

Faith in God and Man After Auschwitz: Theological Implications

by Emil L. Fackenheim

"Faith in God and Man after Auschwitz": this topic was given to me. It would provoke thought *at any time* -- for philosophers about Man, for theologians about God --at least if theirs is the God of Abraham.

But when Yad Vashem formulated the topic, *no one* could have guessed our apocalyptic situation, in Israel, the Territories, the Middle East, Europe, America, the United Nations.

To many events are only politics. These hark back to the first Return to Jerusalem, from Babylon. Without it, two "world-historical events" (Hegel) would not have happened: Jewish history, "lost tribes", would have come to an end, the Christian and Muslim, never begun.

At bar-mitzva lessons, our rabbi in Halle a/S. Germany, Albert Kahlberg, taught that Christianity and Islam are "daughter-religions" of Judaism. I wondered then, ever since, why the "daughters" are so often indifferent to the "mother", even callous, even hate her.

My paper today will be about the second Return: "Jerusalem After Auschwitz". It cannot be abstractly theological, must be concrete and political: as it were, "theopolitical".

I have sent copies to Fr. Michael McGarry, hoping for a Jewish-Christian "dialogue", also to Prof. Moshe Halbertal, hoping for an intra-Jewish one. In tradition ancient Jerusalem was destroyed because Jew's quarreled; this Return, however, after Auschwitz *and because of it* --"because", for Evil exists, must be confronted -- our "trialogue" must end in harmony -- and, with God's help, Jerusalem will last in history -- until, at long last, there is *shalom*, peace.

1. The Right Time and the Right Place

I am old enough to have met Reinhold Niebuhr. Karl Barth, knew Hans Jonas fairly well, more important, was Leo Baeck's Berlin student for two years, and Martin Buber and Leo Strauss were my mentors: what would these great ones, Christian and Jewish, say today, more than fifty years after?

Of them - theologians / philosophers, normative still -- only Dietrich Bonhoeffer was unknown to me, but I had a solid relation with his friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge who is on record that, had his friend known Christian theologians would return to theology "seamlessly", after 1945, where they left it in 1933, he would not have believed it, and Bonhoeffer, whom they murdered in the dying days of the *Reich*, had not even known of the Holocaust, only of Jewish expulsion from Germany. (Christians still convert Jews, as if

Auschwitz had not "solved" a "problem" one way, and baptism another: at the 'Second Coming', only Jewish survivors would be left.) The *Erschütterung*, "shock" of Auschwitz for Christian theology -- so Bethge -- had yet to happen in 1945. (Has it happened yet? Or has "cultural amnesia" set in?¹) My contact with Bethge began when I asked him, by letter, whether, had his friend lived, he would have begun a "post-Holocaust Christian theology". Bethge would certainly be here today, but he died in Germany in 2000, at age ninety.

Hence the title of my opening section may be partly wrong, that "the time is right", when for Bethge it is too late. But the place of this conference remains *right*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem: it could be nowhere else.

About myself, briefly, I was born in Germany, in 1916, in the midst of the Great War, was registered as German citizen of the "Mosaic faith", as delicate custom then had it, and grew up without the experience or belief, even after 1933, that Germans had always been "eliminational"-anti-Semites; else my great-grandfather, Wilhelm Fröhlich, would not have viewed my home-town, Halle a/S, where he was rabbi, as his own home-town, nor would, generations later, two uncles of mine have acted as they did in the Great War:

Willy Schlesinger -- whom I never knew -- fell as *Frontsoldat*; Adolf Goldberg -- whom I knew very well, was very fond of-- lost a leg in it. Hence, despite all the histories, the Nazi *Machtergreifung*, "grab of power", and its use in Auschwitz, is still a riddle to me; should still shock- into- thought philosophers, theologians, Jewish and Christian, the latter especially in Germany.

For me as philosopher, Evil is unintelligible, for the very attempt to understand trivializes it.

What would Barth think today? Bonhoeffer? But what the current pope thinks most Catholics, hopefully, know. In 2000 John Paul II wrote:

"God of our Fathers
You chose Abraham and his descendants
To bring your name to the nations:
We are deeply saddened
By the behavior of those
Who in the course of history
Have caused these children of yours to suffer;
And, asking your forgiveness,
We wish to commit ourselves
To genuine brotherhood
With the people of the covenant."²

Pope John Pius II wrote the above in 2000, but this is 2002.

2. A 614th Commandment

I have decided that, provided I reflect now, thirty-odd years later, on the "commandment", first formulated in 1970, provided also I attend to Primo Levi, whom I was then unaware of, it is appropriate for me to cite the "614th". Two questions arise:

Why a "614th" why not, as with the late Protestant theologian A. Roy Eckardt, to stress its importance, an "11th"? First, in Jewish tradition there are 613 commandments, sufficient for all situations, future as well as past. But the tradition could not anticipate Hitler: the Holocaust was unpredictable, even for *tora- sh ' - be 'al-pe* "oral Torah".

Second, why a commandment that names an enemy, when Jewish tradition avoids names, say of Titus, Hadrian, others *yimach sh 'mo*, "may his name be wiped out"? Earlier enemies had found Jewish "sins" *in behavior* -- stubborn politics in Roman antiquity, stubborn faith in the Middle Ages, but *this new* enemy found Jewish "sin" *in birth*, and set out methodically to "solve" a so-called "problem". As Raul Hilberg has put it, in ruthless honesty:

"When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of 'non-Aryan' into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed." ³

Where else has there ever been -- will there ever be -- a genocide, systematic enough to start with a definition letting "ordinary men" kill babies before males *were even circumcised*? Ending with everyone, old and young, dying in gas chambers, unable I say *Sh 'ma Yisrael*, the Jewish confession at death? No theologian, Jewish or Christian, can evade these questions, nor, as I will show, can a philosopher.

Therefore, as *Jewish* philosopher, I have no choice but to see "the fate of European Jewry" not merely as one- case- among- others, of racism-in-general, but, as a unique and ultimate assault on *Jewish faith*, -- nay, *on the God of Israel*.

Now, more than half a century later, Christians and Muslims must ask: was it also 1 assault on the God of Abraham? Must not, after Auschwitz, Christian and Muslim theology be other than they were, for centuries, millennia, even from the start? Both should check their Holy Scriptures, New Testament and Qur'an and eliminate what can longer be said. Matthew 27:25: *no* Jewish parents ever asked that their children be cursed. *Allah Akbar* "God is great": this, if said by a Muslim murdering a Jew, contradicts *bismillahu rahmani rahim*, the opening words of the Qur'an, "in the name of Allah, the merciful."

Let me re-state the 614th commandment: "Jews are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories."

In 1970 this was divided into four parts: Jews are "commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish"; "to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish"; "forbidden to despair of Man, lest they co-operate in delivering the world to the forces of Auschwitz"; "to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish". ⁴

But *is it possible* to obey this commandment? Winston Churchill promised to finish Hitler and his "shadow". He did the first, but could not do the second: Hitler's shadow, alas, survives.

3. A Perplexity Maimonides did not know of.

The *Guide for the Perplexed* is widely regarded as the greatest work in Jewish philosophy. Its author, Moses Maimonides, also known as Rambam, was once asked a question that perplexed the Jews in Yemen. Their fanatic Muslim regime gave them no choice but death or conversion: what should they do? Maimonides replied that these fanatics were the worst enemies Jews ever had but, concerned as he was with *pikuah nefesh*, "saving lives", he advised them to convert, but leave Yemen speedily, always a possibility since the world was "open and wide".⁵

The Rambam knew about Muslim fanatics, but not about Hitler, nor that, in Hitler's of all times, the world would not be open and wide.

Hence after Auschwitz, there is need for a new Jewish theology, perhaps a new philosophy, possibly both. Realist that he was, Maimonides did not consider the time ripe for Jewish sovereignty, Messianic as it would have to be, in a Jewish state.⁶

4. The State of Israel and its Law of Return

Sometimes life goes to school with philosophy, sometimes philosophy to school with life: after the Holocaust, the latter was the case, could not be otherwise.⁷

The Holocaust ended in 1945. In 1947 the UN voted for two states in Palestine, one Jewish, one Arab. In 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the Jewish state, well aware it would need defense, would not get it from the UN, that inhabitants of the new state would have to do it. Subsequently he said:

"We did not fight in 1948 to establish the state. We fought to defend it. The UN gave it international sanction and then ran away. We brought it about ourselves".⁸

In 1950, the Israeli *knesset* passed the "Law of Return". Next to survival, this Law by the Jewish state is the only true, if inadequate, Jewish response to the Holocaust. Nobody thinks that, had Jewish history not been "crooked" as never before -- i.e., had a Jewish state existed by 1933 -- its army could have defeated the German, well-established ever since the *grosse Kurfürst*, thus preventing the Holocaust: for a while neither the British nor Russians nor Americans could defeat it, and -- horrifying thought! -- it seemed that Hitler would win the War. However, by virtue of *this* Law the Jewish state would have taken Jewish refugees, including my Uncle Adolf Goldberg. Other states ask would-be- immigrants to show cause why they should be admitted -- for instance, only farmers by Canada --, and this is their sovereignty. The Law of Return requires the Jewish state to prove why Jews should not be admitted: thus it limits its own sovereignty. (It cannot reject even ultra-

orthodox Jews, who refuse to recognize a pre-Messianic yet-Jewish state, hence do not defend it. *What other state would admit my uncle, one-legged, whose profession, lawyer, is elsewhere useless?* But in 1942 Himmler's SS ruled my uncle was "unworthy-of-life", classified him with cripples and the insane, murdered him with gas, then lied in a death certificate: he died of heart failure. (The document is in my forthcoming *Epitaph for German Judaism*.)⁹

This "small" lie was part and parcel of the big Nazi lie, their whole *Weltanschauung*.¹⁰

In a lecture to Jewish students at Ann Arbor University, Michigan, I once asserted -- it must have been in the late 1970s -- that, if only in memory of the six million, the Law of Return should never be revoked, also asserted that, even if at home in the United States, they might consider Aliyah, "immigration to Israel".

After the lecture, a student asked what, if she was not prepared to go that far, was next best. I replied: "have one more child than you meant to have." I should have added: convince your future husband.

They say the earth is over-populated; but, after Auschwitz, Jews are a "small remnant" (Isaiah).

5. Auschwitz in Jewish-Christian relations; Primo Levi on the Muselmänner

Johann Baptist Metz seems to have confronted Auschwitz first religiously, as a Roman Catholic theologian, when he was asked how, if there could be "no poetry after Auschwitz" (Adorno), Christian prayer was possible; he replied because, even in Auschwitz, Jewish prayer was actual.¹¹

(After this address, I understand, Fr. Michael B. McGarry will speak on prayer-after-Auschwitz.)

Later, Metz published an article that, for post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian relations, breaks new ground: any wish to "comprehend Auschwitz" is to have "comprehended nothing", is not to have been gripped by *unbegriffenes Grauen*, "uncomprehended horror"; to be involved with history is to refuse to evade history's catastrophes, with Metz himself not evading controversial politics, i.e., siding with Israelis explain they are no colonizers, merely defend their country, the only Jewish state there is; as a "house against death." With these and other statements, each going to the core, Auschwitz is an *Erschütterung*, "shock" for Catholic Metz as it was for Protestant Bethge when still alive. And Metz -- who is still with us -- denies that, for the Holocaust, there can be a "statute of limitations". Hence, near the end of his essay he repeats what he wrote near its beginning:

"We Christians will never get back behind Auschwitz and, seen accurately, beyond Auschwitz only, no longer alone, but only with the victims."¹²

Metz urges Christians, at long last, *to listen* to Jews, although he never had a chance to hear Auschwitz-survivor Primo Levi, on the *Muselmänner*:

"Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continuously renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty really to suffer."

Then -- although no professional philosopher -- the condition described makes him one:

"*One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death.*" He adds: "in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand".¹³

It took Levi fully thirty years to write that the *Muselmänner* are not only victims, but also witnesses:

"When the destruction was terminated, the work was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to recount his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the submerged would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy."

In preface, Paul Bailey writes: "They were not merely destroyed, they were blotted out of existence".¹⁴

In a "dark age" -- philosophically, religiously --, philosopher Martin Heidegger was "proxy" to "existents", viewed them as "authentic" only if facing, not death-in-general, but theirs-in particular, but evaded Primo Levi's *Muselmänner*.

Of course, Heidegger did not know Levi, no philosopher, not even German. But he was well aware of gas-chambers, wrote one sentence about annihilation camps:

"Ackerbau ist jetzt motorisierte Ernährungsindustrie, im Wesen der Sache dasselbe wie die Fabrikation von Leichen in Gaskammern und Vernichtungslagern, das Selbe wie die Fabrikation von Wasserstoffbomben"

"In essence' 'technocracy' is the same, in 'food industry', 'gas-chambers', 'nuclear weapons'".¹⁵ This flight into "technocracy-in-general" -- I call it "flight", for no person is responsible -- contrasts with Raul Hilberg's *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*.¹⁶

Hilberg begins with one person, Hitler, this one "indispensable", passes through derivative, but essential "perpetrators", equally relentlessly through "victims", equally so through "bystanders", ending with one person, ailing Berlin priest Bernhard Lichtenberg who, on his way to Dachau, "was given last rites and died at 6 a.m. on November 3, 1943".

Lichtenberg, too, is "indispensable": there were other Christians; but this one prayed for two years in Berlin, the Nazi capital, bold enough to name "Jews", which his pope never did and, while saving not a single Jew, saved Christianity, or what remnant of it there was.

If philosopher Heidegger has fled into "technocracy-in-general", historian Hilberg stays with persons-in-particular, caught in bureaucracy, both mostly German.

In a different way, theologian Metz also contrasts with Heidegger: he faces what should have happened after Auschwitz, but did not:

"The dead of Auschwitz should have altered everything; nothing should have remained as before, in our nation, in our churches. Especially not in our churches."¹⁷

Metz did not listen to Primo Levi but, as it were, heard him to the end; yet this undid his own beginning, for the *Muselmänner* did not pray, no longer could.¹⁸

6. The Jewish People of Today: a Collective Nahshon

A Midrash has been heavy on Diaspora Jewry, for two millennia; after Auschwitz disheartens us; inspires us in the age of a sovereign Jewish state. The Midrash reads as follows:

"'You are My witnesses, and I am God'. That is, when You are My witnesses, I am God, and when you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were, not God".¹⁹

This Midrash once burdened Diaspora Jewry, in normal times -- normal even if calling for martyrdom -- a witness without which, "as it were, He is not God". But the Midrash knows about Jews able to choose between "yes" and "no", even to martyrdom, not about *Muselmänner* one "hesitates to call living", whose death one "hesitates to call death": *what, in Auschwitz, is a God who "as it were, is not God"?*

And Jews today? Jewish history almost ended when it had hardly begun, at the Re(e)d Sea; but a miracle happened, caused Jewish history to go on for millennia, and God still wants Jews to survive. In the Midrash the biblical Nahshon stepped into the waters before they even parted, sure the miracle would happen: some even think Nahshon's action *made it* happen. At Pessach, just over, we have said *she-hechehecheyanu*, the blessing that the Re(e)d Sea miracle is still with us, that a "small remnant" of Jews still survives. But if *no* miracle happens now, not only Jews here, in Jerusalem's Yad Vashem, but Jews the world-over must be a collective Nahshon, gather their courage and swim alone.

¹ see note [14](#) below. [\[Return\]](#)

² Good and Evil after Auschwitz: Ethical Implications for Today, Jack Bemporad, John T.Pawlikowski,

Joseph Sievers, eds (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav 2000). [\[Return\]](#)

³ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews: Revised and Definitive Edition*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), p. 1044. [\[Return\]](#)

⁴ Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, (Northvale: N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1999), p. 84. [\[Return\]](#)

⁵ See Abraham Halkin & David Hartman, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1985), pp. 106, 126, 160. [\[Return\]](#)

⁶ See David Hartman on the Rambam on Messianism, *op.cit*, pp. 171-200. [\[Return\]](#)

⁷ Some think Franz Kafka anticipated the Holocaust, but only Primo Levi understood Kafka's "Trial" this way, and even he only as survivor of Auschwitz, see *Der Tagesspiegel*, July 31, 1999. [\[Return\]](#)

⁸ Quoted in Bernard Postal & Henry W. Levy, *And The Hills Shouted For Joy*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), p.193. [\[Return\]](#)

⁹ Emil L. Fackenheim, *An Epitaph for German Judaism. From Halle to Jerusalem*. {Wisconsin Press, 2002). [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁰ The philosophical reasons for *Weltanschauung* as a philosophical term see my *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. by Michael Morgan, {Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1996}, chapter 12. [\[Return\]](#)

¹¹ Referred to by Metz himself in Günther B. Ginzler, ed., *Auschwitz als Herausforderung für Juden und Christen*, (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1980), p. 176. [\[Return\]](#)

¹² "Ökumene nach Auschwitz -- Zum Verhältnis von Christen und Juden in Deutschland", in: *Gott nach Auschwitz*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), pp. 121 - 144. This German translation is of *Dimensions of the Holocaust* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1977). [\[Return\]](#)

¹³ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: the Nazi Assault on Humanity*, (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 82. The original title, in Italian, was more philosophical: *Is this a Man?* [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁴ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (London: Abacus, 1988), p.64, xi. [\[Return 1\]](#) [\[Return 14\]](#)

¹⁵ Quoted by Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Heidegger und "die Juden"*, (Wien: Passagen, 1988), p. 98. [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁶ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁷ *Op.cit.*, p.139. [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁸ See Metz in 1998 on "cultural amnesia", *Good and Evil after Auschwitz Ethical implications for Today*, (Hoboken, N.J., 2000.), pp.21 -27. [\[Return\]](#)

¹⁹ I have quoted this Midrash on Psalms 123.1 at the end of my *To Mend The World*, adding that, after Auschwitz, "an immense burden" falls on its "as it were." [\[Return\]](#)