, there was no doubt that Eichmann was an antisemite, who told the commandant of Auschwitz to put one thousand children in the gas chambers in the name of the future. When a Dutch fascist asked Eichmann if he regretted something, he answered that he regretted not to have been tough enough. Although Arendt paid less attention to the origins of antisemitism, her defence of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and her struggle against the nation-state and ethnic homogeneity remain crucial in the active remembrance of the Shoah.

In Arendt's view, the Shoah was part of universal history. This viewpoint conflicted with the view that the Shoah first of all concerned the Jews. However, it is doubtful if there really is a contradiction: the Shoah indeed concerned the Jews, but it was at the same time the result of processes that take place in totalitarian regimes with people who execute orders and blindly obey their superiors.

Similar to Arendt, Alain Finkielkraut celebrates plurality and democracy. On the occasion of the trial of Klaus Barbie, nicknamed ‘the butcher of Lyon’, Finkielkraut wrote about ‘a vain memory’ (*une mémoire vaine*; Finkielkraut 1989). He thought that, if the Shoah is not remembered as a ‘crime against humanity’, the memory is void. Remembering the Shoah involves permanent vigilance to prevent crimes against humanity.

It is certainly legitimate to ask how the Shoah has to be remembered. Yet, a caveat is needed here: there are memories that are rather problematic. For example, when one uses the word Shoah in the context of the Israeli attitude towards the Palestinian population. Traditionally, the Shoah is remembered on the yearly Day of the Shoah, in schools and in public spaces. Religious people remember the Shoah by reciting *Yizkor*, the memorial prayer for the dead, four times a year. In Israel, there are academic and informal courses on the subject of the Shoah.

2 Remembering in Zionist narratives

The realization of the Zionist dream is considered by many as an excellent way of coping with the Shoah. However, there are multiple ways of being a Zionist. The moral Zionism developed by Ahad ha-Am and Martin Buber implies the peaceful coexistence with Arabs. This Zionism is shared by the people of *Shalom akhshav* and other peace movements. For them, remembering the Shoah becomes concrete in the contestation of the occupation of Arab territories and the promotion of good Jewish-Arab relationships. The creation of a dialogical human being was Buber’s Zionist vision. Whereas social relations were destroyed during the Shoah, the creation of a model society is viewed as the concrete fulfilment of the remembrance of the Shoah. Those who saw destruction remember it by constructing civilization. In this perspective, the building of a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic society with respect for others is the task of the day. In moral Zionism, one may be at the same time realistic – knowing that enemies are there – and perceive oneself as related to others. In this perspective, remembrance of the Shoah does not stop with moving religious and civil ceremonies; it concerns the building of positive relations with others as a contribution to civilization.

In the Zionist narrative immediately after the Shoah, the passive attitude of Jews in the Shoah was replaced by active Israeli pioneers, who wanted to get rid of the *galut* (diaspora) mentality. The children of the diaspora, the *bené galut*, had to be substituted by the children of redemption, *bené ge’ula*. The pioneers saw themselves as David against Goliath. They appreciated the Jewish resistance during the Shoah and praised the fighters in the ghetto of Warsaw. The *sabra* (a term referring to any Jew born in Israel) was of a Brennerian-Nietzschean type. One reinterpreted Jewish history as a history of resistance, from Eliezer ben Yair to Tel Chai. The fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto were a historical repetition of the Jewish resistance against Greek and Roman oppressors: Masada should not fall again. Some opponents of Israel turn Zionists into Nazis and the Palestinians into Jews, as in their view the Israelis want expansion of their territory, comparable to the Nazi desire for *Lebensraum* (living space). Finkielkraut (1983) protested against such a Manichean way of thinking.

Beside the classical Zionist heroic view, in which passivity was condemned and defence glorified, post-Shoah Jewish writers and thinkers developed quasi-Messianic thoughts. Their idea was that after a series of catastrophic events, crowned by the Shoah, the time of redemption had come. Just as the expulsion of Jews from Spain was followed by the Lurian Kabbalah, and just as the pseudo-Messiah Shabtai Tsvi was followed by the Baal Shem Tov and Hasidism, the State of Israel was born after the catastrophic event of the Shoah.

Eliezer Berkovits argues that after each *hurban* (destruction) something new was built. After the destruction of the first temple, the synagogue came into being. After the second temple was destroyed, Judaism of the Talmud was created. After the liquidation of the exile in the Shoah, Jews returned to Zion (Berkovits 1973: 157).

The link between catastrophe and redemption is also expressed in the geographic proximity of the memorial Yad va Shem and the Herzl mount, where statesmen and fallen soldiers are buried. Moreover, the temporal link between the Day of Remembrance of the Shoah and Resistance (*yom ha-Shoah ve ha-gevura*) and the Day of Remembrance of the fallen soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (*yom ha zikkaron le-?alelé tsahal*) testifies to the existence of the link that is formed between the Shoah and the state of Israel. Arendt contested such a link, since for her the state had to be multinational. Buber too pled for a binational state, in which Jews and Arabs could live together in common care.

A Halakhic debate took place regarding commemorating the Shoah on *Tish'a be-Av* or on a special *Yom ha-Shoah* (Schacter 2008). Chief Rabbi Yitshak ha-Levi Herzog favoured a separate day of commemoration of the Shoah. His opinion was opposed with the argument that *Tish'a be-Av* is the only day on which to commemorate Jewish tragedy. The Knesset approved a law in 1959 that the twenty-seventh day of Nisan was the day to commemorate the Shoah, close to the Day of Remembrance of the fallen soldiers.

3 Shoah and psychoanalysis

Yet another way of remembering the Shoah has been formulated by the French-Jewish psychanalyst Jean-Gérard Bursztein (1996). For him, Jews represent the symbolical Law; they stand for the command 'thou shall not kill'. The Shoah had to be remembered as the attempt to get rid of the symbolic Law. Through the annihilation of Jews, the Nazis wanted to abolish the disturbing command to respect life. Hence, the Shoah was an attempt of patricide, a refusal to accept what Jacques Lacan calls '*le nom du père*' (the name of the father): Nazism tried to destroy civilization itself. In Nazi Germany, there was no Law anymore as the expression of love for the symbolic Father. Adolf Hitler became the cruel, tyrannic father, for whom one had to bring sacrifices. Brothers became comrades and racial propaganda replaced civilization. Nature became culture. The masses were hypnotized by Hitler, they imitated his behaviour and his outer appearance. For Bursztein, they suffered from a social psychosis. In their eyes, the physical destruction of the Jews would lead to the elimination of the disturbing law of the sanctity of life.

4 Shoah, equality, and civilization

A fitting way of remembering the Shoah consists in taking seriously the duty of creating an equal and just society in alertness to the destruction of civilization. The scroll of Esther 4:14 reads: 'If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place'. The Shoah demonstrated how civilization was systematically destroyed and how one's belonging to the wider world was forgotten. In difficult times, one must speak up and stand up against evil. If democracy and universal values are neglected, the memory of the Shoah obliges one to be courageous in building and defending civilization by promoting democracy, diversity, and equality. In this humanist view, remembering the Shoah consists in hallowing life, as against destroying life.

5 Fresh thinking on God and on human beings

New times need new or forgotten old thoughts. During and after the Shoah a new anthropology and a new theology were constructed. Instead of the almost invincible Siegfried, the *Übermensch* hero of Germanic legend who lives his life above values and beyond good and evil, a human being who is sensitive to the suffering of others made his appearance. This anthropology with its compassion and care for others is the opposite of the brutal Nazi ideology. This anthropology was based on the Suffering Servant of the prophet Isaiah, in humble service of others. Theology too was reformulated. The inscription 'God with us' on the belts of the Nazis is in contrast with a biblical God who cares for all. Fresh thinking on God and the human being was

needed. Many Jewish thinkers engaged in such a revision and reimagination.

In his depth-theology, Abraham Joshua Heschel replaced an Aristotelian, immovable God with God as the ‘most-moved Mover’ (Heschel 1993). The human being is God’s concern. God has pathos and the prophets are people who share the divine concern for the human being. For Heschel, the human being is a ‘need’ of God. Heschel’s God is a suffering God, the ‘most-moved Mover’. Confronted with evil, one does not have to blame God, but rather the human being. Heschel writes about a God who hides Himself so that the human being may look for Him and find Him. Human beings led God into exile. In a lecture of February 1938, before an audience of Quaker leaders, he said:

> Perhaps we are all now going into exile. It is our fate to live in exile, but HE has said to those who suffer: ‘I am with them in their oppression’. The Jewish teachers tell us: Wherever Israel had to go into exile, the Eternal went with them. The divine consequence of human fate is for us a warning and a hope. (Heschel published a translation of this speech in the *Hebrew Union College Bulletin* of March 1943. One year later he also published a slightly revised translation, which appears in *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* [1954: 147–151])

The task of human beings is to reunite the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence) with God and to redeem the suffering God. Heschel quoted the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, to remind his audience how to react when confronted with evil: ‘If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him’ (Heschel 1954: 148). Against human indifference, he confronted harsh reality and opposed evil.

Close to Heschel’s thoughts, Buber maintained that God’s face is obscured by human deeds which are responsible for God’s presence (Buber 1952). He conceived the Messiah as a person, but also as the entire people of Israel (Buber 1964: 483). Against the ‘religion’ of Job’s friends, he recognizes Job as encompassing his entire generation. When God speaks to Job, He addresses the Shoah generation. The new Job is the Shoah survivor who searches for God and experiences His presence, notwithstanding evil. He or she is the Suffering Servant (*’eved ha-Shem*) of Deutero-Isaiah who takes responsibility for the world. Israel suffers and God suffers with them, but mysteriously – through Israel as God’s hidden arrow – this will bring redemption to the world.

The suffering of the Jews and a suffering God identifying with Israel’s suffering go together in Buber’s and Heschel’s thoughts. However, in remembering the Shoah from a narrow ethnocentric perspective, disproportionate attention to one’s own suffering leads to forgetting the suffering of others. In a broad humanistic perspective, the memory of the destruction of civilization and of the social as such leads to the building of civilization. In such a view, one contests the utterance that the Jewish identity is formed solely by the enemies: Jewish identity is shaped not on the negative background of others, but in relation to them.

Jewish thinkers after the Shoah felt the need to develop a philosophy in which ethics and the creation of a just society are central. They emphasized the fundamental interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all in the footsteps of the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen, who wrote about the human being as *Mitmensch*, someone in coexistence. Buber, for instance, lauded the *Zwischenmensch*, the between-person. He famously contrasts the holistic I-you, the connecting I, with the categorizing and describing I-it. In his view, the relation to the other leads to connection with the eternal Thou (Buber 1970: 53–57). His thoughts on the interpersonal may be extended to the relation between groups or between subgroups of the same group (Meir 2006a). His universal humanism remains inspirational for Jews and non-Jews alike who desire to mend the world through interhuman relationships and through the creation of a just society with equality for all.

Emmanuel Levinas is another Jewish thinker whose metaphysics after the Shoah are profoundly ethical. He develops a philosophy as love of wisdom that learns from the wisdom of love, present in the best of the Jewish tradition (Meir 2008). The logical discourse of Athens becomes possible thanks to the ethical discourse of Jerusalem. Speaking is always speaking to someone and answering his or her ethical demand. For Levinas, the human being has an infinite responsibility towards the other. The infinity stemming from the face of the other ruptures one's totality. Unlike his teacher Martin Heidegger, whose ontology lacks ethics, Levinas pays attention in his ethical metaphysics to the call stemming from the other's face. His philosophy with its extraordinary attention to the suffering of the human being is illustrative of a renewed Jewish thinking that copes with the Shoah.

In post-Shoah Jewish thinking and in the footsteps of Heschel, Buber and Levinas, there is frequent adoption of contemporary values in an attempt to abandon patriarchal, homophobic, nationalistic, and racist ways of thinking, in order to give more space to human rights activists who make a difference by their non-difference for other human beings.

Yitz Greenberg argues that there are different covenants of God, starting with a covenant humanity as a whole after the flood and then with Abraham and the Jewish people. The concept of the covenant has been transformed in the course of time. The Sinai covenant was coercive. After the destruction of the Temple, Israel became a creative partner in the covenant. The covenant of Purim renewed Sinai: the Divine had self-limited and 'the Jews established and took upon themselves' (Esth 9:27), taking additional responsibilities. The covenant was enforced by reward and punishment. With the murdering of the covenant people in the Shoah, however, the covenant was shattered. In the words of Elie Wiesel, God broke the covenant. He has to repent of the covenant for having given his chosen people a task without protection. As a result, the covenant cannot be commanded anymore. The Jewish people reaccepted the covenant out of free will and love. They witness to the covenant by living as Jews. The voluntary nature of the covenant is the ultimate result of God's self-limitation out of respect for human dignity and free will (Greenberg 1982).

6 God and history

Another characteristic in Jewish thinking coping with the Shoah concerns the multitude of views on the connection or disconnection between God and history. In her book *History, Metahistory, and Evil: Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust* (2020), Barbara Krawcowicz compares a variety of theological responses to the Shoah. Scholars have examined the *haredi* writings of Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, Yissakhar Shlomo Teichthal, and Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, as well as the writings of the post-Shoah theologians Eliezer Berkovits, Richard L. Rubinstein, and Emil L. Fackenheim. The novelty in Krawcowicz's book is that she brings ultra-orthodox writings during the Shoah into contact with post-Shoah Jewish responses to the Shoah. In this sense, she sheds new light on the aforementioned theologians who struggled with similar questions in a variety of ways. Her sophisticated analysis shows the similarities and differences between these theologians, who dealt with the presence, absence, or limits of a covenantal theodicy. Their thinking circles around the question of God's presence or absence in history. They embrace or reject a covenantal theodicy that works with paradigmatic thinking and excludes radical novelty. In Krawcowicz's view, *haredi* and non-*haredi* writers illuminate each other.

Already in Talmudic times, Elisha ben Abuya contested divine intervention in history, in which he perceived no justice and no judge (*lét din ve-lét dayan*). In modern times, religious Zionists defend the opposite claim. In a widespread religious-Zionist idea after the foundation of the Jewish state, the annihilation of the Jews – the *chorban* – preceded the beginning of the redemption, *'at?alta di ge'ula*. For Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of the famous Rabbi Abraham Yitschak ha-Cohen

Kook, the Shoah was an integral part of a divine plan: it was the price which Jews paid for the Jewish state; after the catastrophe came redemption. The Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz radically opposed such a view. He conceived of history as devoid of divine intervention. There was no *deus ex machina*. Faith had nothing to do with belief in the divine finger in history (Leibowitz 1992: 99). He appreciated living in the Jewish state which was the fulfilment of political-national independence. But he warned:

> The state fulfils an essential need of the individual and the national community, but it does not thereby acquire intrinsic value – except for a fascist who regards sovereignty, governmental authority, and power as the supreme value. (Leibowitz 1992: 118)

True heteronomous faith was not only separated from autonomous, humanistic values. True faith supposed the service of God, without pretending to know the divine intentions (Leibowitz 1992: 119). Similar to Leibowitz, Levinas maintains that God does not intervene in history to compensate human shortcomings. Both thinkers occupy a non-traditional position in that they reject any theodicy. For both, history is ruptured by obeying the divine command, which, again, was interpreted differently.

7 Reimagining Jewish faith after Auschwitz

Jewish thinkers have reformulated the Jewish faith after Auschwitz. Richard Rubenstein developed a radical position. In *After Auschwitz* (1966), he formulates a kind of ‘God is dead’ theology (Rubenstein 1992). Following Herbert Marcuse, he deems that a ‘logic of domination’ had to be replaced by a ‘logic of gratification’ (Rubenstein 1992: 205). His anti-metaphysical position is contested by Steven Katz, who labelled Rubinstein’s theory a ‘new naturalistic paganism’, in which naturalistic categories substituted the traditional, normative categories (Katz 1983: 174–204).

Whereas Rubenstein abandons the traditional Jewish idea of God, Steven Jacobs refuses to accept a commanding God (Jacobs 1994). He deems that a God who does not intervene at Auschwitz loses his credibility. There is no divine Providence (hasgacha). Neither can there be after Auschwitz a commanding God. There is no command (mitsva), no commander (*metsavé*) or a commanded person (*metsuvé*). ‘Ascribed authority’ had to be replaced by ‘achieved authority’.

A further reflection on Jewish faith is that of the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who was the first to systematically reflect on Jewish existence post-Auschwitz (Fackenheim 1972). Dissimilar to Jacobs, he states that God does command after Auschwitz: God commands not to despair, to continue to trust Him, to continue to hope and to mend the world (*tiqqun ‘olam*). Fackenheim calls this the 614th commandment. One must remain a Jew in order not to become an accomplice to diabolical plans:

> Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. […] One possibility […] is wholly unthinkable. A Jew may not respond to Hitler’s attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work […]. (Fackenheim 1972: 84)

For Fackenheim, the Shoah – like the revelation on Mount Sinai – is an ‘epoch-making event’: God’s voice commanded Jews to remember, to survive, and not to despair.

Levinas too made the ethical command, eminently expressed in the phrase ‘thou shall not kill’, central in his ethical metaphysics. This fits a concept of Judaism in the post-Shoah era. After the Shoah, everything is allowed, or – this is Levinas’s standpoint – ethics nevertheless remain important. In the footsteps of Kant, he bases religion on morality and not vice versa. Ethics is not an appendix to religion; it is its very essence. For Levinas, Judaism was ‘a religion of adults’ (*une religion d’adulte*s; Levinas 1990: 11–26). Whereas the numinous or the sacred violently transports the human being beyond his will, Levinas understands Jewish monotheism as a triumph over the numinous powers. Judaism is against pathos, enthusiasm, and ecstasy; it affirms human independence and human intelligence, even with the risk of atheism. Levinas perceives the ethical relation as a religious relation:

> Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression. In the Holy Ark from which the voice of God is heard by Moses, there are only the tablets of the Law. (Levinas 1990: 17)

According to Levinas, Judaism that links the Divine to the moral always aspired to be universal. Jewish particularism ‘outside the nations’, its very election, conditions universality (1990: 21–22). Yet, in Levinas’ view, Judaism is a special humanism; it is a humanism of the other human being (1990: 277–288). Moreover, Jewish education puts a limit on the interiorization of principles of conduct by converting inspirations into gestures and rituals. It ‘does not rely on the ineffective brutality of constraints imposed by the totalitarian State in order to maintain a law within freedom and guarantee freedom through law’ (1990: 288). In Judaism, the way to God leads ipso facto to the human being and the way to the human being leads to ritual discipline. Judaism is therefore both eminently particular and eminently universal.

Like Leibowitz, Levinas sees the Law as essential in Judaism. Both develop an anti-mystical approach of Judaism. Their concept of religion is an antidote against a Judaism in which religion is a need to be satisfied. For both religion is not a tool in service of the state. Yet Levinas interweaves ethics and metaphysics and perceives morality as heteronomous. For Leibowitz, morality is autonomous and only the divine command is heteronomous. Unlike Leibowitz, Levinas puts humanism at the centre of the Jewish faith.

8 God and evil

Jewish tradition offers several answers to the problem of evil. Jewish thinkers coped with what Leibniz called ‘theodicy’. David Birnbaum, a contemporary scholar who grapples with the problem of evil, has given a short overview of traditional views on the relation between God and the existence evil as well as a survey of some modern positions on this issue (Birnbaum 1989). Job’s stance that man cannot comprehend God’s ways is well known. Job refused his friends’ position, that he received punishment for his sins. Another traditional solution is given by referring to the hiding of God’s face, *hester panim*, a kind of suspension of God’s active involvement in the world. Others wrote about the divine chastening ennobling the human being (*yissurim shel ahava*). For Maimonides, the intellectual link with God causes divine Providence which protects from evil accident. Rabbi Levi Yitzaq of Berditchev is said to have interrupted the Yom Kippur service to protest against the heavenly King who failed to protect his people. Yet, he recited qaddish, hallowing God’s name. He combined protest and praise.

With the Shoah, the question of how God and evil are compatible became even more urgent. How

was an omniscient, omnipotent, and beneficent God reconcilable with the existence of evil? Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn referred to the human impossibility of understanding God. Rabbi E. M. Shakh and Rabbi M.E. Hartom, as well as Rabbi J. Teitelbaum and Rabbi I.S. Teichtal, considered the Shoah as a divine punishment (*mipné ?ata'enu*), for opposite reasons. Others like H.S. Kushner refer to a divine non-omnipotence (Kushner 1981: 81). E. Berkovits wrote on divine self-control. Finally, there are the radical positions of Franz Kafka, for whom God was indifferent and incomprehensible, and of Richard Rubenstein, who concluded that God is non-existent (however, in the second edition of *After Auschwitz* [1992], Rubenstein emphasizes that his restructured, demythologized post-Shoah Judaism does not endorse atheism).

Birnbaum develops a new theodicy. He explains how divine existence is compatible with the reality of evil. His solution is linked to his view of the human beings who strive to realize their maximal potential. To achieve his potential, the human being had to develop his independence. However, God is like a parent who does not send his children out on their own in the cruel world. He gradually contracts his divine power (*gevurah*). *Hester panim* is rare before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, but after that date it increasingly becomes the norm. According to Birnbaum, God contracts more and more from the here-and-now and allows for a person's spiritual attainment in ever growing freedom and responsibility. With his revisited theodicy, Birnbaum has a staunch belief in human development and in infinite progress. He still believes in a God who, albeit gradually less and less, pulls the strings of human history.

Levinas recognized the importance of theodicy in the Jewish past. Yet, to his mind, the Shoah put an end to this kind of thinking because of the unjustifiable character of one's neighbour's pain. He writes of the 'end of theodicy'. After Auschwitz, one has to eliminate 'useless suffering'. Love or 'non-useless suffering' (*la souffrance non-inutile*) constitutes the I as one-for-the-other (Levinas 1984).

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is not interested in asking questions concerning God and evil. Rather, he asks what Jews have to do in front of a catastrophe. For him, the covenant of fate and the covenant of destiny are linked: the people of Israel, *klal Yisrael*, and its spiritual orientation cannot be separated from each other. They belong together, each cannot exist without the other. Soloveitchik uses the terms of Song of Songs 5:2: God knocks at the door; he gives signs such as the recognition of the state of Israel or the possibility of Jewish self-defence. God waits for the response of the Jewish people (Soloveitchik 2006).

9 Alternative thoughts on God: divine retreat and full human responsibility

On the occasion of receiving the Leopold Lucas Award in 1984, Jonas studied the age-old question of how God is compatible with evil. In the past, one explained evil as the consequence of Israel's unfaithfulness and of the divine punishment. At the time of the Maccabees, the notion of 'edut, testimony, came into being. The righteous testified before God: they suffered and even died in qiddush ha-Shem, in hallowing the divine Name. Jonas acknowledges these ways of coping with evil, but he himself develops a mythical thinking in which the Divine retreats (mystics talk about tsimtsum, divine contraction) to create an evolving world. With the appearance of the human being on the scene of the universe, good and evil entered into the world. From then on, human beings influence the divine fate. For Jonas, God is not immovable, but is concerned with the world. He has empathy with human beings. Jonas talks about God who is not omnipotent (Jonas 1948). A good God and an omnipotent God are not compatible, therefore one must opt for a good God. However, a good God is not compatible with the existing evil. A good God, who does not intervene in Auschwitz, is problematic in Jonas' view. He concludes that God did not intervene, not because He did not want to, but because He could not. He retreated and gave full responsibility to human beings. Clearly, Jonas disagrees with Job. He does not ask 'where was God?' but rather 'where was the human being?'.

Birnbaum too works with divine contraction to explain the existence of evil (Birnbaum 1989). The gradual retreat of God from history would explain the divine interference in Egypt and his non-interference during the Shoah. However, a God-Father who allows human responsibility to grow and, in this perspective, permits the Shoah remains problematic. The complete retreat or tsimtsum of God on the contrary makes full responsibility of the human beings for history possible from the beginning.

Parallel to Jonas, Levinas developed a philosophy that gives weight to the word ‘God’ and the entire responsibility to the human being. He does not give meaning to history, which becomes only meaningful in one’s relation to the ‘face’ of the other. God is approachable in the infinity that stems from the appeal of the other’s ‘face’. To approach God becomes possible in the proximity to the other.

Levinas proposes to believe in a God without promise of a happy end. The vulnerable demanding face of the other brings God into the mind. The more one respects the other, the more one becomes conscious that the way of becoming good is still very long, in fact it is infinite. In the Jewish tradition, the righteous one, the tsaddiq, is judged more severely than others: he is judged ke-?ut ha-sa’ara, according to the tininess of a hair. The one who makes ethical progress knows how long it takes to be in the nearness (proximité) of others, to be near to God. For Levinas, suffering is never justified (Levinas 1984). Solidarity and healing are demanded: they are the criteria for real religiosity. God retreats once and for all, He is transcendent, approachable in responsibility and in response to the infinite demand of the other. Because of the divine retreat, the task of mending the world is now totally in the hands of human beings.

10 Antisemitism and Christianity

Raul Hilberg has shown how Christian antisemitism is the basis of racial antisemitism and how the secular ideology of the nineteenth century continues the Christian politics of the fourth century and the idea of Christianity as state religion (Hilberg 1961). Dissimilar to Hilberg, Arendt separated Christian antisemitism from the ideological antisemitism, which started in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries in communities where Jews were strangers (Arendt 1951: preface). Yet, Hilberg clearly showed the parallels between ecclesiastical decrees and Nazi rules. In her focus upon the fragile status of marginal people Arendt was less attentive to the centuries-long Christian antisemitism.

Rivka Schechter added some insightful remarks on Christian antisemitism. Reflecting on the roots of antisemitism, she points to the gnostic theology of Martin Luther, whose ideas contributed to the ideology of the Third Reich (Schechter 1990). She discusses Luther’s dualistic thinking that goes back to Marcion of Sinope, who rejected the Old Testament and the Jewish God. Goethe’s Faust was the link between Luther and the Shoah. With her theological reflections, Schechter wanted to uncover the theological roots of the Shoah, explaining how the gnostic Marcionite way of thinking influenced Luther and was eminently present in Goethe’s Faust.

In an article of 1922, Leo Baeck threw light on Christianity as it functioned in history (Baeck 1922). In a typological manner, he contrasted the classical Jewish view that emphasizes human activity with the dreamy romantic religiosity that diminishes human activity. His analysis of the gap and clash between a romantic religion and an activist one anticipates the insights of Raul Hilberg, who blamed Christianity for its historical, negative attitude towards Jews. However, one should always remember how some Christians defended and hid Jews because they felt it was their duty to do so as Christians.

Reform Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum has interpreted the Jewish suffering in the Shoah as the new Golgotha, and as atonement for the world (Maybaum 1965).

11 Ordinary people or ordinary Germans

The debate between Hausner and Arendt discussed at the beginning of this article reappeared in the dispute between Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who differed on the role which antisemitism played in the perpetrators of the Shoah. In his Ordinary Men: The Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (1992), Browning argues that what led to the crimes of this group was not first of all the antisemitic Nazi ideology. These German policemen were obeying orders, and wanted a quick career. Browning concludes: 'If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?' (Browning 1992: 189).

Goldhagen's book Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (1996) goes against Browning's thesis. He argues that German antisemitism was already 'exterminational' in the nineteenth century. Thus the difference between Nazis and ordinary Germans would be less clear than usually assumed. Whereas Browning continues the narrative of Arendt, arguing that each human group can perform inhuman acts out of banal motives, Goldhagen gives more weight to the antisemitic attitudes of the perpetrators of the Shoah.

Goldhagen's theory is also contested. The Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer, for instance, emphasizes that the pseudo-intellectual elite seized power in Germany not thanks to a deadly ideology but to a series of social crises (Bauer 1998). John Weiss deems that large sectors of the German population were not primarily characterized by antisemitism (Weiss 1996). Yet, Goldhagen contributed to the study of the Shoah with his explanation of 'how' the Shoah took place: the perpetrators of the genocide wanted to be photographed, they had no problem that their acts became public (Goldhagen 1996: 240–245). It was not coercion but the will of groups that brought about mass murdering. He took social, economic, and historical reasons less into account.

Jewish thinking on the Shoah is still developing, and it is certain that the future will bring more studies and insights on its nature. Jewish thinkers continue to reflect on the way the Shoah is best remembered. Clearly the Shoah is a watershed moment, which asks for a revisited Judaism, for new and creative views on God and his relation to evil and history.

The debate over whether the Shoah was unique or in line with other instances of Jewish suffering is also linked to the universal or ethnocentric interpretation of the Shoah and to the ways of remembering it. To Arendt, for instance, the Shoah is an episode in the history of totalitarianism. For Fackenheim and Steven Katz, it is an incomparable event (Katz 1994). One may situate the Shoah in the long history of catastrophes such as the suffering in Egypt, Haman, the crusades, inquisition, or pogroms. Yet the Shoah remains unique in the undoing of the social bond, of civilization itself. During the Eichmann trial, Yechiel Dinur (K. Tsetnik) testified that the Shoah occurred 'on another planet'. Later, he regretted his words, since the Shoah took place in our world. To make the Shoah so unique that it is absolutized and almost pulled out of history is problematic, but an all too easy comparison with other terrible events is equally problematic.

Attributions

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