

APPROACHES TO AUSCHWITZ



THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS LEGACY

RICHARD L.
RUBENSTEIN

JOHN K.
ROTH



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Chapter 10



The Silence of God: Philosophical and Religious Reflection on the Holocaust

“As a Jew,” Elie Wiesel has written, “you will sooner or later be confronted with the enigma of God’s action in history.”¹ Religion was not a sufficient condition for the Holocaust, but it was a necessary one. What happened at Auschwitz is inconceivable without beliefs about God held first by Jews and then by Christians. For many who live after Auschwitz, however, it is God, not genocide, that is inconceivable. At the very least, the Holocaust makes both Jewish and Christian religious affirmations more difficult and problematic than they were before.

In an earlier day instances of natural destruction occupied much of the attention of philosophers and theologians. Considering, for example, the great earthquake that devastated Lisbon in the mideighteenth century, they argued whether such events could be reconciled with the claim that we live in the best of all possible worlds or whether God could be regarded as both omnipotent and totally good. The Lisbon earthquake caused fires and floods. It killed thousands of people. It was also beyond human control. In centuries past, philosophers were well aware that some catastrophes are produced by human action, but their analyses often pivoted around natural disasters—“acts of God” as they were called—that human might could not prevent.

Nature’s fury still demonstrates how fragile our lives can be. But today two factors stand out in bold relief. First, human beings do have considerable ability to control some of nature’s destructive might. Death still claims everybody, but it need not come so quickly or painfully as in earlier times. If those results leave one to wonder why natural devastation has been so prevalent, they also testify that suffering can be reduced, that human life is not completely in the grip of necessities and inevitabilities which cannot be broken, and that affirmations about life’s goodness can be underwritten by successes which make human existence more secure.

The second point, unfortunately, is less a cause for celebration. For if headway has been made against natural destruction that threatens human life, the problem of human destructiveness seems greater than ever. Ours is an age of redundant populations, refugees, concentration camps, and mass murder. It is capped by the ultimate dehumanizing threat: nuclear war. Violent deaths, caused by human catastrophes not by natural disasters, number over one hundred million in the twentieth century alone. The scale of human-made death demonstrates conclusively that ours is not the best of all possible worlds.

The Holocaust is paradigmatic. It was not the result of sporadic, random violence carried out by hooligans. Driven by a zealous antisemitism, which seemed totally rational to those who used it as a springboard to power, the Holocaust was a state-sponsored program of population elimination, a destruction process that could successfully target the Jews only because it received cooperation from every sector of German society. Why was this permitted to happen? That question indicts men and women, but since they did not begin history by themselves, the issue becomes a religious one as well. What or who started history is a question without a definitive answer. It is not, however, a question without answers. People have formed innumerable convictions, all of them fallible and possibly even false, to fathom their individual and collective experience. Weighing evidence differently, some of these beliefs are less affirmations in their own right and more rejections of claims held by others—as in atheism, for example. Or, they are manifestations of a refusal to affirm or reject—as in agnosticism—because too much knowledge is lacking. Over time many of a person's responses to religious questions and to questions about God in particular will change both in substance and in certitude. Others will stay remarkably the same in spite of traumatic events that create massive dissonance between what was believed before and what could possibly be accepted after.

The Holocaust certainly qualifies as a watershed event. A typical reaction is to feel that Auschwitz seriously impugns the credibility of many, if not all, the claims about God that Jews or Christians have usually made. Indeed the Holocaust appears to call the very existence of God into serious doubt, if it does not make God's nonexistence perfectly clear. Some would argue that the Holocaust was not required to do these things. Previous human history contained far more than enough senseless injustice to demonstrate that trust in God was a delusion. Such appraisals, however, do not give the Holocaust its due. Both in its own right and in the impact of its massive addition to history's accumulated waste, the Holocaust can shatter belief that had been able to endure more or less intact everything else that went before. Theologians and philosophers who wish to defend Jewish or Christian views about God have always had a formidable task to show that God is not buried beneath history's debris. Few who encounter the Holocaust with seriousness would deny that Auschwitz makes their interpretive efforts more problematic than does any other reality.

Philosophers and theologians usually claim to ground their arguments in appeals to actual human experience. Unavoidably these appeals go beyond direct knowledge of individual cases or the statistically documented studies of human behavior and belief carried out by social scientists. Philosophers and theologians draw on such material, and on historical studies as well, but their efforts often require them to raise and reflect on questions that exceed immediate experience. The facts, it is often said, speak for themselves. They do not always speak clearly, however; nor are they self-interpreting. Philosophy and theology are disciplines that seek to interpret experience so that its most basic features—structural and normative—are clarified.

“Unique” and “unprecedented” are two descriptive terms often applied to the Holocaust. Jews in particular are likely to insist on using them, along with an emphasis on the particularistic nature of Nazi genocide, which specifically targeted Jews for total extermination root and branch simply because the Jews were Jews. Such emphases have validity because they help to demonstrate that the Holocaust was a boundary-crossing event, one of those moments in history which changes everything before and after, even if the substance and direction of the change take time to dawn on human consciousness. As philosophers and theologians probe the religious impact of the Holocaust, they can help to bring that dawning to fullness. They can also explore and indicate how that dawning might be shaped, since its course, like all human experience, remains subject to variation.

The Religious Testimony of Survivors

The first to probe the religious impact of the Holocaust were not philosophers and theologians who thought about the Nazi onslaught after it ceased. Men and women who lived and died and in some cases survived the hiding places, the ghettos, and the camps already carried on that activity as their circumstances, energy, and inclination permitted. Their observations and feelings, expressed in diaries and eyewitness accounts, provide some of the most important experiential data for philosophers and theologians to encounter. Such testimony has an irreplaceable significance because it represents those who had to cope with the Holocaust firsthand. To make pronouncements or even suggestions about what can or cannot, must or must not, be credible religiously after Auschwitz without knowing what the survivors think about their own experiences would be to develop one's philosophy or theology in a considerable vacuum.

Until recently knowledge about the faith and doubt of Holocaust survivors had to rest largely on inferences drawn from oral and written testimony that remained scattered and unsystematically analyzed. There is still much to do in collecting this testimony, but thanks to the cooperation of hundreds of survivors, a major social scientific study is now available. During the 1970s, Reeve Robert Brenner polled a thousand Israeli survivors to ascertain the religious change, re-

jection, reaffirmation, doubt, and despair that the Holocaust brought them. Selecting the subjects at random from survivor rosters, especially from those carefully maintained at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, he received more than seven hundred responses to a lengthy questionnaire. Of those who responded, one hundred were interviewed personally, the remainder by mail. The data gathered is rich, the testimony moving. Much of it speaks about the silence of God, which is one way to designate what may be the most crucial religious problem posed by the Holocaust. How survivors have coped with that silence is instructive for the interpretive work that falls to philosophers and theologians today. Also challenging are some of Brenner's conclusions.

When Brenner speaks of "Holocaust survivors," he means Jews who successfully endured "various types of Nazi concentration camps, including detention or internment camps, transit and exchange camps, and annihilation or death camps where crematoria were installed." Within his random and representative sample, one of the most fundamental findings is that 53% "consciously and specifically asserted that the Holocaust affected or, to a certain extent, modified their faith in God." The other 47% "averred that the Holocaust had no influence on their beliefs about God." Considering the cataclysmic qualities of the Holocaust, plus the fact that 69% of the surveyed survivors held that they had believed in God prior to the Holocaust, a figure that would have been another 10% higher for eastern European Jews, the size of the 47% category may seem surprising. Brenner has no doubts that the survivors explored their religious histories profoundly and honestly in answering the wide-ranging and disturbing questions he raised about religious behavior and belief before, during, and immediately after the Holocaust, and in the present as well. Nor does he regard the significant numbers of people—approximately one in three—who remained unwavering in their belief in the existence of God, personal or impersonal, as sufficient to modify his judgment that for those caught in the Holocaust "a radical transformation of faith took place." The most salient feature of this transformation is that of the 55% who before the Holocaust believed in "a personal God" who is involved in humanity's daily life, more than one in four rejected that belief either during or immediately after the war. Nor have they reclaimed it since. At the heart of this rejection stands a fundamental premise, namely, that if there were a personal God who is involved in humanity's daily life, that God would surely not cause or even permit an Auschwitz to exist.²

Stubbornly powerful though it is, that assumption has not governed all theological reflection either during or after the Holocaust. In fact, Brenner's research found a vast array of religious responses among the survivors who responded. They included Orthodox Jews who say the Holocaust was God's punishment for Jewish refusal to honor their historic covenant with the God who made them a chosen people. Others affirmed God as One who is impersonal, uninvolved in human history generally or in the Holocaust specifically. And if

nearly three out of four of the 53% who found their faith affected or modified by the Holocaust underwent "either a complete loss or an attenuation of religious faith," the remainder reported that the Holocaust made them more religious. Overall about 5% of Brenner's sample were transformed from atheists into believers. If that figure seems insignificant, Brenner puts it in a different light by noting that "nearly one of every four religiously transformed survivors began to believe in God because of the Holocaust."³ That is, of those who moved from the basic position of affirming or denying the existence of God, the shifting was not exclusively in one direction. Twenty-five percent of that group found themselves moved to affirm the existence of God when they had not done so before, and the impetus for the movement was the Holocaust itself. In all, Brenner observes, the total loss of faith in the existence of God among his sample of Holocaust survivors came to 11%.

Faith in God after Auschwitz is not easy for Holocaust survivors, for questions about God's silence quickly lead to another question: how can one believe in God at all after Auschwitz? Brenner found, however, that the believers' perplexity and discontent with their own beliefs had parallels in the experiences of those who professed atheism. Granted, those who sustained or arrived at atheism during the Holocaust were spared the frequently agonizing questions posed for those who affirmed God's reality. In some cases this atheism was strident, maintaining not merely that the existence of God, especially of the omnipotent God of Israel, is incredible but also that no theologian could possibly be qualified to controvert, let alone refute, that conclusion unless he or she had been through the "selection" itself. On the other hand, Brenner found the atheism of others less self-assured. For some survivors, Brenner is convinced, profession of atheism is less a simple theological posture and more an emotional reaction, an expression of deep hurt and anger against God for leaving Jews so radically abandoned. Others found their atheism producing a sense of guilt. This was not guilt over having survived (Brenner's findings turned up very little of that syndrome), but rather a sense that one's atheism betrays too many of those who perished and even entails disloyalty to the Jewish tradition itself. At least for Jewish survivors, atheism after Auschwitz, however natural a response it may be, is rarely easy or comfortable.

If it is ironic that "those Holocaust survivors who became non-believers appear to feel the urgent need to explain and justify their non-belief to a far greater extent than believers seem to feel the need to justify *their* belief,"⁴ still the believers are left to contend with demanding questions about the kind of God they affirm. Again, the variety of outlook is the most striking feature in Brenner's sample. Far from irresistibly driving survivors away from belief in God, the Holocaust draws out many different views, thus suggesting that post-Holocaust religious options are not simply reducible to affirmation of one God or of none at all. The sheer diversity of affirmative views underscores that no single idea

about God will ever be acceptable to all. That same pluralism, however, means that the spectrum of what one may find religiously credible after Auschwitz remains open wide. One survivor's religious convictions do not necessarily speak for anyone else. Nor do those of philosophers or theologians who declaim for or against God in the Holocaust's aftermath. What such reflection can do is to help people confront the options so they can consider what honestly makes the most good sense to them. Survivors do this by showing how they personally have coped with massive destruction. Philosophers and theologians can share in the quest by developing various options in greater detail; by testing the alternatives critically as to their assumptions and implications; and by bringing imagination to bear to reinterpret religious traditions and to break new ground that reveals the significance of the Holocaust and the resources we need to reduce the waste that human power can spew out.

Survivors do not provide ultimate, final answers to complex questions raised by the Holocaust. No one can. The survivors' religious disagreement is substantial, but it is also worth noting that those who affirmed God's reality tended toward a consensus about views they *rejected*. None, for instance, regarded the Holocaust as evil that might really be good in disguise if viewed from a proper perspective. Nor did it seem to them that the Holocaust was a device used by God to refine or to purify moral character through suffering. Also unrepresented was the suggestion that there is an ultimate source of evil, a devil, who coexists with God: God may be the source of evil as well as of good, but God has no peers. At no time, moreover, did the survivors believe that Jews would finally disappear from the earth, and they welcomed the state of Israel as vindication of that trust. But likewise, when questioned whether Israel was worth the Holocaust, their collective response was "if not a resounding and thunderous no, then certainly an emphatic no, a declination with little hesitation or uncertainty." Indeed if the state of Israel was insufficient to justify the Holocaust, not one "among these 708 twentieth-century Jewish victims . . . thought the world-to-come—whether as afterlife, heaven, messianic future, resurrection, or whatever a survivor may conceive—was sufficient alone to make sense out of the Holocaust" either.⁵

Although it does not follow that the survivors were equally unanimous in rejecting all affirmations of a world-to-come, large numbers—but not all—denied the theory that those who perished in the Holocaust were being punished by God for their own sinfulness. More than 70% of those who responded to that issue set aside any interpretation that linked the Holocaust to God's wrath or judgment in response to human sin. The Holocaust, they stressed, was humanity's doing, not God's. In emphasizing that point, however, the survivors recognized that the issue of God's relation to the Holocaust is not set aside. Their response to the following question, which merits quotation in full from Brenner's study, made that fact plain:

With regard to the destruction of the Six Million which one of these responses is the most acceptable to you?

- a. It is inappropriate to blame God for the acts of man (man may decide to kill or not to kill).
- b. It is not for us to judge the ways of God.
- c. God was unable to prevent the destruction.
- d. The Holocaust was the will of God (it was part of His divine plan).
- e. Nothing can excuse God for not having saved them.⁶

Of the 26% in Brenner's survey who chose not to answer this question, virtually all were non-believers. Among the remainder, the response most frequently chosen first (34%) was *b*. This option was followed closely (27%) by *a*. One out of four chose *e*. Overall only 9% of the survivors picked *d*. Fewer still checked *c*. The configuration of choices suggests that Holocaust survivors who believe in God take seriously the reality of human freedom and responsibility. Nonetheless, far from removing puzzles about God, that emphasis on freedom stands by another, namely that it is not for us to judge the ways of God. The latter response implies ambivalence as much as piety. In spite of humanity's freedom, or even because of it, the ways of God remain puzzling in light of the Holocaust, an intimation that is reinforced by the fact that hardly any of the survivors decided theologically that God was unable to prevent the destruction.

The opinions of Holocaust survivors are not necessarily normative theologically, but neither are they without significance and interest when compared with some of the theological interpretations of the Holocaust that both Christians and Jews have offered recently. For as we shall see in what follows, many of those interpretations in one way or another emphasize the very point that the survivors find immensely difficult to accept, namely, that God was somehow unable to prevent the destruction.

A Christian Response

Slowly and painfully Christians are discovering the Holocaust's impact on their tradition. The awareness that Christian anti-Judaism contributed much to the destruction of European Jewry requires them no less than Jews to reconsider the most fundamental aspects of their faith. Although Christian theology in America has usually played second fiddle to European and specifically German theological work, when it comes to responses to the Holocaust, American thinkers are more in the vanguard. Significantly, there are more Jews in the United States than in any other country. Not only does that fact warrant special American ties to the state of Israel, but also it makes Holocaust reflection by American Christians all the more important.

As American Christian responses to the Holocaust developed until recently, study concentrated on two main areas: appraisal of church life in the Third Reich and inquiry about the Christian roots of antisemitism. These analyses

were largely historical. Now a movement is under way to go beyond that necessary beginning and toward substantial theological revision. Seriously studying what Jewish thinkers have to say, Christian writers such as Robert McAfee Brown, Harry James Cargas, A. Roy and Alice Eckardt, Eva Fleischner, Franklin Littell, John T. Pawlikowski, and John K. Roth contribute to this process. The most significant current example, however, is provided by Paul M. van Buren, who is completing a systematic Christian theological response to the Holocaust. In a projected four-volume work that assesses Christian thought in light of the Holocaust—including the sensitive question of how Christians should regard Jesus after Auschwitz, the vigor of Jewish religious life throughout the centuries, and the reemergence of the state of Israel—van Buren does much to overcome Christian triumphalism and the notion that Christianity has superseded or negated Jewish faith.⁷ Unfortunately, his suggestions about God's relation to Auschwitz are far less credible than his estimates about how to reconceive the relations between Christians and Jews so that anti-Jewish sentiment in Christianity is laid to rest forever.

Van Buren's theology stresses that Christians worship the God of the Jews, the same God presumably who is the God of the survivors polled in Brenner's survey. Although he underscores the difficulties of speaking about God at all after Auschwitz, van Buren joins the survivors in stressing that God has created us free and responsible. To bestow us with those qualities, he believes, is a loving thing for God to do. It also entails that God has "to sit still and to suffer in agony as His children move so slowly to exercise in a personal and loving way the freedom which He has willed for them to have and exercise."⁸ Confronted by the question, "Where was God at Auschwitz?" van Buren believes that God was in the midst of that destruction, suffering "in solidarity with His people." The objectives of this suffering God, he surmises, might have included "trying to awaken His creatures to their irresponsibility. Perhaps He was trying, by simply suffering with His people, to awaken His church to a new understanding of love and respect for them." Obviously uneasy about those answers, van Buren adds: "The cost seems out of all proportion to the possible gain, so silence may be the wiser choice."⁹ If so, van Buren eschews it and goes on to elaborate his views about God's suffering.

Those views amount to an apologetic defense of God predicated on the principle that God's creation of human freedom "constitutes a divine self-determination. . . . Having made this decision and taken this step, there are some things which God cannot be and some choices that are no longer open to Him. . . ." ¹⁰ Specifically, God could not intervene to stop the Holocaust, asserts van Buren, "without ceasing to be the God of love and freedom who has . . . conferred responsibility and free creative power on His creatures."¹¹ Here van Buren begs the question twice over. Responsibility and free creative power are not incompatible with Holocaust interventions by God unless God or van Buren

defines them that way. Moreover, if van Buren or God does define them that way, then one might wonder how that decision is supposed to embody love, seeing that its outworkings in history led to unremitting slaughter in the Holocaust. Van Buren pleads that, if we are to think of God as a parental figure—the imagery is common to both Judaism and Christianity—“then this must surely be an agonizing period in God’s life.”¹² Well it might be, though less because of van Buren’s emphasis that God is so explicitly bound by the existence of human freedom and more by second thoughts about what God did in creating a world of freedom in which irresponsible destructiveness destroys more than love appears to save.

About one matter van Buren is perfectly credible: “God is not a God who does it all for His creatures.” He may even be correct that if more Christians had acknowledged that fact earlier, millions murdered by Hitler might have been rescued. But if we are to go on to suggest, as van Buren does, that the Holocaust becomes divine revelation, informing us “that God requires that we take unqualified responsibility before Him for His history with us,”¹³ then at the very least common decency would seem to enjoin us to ask God, or at least van Buren, whether there were not a more effective, less wasteful, way for God to get that message across. Van Buren reads the emergence of the state of Israel in a similar light. That development did occur because of human initiative, but to speak of such effort as containing revelation from God concerning human responsibility should raise still more questions about what God is doing. For however wonderful the state of Israel may be, the Holocaust survivors speak convincingly when they emphasize that in no way is it worth the price of the Holocaust, which has played such an unmistakable role in establishing and in sustaining Israel.

Van Buren’s Christian theology tries to retain a God whose goodness is as great as God’s suffering and whose love is as vast as God’s freedom. As far as history is concerned, however, his account suggests that God’s power recedes as humanity’s emerges. Van Buren believes that Christians take “the crucifixion to be God’s greatest act,” the very essence of suffering love.¹⁴ But van Buren’s perspective underplays the fact that the crucifixion would have been just another Roman execution had it not been succeeded by what certain Jews took to be a substantial intervention in human affairs, namely, the resurrection of Jesus from death itself. At the very core of Christianity—and it poses a serious inconvenience for van Buren’s Holocaust theology—is the assertion that God’s divine power far exceeds anything that human beings can do. God is not bound by human freedom unless God chooses to be. And if God wants to be, so that the divine presence at Auschwitz is that of suffering with the victims and not interceding on their behalf, then that is a problem for us all—God, Christians, Jews, and everybody else.

A credible Christian theology in a post-Holocaust world neither can nor will

want to take God off the hook quite so easily as van Buren does, unless it is true that Christians are simply unwilling to confront the awesome and dreadful possibility that their God of love is at times needlessly and even wantonly involved with evil that did not have to be. "If we are to speak of ourselves as being responsible for history," writes van Buren, "then we shall have to find a way to speak of God that corresponds."¹⁵ True, people are responsible for history, but humanity's responsibility cannot be the whole story. It is irresponsible, not to say unchristian, to assign responsibility inequitably. If God exists, God must bear a fair share. God's responsibility would be located in the fact that God is the One who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being. Granted, since we are thrown into history at our birth, we appear in social settings made by human hands. But ultimately those hands cannot account for themselves. To the extent that they were born with the potential and the power to be dirty, credit for the fact belongs elsewhere. "Elsewhere" is God's address. Stendhal, the French novelist, need not have been correct when he remarked that God's only excuse is that God does not exist. Still, to use human freedom and responsibility as a defense for God does not ring true as we now ought to be mature enough to see. God's establishment of that very freedom and responsibility, at least given the precise forms it has taken in history, rightly puts God on trial.

Van Buren remains hopeful about human existence after the Holocaust. Having stressed God's limited intervening role in history, he asserts that history shall be redeemed. To transform history into something very different from the slaughter-bench Hegel envisioned it to be, radical changes are required. The issue is who will carry them out? By van Buren's reckoning, the burden of freedom places overwhelming responsibility on human shoulders, unless God changes and suddenly falls back on a more dramatic divine intervention within history than van Buren's discerning of the ways of God provides a basis for expecting. Where is the evidence to suggest that, in a post-Holocaust world, human beings have made or are likely to make substantial progress in redeeming history? Who, in short, is going to do the redeeming? Van Buren holds little stock in secular humanity; its ways did too much to pave the way to Auschwitz. Christians, he notes, are declining in absolute numbers in the world. Perhaps, then, the task falls to the Jews. If it does, it is not likely that their human power alone will succeed in turning the world's swords into plowshares and its spears into pruning hooks. If lions and lambs are to lie down together in peace on this earth, nothing less than a massive intervention in history by God appears to be necessary. Given God's continued policy of nonintervention, the historical order will probably remain less than redeemed. Meanwhile, Jews and Christians alike are left to await the fulfillment of God's promises, even as they try themselves to make the world less destructive.

Reeve Robert Brenner reminds us that "nearly three of every four survivors

were of the conviction that the Six Million were destroyed only as a consequence of man's inhumanity to man and with no connection whatever to God.' Though in one way or another the Holocaust has diminished our sense of God's presence in history, the fact remains that human existence does not account for itself. The fact is enough to keep at least the question of God in our midst. Insofar as the question of God remains alive in the survivor community polled by Brenner, it bears remembering that only 5% "were of the conviction that 'God could not have prevented the Holocaust.' . . . For most other survivors, 'a God who is not all-powerful is no God at all.'" ¹⁶ The views of these survivors suggest that religious questions about the Holocaust concern power. As Jewish and Christian theologians continue to wrestle with the silence of God, the survivors' testimony is a reminder that the power equation between God and humanity remains at issue.

Covenant and Election

Central to van Buren's *A Christian Theology of the People-Israel* is the conviction that "the Jews are the chosen people, and chosen as a people, they are not a people consisting of individually chosen persons." This theology of covenant and election, van Buren continues, led Israel to take "its historical experience to be evidence of how things stood between itself and God. Defeat by enemies and natural disasters were evidence of divine displeasure over Israel's infidelity." Acknowledging with Brenner the current difficulties of such a view, van Buren notes that there has nonetheless been a paucity of "Jewish exploration of the appropriateness to the Holocaust of the rabbinic response to the destruction of the Temple—that it happened 'for our sins.'" He properly acknowledges that for Christians the issue of sin and the Holocaust should point to "centuries of Christian teaching of anti-Judaism." As to the Jewish dimensions of this issue, van Buren concedes that "this is hardly a subject on which a Gentile can speak."¹⁷

The Holocaust has bequeathed to the post-war Jewish religious community extraordinarily painful questions as to whether and to what extent God, as traditionally understood in Judaism, was involved. To understand these problems, it is important to distinguish between *religious* and *philosophical* problems. For philosophers, the Holocaust raises the age-old question: how can a God who is thought to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent permit such evil to occur? The evil of the Holocaust—in which thousands of human beings were exterminated daily—was undoubtedly of far greater magnitude than the examples which usually elicit the question of the apparent contradiction between God's power and goodness. For example, in Dostoevski's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov argues that he cannot reconcile the suffering of even a single innocent child with the claim that God is both good and all-powerful. The Holocaust poses the philosophical question with especial ur-

gency. Nevertheless, the question remains in many ways the same whether the contradiction involves a single instance or a multitude.

When we turn to the religious problem posed by the Holocaust, numbers do make a crucial difference. In confronting the Holocaust, both Judaism and Christianity must show that its occurrence is consistent with a biblical understanding of God. For Judaism, this means the view of God received from Jewish Scripture as interpreted by the rabbis. Although the book of Job raises the question of the innocent individual sufferer, Jewish Scripture does not depict God as promising that the innocent *individual* will be exempt from suffering in this world. The Bible does, however, depict God as choosing a particular community as the object of special divine concern; promising to protect that community if they were faithful to divine Law; and warning of dire *group catastrophes* which God will inflict if the community ignores divine commandments.

If God is in fact especially concerned with what happens to God's chosen people in history, then the Holocaust is more than a particularly gruesome example of the age-old philosophical contradiction between an all-powerful, infinitely good God and human evil. From the perspectives of both Judaism and Christianity, the Holocaust can hardly be considered a random occurrence since it was inflicted upon that community which the Bible asserts to be God's chosen people.

In the past, whenever the community of Israel experienced a major disaster, her religious teachers interpreted the event as divine punishment inflicted upon the nation because of its failure to fulfill the biblical covenant. Christian teachers offered a similar interpretation. Jewish and Christian authorities agreed that God was the ultimate Author of Israel's misfortunes. They disagreed only in identifying the nature of the sin for which Israel was punished. Invariably, Jewish authorities identified the offense as some want of conformity to God's Law. By contrast, Christian authorities saw the same misfortunes as due to Israel's rejection of Christ as the Messiah.

Thus, given the classical theological positions of both Judaism and Christianity, the fundamental question posed by the Holocaust is not only "why was God silent (or absent) during the Holocaust?" but also "did God use Adolf Hitler to inflict terrible sufferings upon six million Jews, including more than one million children, plus more than six million others who perished in Nazi murders of defenseless people?" It should be recognized, however, that even if God were the ultimate Author of the death camps, it does not follow that those divine actions were necessarily punitive. Both Judaism and Christianity allow for the possibility that the innocent may be called upon to suffer sacrificially for the guilty. Neither Jewish nor Christian Scripture interprets every misfortune as divine punishment. For example, Job is depicted as having experienced great misfortune without having offended God. Similarly, the "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah 53

appears to have been an innocent sacrificial victim whose death atones for humanity's sins.

Nevertheless, whenever Israel experienced *radical communal misfortune*, her religious teachers almost always interpreted the event as divine punishment. This was the case in 586 B.C.E. when Jeremiah prophesied concerning the impending fate of Jerusalem which was then threatened by Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon:

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me? Therefore, thus says the LORD: Behold, I am giving this city into the hands of the Chaldeans and into the hands of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, and he shall take it. The Chaldeans who are fighting against this city shall come and set this city on fire, and burn it, with the houses on whose roofs incense has been offered to Baal and drink offerings that have been poured out to other gods, to provoke me to anger. For the sons of Israel and the sons of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; the sons of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands," says the LORD. (Jer. 32:26-30)

Given Jeremiah's belief in Israel as God's chosen people, it was impossible for him to view the fall of Jerusalem as an event devoid of religious significance. The prophet understood that divine election places an awesome responsibility on Israel. Undoubtedly, he was mindful of the terrible warning the prophet Amos had pronounced upon his own people at an earlier time:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

*"You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities."* (Amos 3:1-2, italics added)

Jerusalem was destined to fall yet again at the end of the Judeo-Roman War of 66-70 C.E. At the time, the rabbis, who had succeeded both the prophets and priests as the religious authorities within Judaism, interpreted their people's misfortunes as had their predecessors. A characteristic example of the rabbinic response is to be found in the liturgy for the Holy Days and Festivals which is still used by traditional Jews:

Thou has chosen us from all peoples; thou hast loved us and taken pleasure in us, and hast exalted us above all tongues; thou hast hallowed us by thy commandments, and brought us near unto thy service, O our King, and hast called us by thy great and holy Name. . . .

*But on account of our sins we were exiled from our land, and removed far from our country.*¹⁸

We have noted in Chapter 2 that the young Christian church also interpreted the fall of Jerusalem as divine punishment. Given the fact that both the classical

Jewish and Christian authorities have consistently interpreted major Jewish communal disaster as divine punishment, it is impossible to avoid the following questions: is the Holocaust to be considered yet another example of God's punishment of the Jews for failing to remain steadfast to the covenant? if we cannot understand the Holocaust in this way, does this significantly affect our religious belief?

In the history of the Jews, there have been many group tragedies. Nevertheless, only three major communal disasters have irrevocably altered the character of the Jewish world: Nebuchadrezzar's defeat of Judea in 586 B.C.E., the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E., and the extermination of six million European Jews during World War II. Not since 70 have the Jews of the world experienced a catastrophe remotely like that which they endured between 1939 and 1945. In reality, never before in their long history have the Jews experienced so overwhelming a disaster.

Given the doctrines of covenant and election, it has been impossible for Jewish thinkers to ignore the religious implications of so overwhelming a catastrophe. In reality, no subject has so dominated the concerns of Jewish thinkers, at least since the mid-1960s when two radically different theological interpretations of the Holocaust first appeared: *The Face of God after Auschwitz* by Ignaz Maybaum and *After Auschwitz* by Richard L. Rubenstein, the co-author of this book. Rubenstein's volume has received far more attention both from scholars and the media. There is general agreement that the Holocaust became a predominant subject within Jewish theology after its publication. Although Maybaum's book was written in English, it was published in the Netherlands, and for many years remained almost totally unknown in the United States. No two works of Holocaust theology are in such total disagreement. Precisely for that reason, they ought to be considered together. Their disagreement illuminates many of the crucial issues confronting religious faith after Auschwitz.

Maybaum, a Viennese-born Reform rabbi, served congregations in Germany until 1939 when he emigrated to England and served for many years as a liberal rabbi and theologian. In his book Maybaum affirms the continuing validity of God's covenant with Israel. He further insists without qualification that God continues to intervene in history, especially the history of the chosen people, the Holocaust being one of God's most important interventions. Maybaum also holds that Israel has a divinely ordained mission to bring knowledge of the true God and divine Law to the nations of the world. This idea was strongly affirmed in the nineteenth century by Reform Jewish thinkers in both Germany and the United States. It never met with favor among traditional Jews or Zionists. The ideal of the "mission of Israel" is important for Maybaum's understanding of the Holocaust.

Although Maybaum sees the Holocaust as God's deliberate intervention, he rejects the idea that it was in any sense a divine punishment. Maybaum uses the

crucifixion of Jesus as his model for interpreting the Holocaust. Just as Jesus was the innocent victim whose death made possible the salvation of humanity, the millions of Holocaust victims are divinely chosen sacrificial offerings.

The use of the crucifixion as a theological model by a rabbi may seem strange, but Maybaum argues that God's purposes can only be understood if God addresses the nations of the world in the language they understand. It is Maybaum's view that the nations of the world can only hear and respond to God's call when it is expressed in the language of death and destruction. Hence, the importance of the crucifixion, which is the only model by which the Christian world can comprehend God's activity. According to Maybaum, it was the awesome fate of six million Jews, *precisely because they were God's chosen people*, to become sacrificial victims in the death camps so that God's purposes for the modern world might be understood and fulfilled: "The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz. The cross, the Roman gallows, was replaced by the gas chamber."¹⁹

Maybaum concurs in the view that the Jewish world has experienced three overwhelming communal disasters in its long history. He uses the Hebrew term *Churban* (destruction) to characterize these events. The Holocaust is Judaism's third *Churban*. According to Maybaum, a *Churban* is an event of utter destruction which is world-historical in its scope and significance. It is a divine intervention which has as its purpose a decisive alteration of the course of history. Nevertheless, there is a creative element in this floodtide of destructiveness. A *Churban* marks the end of one era and the beginning of a new and better one, both for the Jews and the world as a whole. Unfortunately, the new era can only come into being if the old is destroyed. Maybaum holds that the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., which initiated the Diaspora of the Jews, was the first *Churban*. It can be argued that the uprooting of a population from its native soil, such as took place when Nebuchadrezzar exiled a large part of Judea's population to Babylon, is an unmitigated disaster. However, in keeping with the idea of "the mission of Israel," Maybaum holds that the first *Churban* had the fortunate consequence of enabling the Jews to bring knowledge of the true God and divine Law to the pagan nations beyond Judea's borders. Had not Israel suffered the pain of exile, knowledge of God's word might have remained confined to one small community. Thus, the first *Churban* was an example of God's "creative destructiveness."

The second *Churban*, the Roman destruction of Judea and Jerusalem, is also seen by Maybaum as progressive. With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the synagogue became the predominant Jewish religious institution. Unlike the Temple, the synagogue is an institution in which God is worshiped through prayer and study rather than animal sacrifices. Maybaum regards this new type of worship as spiritually "higher" than the old type. Only by means of the destruction of the older, more "primitive" religious life could the newer, more

“spiritual” type come to predominate. It should, however, be noted that not all Jews or Christians regard the displacement of sacrificial forms of worship as progress. To this day, Orthodox Jews pray for the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple and its biblically ordained sacrifices. Roman Catholics participate in sacrificial worship whenever the Mass is celebrated, and all Christians regard Jesus as the supreme sacrifice. In *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein explicitly rejects the idea that prayer is a higher mode of religious life than sacrifice.²⁰ Maybaum’s idea of religious “progress” would thus appear to be dependent upon an unexamined affirmation of the values of nineteenth-century Reform Judaism that are by no means universally accepted in the late twentieth century.

Maybaum also sees the dispersion of the Jews among the nations of the Roman world as progressive. Although the Jews lost their political independence, they were, in Maybaum’s view, enabled to fulfill their mission by spreading the knowledge of God throughout the Roman empire. By contrast, most religious Jews have never regarded the Diaspora as progressive. Traditional Jews saw the Diaspora as divine punishment, and many Christians have believed that the Jews were doomed by God to wander homelessly because of their denial of Jesus as the Messiah.

Maybaum argues that the third *Churban*, the Holocaust, was yet another example of God’s use of the Jewish people as sacrificial victims in an act of creative destruction. According to Maybaum, God used the Holocaust to accomplish the final overcoming of the Middle Ages and the full transition of the peoples of the world into the modern world. Humanity’s “sin” for which the Jews had to die in the Holocaust was the retention by Europe of the old remnants of the medieval feudal world in an age in which they were no longer appropriate. It is Maybaum’s view that after World War I the West could have brought “freedom, land reform and the blessings of the industrial revolution to the east European countries.”²¹ Instead, it did nothing. As a result, the slaughter of that war was in vain and Hitler was sent by God to do what “the progressives” should have done but failed to do. This meant that the work of creative destruction had to be carried out at an infinitely greater cost in human suffering.

For Maybaum, the Holocaust was God’s terrible means of bringing the world fully into the modern age. This transition could not have occurred without the destruction of all that was medieval in Europe. Maybaum points out that the vast majority of the Jews who perished in the Holocaust were eastern European Jews who still lived in a medieval, feudal way more or less as their ancestors had, ritually and culturally isolated from their neighbors. In spite of the fact that it took a Hitler to destroy this outmoded way of life, Maybaum interprets the extermination of eastern European Jews as an act of creative destruction. Unfortunately, so too did the National Socialists, though obviously for very different reasons. With the passing of the community, which had been the most faithful to the ancient beliefs and traditions of rabbinic Judaism, the world’s Jews were

concentrated in the United States, western Europe, Russia, and Israel. There they were free to participate fully in an enlightened era of progress, rationality, and modernity.

In discussing Maybaum's ideas concerning God's reasons for destroying the Jews of eastern Europe, we feel constrained to point out that he appears uninformed concerning the actual character of the east European Jewish community in the years immediately before World War II. While it is true that many of eastern Europe's Jews lived self-contained, ghettoized lives, Maybaum ignores the fact that a very large proportion of the Jews of Poland, Lithuania, and Rumania had fully entered the modern world, as indeed had many Orthodox Jews. Maybaum appears to equate religious traditionalism with medievalism. If that identification were valid, we would have to regard millions of Orthodox Jews, conservative Christians, and Moslems as somehow not a part of the modern world. In reality, there have been many legitimate ways of responding to modernity, among which participation in or return to traditional religion is by no means the least important.

Maybaum also expresses a quasimesianic enthusiasm for the place and role of the Jews in the post-Holocaust world. His enthusiasm for the destruction of the medieval elements in Jewish life is such that he can equate the modernized, post-Holocaust Judaism of the "enlightened" Western world with the "first fruits" of redemption: "The Jewish people is, here and now, mankind at its goal. We have arrived. We are the first fruits of God's harvest."²²

Nor does Maybaum flinch from carrying his theological argument to its bitter, logical conclusion. When Nebuchadrezzar sought to destroy Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah referred to him as "Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant" (Jer. 27.6). Jeremiah had no doubt that, however terrible Nebuchadrezzar's deeds, the Babylonian conqueror was only the instrument of the sovereign Lord of history. In a deliberate allusion to Jeremiah, Maybaum depicts God as declaring "Hitler, My Servant!" Insisting that Hitler was God's instrument, Maybaum continues: "God used this instrument to cleanse, to purify, to punish a sinful world; the six million Jews, they died an innocent death; they died because of the sins of others."²³

There are obviously enormous problems with Maybaum's defense of the biblical God of history and the election of Israel. No matter what "higher" purposes were, in Maybaum's view, served by the Holocaust, he regards God as One who was quite willing to subject millions of innocent people to the most degrading and obscene suffering and death ever experienced by a human group. Moreover, we are compelled to ask whether the "higher purpose," namely, the definitive onset of modernity, for which the victims were alleged to have been sacrificed, was worth even a single life. In the nineteenth century, German and American Reform Jews greeted the onset of the modern world, with its removal of ghetto restrictions, as a divinely bestowed, proto-messianic redemption. It is

not difficult to understand why those who for centuries had been restricted to a ghettoized existence were filled with enthusiasm for the Enlightenment and its promise of civic emancipation. It is, however, difficult to understand how an intelligent thinker can retain that kind of optimism now that the night side of modernity stands fully revealed. This is not the occasion to detail the horrors the world has experienced precisely because we have entered into the age of modernity. Nor do we suggest that we could or should abandon modernity. Nevertheless, when we turn to the problems of environmental pollution, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the world-wide phenomenon of technologically-induced mass unemployment and poverty, we see that there is reason for skepticism concerning Maybaum's unreserved enthusiasm for modernity.

Nor, as Steven T. Katz has argued, can the crucifixion be used by Maybaum as an appropriate model for the Holocaust. In the crucifixion, God descends to the world, takes human form, and voluntarily gives up human life to save a world of undeserving sinners. In the crucifixion, God causes God to suffer for the sake of others. In Maybaum's version of the Holocaust, God inflicts hideous suffering upon millions of frail, frightened, and undeserving human beings.

In fairness, it must be said that Maybaum's interpretation of the Holocaust is motivated by a desire to defend the classical Reform Jewish version of the biblical image of God and the biblical doctrines of covenant and election. Maybaum fully understands the logical entailments of the faith he defends. Unlike Maybaum, most religious thinkers tend to affirm the God-who-acts-in-history while hedging that God acted in history at Auschwitz. By asserting that God's ways are "mysterious" such thinkers seek to affirm traditional faith while avoiding the negative consequences of doing so. Put differently, they seek to avoid the horns of a very unpleasant religious dilemma: absent the affirmation of some version of the traditional biblical view of God, believers may ask whether there is sufficient reason for participation in a religious community; yet if God is depicted as ultimately responsible for Auschwitz, some believers may ask themselves whether such a God is worthy of their love, trust, and loyalty.

Thus it is not surprising that many religious thinkers and clergy have tended to gloss over the whole question of God and the Holocaust. To his credit, Maybaum has refused to do this. His position indicates the kinds of affirmations that are logically required to defend the biblical image of God in the light of the Holocaust. This does not mean that Maybaum has provided the *only* logical defense of the biblical-rabbinic view of God. Nevertheless, he does show that it is impossible to affirm the existence of the biblical God of covenant and election, who is also the God-who-acts-in-history, without in some way affirming divine action at Auschwitz. Usually; such a position involves affirming God's omnipotence at the cost of compromising divine love and mercy. Maybaum himself attempts to avoid this split by insisting that Auschwitz does not constitute evidence of the absence of God's love and mercy since two-thirds of the world's

Jews survived, the Holocaust was of brief duration, and it was followed by the "Promised Land" of the fully realized modern age. Maybaum cites the prophet Isaiah to make his point:

"For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer" (Isa. 54:7-8).

Nevertheless, we question whether many will follow Maybaum in regarding the events of 1933-45 as "a small moment" or the contemporary world as an example of God's "everlasting kindness." In the opinion of many scholars, including us, the so-called Final Solution was a consequence rather than a cause of the modernization of Europe's economy and society. In contrast to Maybaum, who interpreted the Holocaust as the last gasp of medievalism, they have maintained that it was a thoroughly modern enterprise in its methods and spirit. It is thus possible to credit Maybaum with the courage involved in following his theological position to its logical conclusion without finding his position credible.

Richard L. Rubenstein had not heard of Maybaum until many years after the 1966 publication of *After Auschwitz*. Had he read Maybaum before writing *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein would certainly have referred to his writings as shedding light on why he was compelled to reject the traditional biblical God of covenant and election. As we shall see, there has been considerable development in Rubenstein's theological position, especially since 1976. Rubenstein's theologically controversial stand in 1966 was triggered not by intellectual speculation but by a crucial encounter with a German clergyman. In August 1961 Rubenstein had scheduled a research trip to West Germany to begin on Sunday, 13 August. He was spending that summer in the Netherlands. On 13 August the wall was hastily erected between East and West Berlin creating a major international crisis. Rubenstein decided to postpone the trip until Tuesday, 15 August. When he arrived in Bonn, the West German capital, he was invited by his hosts, the *Bundespresseamt*, the Press and Information Office of the Federal Republic, to fly immediately to Berlin to view the crisis firsthand. He accepted.

When Rubenstein arrived in Berlin, many people there were fearful that the Third World War was about to erupt. Rubenstein attended a mass rally of two hundred and fifty thousand West Berliners in the Rathaus (City Hall) Square which was addressed by Willy Brandt, then mayor of West Berlin and later chancellor of the German Federal Republic. He also spent a day in East Berlin and observed a tense, fearful city on military alert. Wherever he went in East or West Berlin, the atmosphere was apocalyptic in the true sense of the word. People were afraid that nuclear war might break out, bringing the world to an end.

In that atmosphere, Rubenstein was invited to interview Heinrich Grüber, dean of the Evangelical Church in East and West Berlin, at his home in the West Berlin suburb of Dahlem. The meeting was set for 4:30 P.M. on Thursday, 17 August. As Rubenstein entered Grüber's home, a column of American tanks noisily rumbled by on the street outside. Rubenstein and Grüber discussed many issues. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the Holocaust. During World War II, Grüber had attempted to rescue baptized Jews whose treatment by the Nazis was no different than that meted out to other Jews. He also opposed the antisemitic program of the Nazis and was incarcerated for three years in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In the spring of 1961, Grüber was the only German to testify at the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the leading National Socialist architects of the Holocaust.

In his conversation with Rubenstein, Grüber affirmed a biblical faith in the God-who-acts-in-history and in the covenant between God and Israel. Like Maybaum, Grüber believed that the Holocaust was God's doing. He, too, likened Hitler to Nebuchadrezzar as one of the "rods of God's anger." When Grüber asserted that Israel was God's chosen people and that nothing could happen to the Jews save that which God intended, Rubenstein asked him: "Was it God's will that Hitler destroyed the Jews?" Grüber replied by quoting from the Psalms: "For thy sake are we slain all the day long" (Ps. 44:22). He then continued: "For some reason, it was part of God's plan that the Jews died. God demands our death daily. He is the Lord. He is the Master; all is in His keeping and ordering."

Grüber had no doubt that Hitler's actions were immoral and that Hitler would be punished. He also had no doubt that those actions ceased to be immoral when God was the perpetrator: "At different times God uses different people as His whip against His own people, the Jews, but those whom He uses will be punished far worse than the people of the Lord."²⁴ Rubenstein did not have time to ask Grüber to specify why the Jews were being punished, but there is no reason to doubt that Grüber regarded Jewish misfortune as Christian thinkers have throughout most of the history of that tradition. In fact, Grüber's colleagues in the German Evangelical Church meeting in Darmstadt in 1948 asserted that the Holocaust was a divine punishment visited upon the Jews and called upon the Jews to cease their rejection and continuing crucifixion of Jesus Christ.²⁵ If such pronouncements are heard no longer, it remains significant that, three years after the end of World War II, the leaders of the Evangelical Church were telling the Jews that they had nobody to blame but themselves for the Holocaust and that their only possible hope was to cease to be Jews and become Christians.

Rubenstein has since wondered whether his own views on God and the Holocaust would have changed as much as they did as a result of meeting Grüber had a non-German member of the clergy, speaking in a less crisis-ridden moment and in a less apocalyptic setting than the divided former capital of the Third

Reich, offered him the same interpretation of the Holocaust. He has concluded that dramatic circumstances surrounding his encounter with Grüber and the fact that Grüber was a clergyman, albeit one who had endured great hardship because of his opposition to National Socialism, were important components in changing his opinions on the subject. Above all, the Berlin setting reminded Rubenstein that the question was more than an abstract speculation with little practical consequence in people's lives.

Rubenstein has since referred to Grüber as a "straight arrow," by which he sought to convey his impression that Grüber was a man with an uncompromising sense of religious vocation. When the German theologians met at Darmstadt in 1948, some may have been motivated by anti-Jewish hostility and residual sympathy for National Socialism. That was not the case with Grüber. Like Maybaum, he took his faith in the God-who-acts-in-history with utmost seriousness. He knew what such a faith entailed. He did not attempt to avoid its logical consequences. If God acts in history, it was clear to Grüber that God alone was the ultimate Author of the Holocaust. Grüber had the courage of his convictions, whether he was expressing his opposition to National Socialism during the Third Reich or affirming his belief in the God of the Bible.

There was, however, an important difference between Grüber and Maybaum. Ironically, the rabbi had used the crucifixion as his model for understanding the Holocaust whereas Grüber has used the prophetic-Deuteronomic model of the God of the covenant as his model. Grüber saw the Jews as *guilty* offenders against God's Law. In fairness to him, he had a similar view of his own people. Maybaum could neither challenge God's sovereignty nor imagine any crime which would justify extermination at the hands of the Nazis, yet he had no doubt about the innocence of the victims. This compelled him to turn either to the model of the Suffering Servant or to the crucifixion. Maybaum regarded the Jews as innocent sacrificial victims.

When Rubenstein left Grüber's home, something in him had changed permanently and decisively. Undoubtedly, the change had been gestating for a very long time. Nevertheless, the encounter with Grüber convinced him that he could no longer avoid the issue of God and the Holocaust. There was little Grüber had said about Jewish misfortune that had not been spoken by the prophets and rabbis in the past. Rubenstein understood that Grüber was a man of courage and good will who, because of his beliefs, could not have offered any other opinion. Since Grüber's position was essentially in harmony with Scripture, Rubenstein was convinced that an inescapable difficulty was involved in the position of both Grüber and traditional Judaism. In 1966 he expressed his new convictions:

I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps. I am amazed at the silence of contemporary Jewish theologians on this most crucial and agonizing of all Jewish issues. How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional

Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, anti-human explosion of all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept. I do not think that the full impact of Auschwitz has yet been felt in Jewish theology or Jewish life. Great religious revolutions have their own period of gestation. No man knows when the full impact of Auschwitz will be felt, but no religious community can endure so hideous a wounding without undergoing vast inner disorders.²⁶

Because of his position, Rubenstein has often been accused of atheism. It is important to note that on no occasion has he denied the existence of God, although he has rejected the image of God presented in the Old and New Testaments, and he has insisted that "we live in the time of the death of God." What he meant is succinctly stated in the following passage:

No man can really say that God is dead. How can we know that? Nevertheless, I am compelled to say that we live in the time of the "death of God." *This is more a statement about man and his culture than about God.* The death of God is a cultural fact. Buber felt this. He spoke of the eclipse of God. I can understand his reluctance to use the more explicitly Christian terminology. I am compelled to utilize it because of my conviction that the time which Nietzsche's madman said was too far off has come upon us. There is no way around Nietzsche. Had I lived in another time or another culture, I might have found some other vocabulary to express my meanings. I am, however, a religious existentialist after Nietzsche and after Auschwitz. When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources. After Auschwitz, what else can a Jew say about God?²⁷

Today, Rubenstein considers his position more akin to mystical religion, both Eastern and Western, than to existentialism. Moreover, he no longer regards the cosmos as "cold, silent, unfeeling." At the very least, insofar as humanity is a part of the cosmos and is capable of love as well as hate, it cannot be said that the cosmos is entirely cold and silent. Rubenstein's response in *After Auschwitz* must be seen as the expression of a highly assimilated Jew who, because of the Holocaust, had committed himself to the defense of his inherited religious tradition and then, triggered by his Berlin encounter with Grüber, found that he could no longer believe either in the God of that tradition or in the tradition's crucial doctrines of covenant and election. Given both his loss of faith and the events of World War II which brought it about, his view of existence was understandably bleak at the time. Today, Rubenstein would balance the elements of creativeness and love in the cosmos somewhat more evenly with those of destruction and hate than he was prepared to do in 1966. What has not changed is

his affirmation of a view of God quite different from the mainstream view of biblical and rabbinic Judaism and his rejection of the notion that the Jews are in any sense a people either chosen or rejected by God. On the contrary, he holds that the Jews are a people like any other whose religion and culture were shaped so as to make it possible for them to cope with their very distinctive history and location among the peoples of the world. Put differently, Rubenstein has consistently denied that the existence of the Jewish people has any divinely bestowed superordinate significance whatsoever.

Rubenstein's unqualified rejection of the biblical God and the doctrine of the chosen people was a step of extraordinary seriousness for a Jewish theologian. Later his critics were to ask whether anyone who accepted Rubenstein's views had any reason for remaining Jewish. For millennia the literature and the liturgy of normative Judaism have been saturated with the idea that God had chosen Israel from among all the nations of the world and that Jews were under a divinely sanctioned obligation to obey the divinely ordained laws and traditions of the Torah. Why, it was asked, should anyone keep the Sabbath, circumcise male offspring, marry within the Jewish community, or obey the dietary laws if the God of the Bible did not exist?

Briefly stated, Rubenstein's early response was that the demise of Judaism's theological validation did not entail an end to the psychological or sociological functions the religion fulfilled. He relied heavily on the fact that, save for the case of conversion, entrance into Judaism is a matter of birth rather than choice and that even conversion to Christianity does not cancel Jewish identity. There is an ethnic component to Jewish identity which persists long after the loss of Jewish faith. Rubenstein was aware of the fact that many Jews had in fact experienced their own loss of faith but remained Jews nevertheless. He argued that religion is not only a system of belief but a system of shared rituals, customs, and memories by which members of a community cope with or celebrate the moments of crisis in their own lives or the life of the community. He thus maintained that religion is not so much dependent upon belief as upon practices related to the life cycle. For example, no matter how tenuous the faith of the average Jew or Christian, he or she would normally find their inherited traditions the most suitable vehicles for consecrating such events as the birth of a child or a marriage. In a crisis such as the death of a parent, spouse, or child, the need to turn to the religious ways of one's inherited tradition would be even more urgent. Rubenstein wrote:

Though I believe that a void stands where once we experienced God's presence, I do not think Judaism has lost its meaning or its power. I do not believe that a theistic God is necessary for Jewish religious life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written that our problem is how to speak of God in an age of no religion. I believe that our problem is how to speak of religion in an age of no God. I have suggested that Judaism is the way in which we share the decisive times and crises of life

through the traditions of our inherited community. The need for that sharing is not diminished in the time of the death of God. We no longer believe in the God who has the power to annul the tragic necessities of existence; the need religiously to share that existence remains.²⁸

In rejecting the biblical image of God, Rubenstein expressed his belief in the immanence rather than the transcendence of Deity. The Bible depicts God as transcending the created world. But there is another view of God, one in which God is thought to be immanent in the cosmos, which in turn is regarded as alive and capable of thought, reflection, and feeling. In this view, the cosmos in all its multiplicity is none other than the expression of the single unified and unifying Source and Ground we name as God. Moreover, if human beings are an integral part of the cosmos, which in turn is an expression of the Divine Ground, then Deity is capable of thought, reflection, and feeling, at least in its human manifestation. This view affirms that human thought and feeling are expressions of divine thought and feeling. We cannot enter into details on this complicated subject. It is, however, relevant to note that this view of God has been expressed in at least two major modes of religious sensibility in the West, the nature paganism of the prebiblical world and religious mysticism. Having rejected the biblical God and not God in essence, largely because of his profound disagreement with the doctrine of the chosen people, it is not surprising that Rubenstein turned to both paganism and mysticism in order to find an alternative basis for religious life.

Rubenstein's turn to nature paganism paralleled the return of the remnant of the Jewish people that survived the Holocaust to their ancestral homeland, and the rebirth of an independent Jewish state for the first time since the Judeo-Roman wars of the first and second centuries. A people who are at home, argued Rubenstein, live a very different kind of life than does a band of wandering strangers. Citing the traditional Jewish liturgy, he pointed out that during the whole period of their wanderings, the vast majority of the Jewish people had prayed that they might be restored to the land of their origin. Wherever they dwelt in the Diaspora, their lives and their safety were wholly dependent upon the tolerance of others. During the two thousand years of the Diaspora, Jewish history always had a goal: to return to the homeland from which the Jews had been exiled. That goal was given expression in prayers, originally written in the aftermath of the Judeo-Roman Wars, and still recited three times daily in the traditional liturgy:

Sound the great horn for our freedom; raise the ensign to gather our exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who gatherest the dispersed of thy people. . . .

And to Jerusalem, thy city, return in mercy, and dwell therein as thou hast spoken; rebuild it soon in our days as an everlasting building, and speedily set up therein the throne of David. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who rebuildest Jerusalem.²⁹

With his nineteenth-century Reform Jewish ideas about the "mission of Israel," Maybaum rejected the spirit of these prayers and argued that the Diaspora was "progress" and an integral part of God's plan for humanity. Rubenstein was closer to Jewish tradition in identifying the Diaspora as a form of communal alienation. He further pointed out that the Holocaust had demonstrated how hazardous it was for any people to be utterly dependent for their security on a majority that regarded them as religiously and culturally alien, especially in times of stress.

If Jewish history had as its goal return to the land of Israel, Rubenstein maintained that Jewish history had, at least in principle, come to an end when that goal was attained and a Jewish state was established in Israel. It may have made sense, Rubenstein argued, to worship a God of history while Jewish history was still unfulfilled, that is, while Jews still envisioned the goal of their history as a return to Israel in the distant future. The Jewish situation changed radically when the goal was reached. Not only had Jewish history come to an end, but after Auschwitz the God of history was no longer credible: Rubenstein further argued that, whenever in the biblical period the Jewish people had felt at home in their land, they turned to the earth gods of Canaan. Since Rubenstein was not a polytheist, he argued that after Auschwitz and the return to Israel, the God of nature, or more precisely the God manifested in and through nature was the God to whom the Jews would turn in place of the God of history, especially in Israel. This was consistent with his view that religion was essentially the way we share the crisis moments, that is, the turning points, of both the life cycle and the calendar. Having rejected the biblical God of history, Rubenstein turned to a modified form of Canaanite nature paganism.

Another strand in Rubenstein's post-Holocaust view of God was mystical religion. As the years passed, it became predominant. His earlier paganism, which was inextricably linked to the land of Israel, receded in importance even as Israel itself became less important in his own thinking. He had argued that when the Jewish people were at home in their own land, they had turned to the nature gods of the land. He came to see that the majority of the world's Jews were not "at home" in Israel. Even those who lived there were constantly mindful that the fragile state and its people could be annihilated were the Arabs to win a single decisive wartime victory. The majority of those outside of Israel had no desire to settle there. Clearly, the "goal" of Jewish history had not been reached, and Jewish history was not at an end. Although he remained unable to accept the biblical version of the God of history, he became convinced that most religious Jews eventually would, *even if that meant regarding Auschwitz as divine punishment*.

He also saw that the Jewish people in Israel had little interest in nature paganism. To the extent that they ceased to accept the biblical God of history, they became *secular* Jews rather than pagan. That distinction is fundamental. Secu-

larism is a dialectical outcome of the negation of biblical religion. By asserting that God is the only sacred reality and that both the human and the natural orders are dependent creations, biblical religion fostered a development sociologists have called *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world). Whereas the ancient nature pagans saw divinity/ies immanent in both the natural and human orders, biblical religion ascribed divinity to God alone. When faith in the biblical God was lost, men and women were left to dwell in a wholly godless universe. It was that phenomenon rather than nature paganism to which Rubenstein was giving expression when he wrote that "we stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos." For the pagan, and for Rubenstein at a later period, the cosmos is neither cold nor unfeeling. On the contrary, it is full of life. Moreover, the source of that life is Divine Life. Rubenstein's earlier emphasis on the coldness and silence of the cosmos had been partly a response to the fate of the victims of the Holocaust. It was also an expression of the secular view of the nature of things, which is a likely consequence of rejecting the biblical view. Still, the mystical view of God was already present in *After Auschwitz*. It was to deepen as Rubenstein's life experiences deepened and most especially as he came into contact with the civilizations of Asia and their religions. Indeed, today Rubenstein's mystical theology has certain affinities with Buddhism as well as with elements in Hegel, although the germ of his current position was already present in his earlier writings:

I believe there is a conception of God . . . which remains meaningful after the death of the God-who-acts-in-history. It is a very old conception of God with deep roots in both Western and Oriental mysticism. According to this conception, God is spoken of as the *Holy Nothingness*. When God is thus designated, he is conceived of as the ground and source of all existence. To speak of God as the *Holy Nothingness* is not to suggest that he is a void. On the contrary, he is an indivisible *plenum* so rich that all existence derives from his very essence. God as the *Nothing* is not absence of being but superfluity of being.

Why then use the term *Nothingness*? Use of the term rests in part upon a very ancient observation that all definition of finite entities involves negation. The infinite God, the ground of all finite beings, cannot be defined. The infinite God is therefore in no sense a thing bearing any resemblance to the finite beings of the empirical world. The infinite God is nothing. At times, mystics also spoke of God in similar terms as the *Urgrund*, the primary ground, the dark unnameable abyss out of which the empirical world has come.

At first glance, these ideas may seem like little more than word play. Nevertheless, wise men of all the major religious traditions have expressed themselves in almost identical images when they have attempted to communicate the mystery of divinity. It is also helpful to note that whoever believes God is the source or ground of being usually believes that human personality is coterminous with the life of the human body. Death may be entrance into eternal life, the perfect life of God; death may also end pain, craving, and suffering, but it involves the dissolution and disappearance of individual identity. . . .

Perhaps the best available metaphor for the conception of God as the Holy

Nothingness is that God is the ocean and we are the waves. In some sense each wave has its moment in which it is distinguishable as a somewhat separate entity. Nevertheless, no wave is entirely distinct from the ocean which is its substantial ground.³⁰

In mysticism Rubenstein had found the God whom he could affirm after Auschwitz, yet as critics pointed out, there was little that is distinctively Jewish in Rubenstein's view. This did not trouble Rubenstein. As he matured, he was willing to accept the role of outsider to his own inherited tradition. He was unwilling either to reject the inheritance or to affirm its truth. He did insist that in the past it had enabled most Jews to cope with their very difficult life situation as eternal strangers in the Christian and Moslem worlds. Yet, he also saw the Jewish community in America rapidly diminishing in number as a result of intermarriage. He suspected that the unprecedented rate of intermarriage was in fact a delayed response to the Holocaust of those who no longer believed, as Jews once had, that Judaism was worth dying for.

Recently, Rubenstein wrote that, outside of Israel, the Jewish religious mainstream will consist primarily of that relatively small remnant of the Jewish people who continue to affirm faith in the God of history and the election of Israel. He agreed with his critics that without such a faith there is simply no reason for Jews to remain eternal strangers in the predominantly Christian world in which they live.³¹ In his lectures, he has also observed that while relatively few Jews join that world through baptism, many Jews facilitate their children's entry into the Christian world by marrying Christian partners. This, too, can be seen as an important Jewish response to the Holocaust. The Holocaust had finally revealed the full dimensions of hazard involved in being permanent strangers in the modern world. In the long run, only those who firmly believe that in remaining strangers in a Christian world they have been chosen by God to serve God are likely to have the courage to remain Jewish.

Mending the World

The first theological response to the Holocaust to be received with widespread favor within the Jewish community was that of Emil L. Fackenheim, a Reform rabbi and distinguished philosopher who left his native Germany in 1939 after imprisonment in the Nazi concentration camp at Sachsenhausen and who has spent the major portion of his career as a professor at the University of Toronto. Fackenheim's thinking about God and the Holocaust must be seen against the background of his fundamental religious position. Fackenheim's conviction is that both Judaism and Christianity affirm an "actual Divine Presence" that can and does manifest itself in the real world. This Presence is neither an intellectual hypothesis about God nor merely a subjective feeling on the part of the believer. It is the Presence *par excellence*, a Presence which is revealed in Scripture but which is not confined to it. Fackenheim has written that "in a genuine divine-

human encounter—if and when it occurs—Divinity is immediately present to the believer."³² Fackenheim also denied that the social sciences have any constructive role in comprehending the Presence. The Presence is a real, not an imaginary or projected, datum of the believer. The Presence can be met; it cannot be argued into or out of existence: Fackenheim's religious thought, including his reflections on the Holocaust, can thus be seen as an attempt to spell out the consequences for contemporary religious faith of the experience of the Divine Presence.

In any discussion of Fackenheim's thinking about the Holocaust, it is important to keep in mind that his position has evolved considerably as his own reflections on and knowledge of the Holocaust have deepened. Fackenheim has written that for more than twenty years he was convinced that the Holocaust was not a theological problem for Judaism. Judaism, he argued, was subject to no historical refutation until the time of the Messiah.³³ In the late sixties, he changed his mind: "Doubtless the greatest doctrinal change in my whole career came with the view that at least *Jewish* faith is, after all, *not absolutely* immune to *all* empirical events."³⁴ In a more recent book, Fackenheim elaborated on that change. He expressed agreement with Rabbi Irving Greenberg's observation that:

"The Holocaust poses the most radical counter-testimony to both Judaism and Christianity. . . . The cruelty and the killing raise the question whether even those who believe after such an event dare to talk about God who loves and cares without making a mockery of those who suffered."³⁵

Although there has been a tendency to view Fackenheim and Rubenstein as opposites, both men emphatically reject the idea that the Holocaust was a divine punishment. Moreover, Fackenheim is no more able to accept the doctrine of covenant and election as it is understood by Orthodox Jews or Christian fundamentalists than is Rubenstein. Fackenheim's affirmation of the Divine Presence is by no means identical to the traditional biblical-rabbinic God who rewards obedience to divine commandments and punishes disobedience. Like Rubenstein, Fackenheim has also rejected the idea that the victims were sacrificial offerings required by God, as Ignaz Maybaum has suggested. Additionally, Fackenheim's view of revelation is quite different from the traditional view. As early as 1951, Fackenheim distinguished the *presence* of Divinity from the explicit *content* of the covenant:

Revelation thus remains a mystery even while it is revealed; and every single word spoken by any prophet is inexorably shot through with human interpretation. Franz Rosenzweig observed: "Revelation is not identical with legislation; it is, in itself, nothing but the act of revelation itself. Immediately, it is its own sole content; properly speaking, it is completed with the word *vayyered* ('and He descended'); even *vayyadabber* ('and He spoke') is already human interpretation."

... Orthodoxy identifies the human—if ancient—interpretation of the revelation with the revelation itself; ... All interpretation of revelation is human.³⁶

The above passage does point to a fundamental difference between Fackenheim and Rubenstein. Rubenstein is a native-born American who has been more deeply and persistently influenced by conservative American Protestantism than Fackenheim. While in no sense rejecting the idea that the text of Scripture requires interpretation, Rubenstein does insist that when one is confronted with doctrinal issues as fundamental as God's relation to Israel, something close to the "plain meaning of Scripture" must be taken very seriously. If Scripture depicts God as demanding obedience from Israel on pain of dire punishment for disobedience, Rubenstein insists that the intent of the text cannot be softened because we are embarrassed by its modern application, for example, that Hitler is to be seen as a modern Nebuchadrezzar. Rubenstein would insist that we are faced with a choice that can neither be evaded nor glossed over: either the scriptural account of the covenant is accurate or, however we understand God, Divinity is not the God-who-acts-in-history-and-chooses-Israel. Rubenstein's Berlin meeting with Grüber was decisive because both men took the plain meaning of Scripture seriously. Grüber accepted its meaning. Rubenstein had too much respect for the integrity of the text to water down its meaning. Since he could not accept Hitler as a modern "rod of God's anger," he had no choice but to reject the biblical doctrine of covenant and election.

In reality, Fackenheim rejects the *literal* biblical doctrine no less than does Rubenstein, although he continues to employ scriptural imagery as if he were within the old tradition. This is neither dishonesty nor evasion on Fackenheim's part. It represents an honorable and creative but very different approach to religious faith, an approach that holds that all revelation is mediated by believers who stand in a particular historical context and who reflect that context in the way they understand and testify to their encounter with Divinity. As we shall see, for Fackenheim the context in which Jewish people experience the Divine Presence after Auschwitz is radically different than it was before.

In the past Fackenheim has maintained that God was present during the Holocaust, as indeed the Divine Presence had been encountered in all of the decisive moments of Israel's history. According to Fackenheim, God has been revealed in Jewish history through a series of "root experiences," events of such decisive character that they have influenced all subsequent periods of Jewish life. These "root experiences" include the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Both at the Red Sea and at Sinai, Israel experienced the saving activity of God which shaped Jewish character ever after. At Sinai the saving God was also experienced as a commanding God. Moreover, in every age Israel has recollected these "root experiences" not as events of a long-vanished past but as present assurances that "the past saving God saves still."³⁷

In addition to "root experiences," Fackenheim held that Israel experienced "epochmaking events" which have tested and challenged the "root experiences" with new and terrible situations. The destruction of Jerusalem, first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans, constituted such epochmaking events. In both cases, the test was met. In spite of the overwhelming nature of the tragedies, first the prophets and then the rabbis taught their community to hold fast to their faith in God's presence in history and to their faith that God would redeem Israel in the future as God had in the past. These were by no means the only epochmaking events. Throughout the long night of the Diaspora, Israel's "root experiences" were tested over and over again. In every instance, Israel reaffirmed its commitment to the "saving and commanding" God of the Exodus and Sinai.

The Holocaust was the most radically disorienting "epochmaking event" in all of Jewish history. Fackenheim insisted that the Jewish people must respond to this shattering challenge with a reaffirmation of God's presence in history. Fackenheim acknowledged that it is impossible to affirm God's saving presence at Auschwitz, but he did insist that while no "redeeming Voice" was heard at Auschwitz, a "commanding Voice" was heard and that the "commanding Voice" enunciated a "614th commandment." The new commandment is said to be that "the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another posthumous victory." Fackenheim has spelled out the content of the 614th commandment:

We are, first, commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, second, to remember in our very guts and bones the martyrs of the holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with Him or with belief in Him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler's victory at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other posthumous victories.³⁸

Probably no passage written by a contemporary Jewish thinker has become as well known as this. It struck a deep chord in Jews of every social level and religious commitment. Most of Fackenheim's writing is on a philosophic and theological level beyond the competence of the ordinary layperson. Not so this passage, which is largely responsible for the fact that Fackenheim's interpretation of the Holocaust has become the most influential within the Jewish community. A people that has endured catastrophic defeat is likely to see the survival of their community and its traditions as a supreme priority. Fackenheim gave expression to this aspiration, and he gave it the status of a divine command. Instead of questioning whether the traditional Jewish understanding of God could be maintained after Auschwitz, Fackenheim insisted that God's Pres-

ence to Israel, *even in the death camps*, was not to be challenged on pain of being considered a posthumous accomplice of the worst destroyer the Jews have ever known. The passion and the psychological power of this position are undeniable.

There are however, unfortunate consequences of Fackenheim's position. Those Jews "who denied or despaired" of the scriptural God have been cast in the role of accomplices of Hitler. Given the influence of Fackenheim's ideas within the Jewish community, that is a matter of considerable seriousness. Moreover, Fackenheim went so far as to suggest that those who did not hear the "commanding Voice" at Auschwitz were *willfully* rejecting God: "In my view, nothing less will do than to say that a commanding Voice speaks from Auschwitz, and that there are Jews who hear it and Jews who *stop their ears*."³⁹ Fackenheim either excluded or ignored the possibility that some Jews might honestly be unable to believe that God was in any way present at Auschwitz, no matter how metaphorically that idea was presented. To stop one's ears is, after all, a voluntary act. The practical consequence of Fackenheim's insistence that the "commanding Voice" had prohibited Jews to deny or despair of God has been to limit meaningful theological debate on the Holocaust within the Jewish community to those who could affirm, as did Fackenheim, that the God of Israel was somehow present at Auschwitz. Instead of seeing the Holocaust as the shared trauma which had shaken every Jew, and certainly every Jewish theologian, to the core of his or her being, the Jewish community has, following Fackenheim's lead, often treated theological dissenters as if they had handed Hitler "yet other posthumous victories." Fackenheim is not responsible for this development. Fackenheim's description of the commanding Voice gave expression to a deep-seated Jewish response to the Holocaust and defined the limits beyond which the Jewish community was apparently unwilling to tolerate theological debate.

In spite of its power, Fackenheim's position was not without difficulty even for the tradition he sought to defend. Given Fackenheim's conviction that revelation was inseparable from interpretation, it was not clear whether the commanding Voice was a real or a metaphorical event. There is now reason to believe that Fackenheim would reject both alternatives and would hold that the commandment would have been unreal without an affirmative Jewish response. It was, however, possible to inquire of those who took it as a real event whether anyone had actually heard the commanding Voice enunciate the 614th commandment during the Holocaust years. If language is to have any reliable meaning, *something* resembling the content described by Fackenheim had to be communicated to somebody who thereafter testified to his or her experience. Taken literally, there does not appear to be any credible evidence that anybody heard the 614th commandment, as indeed Fackenheim's recent description of how he came to write the passage would indicate. In *To Mend the World* (1982),

Fackenheim told his readers that after he had come to the conclusion that the Holocaust was a radical challenge to Jewish faith, "my first response was to formulate a '614th commandment.'" ⁴⁰ Fackenheim may have been like a prophet of old in receiving a "word" that insisted on communication, but the status of his commandment as commandment remains—perhaps unavoidably—ambiguous.

Fackenheim's critics also found considerable difficulty with his assertion that the commanding Voice had enjoined Jews to "survive as Jews." In the case of traditional Jews, no such commandment was necessary. They have always believed that Jewish religious survival was a divine imperative. They had no need of an Auschwitz to receive such an injunction. In the case of secularized Jews, the commandment appeared to be a case of pedagogic overkill. It hardly seemed likely that even a jealous God would require the annihilation of six million Jews as the occasion for a commandment forbidding Jews to permit the demise of their tradition.

Perhaps the most questionable aspect of the "614th commandment" was the injunction not to deny or despair of God lest Hitler be given "yet other posthumous victories." Here Fackenheim confronted the fundamental issue of Holocaust theology, but whereas other theologians attempted, each in his or her own way, to offer a view of God that was not at odds with the empirical evidence of history, Fackenheim told his readers what God has commanded.

Does this mean that Fackenheim perpetrated a fiction in order to maintain the theological integrity of his reading of Judaism? Given Fackenheim's faith in the Divine Presence, there was simply no way he could have thought of God as absent from Auschwitz. It was impossible to speak of a saving Presence at Auschwitz. Yet, utter defeat and annihilation could not be the last word. A way out of the ashes had to be found. The "614th commandment" expressed what most religious Jews regard as their sacred obligation in response to the Holocaust. In the language of Jewish faith that response could most appropriately be communicated in the imagery of the commandments. Fackenheim's 614th commandment is religiously and existentially problematic. That, however, is beside the point. *It is perhaps best to see Fackenheim's 614th commandment as a cri de coeur transmuted into the language of the sacred.* That would at least help to explain why it has touched so many Jews so deeply.

In *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim returned to the problem of the Holocaust as a radical "counter-testimony" to religious faith. Although he did not reject the notion of a commanding Voice at Auschwitz, his response to the Holocaust had lost the dogmatic edge it seemed to have a decade earlier. More than ever he emphasized the fact that in every major institution and in every dimension of human experience, the Holocaust was not a "relapse into barbarism" but "a total rupture" with the previously accepted values of Judaism, Christianity, and Western philosophy. His view is largely in accord with that of George M. Kren

and Leon Rappoport, who have written that the Holocaust is a crisis in human behavior of such dimensions that all of the guidance mechanisms of Western society, "institutions of law and religion and education," proved impotent in meeting it.⁴¹ Fackenheim has added that not only did these institutions fail to respond to the crisis but in the ensuing years they have largely taken the path of escapism in treating the Holocaust as if it were an unfortunate incident which requires neither self-examination nor serious inquiry into how to prevent its repetition. Fackenheim insisted that there cannot be even the beginning of a mending of the rupture unless the full measure of the catastrophe is understood.

Fackenheim therefore turned his attention to the question of how the mending and healing process could begin. He used a term taken from the tradition of Jewish mysticism, *Tikkun*, to mend or restore, to denote the process. In the beginning of his book Fackenheim stated the nature of his quest: "But if the Holocaust is a *unique* and *radical* 'counter-testimony' to Judaism and Christianity . . . how can there be a "commandment" to resist its destructive implications, to say nothing of the will and the strength to obey it?"⁴² In no case could the mending take place solely in the "sphere of thought." The rupture took place in the sphere of life; and it is in that sphere that *Tikkun* was necessary. Fackenheim did not regard thought and life as opposed. He did, however, regard life as the prior category in the present crisis.

In the case of Jews and Judaism, the creation of the state of Israel "on the heels of the Holocaust" was the most authentic Jewish response to the National Socialist "logic of destruction" that came to full expression in the Holocaust. That "logic of destruction" was totally different from all previous attempts of one people to exterminate another. Following Hitler's lead, the National Socialists regarded the Jews as vermin and bacilli, rather than human beings, and were determined to murder them, wherever in the world they were to be found. They were not, however, content with murder. They created a "logic of destruction" in which technical intelligence, planning, and rationality were employed in the death-camp universe to bring about, first, the most extreme form of Jewish self-loathing and then mass Jewish *self-destruction*.

Terrence Des Pres has identified this process as "excremental assault."⁴³ For example, with their penchant for order, the Germans insisted on severely restricting the time and the place at which the prisoners could eliminate their waste. Going to the toilet at any other time was punished by vicious beatings and death. At the same time, the available toilet facilities were hopelessly inadequate. One camp section at Auschwitz had only a single latrine for more than thirty thousand female prisoners.⁴⁴ In addition, the soup that was the prisoners' principal fare made many ill with severe diarrhea and dysentery. Unable to control their bowels, they were compelled to risk severe beatings or death by "illegally" going to the toilet. Alternatively, they evacuated in their own utensils or clothing. The "excremental assault" actually began when the Jews were first

herded like animals into cattle cars and transported to the camps. Forced to stand during the seemingly endless journey, it was often impossible for the victims to avoid vomiting, defecating, or urinating where they stood.

As Des Pres and others have pointed out, the whole system had the deliberate purpose of filling prisoners with such deep self-contempt that they no longer had any wish to survive. As a result, many of the victims were transformed into a new kind of being, the *Muselmann*. Fackenheim cites Primo Levi's description of the process:

On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selection or from death by exhaustion. 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 labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty really to suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death.⁴⁵

According to Fackenheim, the most original and characteristic product of the Third Reich was the *Muselmann*, the person who is dead while alive and whose death is no longer a human death. The "destructive logic" of the system operated inexorably to mass produce those worked to death into *Muselmänner* before they expired. Moreover, the power equation was such that no victim stood much chance of successfully resisting the National Socialist machine, which aimed to rule the world and did in fact rule Europe during the war.

Amazingly, there was resistance, and it is in that resistance that Fackenheim finds both the Jewish religious response to Auschwitz and the beginning of the Jewish *Tikkun*. The first response occurred when some camp inmates resisted the "logic of destruction" and prevented themselves from becoming *Muselmänner*. Resistance also took the form of pregnant mothers in the camps refusing to abort their pregnancies, hoping against hope that their children would survive and frustrate the National Socialist plan to eradicate every last Jew. It took other forms as well: Jewish partisans took to the woods to fight the Nazis in spite of the fact that Polish partisans were often as determined to destroy them as were the Germans; Hasidic Jews prayed when forbidden to pray; young Jews who could have fled to the woods elected instead to remain in the ghettos with their families in the hope of giving them some protection. Fackenheim acknowledges that, when measured against the success of the machine of destruction, the number who resisted was small. That, however, was not the fundamental issue. What was decisive was that there were some who did resist against hopeless odds. By their acts they demonstrated that the "logic of destruction" could be overcome.

Fackenheim argues that it is not enough to grasp the Holocaust universe conceptually. As a trained philosopher, he understands that when thought completes its work of philosophic comprehension, the thinker is left with a peculiar sense of tranquillity not unlike that felt by an audience after witnessing a Greek tragedy. For example, after contemplating the whole course of human history, with its record of crime, slaughter, and horror, Hegel was able to write in utter calm and philosophical detachment: "The wounds of the spirit heal and leave no scars behind."⁴⁶ Hegel exhibits a similar tranquillity when contemplating the presence of evil in history:

In order to justify the course of history, we must try to understand the role of evil in the light of the absolute sovereignty of reason. We are dealing here with the category of the negative, as already mentioned, and we cannot fail to notice how all that is finest and noblest in history is immolated upon its altar. Reason cannot stop to consider the injuries sustained by single individuals, for particular ends are submerged in the universal ends.⁴⁷

For such philosophers, to comprehend is both to transcend in thought and to forgive. Like the audience at a Greek tragedy, they contemplate the tale of strife secure in the knowledge that it was right that things were the way they were.

Contemplation of the Holocaust leaves us with no comparable tranquillity. The Holocaust cannot be transcended in thought. A universe that systematically aims to create *Muselmänner* is radically different from that of the tragic hero. Fackenheim therefore insists that it is not enough to understand the Holocaust intellectually, theologically, philosophically, or historically. Instead, the Holocaust universe must be *resisted* in "flesh-and-blood-action and life." Moreover, once an enterprise like the Holocaust has proven its success, everything that follows is changed. State power becomes infinitely more threatening. Antisemitism takes on a permanently genocidal character. Civilization itself now includes death camps and *Muselmänner* among its material and spiritual products. Those who understand something of what took place in the Holocaust are no longer able to view European civilization without seeing rationally organized, systematized "excremental assault" as one of its components. It is, for example, difficult for a knowledgeable visitor to look at the handsome uniform of a Paris policeman without recalling that it was men wearing the same uniform, not the SS, who rounded up Paris's Jews to form the cattle car trip to Auschwitz that started on the French National Railroads. Nor can one forget that papers on sadistically abusive experiments on death camp victims were read without protest at meetings of German medical societies during the war. The Holocaust has revealed new dimensions in the practice of medicine. As a result, resistance to the Holocaust universe and *Tikkun* become never-ending imperatives. It is in that sense that Fackenheim can still speak of a commanding voice at Auschwitz.

Fackenheim stresses that it is only as a consequence of the *deed* of resistance that resisting *thought* can come to have any meaning. Such resistance is an

“ontological category.” The Holocaust, he argues, was both an ordered and disordering universe designed to leave its victims with no possibility of re-orientation so that they might escape the fate of becoming *Muselmänner* and passing from the world of the living dead to death itself. The first act of resistance was the simple decision, against all odds, to survive and, if the worst came, to die the death of a human being. The second was to grasp the nature of the “logic of destruction.” This is a difficult enterprise because there is always the danger, as we have seen with Hegel, that what is understood will be accepted, at least in thought. Fackenheim therefore insists that such thought must be accompanied by active resistance.

In the case of those victims who found the courage to resist, thought and action were intertwined. As Fackenheim has stated, “Their *recognition* of the Nazi logic of destruction *helped produce resistance* to it—a life-and-death struggle that went on day and night.”⁴⁸ In addition, more was involved than mere self-protection. As the Holocaust was a *novum* in human history, *this* resistance was also a *novum*. It was both a way of being and a way of thought. During the Holocaust, Fackenheim asserts, authentic thought was to be found neither in the greatest of philosophers, who neither understood Nazism nor were troubled by the death camps, nor within the circles of Europe’s religious leaders. Authentic thought was actual only among the resisting victims.

One of those resisting victims was a Polish Catholic noblewoman, Pelagia Lewinska, who was an Auschwitz inmate. Fackenheim cites her memoir in which she told of her resistance:

At the outset the living places, the ditches, the mud, the piles of excrement behind the blocks, had appalled me with their horrible filth. . . . And then I saw the light! I saw that it was not a question of disorder or lack of organization but that, on the contrary, a very thoroughly considered conscious idea was in the back of the camp’s existence. They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abase us, to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of humanity . . . to fill us with horror and contempt toward ourselves and our fellows.

. . . From the instant when I grasped the motivating principle . . . it was as if I had been awakened from a dream. . . . *I felt under orders to live.* . . . And if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being, I would hold on to my dignity. I was not going to become the contemptible, disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be. . . . And a terrible struggle began which went on day and night.⁴⁹

This testimony is of great importance to Fackenheim. Lewinska felt under orders to resist and to survive. Fackenheim interprets her experience as evidence of the ontological dimension of resistance and of the “commanding Voice.” He acknowledges that Lewinska does not tell us who gave her the orders. He does, however, tell of other victims, religious Jews, who felt they were under the same orders and had no doubt that the orders came from God.

In previous eras, the ultimate testimony of fidelity a Jew could offer was *kid-*

dush ha-Shem, the sanctification of God's Holy Name that took place when he or she willingly accepted martyrdom rather than betray his or her religion. Fackenheim points out that such martyrdom no longer made sense in the Holocaust. There was no such sanctification in the pathetic death of *Muselmänner*. To die under any circumstance was to give the German death machine what it sought of all Jews. Thus, resistance embodied a new kind of sanctification, *kiddush ha-hayyim*, the sanctification of life. Any refusal to die and outlive the infernal process became holy, not only for the individual survivors who were saved but for the religious tradition National Socialism sought to destroy.

Fackenheim's answer to the question, "Who heard the commanding Voice at Auschwitz?" is this: all who felt "under orders" to survive, resist, and overcome the "logic of destruction." Nevertheless, in *To Mend the World* he does not seek to defend the traditional Judaism of covenant and election, reward and punishment. He is no longer interested in reducing the dissonance between the "countertestimony" of the Holocaust and the teachings of Judaism as was, for example, Ignaz Maybaum. On the contrary, he emphasizes the rupture between the pre-Holocaust and the post-Holocaust world. He insists that the Holocaust is not a "relapse into barbarism" but a "total rupture." Citing Martin Buber, Fackenheim frankly acknowledges, that in the aftermath of the Holocaust "our 'estrangement from God' has become so 'cruel' that, even if He were to speak to us, we have no way of understanding how to 'recognize' him."⁵⁰

Fackenheim offers a number of examples of the rupture. We cite two. Even after abandoning his earlier enthusiasm for National Socialism, Martin Heidegger, arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, was unable to be seriously concerned with the fact that *his* nation had introduced those prototypically modern phenomena, the death camps and the *Muselmänner*, into the heart of Europe. Similarly, although the Vatican was undoubtedly one of the world's best informed institutions during the war, the Pope was unable to utter a single word *explicitly* condemning the destruction process or warning Catholics of the danger to their souls of participation in the process.

Nevertheless, Fackenheim argues, the rupture cannot, must not be the last word. What has been broken must be mended by acts of *Tikkun*. In the past Jewish mysticism audaciously described the disasters experienced by the Jewish people as catastrophes within the very substance of Divinity. Thus, when the Jewish people were driven into exile in consequence of the Judeo-Roman Wars of ancient times, the Kabbalistic tradition described God's Holy Presence, the *Shekhinah*, as also going into exile. The seventeenth-century mystic, Isaac Luria, described the creation of the universe as a consequence of a cosmic rupture in the Divine Ground which he called the "breaking of the vessels." This was a Kabbalistic metaphor for the Jewish experience of being out of place and homeless at a particularly dark hour in Israel's history.

The mystics sought to mend the earthly rupture which had rendered the Jew

homeless and the heavenly rupture which, so to speak, had made God a stranger to God's self. They did so by special prayers and rituals, which they regarded as mystical acts of *Tikkun*. Today, Fackenheim contends, new acts of *Tikkun* are necessary to mend the ruptured world. Such acts may prove impossible. Under the best circumstances, they are likely to be only fragmentary. Still, we have reason to hope in their partial success because contemporary acts of *Tikkun* were already accomplished during the Holocaust years. Fackenheim cites the example of Dr. Kurt Huber, the Munich professor of philosophy who publicly protested the acts of the National Socialist regime as a member of the "White Rose" and, as a result, was sentenced to death on 19 April 1943 by the court of Roland Freisler, Germany's most notorious Nazi judge. Huber could easily have enjoyed the relatively comfortable life of a philosophy professor. All he had to do was to keep his opinions to himself. Instead, invoking the ideals of Kant and Fichte, he willingly took upon himself the role of philosophic martyr. Huber refused to restrict his opposition to the realm of thought. He chose to unite thought and action. While Martin Heidegger was Germany's greatest "thinker," Huber took the path of Socrates and became a martyr.

Fackenheim cites another act of *Tikkun*, that of Bernhard Lichtenberg, canon of Berlin's St. Hedwig's Cathedral. On 10 November 1938, the day of *Kristallnacht*, Canon Lichtenberg beheld the monumental pogrom initiated by the Nazis, went to his church, and prayed publicly for the Jews and concentration camp prisoners. He continued to do so daily until he was arrested on 23 October 1941. When brought to trial, he testified that he was scandalized by the vandalism in an ordered state and felt that the only thing that he could do to help would be to pray for the Jews. He said that, if freed, he would continue to do so. While in prison he resolved upon release to join Berlin's Jews, who had been shipped to the Polish city of Lodz. He never got the chance. He died on the way to Dachau. Fackenheim compares the public prayer and martyrdom of Canon Lichtenberg with the silence of Pope Pius XII. He sees Lichtenberg's martyrdom as an act of *Tikkun*. As with Huber, all that Lichtenberg required for safety was silence. In both instances, the "logic of destruction" was resisted not by theory but by utterly selfless action.

Among the first Jewish acts of *Tikkun* were the astonishing acts of resistance to total excremental assault during the Holocaust. The most profound response to the Holocaust was the collective decision of the survivors to make their way from the graveyard of Europe to the one place where Jews could be at home. Fackenheim sees the establishment of the state of Israel as the fundamental Jewish act of *Tikkun*. It is, he admits, an incomplete and an endangered *Tikkun*. Nevertheless, it constitutes a profound attempt to overcome the Holocaust, not in theory or by a return to the grudging sufferance of the Christian world, but by the creation of conditions in which, for the first time in two thousand years, Jews have assumed responsibility for their own future, both biologically and

spiritually. Moreover, Fackenheim argues, the emergence of the state of Israel is the indispensable precondition of a "post-Holocaust *Tikkun* of Jewish-Gentile relations." During the Holocaust, Jewish powerlessness was such that their survival was wholly dependent upon non-Jews. According to Fackenheim, "After the Holocaust, the Jewish people owe the whole world the duty of not encouraging its vices—in the case of the wicked, murderous instincts, in the case of the good people, indifference mixed with hypocrisy—by continuing to tolerate powerlessness."⁵¹

Implicit in Fackenheim's conception of the post-Holocaust Jewish *Tikkun* is a rejection of the Judaism of the Diaspora, if for no other reason than the obvious fact that in the Diaspora Jews remain dependent upon others for their survival. Only in Israel are they in control of a state possessed of the weapons with which they can defend themselves. Mindful of the total character of the rupture created by the Holocaust, Fackenheim declares that, although Jews continue to live in the *Galut*, the Diaspora, *Galut* Judaism may have been destroyed by the Holocaust, an opinion incidentally shared by Rubenstein. For both Fackenheim and Rubenstein, if the broken threads of Judaism are to be mended—and at this writing it is not clear that they can be—the mending can only take place in Israel. Moreover, this *Tikkun* will involve both religious and secular Jews, who are bound together by a common inheritance that includes not only the Holocaust but the Bible. Neither the secular nor the religious Jew would have found a home in Israel were it not for the Bible. The Holocaust may have driven them to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Only the Bible has the power to keep them there. Thus, in Israel and probably in Israel alone is there hope for the beginnings of a Jewish *Tikkun*.

It is noteworthy that the subtitle of *To Mend the World* is "Foundations of Future Jewish Thought." Fackenheim does not offer a complete theological response to the Holocaust or a new dogmatic foundation for post-Holocaust Judaism. He merely points the way and suggests the dimensions of the task. Fackenheim's religious journey has thus taken him from his personal encounter with the National Socialist "logic of destruction" in the land of his birth, including his own incarceration in Sachsenhausen, to a period in which he reacted to the total rupture of his world by attempting to find security in a posture of dogmatic and fideistic neo-Orthodoxy and then to his present position of openness, tentativeness, and awareness of how profound the rupture has been and how fragile and beset are our post-Holocaust resources for *Tikkun*. As most people mature, they tend to lose something of their physical and intellectual flexibility. That has not happened to Fackenheim, who has manifested an extraordinary capacity for self-criticism, insight, and growth in his awesome vocation.

A final word must be said about the richness of Fackenheim's thought. Because of our concern with the Holocaust, we have focused our attention on a single thread in his work, his explicit response to the Holocaust. We have been

unable to do justice to the richness of Fackenheim's thought which encompasses, among other disciplines, an authoritative knowledge of Western philosophy, especially German philosophy in the modern period, Jewish religious thought and philosophy, and modern European history. His knowledge has enabled him to examine with great lucidity the profound character of the modern crisis. Above all, it has enabled him to move reflection concerning the Holocaust and its aftermath beyond the parochial and to demonstrate its universal significance.

The Religious Future

Finally, we consider the work of the late Arthur A. Cohen, one of the first Jewish thinkers of his generation to publish a major theological work, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew* (1962).⁵² Like Fackenheim, however, Cohen was initially silent on the problem of God and the Holocaust. He did not address that problem in a book-length publication until the appearance of a more recent work, *The Tremendum* (1981). There Cohen explained his silence, suggesting that he, like many of his peers, "had no language with which to speak of evil (other than by exhibition and denunciation)." This left him deeply moved by the Holocaust but unable to speak of it. Cohen admitted he "had constructed a modern theology without dealing with evil, either in itself or in its horrific manifestation as *tremendum*."⁵³

In *After Auschwitz* (1966) Rubenstein criticized Cohen for writing a Jewish theology without confronting the question of God and the death camps. Nevertheless, Rubenstein recognized that in the aftermath of a trauma as radical as the Holocaust, it was not surprising that Jewish thinkers waited a whole generation before turning to the question. The shock was simply too great. In 1966 Rubenstein wrote:

A religious community has some resemblance to a living organism. It is impossible savagely to rip out half of its substance without drastically affecting the surviving remnant. The first reaction to such a wounding must be shock and numbness. I do not believe the period of shock has entirely spent itself. It is only now that a tentative attempt can be made to assess the religious meaning of the events.⁵⁴

Cohen later acknowledged Rubenstein's criticism:

Richard Rubenstein was right. I had ignored Auschwitz, imagining that somehow I had escaped. But he was not right in that imputation. I did not imagine that I had escaped (or that any Jew of the non-European Diaspora had escaped). But I was struck dumb and I turned aside . . . and that amounts to the same thing: avoidance. The *tremendum* cannot be avoided.⁵⁵

Writing about the Holocaust, Cohen uses *tremendum* to denote the event. He has said that he was mindful of Rudolf Otto's characterization of God's holiness

as *mysterium tremendum* when he chose his term. According to Cohen, both *mysterium tremendum* and *tremendum* convey "the aspect of vastness" and "the resonance of terror." Nevertheless, the two terms refer to utterly disparate realities. In contrast to God's awesome holiness, Cohen sees the Holocaust as:

... the human *tremendum*, the enormity of an infinitized man, who no longer seems to fear death or, perhaps more to the point, fears it so completely, denies death so mightily, that the only patent of his refutation and denial is to build a mountain of corpses to the divinity of the dead, to placate death by the magic of endless murder.

Cohen offers a further explanation of his use of *tremendum* in connection with the Holocaust: "I call the death camps the *tremendum*, for it is the monument of a meaningless inversion of life to an orgiastic celebration of death, to a psychosexual and pathological degeneracy unparalleled and unfathomable to any person bonded to life."⁵⁶

Like Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, Cohen's *tremendum* is intended to convey a sense of unfathomable mystery. Cohen writes of the "palpable irrationality" of the Holocaust, an event which he regards as surpassing all others in its extremity and its uniqueness. He questions the possibility that the conceptual and intellectual tools normally used by historians and political and social scientists to comprehend war, religious and social conflict, and mass slaughter are appropriate to understanding the Holocaust.

Like Rubenstein and Fackenheim, Cohen eventually came to see that the Holocaust had rendered problematic faith in the biblical God of covenant and election. Nevertheless, when Cohen formulated his theological response, he was more explicit in addressing the difficulties the Holocaust poses for classical theism than in confronting the specific problems it raises for the normative biblical-rabbinic view of God's relation to Israel. In regard to the perennial question of the contradiction between an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God and the existence of even a single case of innocent suffering, Cohen argues that a constructive theology after the Holocaust must have at least three characteristics: (1) God must abide in a universe in which neither evil nor God's presence is accounted unreal; (2) the relation of God to *all* of creation, including demonic elements and events, must be seen as meaningful and valuable; (3) the reality of God can no longer be isolated from God's real involvement in the life of creation. If any of the three characteristics is without foundation, asserts Cohen, God ceases to be anything other than a "metaphor for the inexplicable."

In attempting to satisfy these criteria, Cohen, like Rubenstein, leans heavily on the Kabbalistic theology of Isaac Luria (1534-72). He also acknowledges his indebtedness to philosophical traditions appropriated for Jewish thought by the German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929). This tradition was spelled out most completely by Hegel's contemporary, the German philosopher

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854). Schelling in turn was strongly indebted to the medieval Rhineland mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) and to the first words of the Fourth Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word."

The idea of human freedom is crucial to Cohen's Holocaust theology. Relying heavily on the aforementioned sources, Cohen holds that in the beginning the divine *Urgrund* (Primal Ground of all reality) overflowed its original and absolute self-containment in a movement of love. As long as God was all-in-all and there was nothing beside God, there could be neither manifestation of divine love nor personality, both of which require a nondivine otherness, such as a created world and creatures capable of responding to God. Thus, the world is, for Cohen and his theological predecessors, God's created other, lovingly formed by the Divine Word. Nevertheless, without the presence of humanity, the world would be devoid of freedom and incapable of responding to God's love or personality. It is humankind who, partaking of God's speech and divine freedom, is alone capable of responding to God. According to Cohen, freedom was originally intended by God to be tempered by reason, thereby preventing it from becoming willful caprice. Unfortunately, this did not happen, and human freedom, without which we could not be human or respond to God, eventually became the willful caprice of the Holocaust.

Cohen is especially concerned with responding to those who complain of the silence of God during the Holocaust. He argues that this complaint is in reality a mistaken yearning for a nonexistent, interruptive God who is expected magically to intervene in human affairs. According to Cohen, if there were such a God and if God were capable of interfering in history, creation would be an extension of God rather than an independent domain brought into being by God's creative love. Freedom, the essence of humanity, would be nonexistent and human beings would be mere automatons. Put differently, if humanity is free, God cannot intervene in human affairs no matter how depraved they become. Cohen's position is summarized in the following statement:

... what is taken as God's speech is really always man's hearing. . . . God is not the strategist of our particularities or of our historical condition, but rather *the mystery of our futurity*, always our *posse*, never our acts. If we can begin to see God less as the interferer whose insertion is welcome (when it accords with our needs) and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration . . . whose plentitude and unfolding are the *hope of our futurity*, we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honor, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand.⁵⁷

Clearly, Cohen does not see God as having a concrete role in history. Cohen thus rejects the idea that God was ultimately responsible for the Holocaust. Instead, Cohen relegates God's active role in history to the future. This is a theological strategy not unlike that of the German Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann. It is, however, subject to much the same criticism: by denying

God's role in contemporary history and by relegating decisive divine activity to the future, Cohen, like Fackenheim in his earlier period, consigns God's activity to a domain wholly inaccessible to empirical confirmation and hence subject to every conceivable flight of fancy. One can say almost anything about God's future activity because there are no hard facts against which such claims can be measured. Although powerfully evocative, one wonders what actual content can be legitimately be assigned to words such as "the hope of our futurity."

Nevertheless, Cohen does not see God's presence in history as limited to the indefinite future. Cohen describes the divine life as "a filament within the historical, but never the filament that we can identify and ignite according to our requirements." Cohen holds that humankind has the power to "obscure, eclipse, burn out the divine filament,"⁵⁸ but it is not in God's power to limit human freedom. Insofar as God takes an active role in human affairs, it is as Teacher *par excellence*. The speech of God offers humanity a teaching with which to limit the destructive and capricious elements in human freedom. According to Cohen, that teaching is to be found in the *Halakha*, the corpus of rabbinic law. Beyond the role of Teacher, God exercises no direct interference with human freedom.

There is, of course, a very powerful reason why Cohen refrains from seeing God as playing a greater part in history than that of "divine filament." Were Cohen to do so, he would be confronted with all of the difficulties that flow from seeing God as the ultimate Author of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, one can ask whether the problem of God and the Holocaust has been solved by limiting God's role to that of "divine filament" and Teacher of essentially free agents. By this limitation, Cohen may have portrayed God as functionally irrelevant. A human being who is prepared to accept the consequences of his or her actions will have no reason to take God-as-filament into account. As long as such a person is prepared to accept the costs as well as the benefits of his or her behavior, there will be no reason to be concerned with a God who places no restraint on human freedom.

There are other difficulties that confront Cohen and all those who attempt to extricate post-Holocaust Judaism from the dilemma of having to choose between a view of God that renders God functionally irrelevant and one which sees God as using Hitler and Auschwitz as instruments of divine punishment. Although we do not here consider in depth the thought of the Orthodox Jewish thinker, Eliezer Berkovits, he has sought to defend the traditional Jewish belief by adopting a position on God and human freedom similar to Cohen's.⁵⁹ According to Berkovits, God created free persons not automatons. This has had the paradoxical consequence that "while he [God] shows forbearance with the wicked, he must turn a deaf ear to the anguished cries of the violated."⁶⁰ Thus, for both Cohen and Berkovits, the Holocaust is not the work of a punishing God but of men and women who have obscenely used their freedom for mass destruction.

Another traditional doctrine Cohen seeks to defend by a nontraditional reformulation is that of the election of Israel. Thus, Cohen argues: "The death camps ended forever one argument of history—whether the Jews are a chosen people. They are chosen, unmistakably, extremely, utterly."⁶¹

In actuality, unless one sees the Holocaust as divine punishment, the Holocaust is more likely to raise doubts about than to serve as proof of Israel's election. Moreover, it is possible to ask whether Cohen has confused being targeted for annihilation by human beings with being chosen by God. The Holocaust simply reveals the obvious fact that the Jews were targeted for annihilation. The fate of Europe's Jews demonstrates, if indeed demonstration be needed, that in times of acute stress Jews are in danger of becoming the target *par excellence* of the nations of the world. This is hardly identical with being chosen by God.

Like Rubenstein and Fackenheim, Cohen recognizes that the Holocaust has resulted in a Jewish return to history, by which all three men mean a return to a situation in which, at least in the state of Israel, Jews are dependent upon themselves rather than host peoples for their survival. As noted, Fackenheim regards the return as the beginning of a Jewish *Tikkun*. Cohen's assessment is less positive. He suggests that the return to history may prove "more threatening even than genocide has been, for in no way is the Jew allowed any longer . . . to repeat his exile amid the nations, to disperse himself in order to survive." In a similar vein, Cohen comments that immersion in a history without transcendent meaning may lead to a modern form of paganism: "History without a capstone, time without eternity, the present moment without the inbreeding of the *eschaton* leaves us, as Jews, with little more than the chthonic vitalities of our blood as shield and buckler."⁶²

The Greek word *chthonos* means "earth." Cohen thus concludes that, absent faith in some version of the God of history, the Jewish return to history is likely to be a return to a modernized version of a very ancient earth paganism. Rubenstein had come to a similar conclusion two decades earlier. Cohen, however, is unwilling to rest content with a Jewish people enmeshed in the powers of earth. Having failed to find a "beyond" for the individual, he refuses to abandon hope in the immortality of the Jewish people as a sacred collectivity.

Given this hope, Cohen sees the state of Israel as a far less significant response to the Holocaust than does either Rubenstein or Fackenheim. According to Cohen, political states are a part of the incessant rhythm of history's rise and fall. A Jewish state is no exception. Hence, the eternity of this people cannot take a political form. Cohen writes that he stands outside the wall of the Jewish state as well as any other state. Nevertheless, he does not stand outside the Jewish people which, he asserts, constitutes "the eternal speaking of revelation to the Jew of history." In view of the twentieth-century experience of the Jews, Cohen understands his position to be problematic. *If the Holocaust has a single overriding lesson, it is that there is absolutely no limit to the obscenities a deter-*

mined and powerful aggressor can freely visit upon stateless, powerless victims. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the survivors could no longer trust their safety to anyone but themselves. They risked their lives to create a Jewish state in the full knowledge that it might be destroyed by its enemies. If the state survived, they would enjoy normal human dignity; if it perished, they would at least die honorably, defending themselves rather than as pathetically impotent victims of some future excremental assault.

Cohen's critics have found much to praise in *The Tremendum*. They have, however, tended to find his attempt at a constructive theology after Auschwitz to be the weakest part of the book. Nevertheless, if Cohen has failed to offer a credible post-Holocaust theology, his failure probably tells us more about the inevitable difficulties confronting Jewish theology after Auschwitz than about any lack of ability or brilliance on his part. Put simply, it may be impossible to affirm the traditional Jewish God without also affirming the one idea that nearly every post-Holocaust Jewish thinker, save Maybaum, has rejected, namely, that the Holocaust was an integral part of God's action in history. Cohen himself has apparently recognized the limitations inherent in any attempt to write Jewish theology after the Holocaust. He writes: "I have promised only to cross the abyss. I have not promised to explain it. I would not dare."⁶³ Yet, if Cohen has failed to offer a credible post-Holocaust theology, his failure can, with justice, be described as tragic rather than personal. Let us recall that the tragic is not so much the story of human error or folly as it is the inexorable unfolding of a destiny wholly resistant to human intention. When Oedipus learned that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother, he did everything he could to evade that destiny. Nevertheless, every evasive measure only brought him closer to the fated denouement. For the best and certainly the most understandable of reasons, Cohen may simply have attempted the impossible.

Does that mean that the ancient and hallowed faith in the biblical God of covenant and election has no future among religious Jews? On the contrary, it is probably the theological option most likely to have a future. Whatever doubts secularized Jews may currently entertain, that faith has been the hallowed, authoritative faith of the community of Israel from time immemorial until the modern period. It has given the Jewish people two supremely important gifts, the gifts of meaning and hope. Instead of viewing their experiences as a series of unfortunate and essentially meaningless events, biblical-rabbinic faith has enabled the Jewish people to see their history as a meaningful expression of their relations with their God. Moreover, no matter how desperate their situation became, their faith enabled them to hope that, sooner or later, "those who sow in tears will reap in joy." The old biblical-rabbinic view that God is the ultimate Actor in history and that the Jewish people are bound to God by an eternal covenant remains the most coherent, logically consistent way of understanding Jewish experience and history that is acceptable to the Jewish people. Rubenstein

has pointed out the bitter, yet inescapable, consequences of holding this faith after Auschwitz. Nevertheless, no credible theological alternative has emerged that does not deny the very foundations of normative Judaism.

Faith in covenant and election appears to be indispensable to the Jewish religious mainstream. One does not have to be a Jew to be a monotheist. What distinguishes Judaism is the faith that God has chosen the Jewish people to serve and obey God by fulfilling the divine commandments revealed in Scripture and authoritatively interpreted by the rabbis. Moreover, it can be argued that the Christian world *expects* Jews to affirm faith in the biblical God of covenant and election for a simple but compelling reason: from an evangelical perspective, the Jews were the chosen people to whom God sent the Son as humanity's redeemer. The Jews have, of course, failed to recognize the true nature of Jesus Christ. Hence, God's election passed from the Israel "according to the flesh" to the Israel "according to the spirit," namely, to all those who have recognized Christ's true nature. Nevertheless, most believing Christians still have no doubt that, sooner or later, at least a "saving remnant" of Israel will finally see the light.⁶⁴ Like Judaism, Christianity cannot abandon the doctrines of covenant and election.

Christian influence on Jews and Judaism is far greater than is commonly recognized. By virtue of the fact that both Christians and Jews regard the Bible as of divine inspiration, Christians give Jews a context of plausibility for their most deeply held beliefs. If Jews lived in a culture in which the majority accorded the Bible no greater respect than we accord the Greek myths, Jews might still hold fast to their beliefs but they would receive no external reinforcement. Even the fact that Jews and Christians disagree about the true nature of Jesus reinforces the context of plausibility, for the disagreement is about the true meaning of the Book both regard as divinely inspired.

The profound influence of American Christianity on American Judaism, even on Orthodox Judaism, ought not to be underestimated. The world's largest Jewish community lives in and is ultimately dependent for its security and the security of the state of Israel on the world's largest Christian community. The state of Israel's strongest American Christian supporters are Fundamentalists who believe in the inerrancy of scriptural revelation. As conservative Christian influence continues to grow within the United States, it will encourage Jews to affirm a faith rooted in biblical revelation.

Thus, both external and internal influences foster a renewed Jewish affirmation of covenant and election. Even those Jews whose reasons for remaining in the synagogue are primarily ethnic rather than religious are likely to convince themselves that the principal beliefs of the Jewish mainstream are true. To do otherwise would be to create too great a dissonance between belief and practice. If the survival of the Jews as a group outside of Israel is perceived to depend upon religious affiliation and some measure of Jewish religious practice, which