



## ISSUES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

### THE HOLOCAUST

— a personal view —

By Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks (MA Cantab)

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Jewish young people growing up at the end of the twentieth century face challenges and opportunities never before encountered. The break up of European Jewish communities and the simultaneous availability for many of academic and professional careers was swiftly followed by mass defection from Jewish faith and Jewish living as the outside world beckoned. But the optimism of the nineteenth century gave way to the grim reality of the twentieth century as war and holocaust proved that intellectual and scientific progress did not inevitably lead either to peace or to justice. As a result, post war generations have a healthy and sometimes radical cynicism towards modernity. The rise of modern Israel has complicated and deepened the dilemma for the generations of the 60's, 70's and 80's. Modern nationalism is frequently seen as morally degenerate, yet a commitment to and a feeling for Israel is normally asserted as the lowest common denominator of Jewish life.

Many young people are now being thrust into this maze with little hope of finding the way through. Their Jewish education and knowledge is normally inadequate to respond with any degree of cogency to the intellectual probing of a modern western upbringing and education in which the critical faculty is well developed and even glorified. But in many cases the home inheritance is enough to point in the direction of Jewish tradition or Israel without being able rationally to support such a life style. The resultant confusion explains an intermarriage rate of over 20% and a negation of Jewish values from all segments of the Jewish population.

For 40 years Jewish Youth Study Groups has attempted to provide for its membership a movement whereby young people could grow up within a stable and supportive Jewish environment and equip themselves with at least some clues to form a way through the maze described above. Local Study Groups with their study courses and shiurim, national events and Shabbatot and the annual Summer and Winter Schools together build a model of Jewish life both residential and non-residential through which Study Groupers can expand their Jewish horizons. Many complete this surrogate Jewish education by spending time in Israel on a Study Group Israel Summer School or a period in a yeshiva/girls college. As a further contribution to this process we are happy to offer this series of "Issues in Jewish Thought" by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. Our author was carefully chosen as he exemplifies the path trodden by so many Study Groupers in his own life and can write with both erudition on his chosen subjects and empathy towards his readers. We are happy to acknowledge with grateful thanks the assistance of the United Synagogue Youth and Community Department and its director Mr. Jeffrey Blumenfeld. His cooperation and help in the production of this series has been invaluable. It is our hope and prayer that this series will provide for both Study Groupers and the wider Jewish public a beginning to the mystery of the life and survival of the Jew in the 20th and 21st century.

Tze u'Lemad.

Bobby Hill  
JYSG Organiser  
1973-1982

Joel Portnoy  
JYSG Organiser  
1982-

I cry out to You, O God, but You do not answer.  
I stand up, but You merely look at me.  
You turn on me ruthlessly;  
With the might of Your hand You attack me.  
You snatch me up and drive me before the wind;  
You toss me about in the storm...  
My skin grows black and falls from me;  
My bones are burned with heat.  
My harp is tuned to mourning,  
And my flute to the voice of those who weep. (Job 30:20-31)

Job: the voice of the holocaust. A cry, a lament, a prayer, a protest.  
Not an explanation.

We try to find precedents for the sho'ah, to fit it into the pattern of Jewish suffering. We fail.

Abraham, before Isaac was born, was given a vision: his children would be driven into exile and enslaved. 'A deep dark dread' fell upon him. But the end was also foretold: they would be saved. The victims of the holocaust were not saved.

Moses warned the people, before he died, that if they disobeyed God they would be uprooted from their land and given no rest from their enemies. 'You will live in constant suspense, filled night and day with dread, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening". In the evening you will say, "If only it were morning — because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see.' But that was 'if you do not carefully follow all the words of this law.' Amongst the victims of the death-camps were those who had carefully followed the words of the law all the days of their lives.

Haman issued a decree 'to destroy, slay and exterminate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day.' But the decree was averted. Hitler's was not.

When God wanted to put an end to the Israelites in the wilderness, Moses protested: 'Now you want to kill this entire nation like a single

man.' The nations who hear this news about You will say that God was not able to bring this nation to the land that He swore to them, so He slaughtered them in the desert.' It was enough. God said, 'I will grant forgiveness as you have requested'. At Auschwitz, there was no reprieve.

Where was God at Auschwitz? Was He there or not? If he was, what sin could justify such punishment? If He was not, how could He hide His face at the darkest moment of His people's history?

Two men in the Bible stood in the presence of God and said, 'I am dust and ashes'. Abraham and Job: the two men who challenged God's justice. Abraham, who said: 'Shall the judge of all the earth not do justly?' Job, who said: 'Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?' We, too, ask those questions. On behalf of the one Jew in three who was turned into dust and ashes.

We cannot here try to summarise the facts of the holocaust. To read those facts for ourselves has become a sacred duty of our time, no less than the story of Esther at Purim or of the exodus on Pesach. 'We are duty-bound to see ourselves as if we, personally, had gone forth from Egypt', says the Mishna about the seder-night. In such a way are the generations born after the holocaust duty-bound to see themselves as if they, personally, had stood at Auschwitz; had been face to face with the angel of death.

## THE PROPHETIC QUESTION

There is no doubt that the attempted destruction of Jewry by the Nazis, and the birth, soon after, of the State of Israel, are events more epic than any in our history since the slavery in Egypt and the exodus. But no longer do we have the prophets who would see and explain, who would read the meaning of history for us and tell us why it happened. We feel that these events are too tragic to be meaningless. But when we try to attach meanings, we recoil against them. Were the death-camps a punishment for our sins? God forbid. Does Israel in

some way compensate for the human burnt-offerings? If so, we should have refused to accept it.

Yet we cannot avoid asking the questions. There is an obligation on all of us to share the agitation of the prophet as he searches for a meaning that will lead him on beyond the valley of the shadow of death.

The Torah speaks several times about the fact that in the future, children will ask their parents: Why do we celebrate Pesach? Why redeem the first-born? Why the Torah and the commandments? In each case the answer is: to tell the story of the going out of Egypt. And if they do not ask, we must make them ask.

Yet at the heart of the Torah is an unanswered question. Why did God need to bring the Israelites into Egypt in the days of Jacob, to make them suffer slavery and hardship before they were brought to the land? Nowhere in the whole Torah is there an attempt at an explanation. But there is something else. God commands that we must never forget those years, those events. Every day we must mention the exodus; once a year we must relive it. Why? Not so that we should understand it: that we will never do. But **so that it should not have been for nothing.**

We will never understand the holocaust. But the asking of questions is itself a religious act. Future generations will ask: Why do we keep on being Jews? The answer is: to tell the story of our death-sentence and our survival. And if they do not ask, we must make them ask.

## THE FALLACY OF THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE JUSTICE

One confusion runs through much that is said and thought about the **sho'ah**. The prophets, we believe, were the spokesmen of Divine justice. Jeremiah is told by God: 'I will pronounce judgement on My people because of their wickedness in forsaking Me'. Isaiah's vision begins: 'Hear, O Heavens. Listen O Earth. For the Lord has spoken: "I

reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me." Israel sins: God sends disaster. If they had obeyed, it would not have happened. These are the terms of history. They had been set forth by Moses. They were the covenant accepted at Sinai. So it is natural to apply this thinking to the holocaust. It must have been punishment. But what was the crime?

But is this so? It is crucially important to see that it is not. The point is made most clearly in the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to preach against Nineveh 'because its wickedness has come up before Me'. He tries to run away. God sends him back. He goes and tells the inhabitants, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed'. They repent. God forgives. Nineveh is spared. But Jonah, says the Torah, 'was greatly displeased and angry'. He wants to die.

Why? Jonah had understood history as Divine justice. A nation sins; therefore it is punished. A prophet issues a prediction and a sentence: This will happen because of what you have done. Therefore Jonah cannot live with the actual result of his prophecy, which is that the people mend their ways, **and the predicted destruction does not occur**. Does this not show that he spoke falsely? And how can the people undo the past by mere repentance?

God tries to show him that he is wrong on two counts. The first: Disaster is not brought by God as retribution for the past, but to bring about a better future. He wishes man to return to the good. Therefore if the threat of disaster is sufficient, there is no need for the disaster itself. 'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' says the Lord God; 'and not rather that he should return from his ways and live?' (Ezekiel 18:23) So: **history must not be seen as Divine justice**, but as a Divine call to man and to righteousness.

From this follows the second point: If a prophecy comes true, the prophet is a failure. **He has only succeeded if what he foresees does not come to pass**. He was ordered to paint a picture of the future so that men should see what they were walking towards, and so that they should choose another path. **He prophesies in order to avert**.

Jonah felt that the people of Nineveh deserved to die. He thought

that this was what Divine justice required. Had the city been destroyed, he would have explained: This was the will of God. **And this was his mistake**.

It is utterly wrong even to begin to think of the holocaust as Divine justice; as the will of God; as punishment. And not because we shrink from the prophetic view of history, but precisely because we share it. No prophet ever passed judgment. His role was not to predict and bring about. His words were not of justice but of repentance. His task from beginning to end is to avert tragedy.

#### THE BLASPHEMY OF EXPLANATION

We must restate this truth for two reasons. First, there are Jews who feel that Jewish belief must ultimately see the holocaust as a punishment from God. They are appalled at such an idea. Therefore they feel bound to reject Jewish belief. One theologian, for example, has written that an orthodox Jew 'would be drawn to assert that the Jewish people had been exterminated because of their failure to comply with the Lord's commandments as these had been enjoined in the Torah'. This is a conclusion which, naturally, he refuses to accept. So he prefers to choose 'a world without meaning rather than accept the justice of human suffering'. (Richard Rubinstein, *After Auschwitz*, pp.64-5, 68)

Second, there were Christians — pro-Nazi and even anti-Nazi — who argued that the genocide was God's punishment of the Jews for failing to accept Christianity. In 1942, for example, when the Nietra Rebbe went to Archbishop Kametko to plead with him to use his influence to prevent the deportation of Slovakian Jews, he was told: 'This is no mere expulsion. There you will not die of hunger and pestilence. There they will slaughter you all, old and young, women and children, in one day. This is your punishment for the death of our Redeemer. There is only one hope for you — to convert all to our religion'. (Quoted in Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, p.17.)

This is part of an old tradition, as old as the Church Fathers. Augustine in the fourth century C.E. speaks of the Jews as bearing the curse of Cain, the killer of Abel; condemned to wander the earth bearing the stigma of guilt. 'The Church admits and avows the Jewish people to be cursed,' he wrote. In Martin Luther we can read — four centuries before Hitler — many of the suggestions that were to be taken up by the Nazis. He drew up in 1543 the following agenda: 'What shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? . . . First, their synagogues should be set on fire . . . Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken and destroyed . . . To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable, devilish burden — the Jews.'

The record — with honorable exceptions — of Christian complicity with, or silence in the face of, the Nazi programmes was no accident. It was the outgrowth of an antisemitism built into the Church at its very foundations; one which held the sufferings of Jews to be the clearest proof of their guilt and stubbornness. At least some Christian theologians have since struggled courageously to face what one calls 'a massive repentant acceptance of responsibility'. Jewish thinkers in their turn have for the first time spoken the inevitable questions to the Church. Irving Greenberg, surveying the record, asks, 'May one morally be a Christian after this?' Eliezer Berkovits has spoken more bluntly of 'the moral bankruptcy of Christian civilization and the spiritual bankruptcy of Christian religion'.

What must be said, though, is that guilt or blame or recrimination for the holocaust are not part of Jewish thinking. For this fundamental reason: that **we do not believe in passing judgement**. What we protest against is that either Jews or Christians should speak of it as Divine punishment, as if this were the way that the Torah leads us to see history. It is an excusable mistake: it is Jonah's mistake. But it is blasphemous, nonetheless.

### SPEAKING ABOUT AND SPEAKING TO

The prophets warned of tragedies so that they should not happen. That is what they were called on to say to **man**. What, though, did

they say to **God**? They pleaded; they challenged; they protested. 'Why have You done evil to this people?' said Moses. Jeremiah pleaded: 'Why does the way of the wicked prosper?' The Psalmist argues the innocence of his people: 'All this is come upon us; yet we have not forgotten You, nor have we been false to Your covenant'.

From the moment that Abraham steps forward and demands that Sodom and the cities of the plain should not be destroyed, a decisive change takes place in the relation between man and God. Noah had been silent when humanity had been obliterated in the Flood. **It was not what God wanted**. From Abraham onwards, the mark of the prophet is that he is not silent when the innocent suffer, nor even when the guilty are threatened with destruction. To man he may be God's spokesman; but to God he is mankind's defender.

The religious response to the holocaust is not a silent concurrence with the fact of history. The prophet does not look on devastation and say, 'It is just; it is the will of God'. Nor does he say, 'It is unjust, meaningless'. Instead he calls out: 'Awake, O Lord. Why do You sleep? Rouse Yourself. Do not reject us for ever. Why do You hide Your face, and forget our misery and oppression?' (Psalm 44:24-25). He does not speak **for** God or **against** God: he speaks **to** God.

This is the point of the most profound treatment of human tragedy in the Torah: the book of Job. Job is a righteous man, yet he loses everything: his possessions, his children, his health. His friends try to comfort him. They say, he is being punished for his sins. God is just; therefore Job must have done something wrong to deserve his misfortune. He should not question his fate. Job rejects their words. 'Will you argue the case for God?' he says. He insists on speaking out his heart to God, at whatever risk. 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him; but I will argue my ways before Him. This also shall be my salvation, that a hypocrite cannot come before Him.'

In the end, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind. There is no answer; but there is a meeting. God condemns Job's friends for what they have said. Defending God is not the way out of tragedy. Speaking to Him is.

### I WILL NOT DIE, BUT LIVE

The final chapter of Job is easily misunderstood. At the beginning of

the book he had lost everything. At the end, 'the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.' At first sight it seems as if this is supposed to make all right again; as if the death of his children could be repaired by giving him others; as if, in our case, the holocaust could be compensated for by the State of Israel.

But the point is a different one. Simply: Job has seen God, and he has, despite everything, recovered his will to live.

Emil Fackenheim has suggested that this is the miracle at the end of the concentration-camps. How, he asks, did any Jew who lived through them not go mad? 'Or not going mad and surviving, why did he not commit suicide? Or choosing life rather than death, why did he stay a Jew, remarry and raise Jewish children? Why did even a single Jew who stayed sane and chose life and remained a Jew and raised Jewish children remain faithful to his ancient God?'

Six million Jews died. The Jewish people survived. It survived the greatest separation between it and God, and emerged the other side still able to affirm itself. 'I will not die but live, and proclaim what God has done. God has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death' (Psalm 118:17-18). The song of a stricken people. No small act of faith.

### THE BLESSING OVER DEATH

Can anything be said to the memory of those who died? Long ago the rabbis applied to those who were put to death for their Jewishness, the verse: 'I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors — and they have no comforter' (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:1).

Something, though, has been indelibly added to the awe-inspiring possibilities of faith. The Talmud tells of R. Akiva, who chose to face death rather than cease teaching Torah in public. 'When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the time for saying the **Shema**. While they tore his flesh with iron combs, he accepted on himself the kingship of Heaven. His disciples said to him: Our teacher — even to this point? He replied: 'All my days I have been troubled by the verse, "And you shall love the Lord your God . . . with all your soul," which I interpret to mean, "even if He takes your soul". I said to myself, When shall I have the chance to fulfil it? Now that I have the chance, shall I not fulfil it?' (Berachot 61b).

The martyrdom of R. Akiva: the eternal demonstration of the highest limit of the love of God. Or so we thought. In the death-camps there was no choice, to renounce Judaism or to embrace death for the sanctification of the Name. That choice, which had salvaged a moral heroism from every previous persecution, was taken away. Was there any possibility left to draw one spark of sanctification from this descent into human darkness?

A responsum survives — one testament amongst many — from the depths that not even R. Akiva knew. October 29th, 1941: thirty thousand Jews assembled from the Kovno ghetto to face selection for death. One of them, Reb Elya, had a question for the rabbi, R. Oshry. What is the blessing that we make on going to death for the sanctification of the Name? Is it, 'Who has commanded us **al kiddush ha-shem**' or '**le-kadesh et ha-shem**'? The rabbi replies: Whether we use **al** or **le-** in a blessing is discussed in the Talmud and the medieval authorities. We accept the view that when a mitzvah can be performed by someone else on our behalf, we say **al**; when it can only be done by ourselves in person, we say **le-**. Therefore, over martyrdom we say, **le-kadesh et ha-shem**. (See I. Rosenbaum, **Holocaust and Halacha**, pp. 61-64.)

Reb Elya went through the crowd teaching others the correct form of the blessing over death. In the presence of the Gestapo two Jews, pupil and master, stood discussing the Talmud, anxious that the moment of death be dedicated to Heaven by the precise words of blessing; that the mitzvah of being killed by the Nazis should have the **lamed** which signifies a command that no-one else can fulfil for you.

It is no consolation. But if the willingness of Isaac to be bound and to face the knife is remembered for all time on Rosh Hashanah, what shall we say of the countless Reb Elyas who were willing to pronounce a blessing over a death which seemed to defy all meaning? The limit has been reached: there is no point at which the hands of evil can strangle the voice of faith.

### CIVILISATION AND DIVINE COMMAND

But there are no excuses. The sanctification of death does not sanctify the killing or the killer. Judaism insists on man's absolute

responsibility for evil. It will not see in genocide the anger of God or the hiding of God: it will see man.

After the Flood, God made a covenant with Noah. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man' (Bereishith 9:6). To kill is to wage war on God's image. Whoever denies another the right to live has no claim to be human, let alone Divine.

On trial since 1945 are all the values which made Western civilisation think itself the apotheosis of man. What will Christianity say to the charge Nietzsche had levelled against it half-a-century before: 'They say, "Judge not." but they send to Hell everything that stands in their way'?

What will we say of our faith in the power of the humanities to humanise, when we remember that in the camps, the gassing to death of children was accompanied by the sound of string quartets? Chaim Kaplan, in his Warsaw Diary, notes: 'The Germans have gone simply crazy for one thing — books'. George Steiner adds 'That the book might well be Goethe or Rilke remains a truth so vital yet outrageous that we try to spit it out, that we go on mouthing our hopes in culture as if it was not there to break our teeth'.

What will we say of the noble ethic of duty when we remember that Eichmann defended himself at his trial by referring to the greatest of post-Aristotelian philosophers, Kant? When General Jodl was asked at his trial in Nuremberg, 'How was it possible that all of you honorable generals could continue to serve a murderer with such unquestioning loyalty?' he replied that it was 'not the task of a soldier to act as a judge over his supreme commander. Let history do that or God in heaven.' The school of Hillel has pointed out two thousand years earlier that there is no defence for wrongdoing in saying, 'I was only obeying orders.' It did not need a philosopher to understand why: When the words of God and the words of man are in conflict, whose are to be obeyed? (Kiddushin 42b). How wonderfully had man advanced since then, that his duty as a soldier could obliterate his most basic duty as a human being.

What will we say of those who knew and were silent, or of those who did not want to know? Or of Britain and America who knew of

the 'final solution' and still did not bomb the gas-ovens or their supply lines at a time when 10,000 lives were being exterminated **per day**? Is there nothing wrong with standing idly by the blood of thy neighbour, so long as one's hands are clean? Were Rambam and Isaac Arama wrong when they formulated the Jewish belief that those who do not actively protest against institutionalised evil are guilty by their very passivity?

One thing is clear: the commandment to Noah and mankind has not yet outlived its relevance.

### CHOOSING LIFE

Jewish writers about the holocaust have stressed one thing: that after Auschwitz there is a fateful command; not to hand a posthumous victory to Hitler. There must never be another holocaust. Jews must affirm their existence as Jews. Those who escaped the sentence of death are bound by the duty to live.

The rebirth of Israel, the return of Jerusalem: these have added since then two days to the Jewish calendar on which we say Hallel and declare, 'This was God's doing. It is a wonder in our eyes'. Even those who refuse to see a Divine miracle in these happenings, cannot fail to see a human miracle. Whether in obedience to God who said 'Live', or in rebellion against men who said 'Die', the people of Israel has re-established itself against a tidal wave of improbability.

The spectre of the holocaust has not disappeared. There are still Nazi groups in Germany and the countries of the West. There are those who, as Elie Wiesel puts it, wish to murder the victims a second time by claiming that they never existed; that the deaths are a fiction of the Jewish imagination. The Vatican has yet to recognise the existence of the Jewish state. There are Islamic and Arab ideologies built on the sacred dream of the destruction of Israel. There are those who, having ceased to call Jews the children of Satan, now prefer to compare Israeli self-defence with the actions of Hitler.

Against this background we must live, knowing that we have been accorded — by advanced thinking — the unique privilege of the duty

quietly to disappear. If only the people of Moses would cease to exist the world would be a more peaceful place.

Perhaps so. But **Am Yisrael** owes a duty to God. To show that empires vanish but the people of faith still lives. That while God may hide His face, we will not cease to speak to Him. That we will not let His name be desecrated by the extinction of His people.

He spoke once, through Jeremiah, the solemn promise: 'He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine at night . . . Only if these decrees vanish from My sight, declares the Lord, will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before Me' (Jeremiah 31:35-36). For His sake and for ours, we will carry the souls of the dead like a Sefer Torah written in letters of fire: from their ashes shall grow the Tree of Life.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The Holocaust literature is enormous, and it is almost all worth reading. As good a place as any to begin would be with Elie Wiesel's short novel, **Night**, Fontana paperbacks; and you might test your reactions to the strange, kabbalistic novel, **The Last of the Just**, by Andre Schwartz-Bart. An anthology of holocaust literature is to be found in **Out of the Whirlwind**, edited by A. Friedlander, Schocken Books. On the theology of the holocaust, Eliezer Berkovits' **Faith After the Holocaust**, Ktav, is a bold and uncompromising statement from an orthodox Jew. Emil Fackenheim has produced some of the most powerful and arresting thought on the subject: see his **The Jewish Return into History**, Schocken Books, especially the article, **The People Israel Lives**. This can also be found in an important anthology of Jewish-Christian relationships — an important component of post-holocaust reflection — edited by F.E. Talmage: **Disputation and Dialogue**, Ktav. Another anthology containing important material is **Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?**, edited by Eva Fleischner, Ktav. A brief introduction to four approaches, **Jewish Faith After the Holocaust**, by Steven Katz, can be found in the **Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook**, 1975-6, pp.92-105. Not to be overlooked is the record of the response of Jewish law to the extreme life-and-death choices in the camps. Read I.J. Rosenbaum, **The Holocaust and Halakhah**, Ktav.



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#### Other pamphlets in this series:

- Pamphlet 1 — Faith and Reason
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- Pamphlet 5 — The Messianic Age