

ISSUE #27
2016

WHERE WAS GOD DURING THE SHOAH?

A personal attempt to provide an answer after considering a range of Jewish and Christian responses, and to explore the future of Jewish-Christian relatedness in a post-Shoah world.



AN OLIVE PRESS
RESEARCH PAPER

BY
SISTER SCHOLASTICA
(STANBROOK ABBEY)

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – an occasional paper featuring articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ Supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.



Telephone: 01623 883960

E-mail: enquiries@cmj.org.uk

Eagle Lodge, Hexgreave Hall Business Park, Farnsfield, Notts NG22 8LS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper is a personal response. However, the experience and context of an author is important and may give additional perspective to their work. I am a Roman Catholic Benedictine nun of Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, in North Yorkshire. I am also the sister of Alex Jacob, the CEO of CMJ UK and the editor of the Olive Press Research Papers. Alex and I have discussed this paper, and many related issues, at length. We rejoice that we share much common ground, but are aware that there are, nevertheless, considerable differences in our theological understanding and approach to mission practice.

We are pleased to publish this paper hoping that, while it does not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint, it will allow for pertinent reflection on a key issue to take place.

WHERE WAS GOD DURING THE SHOAH?

A PERSONAL ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE AN ANSWER AFTER CONSIDERING A RANGE OF JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES, AND TO EXPLORE THE FUTURE OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATEDNESS IN A POST-SHOAH WORLD.

INTRODUCTION

The question “Where is God...” has been asked of many man-made and natural catastrophes of the twentieth century and long before – all the way back to the Tower of Siloam in Jesus’ time, and indeed back to Job. “Where was God...?” In the post-modern era¹ the Shoah, however, seems to pose the question with a special agony and urgency to all people of faith. It was God’s own people, His chosen people, who were singled out² for total annihilation in a barbarically brutal and yet systematic and bureaucratic way.³ If God could appear to abandon His own people and be completely silent in the face of their suffering, how can we continue to worship and have faith in Him? The questions are still reasonable and pressing seventy years after the event: assuming that God had once existed, does He still exist? Has He died, as Nietzsche and others suggested the previous century? Has He simply given up on the human race and retreated to some far off celestial court? Is humanity freed from any responsibility to God? Has the Covenant been irreparably broken?

All these are questions which people have agonised over in the decades since the Shoah. From the outset it must be clearly stated that to try and find a purpose or meaning for the Holocaust is impossible – and blasphemy. But to seek and find a response is essential. No “answers” can be fully acceptable to all. And yet it is imperative that we keep the questions alive and remember and, by remembering, seek to counter the intolerance and hatreds that continue to surface today. The American Orthodox Rabbi, Irving Greenberg wrote in his ground breaking essay *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust* that the Holocaust challenges us all: Jews, Christians and everyone one

who inhabits the modern, secular world. “Not to respond is to collaborate in its [the Shoah’s] repetition.”⁴

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote “Few are guilty, all are responsible.”⁵ As a Christian I must face the truth that, while not consciously guilty of any overt act of anti-Semitism myself, I belong to the Church which, through the frailty and ignorance of its human agents, has throughout its history created a climate in which such acts could be actively supported or at least tolerated. We must all accept responsibility for our past.

What follows is a purely personal attempt to come to some kind of understanding myself, gathered from my own prayer and reading. I can only attempt to respond as a Christian and as an inhabitant of the modern, secular world, but it has helped my understanding to read a variety of Jewish responses.

In this paper I begin by outlining a range of Jewish perspectives on the question, starting with the voices of two of the Shoah’s most famous survivors. I then examine the challenge that the horror presents to Christianity, and look at some Christian responses. Finally, I attempt to draw some conclusions and consider a possible post-Shoah future in which Jews and Christians must come closer together in joint understanding, to ensure there can be no repetition.

This is my attempt to reconcile the God I know as Love and Peace with the despair and desolation of the Shoah.

THE TEST

It has been suggested that it is impossible, or offensive to the victims,⁶ for anyone who has not personally experienced the Shoah to formulate an authentic and genuine response. Certainly any attempt must be considered only after reflecting on their experience. Rabbi Greenberg proposed a test for all those who would try to come to terms with it. It is an imaginative exercise: imagine that you were there, that you saw the babies (who, in Auschwitz, were hurled alive directly into the flaring burial pits in order to “save the gas”) torn from their mothers’ arms and that you heard their cries... “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children.”⁷

THE VOICES OF TWO SURVIVORS–THE RELIGIOUS AND THE SECULAR

Elie Wiesel spent a year of his youth in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and the rest of his life trying to come to terms with it. All his writings, in one way or another, seek to understand, and yet he repeats, again and again, “I still do not understand.”⁸ Wiesel entered the camp as a pious youth from an observant family. In *Night* he unforgettably wrote what has perhaps become the definitive dialogue of the Shoah:

*I heard the same man asking “Where is God now?”, and I heard a voice within me answer: “Where is he? He is hanging here on this gallows...”*⁹

Wiesel went on to ask, as his camp-mates gathered to honour Rosh Hashanah:

*“Where are You, my God! ... What does Your greatness mean, Lord of the Universe, in the face of all this weakness, this decomposition and this decay? Why do you still trouble their sick minds, their crippled bodies?”*¹⁰ That was a defining moment for him:

*That day I ceased to plead...I was alone, - terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid that preying congregation, observing it like a stranger.*¹¹

The Italian, Primo Levi, claimed he had no faith to lose. “I... entered the Lager as a non-believer, and as a non-believer I was liberated and have lived to this day: the experience of the Lager with its frightful inequity has confirmed me in my laity.”¹² In an interview¹³ he later stated: “There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God.”

For him, the only response was “An immediate and violent impulse” to tell, and tell again, of the horrors.¹⁴

JEWISH RESPONSES AFTER THE SHOAH

Very broadly, the major Jewish responses considered here may be summarized as follows:

1. God abandoned His people during the Shoah; therefore the only possible response is to abandon faith in Him.

2. The abandonment of faith would be completing the Nazis' work for them and would thus grant "a posthumous victory to Hitler."¹⁵ It is imperative, therefore, that the Jewish people and faith in the God of Israel, albeit in a different form, continue.
3. The Shoah, horrendous as it was, was only the latest in a succession of evils to beset the Jewish people, no better and no worse.
4. The Shoah was so monumental that it constitutes a further revelatory event in salvation history.
5. The Shoah was so monumental that it negates all divine-human covenants and responsibility.

For philosopher and environmentalist Hans Jonas (1903-93), it was necessary to completely re-think our understanding of the nature of God in light of the Shoah. His response, set out in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*¹⁶, was that we cannot abandon belief in God and take refuge in science or philosophy because it was the very presentment of science and philosophy in Europe, in ideological dress, which perpetrated the crisis in the first place.¹⁷ While many after the Holocaust asked how there could be a God, Jonas asked, rather, how it was possible to abandon the search for a God-centred truth. For him, to honour the dead demands nothing less than a search for the truth, a search which he insisted was not the unique responsibility of Jews: the crises of the 20th century are by no means over and all of humanity is implicated.

Jonas wrote, "And God let it happen. What God could let it happen?" In response, through the medium of his "myth of becoming", he developed a piece of "speculative theology", based on, and extending, the mystical, Kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*¹⁸; that is, of a God who, by necessity, has to withdraw Himself from active involvement in the world. Jonas claimed that man's free will (which allows horrendous acts as well as acts of generosity and love) is conditional on the *tzimtzum* of God's power.¹⁹ This *tzimtzum*, withdrawal, occurred at the Creation in order to allow space for evolutionary development. As part of his narrative Jonas shows a suffering God, a God who throughout the Bible appears as "slighted and rejected by man and grieving over him."²⁰ This suffering God is one who is involved in and affected by what happens in the world but, through self-imposed necessity, is restrained from actively intervening in it. "For divine renunciation was made so that we, the mortals, could be".²¹

For Jonas, then, the answer is one of human responsibility. Creation is good and has meaning, but the power of God to intervene in the affairs of men was deliberately restricted and therefore it is man who must bear responsibility for the continued existence of the world. God did not intervene at Auschwitz because he *could not* intervene.

Jonas' response, while helpful, is not entirely satisfactory: how does it chime with the God of history, a God who *acts* in history, as revealed in the Hebrew Bible?

Eliezer Berkovits, writing in the 1970s, attempted to put the Holocaust in its place alongside other great tragedies. While never underestimating or playing down the "Hell fiercer than Dante's"²², he maintained that the Shoah must be seen in the context of the whole of Jewish history. The actuality of it does not negate the rest of the covenantal relationship. It does not cancel out the Exodus, Sinai, the return from Babylon or God's revelations through the prophets. "There is a pre-Holocaust past, a post Holocaust present and there is also a future", writes Berkovits. This does not mean that he in anyway discounts the impact on the victims. He appreciates that there were some who survived who lost their faith and others who continued to believe. "The faith affirmed was superhuman; the loss of faith – in the circumstances – human... the faith is holy; but so also is the disbelief and the religious rebellion of the concentration camps holy."²³

Berkovits writes:

*The question after the holocaust ought not to be, how could God tolerate so much evil? The proper question is whether, after Auschwitz, the Jewish people may still be witnesses to God's elusive presence in history as we understand the concept.*²⁴

He believes they must, and that the establishment of the state of Israel gives them the means and validation to do so. Again, he looks at the broader, historic, perspective: the creation of the modern Israel is the culmination of centuries of waiting and praying by the Jewish people. Moreover, it is a sign, in the aftermath of one of the darkest episodes in their history, of God's fidelity to them. "For the Jew, for whom Jewish history neither begins with Auschwitz nor ends with it, Jewish survival through the ages and the ingathering of the exiles into the land of their fathers after the holocaust proclaim God's holy presence at the very heart of his inscrutable hiddenness". "The state of Israel came at a moment in history when

nothing else could have saved Israel from extinction through hopelessness. It is our lifeline to the future”.²⁵

Berkovits, then, cannot see that the Shoah presents a special challenge to faith: for him it poses no greater – and no lesser – problem to Jewish belief and doctrine than the death of one innocent child.

Yet all this does not exonerate God for all the suffering of the innocent in history. God is responsible for having created a world in which man is free to make history. There must be a dimension beyond history in which all suffering finds its redemption through God... This is no justification for the ways of providence, but it is acceptance. It is not a willingness to forgive the unheard cries of millions but a trust that in God the tragedy of man may find its transformation.

Coming from a different, and frequently controversial, perspective is theologian and philosopher, Emile Fackenheim. He is, perhaps, most famous for his “614th Commandment”²⁶, which states that “Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler”. By this he means, by completing Hitler’s work through assimilation, abandoning their Jewish identity and ceasing to survive as Jews. Following on from their basic survival as Jews, the only other adequate response for Jews lay, Fackenheim believed, in the state of Israel. This two-fold response was summed up by his remarks at a lecture to American Jewish students in the 1970s. In memory of the six million dead, he said the Law of Return must never be revoked and he went on to urge them, even though at home in the USA, to consider Aliyah to Israel. Asked afterwards by one girl what she should do if she were not prepared to go as far as emigration, he replied, “Have one more child than you planned to...”²⁷

The concept of a suffering God in this context, as explored by Jonas, was by no means unique to him. It is, not surprisingly, developed by a number of Christian theologians, but one of the most powerful Jewish responses comes from Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel (who lost many relatives and friends in the Shoah and narrowly escaped it himself) wrote, both before and after the event, of a “God of Pathos”²⁸, that is, a God who suffers through and with his people. In the few pieces which he wrote directly about the Holocaust²⁹, Heschel was clear that the question was not one of theodicy but anthropodicy: what he calls “shifting the responsibility for man’s plight to God.”³⁰ The problem is man not God.

*The will of God is to be here, manifested and near; but when the doors of this world are slammed on Him, His truth betrayed, His will defied, He withdraws, leaving man to himself. God did not depart of His own volition; He was expelled. God is in exile.*³¹

In various places Heschel explores the *tzimtzum* theory, but his conception is more of a hiding God, the *nester panim*: God's hiding of his face. He makes it clear that this is "a hiding God, not a hidden God. He is waiting to be disclosed, to be admitted into our lives". But man's sinfulness and refusal to seek Him has tremendous consequences for the world.

God is frequently hidden – or choses to hide Himself - in history. But for those who seek Him, He may be found anywhere, even in His absence.

For Heschel, as for Fackenheim, the abandonment of faith would be to complete the Nazis' work for them: it would be the annihilation of Judaism. "To despair is to betray. " "We all died in Auschwitz, yet our faith survived. We all know that to repudiate God would be to continue the Holocaust."³² For Heschel, there was no answer to the Shoah and to attempt to provide an answer would be the supreme blasphemy.

Another, rather different perspective, is that of Richard Rubenstein. He first heard the news about the extermination camp, Majdanek, during his training to be a Reform rabbi in America. As a response to the unfolding horrors that came out of Germany, he embraced the Orthodox tradition because he could no longer accept "the liberal optimism" and "polite, optimistic religion of a prosperous middle class [which] hardly offered much hope against the deep strains of disorder I saw in the world and myself."³³ He has been called an atheist and his writings can be read in this a-theistic way. His views of God and Judaism post-Shoah are nihilistic and apophatic. His repeated conclusion is "Omnipotent nothingness is Lord of all Creation." His credo is "I believe in God, the Holy Nothingness known to mystics of all ages out of which we have come and to whom we shall ultimately return."³⁴

He asserts:

God really died at Auschwitz. This does not mean that God is not the beginning and will not be the end. It does mean that nothing in human choice, decision, value or meaning can any longer have vertical reference to transcendent standards.

*We are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos. Our actions are human actions... morality and religion can no longer rest upon the conviction that divinely validated norms offer a measure against which we can be judged.*³⁵

This is a terrifying and bleak view, yet a not unreasonable one. It flies, however, in the face of traditional, orthodox, Jewish theology, which maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. For Rubenstein, it seems, there is a void where once believers experienced God's presence as a God who could participate in history, who punished, saved or vindicated His people. To continue to hold to this view in the aftermath of the Holocaust is to see Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will, as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. "Impossible," says Rubenstein "The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept."³⁶ So, for him, it was the omnipotent, actor God who died at Auschwitz.

This is diametrically opposed to Heschel's view of a God of pathos, this view may be seen as *apatheia*³⁷ taken to its extreme. And yet, the result may be almost the same: to rely on oneself, on human actions, to be the actor for the God who is not, or who is, but cannot act.

Irving Greenberg's response differs from the above, and is especially helpful to me in that he tries to address the question from both a Jewish and a Christian theological perspective:

*Both religions have always sought to isolate their central events ... from further revelations or from challenge of the demonic counter-experience of evil in history. Both have ... continued since 1945 as if nothing had happened to change their central understanding. It is increasingly obvious that this is impossible, that the Holocaust cannot be ignored.*³⁸

Does the tragedy constitute a further revelatory event which brings about a catalyst in the journey of redemption of both faiths, such as the destruction of the Second Temple for Judaism or the Incarnation for Christians? That is, is it an event which requires a radical development of doctrine or re-evaluation of covenantal relationships?

What provokes this challenge is that both religions are founded on the premise of God's love for man and both profess the fundamental claim that the human being is of ultimate and absolute value in His eyes. The cruelty and barbarity of the Shoah

“raise the question whether even those who believe after such an event dare talk about God who loves and cares without making a mockery of those who suffered.”³⁹ The Shoah undermined the validity of the covenant and God can no longer be the commanding God. Now the Jewish people have become the senior partner in covenantal action.

Greenberg develops, in later writings, his argument of a dynamic inter-relational shift between God and the Jewish people, and extends this to Christians as well, proposing a radical move forward in Jewish-Christian relations⁴⁰.

For Greenberg, as for Fackenheim, the creation of the state of Israel and the creation of new Jewish life are the key two-fold responses in the post-Shoah process of redemption. “The reborn state of Israel is this fundamental act of life and meaning of the Jewish people after Auschwitz” and “In the light of the crematoria, the Jewish people are called to re-create life.” Humanity is called to eliminate every stereotype and discrimination between people. This demands “vigorous self-criticism and review of every cultural or religious framework that may sustain some devaluation or denial of the absolute and equal dignity of the other.” There is hope:

Perhaps we can pray that out of the welter of blood and pain will come a chastened mankind and faith that may take some tentative and mutual steps towards redemption. Then truly will the Messiah be here among us...

But it lies in the future, it is not yet...

THE CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANITY

How, then, can the Christian respond? If the Nazi regime was able to take root and grow because “anti-Semitism had long been a respectable trait in Western Civilisation”,⁴¹ and if Christian theology helped to bring about the Shoah, can Christian theology also now help us to find ways to move forward and respond? It is imperative that we try.

Alan E Lewis in his wide-ranging *Between the Cross and Resurrection: A theology of Holy Saturday* writes that for Christians to honour the legacy of the Shoah we must begin with the premise of a Holy Saturday conclusion; that is, that the Shoah represents another apparent failure on God’s part.

For Lewis, it was the Cross of Christ which allowed gentiles to become “honorary Jews”, enabled by sheer grace to be grafted in to the branch of Israel. This fact makes Christianity’s long history of pride, superiority, animosity and anti-Semitism a long and shameful anachronism. A failure for two millennia to live by the truth, by the death of Christ who came to make us all one. It is of that anachronism that Christians must repent “post holocaust, returning at last to practices of solidarity and similarity grounded in God’s Good Friday union and reconciliation, wherein Christ crucified transcended all distinctions between insider and outsider, citizen and alien, those far off and those at hand, the chosen and the reprobate.”⁴² Thus, for Lewis, the response must be a more honest and radical form of partnership and must be at the basis of all Jewish-Christian exchange:

*Rather than engaging in a mode of evangelistic mission designed to convert the Jews by diverting them from faithful Judaism, the Christian church since Auschwitz, as it surely should have from the start, has been learning at a quickening pace to respect the dignity, rights and equal worth of Jews and the intrinsic integrity of their own faith and worship. We seek therefore less to preach at Jews than to converse with them in open dialogue, and to stand beside them as we speak together to the world, to the victims and the perpetrators of humanity’s millennial tragedies and crises.*⁴³

The suffering of God figures largely in Christian responses. The American Episcopalian, Paul van Buren, saw God not just as suffering with the sufferers but as directly suffering because of the transgressions His Christian followers committed: “God steps back to leave us free to work His will, if we will, and suffers with us in our failures”. Human beings, van Buren believed, inflict suffering and agony on God when they abuse the freedom of will He bestowed on them. We Christians, he argued, fail to see God in the suffering and failure of the Cross.

In his work Lewis drew on Jurgen Moltmann’s *theologia crucis*, which the latter developed in *The Crucified God*. Moltmann’s conclusions are powerful. He quotes the famous Elie Wiesel passage “He is here: He is hanging there on the gallows.” And goes on to write:

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who would not suffer would make God a demon. To speak of an absolute God would make God

*an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.*⁴⁴

But theological reflection must draw the consequences from such experiences of the suffering God in suffering which cannot be accounted for in human terms. What is the *cause* of the suffering of God who suffers with the persecuted? *How* does he suffer? Does He merely suffer for human injustice and wickedness? Or is the God who suffers in prison and on the gallows of Auschwitz, the God who holds the ends of the earth in His hands? Do the experiences of the passion and suffering of Christ lead us into the mystery of God Himself? Is it here that God Himself confronts us? The divine is revealed and made accessible, to Christians, in and through the self-emptying of the crucified Christ. To recognise God in the cross of Christ conversely means to recognise the cross, inextricable suffering, and hopeless rejection *in* God.⁴⁵

A “theology after Auschwitz” may seem an impossibility or a blasphemy to those who allowed themselves to be satisfied with theism or their childhood beliefs and then lost them. And there would be no “theology after Auschwitz” in retrospective sorrow and the recognition of guilt had there been no “theology in Auschwitz”. Anyone who later comes up against insoluble problems and despairs must remember that the Shema of Israel and the Lord’s Prayer were prayed in Auschwitz.

*It is necessary to remember the martyrs and so not to become abstract. Of them and of the dumb sacrifices it is true in a real transferred sense, that God himself hung on the gallows, as E. Wiesel was able to say. If that is taken seriously, it must also be said that, like the cross of Christ, even Auschwitz is in God himself. Even Auschwitz is taken up in the grief of the Father, the surrender of the Son and the power of the Spirit. That never means that Auschwitz and other grisly places can be justified... for [they, like the cross, are only the beginning] of Trinitarian history.*⁴⁶

This, surely, must be the catalyst for healing, for the healing of the world and the achievement of the Kingdom of God. Here the parallels with the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world, are important and must be the basis for future work together. Together we can work towards the perfecting of the universe here, and the achievement of the reign of God. It is now, but not yet...

The German Catholic, Johann Baptiste Metz, echoes Moltmann when he writes, “We only pray after Auschwitz because people prayed in Auschwitz”. For him, Christians must confront the Holocaust; confront, but never comprehend: “Faced with Auschwitz I consider blasphemy every Christian theodicy...and all language about “meaning””. What the Christian theologian can and must do for the six million murdered is “Never again do theodicy in such a way that its construction remains unaffected by Auschwitz.” The imperative is to bring about a “radical conversion in the relations between Christians and Jews.” Metz also sees the Shoah as a watershed: “an end point and a turning point”. To make a positive response we must confront it and our collective guilt and, only then, can we reach a point where we may begin to see what a “new relationship” between Christians and Jews could be.

This is a new starting point; the work of Rabbi Irving Greenberg and others point the way forward⁴⁷.

COMMENTARY

Some Jewish commentators have gone so far as to believe that the Shoah transcends the ordinary realm of history and contributes a new revelatory moment. Can Christianity accept such an idea? Most Christians would argue “no”. God’s full plan of salvation was revealed with Jesus Christ. A. Roy Eckhardt, a radical American Methodist and disciple of Reinhold Niebuhr, thought otherwise and has written extensively urging Christians to re-examine traditional teaching, and to call for a transformation of the Christian theology of triumphalism.⁴⁸ His ideas are startling and would require further consideration, which is beyond the scope of this present paper.

The Catholic Church too, through successive popes since John XXIII (who called the Second Vatican Council which led to the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, the Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions), has taken further ground breaking steps to heal the past and look to the future. The present Pope, Francis, in a recent letter, sets the tone for a further development of this relationship:

What should we say to our Jewish brothers about the promise made to them by God: has it all come to nothing? Believe me this is the question that challenges us radically as Christians, because...we have rediscovered that the Jewish people

*are for us still the holy root from which Jesus germinated...often in prayer I also questioned God, especially when my mind went to the memory of the terrible experience of the Shoa. What I can say to you...is that God's fidelity to the close covenant with Israel never failed and that, through the terrible trials of these centuries the Jews have kept their faith in God. And for this we shall never be sufficiently grateful to them, as Church, but also as humanity.*⁴⁹

From all this, as a Christian, I have come to believe, my response must be two-fold: First, a deeply respectful response of silence and shame and, secondly, the need to move forward in a radically different approach to the Jewish-Christian relationship, one of true partnership. To put it in the context of Greenberg's "test" set out above, in the presence of the burning children, one's first response can only be shame and horror, but this must immediately be followed by an act of intervention.

TWO-FOLD RESPONSE

1. SILENCE AND SHAME

Pope Benedict XVI said, during his visit to Auschwitz in 2006,

In a place like this words fail: in the end there can only be a dread silence – a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God:

*Why Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this? In silence we bow our heads before the endless line of those who suffered and were put to death here: yet our silence becomes in turn a plea for forgiveness and reconciliation: a plea to the living God never to let this happen again.*⁵⁰

Decades earlier, Pope John XXIII had recognised this shame and responsibility:

*We are conscious today that many centuries of blindness have cloaked our eyes so that we can no longer see the beauty of Thy chosen people...We realise that the mark of Cain stands on our foreheads. Across the centuries our Brother Abel has lain in blood which we drew, or shed tears we caused, forgetting Thy love. Forgive us for crucifying Thee a second time in their flesh. For we knew not what we did...*⁵¹

Awed silence is better than empty words, but silence is not enough.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

As Christians we need to make amends for the past and ensure that the past is never repeated. The conclusion that many Jewish and Christian commentators have made is that we cannot rely on God alone; we must rely on humanity. It is for man to act in the world. Man is made in God's image, man is given free will to act – for good or bad – and he must act on God's behalf or against Him.

*You are meant to help here, Oh God!
But You are silent, while needs shriek.
So help me to help! I'll fulfil Your duty,
Pay Your debts.
Help me to help!⁵²*

A. J. Heschel.

The concept of God not being responsible for human action was recognised by the Dutch Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum, in June 1942 as the mass deportations to Germany and the death camps were underway. She wrote, “God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another.”⁵³ She recognised the need for our cooperation with God: “You cannot help us but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place within us to the last”⁵⁴. If sin is fundamentally a failure to love, then the only way to cooperate with God is through love.

It has been brought home forcefully to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place. And I also believe, childishly perhaps, that the earth will become more habitable again only through the love that the Jew Paul described to the citizens of Corinth in the thirteenth chapter of his first letter.⁵⁵

Etty Hillesum was adamant that, despite all she saw happening around her, God must not be blamed for it.

For Heschel too, the blame cannot sit with God; it is time humanity takes responsibility: “Rather than admit our own guilt we seek, like Adam, to shift the

blame upon someone else... God was thought of as a watchman hired to prevent us using our loaded guns. Having failed in this, He is now thought of as the ultimate scapegoat.”⁵⁶

2. TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING AND SHARING

The Shoah must be seen, if not as a revelatory event, then as the cataclysmic and catastrophic event that it was, and this must demand a response, that, to give any kind of respect to the dead is nothing less than life-transforming. Is it too late? Are we in danger of forgetting already? Or is the transformation already underway? May the Shoah be seen by future generations as the monumental tragedy in history that redirected the course of Jewish-Christian relations? Can we move beyond overt or covert anti-Semitism, beyond missionizing, beyond token dialogue towards some greater fulfilment of God’s ultimate plan for both our covenantal peoples – even to the point of achieving a new unity?

CONCLUSION

Where, then, was God during the Shoah? The answer can only be: Where he is today: with his people in the disasters, murders and pain in the world. It is clear that the finger of God does not come down and blast the evil and save the good; it is humanity which inflicts evil on other humans.

For all those victims, survivors, theologians, Jews and Christians who have agonised over the question a sort of synthesis emerges: God was there, God suffered there too. Consideration must be given to understanding this idea which is almost inconceivable to those who believe in an immutable and omnipotent God. The “Piazesne Rebbe”, whose writings survived the Warsaw ghetto although he himself did not, encouraged his followers: “Do not despair, God is with you here in this Holocaust. He suffers with you.”⁵⁷ And, as Rabbi Irving Greenberg came to realize:

In a flash it became clear to me that I had been asking the wrong question: Where was God during the Holocaust? I suddenly understood that God was with his people... being tortured, degraded, humiliated, murdered. Where else would God be when God’s loved ones were being hounded and destroyed. The realization hit how much God had been suffering in the Shoah but the pain had been infinite as only Infinite Consciousness can experience it. Then I burst into tears: a surge of

*pity for God flowed through me. A sense of compassion, a desire to heal the Divine, breach the wall of polarised anger and complaint that had arisen between us.*⁵⁸

But still a “why?” remains and, at the end of the day, there is no answer to this question, at least that we can know in this world. The Shoah challenges all our spiritual and moral laws and standards. Perhaps Elie Wiesel, who said we should ask the questions but never provide the answers, is right. We should explore the question of theodicy, this is what keeps us alive to God, to humanity and to love. “Each of these theories contains perhaps a fraction of truth, but their sum still remains and outside what, in that night, was truth.”⁵⁹

The response then must be a silence and shame, which will enable genuine repentance and a deeply considered desire for real rapprochement, for reaching out to each other, Jew and Christian. And, through our human testimony, not simply to enter into dialogue, for dialogue can always break down, but into the depths of each other’s beliefs where we may discover genuine, and hitherto uncomprehended, bridges which will lead to a growth of partnership and unity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 While very difficult to define, I use the term for the late twentieth and early twentieth first century: a time characterised by a rejection of absolute truths and the rise of a multitude of different perspectives. A period which may appear to lack the hope and faith of any religious, scientific or philosophical certainties.
- 2 The Jews were not, of course, the only target of Nazi persecution: the Roma, communists, Jehovah Witnesses, Christians of various denominations and many others were also murdered, but it was the Jews who were singled out for the Final Solution: total annihilation as a people.
- 3 The Holocaust destroyed 90% of Eastern European Jewry – a major spiritual and cultural centre of Jewry at the time. See Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews 1933-45*, Pelican 1975
- 4 Rabbi Irving Goldberg, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust* published in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. 2004
- 5 *The Prophets*, volume 1 Harper & Row 1968. (He was not writing directly about the Holocaust but the words are apt).
- 6 See Eliezer Berkovits and others (cited below)
- 7 *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire* op cit.
- 8 *A Plea for the Dead in Legends for our Time* Holt, Rinehart & Winston 1968
- 9 *Night* p77 Penguin Books 1981
- 10 Ibid p78
- 11 Ibid p79
- 12 *The Drowned and the Saved* p117 Abacus 1988
- 13 Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, The Malboro Press 1989
- 14 Preface to *If this is a Man*, Abacus
- 15 Emile Fackenheim
- 16 Published in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Michael L Morgan, OUP 2001
- 17 Interestingly this chimes with the view of a very different commentator, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menchem Mendel Schneerson, who said “It was the German people who epitomised culture, scientific advance and philosophical morality. And these very same people perpetuated the most vile atrocities known to human history! If nothing else, the Holocaust has taught us that moral and civilised existence is possible only through the belief and acceptance of the Divine authority”.
- 18 Meaning the withdrawal or contraction of God from active participation in the world. The concept of *tzimtzum* is one that many theologians and thinkers have drawn on to explain the seemingly inexplicable lack of action by God. See in particular the *Lurianic Kabbalah*.
- 19 The myth is explored by Jonas in *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*
- 20 *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, p6

- 21 *The Concept of God after Auschwitz*, p13
- 22 *Faith After the Holocaust* 1973 Published in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Michael L Morgan, OUP 2001
- 23 *Faith after the Holocaust* p97
- 24 Ibid p99
- 25 Ibid p100
- 26 In Jewish tradition there are 613 commandments altogether in the Torah
- 27 *Faith in God after Auschwitz: Theological Implications of Yad Vashem* April 2002
- 28 See *The Prophets* (first published in 1962, but based on Heschel's doctoral thesis written in Germany in the 1920s) and *God in Search of Man* (1955)
- 29 See *After Majdanek, Our Afterlife* and *Kaddish for our Souls* (all in the collection *Essential Writings* edited by Susannah Heschel 2011)
- 30 *Man is Not Alone* 1951
- 31 From a previously unpublished manuscript in *Essential Writings of A J Heschel*
- 32 *Our Afterlife* ibid p72
- 33 *The Making of a Rabbi* reprinted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed Michael L Morgan, 2001
- 34 *Symposium on Jewish Belief*, reprinted in *A Holocaust Reader*
- 35 *The Making of a Rabbi* ibid
- 36 *Symposium on Jewish Belief* ibid
- 37 See *The Prophets* vol 2 chapter 3 for Heschel's discussion on the divine pathos v. apatheia
- 38 *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. 2004
- 39 Rabbi Irving Goldberg, *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust* published in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. 2004
- 40 See essays in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*
- 41 Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*
- 42 *Between the Cross and Resurrection*, Eerdmans, 2001, p314
- 43 Ibid p315
- 44 *The Crucified God* SCM Press, 1974,p274
- 45 But this is the way only for those who follow Christ. Jewish believers still have the "direct line", as it were, to God through the first Covenant.
- 46 *The Crucified God* p227-8
- 47 *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*
- 48 See *Christians and Jews: Along a Theological Frontier* originally published in "Encounter" journal 40 (2) Spring 1979 and re-produced in *The Holocaust Reader*

- 49 Printed in *La Repubblica* 11th September 2013. A recent Vatican document, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are irrevocable, A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations On the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate* (December 2015) is also instructive here
- 50 Pastoral visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Poland. 28th May 2006
- 51 Prayer 1960
- 52 “Help!” from *The Ineffable Name of God: Man – a selection of Yiddish poetry by A J Heschel*.
- 53 *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum* p183
- 54 Ibid p218
- 55 Ibid
- 56 *God is Not Alone*
- 57 Cited by Pesach Schindler in his paper *Religious Faith after Auschwitz*. 1974
- 58 *Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire*
- 59 *A Plea for the Dead*

© Sister Scholastica 2016

The right of Sister Scholastica to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Editorial team: Sister Scholastica and Rev. Alex Jacob
Concept and design: 18TWO Design
Printed through: A-Tec, Broxbourne, England

