

Orthodox Judaism, Secularization, and the Holocaust

By

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Chapter One: Introduction

The Holocaust is among the most influential events in modern history. It changed the way we look at human beings,¹ the way we divide up countries,² and even the way we treat people medically.³ In order to properly discuss Jewish philosophies and theologies, it is necessary to put these ideas into context. What was Jewish theology like in Europe prior to the Holocaust? Another important thing to address is which Jewish philosophers have pertinent ideas, as there are so many who write about Holocaust theory. In order to get a thorough understanding of the context, it is also necessary to look at the views of the time, which include German National Socialism.

Jewish Theology

Throughout the history of Judeo-Christian theological commentary and interpretation, the question of the problem of evil has been one that has been asked time and time again. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, how is evil possible? This question has not been ignored within Jewish theology, especially given the bloody history of the Jewish people. This became especially true in Jewish theology after World War II. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimonides, who was born March 30 1135,⁴ was a very influential Jewish commentator who had quite a lot to say on the problem of evil and God's omnipotence. Maimonides says, "[The philosophers have] said that only one of two things is possible, either God is ignorant of the individual or particular things on earth, and does not perceive them, or He perceives and knows them."⁵ Daniel Rynhold

¹ The Holocaust was completely dehumanizing, in part because of the way that people were treated and killed, but also because of the system of numbering prisoners and tattooing the numbers onto the prisoners' arms.

² An example of this is the state of Israel, which was established in 1948 by the United Nations. Within Europe, however, the World War II was the cause of a number of border issues, particularly with the Rhineland, which was contested land between France and Germany during the War.

³ The origins of what is known about hypothermia comes from research and tests done on prisoners in the concentration camps. This is the case with many medical diagrams and procedures that are still in use today.

⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1956), xvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

discusses this in his article “The Problems of Evil,” where he says that “by taking just one of the attributes as our starting point, [...] an all-powerful God presumably had the power to prevent the Holocaust.”⁶ Rynhold then says that since God did not stop the Holocaust, he⁷ either did not care or was not aware. Both of these arguments disprove God’s omniscience or his omnipotence, which is problematic from a religious standpoint. How can God be omniscient and omnipotent and still allow the Holocaust to happen? Rynhold says that “what becomes apparent is that the Holocaust stands as the ultimate ‘affirmation’ of the importance of personhood and the undeniable reality of the evils we face as complete human beings.”⁸ What really gets called into question in Jewish theological discussion about the Holocaust is the issue of free will, and what makes a human being a human being:

Previous thought about the problem of evil, the role of God in history, and redemption surely have paved the way for recent Holocaust and Zionist thought; in fact, one of the issues that must be addressed is whether these events pose distinctly new questions or whether they are merely instances – albeit dramatic ones – of theological issues that have been around for a very long time. Either way, considerable effort during the last four decades of the twentieth century has been spent on trying to understand the impact of the Holocaust and the State of Israel for Jewish existence and belief.⁹

While few theological questions are ever answered definitively, the context for the questions provides some insight and this makes all the difference.

Jewish Thinkers

In later a chapter, I will be discussing the ideas of Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel. These four philosophers lived through the Holocaust, though not necessarily in Europe, and they have much to say on the subject.

⁶ Daniel Rynhold, “The Problems of Evil,” in *Modern Judaism*, eds. Nicholas de Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 314.

⁷ In an attempt to be faithful to the sources I am using, God will be referred to using the exclusive male pronoun. I am not in support of this language, but am merely being true to the source.

⁸ Rynhold, “The Problems of Evil,” 317.

⁹ Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 345.

Emil L. Fackenheim was born in Halle, Germany, in 1916. He lived through the Holocaust in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.¹⁰ Fackenheim discusses the importance of not diluting the tragedy of the Holocaust. He dislikes that some thinkers, such as Eliezer Berkovits, diminish its importance by referring to it as “just another Jewish tragedy,” but he also says that trying to “impute a purpose for [it] is blasphemous.”¹¹ Fackenheim emphasizes the importance of practicing Judaism in order to keep Hitler from being victorious posthumously. “Indeed, the Holocaust proved to Fackenheim that philosophy could not be immune to history. We have here a historical event that ruptured the history of philosophy and theology, both Jewish and otherwise.”¹² His philosophy includes the idea of the 614th commandment: “A Jew may not respond to Hitler’s attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction.”¹³ This was a controversial move on Fackenheim’s part, as he was seen as being arrogant in adding another commandment to the 613 that are divinely ordained through scripture.¹⁴ Fackenheim refuted this accusation, however, as he argues that his theory is not an addition to the divine commandments; the 614th commandment simply says that a good Jew should follow the other 613. Because of this, it is argued by some that Fackenheim did not really add anything to the discussion at all.

Eliezer Berkovits was born in 1908 in Germany. He was an Orthodox rabbi and theologian, and did not have to live through the Holocaust in Europe. He preached in Berlin,

¹⁰ Michael L. Morgan, *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim: A Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 119.

¹¹ Rynhold, “The Problems of Evil,” 319.

¹² *Ibid.*, 319.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁴ The “613 commandments” mentioned here are found within the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, called Torah. While some of these commandments cannot be followed because of the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, they still have a religious significance.

England, and Australia before moving to the United States in 1950.¹⁵ He also wrote extensively on the Holocaust as a subject. “It is only if I freely choose to do good that I am worthy of praise. And it is only if I freely choose to do evil that I am deserving of blame.”¹⁶ Eliezer Berkovits’ main philosophical points deal with God’s “hiding of His face,” which is an idea that comes up in the Hebrew Bible. Berkovits argues that it is only through this act that human beings can have free will. The question of whether free will exists is highly contested within all factions of the philosophy of religion, Berkovits simply changes the question from “Why evil?” to “Why a world? Why creation?”¹⁷ This means that there is some conflict with the other ideas that other thinkers have had, which is beneficial to the argument I am making.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in 1907 in Warsaw, Poland. He studied and taught in Germany before the Nazis expelled him in 1938.¹⁸ He eventually immigrated to the United States where he taught the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.¹⁹ Heschel’s ideas mostly deal with the idea of “touchstones of reality”; this is the term he uses to describe the life-changing moments in history. Fackenheim would call these moments “ruptures.” Heschel also discusses the idea of God in search of Man²⁰, rather than Man in search of God. This is important because it is a responsive idea. As Heschel writes, “Certainty in the realness of God comes about as a response of the whole person to the mystery and transcendence of living.”²¹ Within the context of the Holocaust, this idea is a result of the struggle to understand the reasoning behind the human actions that occurred within concentration camps.

¹⁵ R. J. Zwi Werblowsky & Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116-117.

¹⁶ Rynhold, “The Problems of Evil,” 318.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 360.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 360-361.

²⁰ “Man” is here used to refer to “humankind” – I am keeping the original wording in order to be true to the source.

²¹ Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology*, 81.

Elie Wiesel was born in 1928 in Sighet, Romania. He was sent to Auschwitz in 1944 with his family, where they were separated and he was eventually sent to Buchenwald. He was the only member of his family to survive.²² Wiesel, unlike the other philosophers I will be discussing, does not present himself as a Jewish philosopher, but rather as a writer. He is most commonly known for his memoir, *Night*, which was published in 1958, although he had also written more than forty pieces of writing in total, including fiction and non-fiction books, plays, and essays. His other books, while generally focussing on Wiesel's experience during the Holocaust, are not autobiographical. *Night* is autobiographical, and allows the reader to have a better understanding of Wiesel's understanding of the world, hence I shall use it for this purpose.

Holocaust theology is a multifaceted concept, but my interpretation is that it is a way of reconciling the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient God with the devastating event that was the Holocaust, and understanding why bad things happen to good people. Most of the thinkers described above participate in Holocaust theology. The philosophies and theologies of the Holocaust are complex and questions do not have definitive answers. When deciding whose thoughts to consider, it is important to look at their personal stories as well, for the experiences that people have directly influence the way they see the world.

How did these views differ from those around them?

The philosophical ideas of the time were greatly influenced by the National Socialist movement, which is commonly referred to as Nazism. The National Socialist German Workers' Party, which is also shortened to the "German National Socialist" party or the "Nazi" party, began in Germany in the 1920s and was led largely by Adolf Hitler.²³ In the beginning it seemed like a solution to the economic repression that Germany was suffering as a result of World War I. It soon became

²² Michael Berenbaum, "Elie Wiesel," in *World Book Encyclopaedia 2013*. Accessed April 20, 2014.

²³ Michele Murray, "Jewish Traditions," in *World Religions: Western Traditions* (Canada: Oxford University Press, 2014), 127.

clear, however, that “radical anti-Semitism was central to Hitler’s political platform from the start; he placed the blame for Germany’s defeat in the war squarely on the Jews, and he was determined to teach them a lesson.”²⁴ Hitler’s ideologies were very flawed, but his ideas about blaming the Jews for the struggles in Germany began to take. After he became chancellor of Germany in 1933, many regulations were imposed; many of these restricted what Jews could and could not do. This was the beginning of a new era, and the cruelty that manifested itself was earth shattering. Never before had a group of people been discriminated against for something as seemingly trivial as their beliefs, or the beliefs of their parents or grandparents. In his book *Mein Kampf*, he refers to the Jewish people as “Semites,” and the non-Jews as “Aryans.” This is a complete misunderstanding of what those words actually mean, as they are, in fact, linguistics terms referring to language families.²⁵ For Hitler, however, the difference between “Semites” and “Aryans” was equated to the difference between “impure” and “pure,” respectively.²⁶

One very influential thinker was Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, who firmly believed in Nazism. While Heidegger’s Nazism was not generally apparent in his writings, it was made known towards the end of his life. Tom Rockmore writes that “what we can call ‘the facts’ about Heidegger’s Nazism have been known at least in part since the end of the Second World War.”²⁷ Critics of Heidegger frequently use his Nazism as a weapon, although he rarely writes about it.

Since, as Rockmore writes, “Heidegger was the only important philosopher to become a Nazi,”²⁸ he is the obvious choice for discussing non-Jewish philosophies. He does not directly address his Nazism, however, so it is also worthwhile to look at different interpretations of the

²⁴ Murray, “Jewish Traditions,” 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁷ Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger’s Nazism and Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

movement. While this is not possible from a philosophical perspective, there is no issue with looking at it from a socio-political standpoint. Dan Diner brings this up in his book *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* when he writes that:

[The German Jews] did not regard [German National Socialism] as a phenomenon specifically concerning the Jews but rather as a single aspect of a general social threat, to which one reacted first and foremost as a political being, and only secondarily as a Jew.²⁹

This is not an easy concept to accept. The fact that National Socialism was “sold,” so to speak, as a way to deal with the economic downturn in Germany meant that for a large portion of the Jewish population, the anti-Semitism of the movement was not apparent until it was too late. This was because, for a majority of Jews, they did not identify themselves as “Jewish” first, but as members of their respective nations, as will be addressed in a later chapter.

Conclusion

In summation, context is everything when it comes to understanding as accurately as possible the way people think. The theological ideas that led up to the Holocaust were mostly questions regarding the nature of evil, and dealing with God’s omnipotence and omniscience. Numerous philosophers had many things to say, but the four that I will be focussing on are Emil L. Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Elie Wiesel. Each had the kind of personal experiences necessary for asking and dealing with questions relating to the Holocaust. The best way to put these questions into context is to look at the philosophical and political ideas of the society in which they lived: namely, the German National Socialist movement. The best way to do this from a philosophical perspective was to look at the example of Martin Heidegger. With this in mind, it is possible to continue on to look at how Orthodox Judaism was impacted by the Holocaust.

²⁹ Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 97.

Chapter Two

For the purposes of this chapter, I am categorizing the Jews before the Holocaust into two distinct categories: those who were practicing Jews, and those who were only culturally Jewish. In the post-Holocaust period these two categories get divided, resulting in a total of four categories: practicing Jews who came out of the Holocaust believing, practicing Jews who lost their faith after the events of the Holocaust, cultural Jews who maintained their unbelieving stance, and cultural Jews who emerged as believers. This, of course, is not always how it was. Elie Wiesel, who will be discussed in the next chapter, considers himself to be both believing and unbelieving.³⁰

At this point, I think it is necessary to mention that Judaism has many branches. The two that are discussed below are Reform Judaism and Orthodox Judaism. Reform Judaism began in Germany in the 18th Century, as a reaction to the Enlightenment. It was supposed to help Jews be more religious while staying open to the scientific ideas of the time. Today, it is seen as one of the more liberal branches of Judaism. In this denomination, women can be rabbis; Sabbath services are shorter and tend to be in contemporary language, rather than just Hebrew; and it encourages thinking of Judaism as something that evolves with time. Orthodox Judaism began as a response to Reform Judaism. Orthodoxy was reactionary, as some Jews felt that Reform Judaism was going too far into the secular sphere. Orthodox Jews believe very strongly in the fact that the Hebrew Bible is the word of God, and hold rabbinic commentary in high esteem.³¹

Given this, “secularization” of Judaism is a difficult concept. It could be argued that some Reform Jews are “secularized” in comparison to Orthodox Jews. This, however, is not what I

³⁰ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Jewish Faith and the Holocaust,” *Religious Studies* 26, no. 2 (Cambridge University Press: 1990), 277.

³¹ Michele Murray, “Judaisms,” Class lecture, from Judaism: Covenant with God. Bishop’s University, Lennoxville, QC, October 16, 2012.

mean when I use the term “secularization.” Over time, Judaism has become something of an ethnicity as well as a belief system. This is how someone can be an atheist or an agnostic when it comes to belief in God, but can still call themselves Jewish. This belief would also qualify as Cultural Judaism, wherein people consider themselves Jewish but are nonreligious. The essence of what it means to be Jewish is different from what it means to belong to any other religion. It becomes a question of which is more important, orthodoxy or orthopraxy. For many Jews, including cultural Jews, orthopraxy is more important.

When the Holocaust results in an individual no longer believing in God, it is understandable; it is more difficult to imagine a deeply religious person living through the Holocaust and still believing in a God who would allow such a thing to happen.

Non-Observant to Observant

The most notable example of a movement from non-observant Judaism to observant Judaism are the people who were converted after the Holocaust. An example of this is the *Ba'al T'shuva* movement.³² *Ba'al T'shuva* is Hebrew for “master of return,”³³ so people who become *Ba'alei T'shuva* are thought of as “returnees” because they are “returning” to the faith.

This was a movement that occurred only within the Orthodox branch of Judaism. There are a number of branches of Jewish Orthodoxy, although the two that are known best are the *Yeshivische* and the *Chasidic* branches. The *Chasidic* branch is what comes to mind when someone says “Orthodox Jew.” They adhere to strict dress and practices, and are distinct from the *Yeshivische* community. The latter is more scholarly, as they lead certain rabbinical schools, called *yeshivot*. The main difference with regard to scholarship is that members of the *Chasidic* community tend to identify with a specific leader, whereas members of the *Yeshivische*

³² Murray Herbert Danzger, *Returning to Tradition: the Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 346.

³³ *Ibid.*, 346.

community just accept the authority of the heads of the *yeshivot*.³⁴ The *Ba'al T'shuva* movement was concentrated within the *Yeshivishe* community, and it was very popular in the 1960s, especially in America and Israel. As Danzger writes:

In the half century after the close of mass immigration to America, American Jewry had made efforts to draw young people 'of limited background' toward Orthodox practice. Although the effort had some success, the term *ba'alei t'shuva* was not used until in 1972 when [*sic.*] five schools were founded specifically for *ba'alei t'shuva*.³⁵

It was a movement that mostly dealt with people involved in counterculture who became interested in Judaism; Danzger uses the term "hippies."³⁶ He points out that in the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, many people were attracted to new religious movements, some of which were widely discussed in the mass media, others of which were not. The former of these included "the cultists, the Jesus freaks, the followers of Moon, and the Children of God"³⁷ while the latter was, at least for the most part, the *Ba'al T'shuva* movement.

The fact that most of the converts to the latter were young caused many in the Jewish community to dismiss the movement. The assumption was that those who were *Ba'alei T'shuva* were simply "trying on Judaism," in the same way that someone tries on a hat. It was nearly impossible to imagine that people would actually want to return to a religion with such a strict code of values:

Previously no thought had been given to the possibility that people were trying out new commitments and wanted guidance. Only when the widespread testing of values by the youth population became generally known and when thousands of Jewish hippies began drifting to Israel was this new phenomenon identified. [...] From the outside, hippies underwent the more radical transformation. The former hippie with long hair and layered, rustic, or antique clothes now looked

³⁴ Danzger, *Returning to Tradition*, 53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

like a *chasicid*. This new image, so dramatically captured by photographs, recast the return to Orthodoxy.³⁸

The generation that came after the survivors of the Holocaust had a tendency to return to practicing tradition, and so it is unsurprising that the *Ba'al T'shuva* movement was so popular during the height of counterculture behaviour. Because of the stereotype that dictates that the more youthful generation as being irresponsible, “some of the newly Orthodox might be characterized as ‘drifters.’ They move from one setting to another without completing the work undertaken anywhere. But they see themselves as rejecting the system, not as failing to measure up.”³⁹ The idea that the newly converted are just drifting is, unfortunately, not a surprise. It is a generalization that often occurs in communities with a significant age gap like this one.

Danzger writes that, “The Holocaust and a history of persecution have led some Jews to believe that even in an open society they cannot escape from their Jewishness.”⁴⁰ Although some Jews do stop practicing when openly opposed, there are many who take up practicing with vigour. This is reminiscent of a fight-or-flight reaction that often occurs when someone’s life is threatened. Especially post-Holocaust, it is unsurprising that a threat to Judaism inspires people to return to their faith. When something as integral as an individual’s belief system or cultural identity is threatened, they are likely to rise up and defend it, or to return and become more observant, as is the case with the *Ba'al T'shuva* movement.

Non-Observant to Non-Observant

The lack of transition when it comes to cultural Jews remaining cultural Jews after the Holocaust is not surprising. It is not difficult to imagine that someone who is only culturally Jewish would survive the Holocaust and feel as if it was necessary to continue the culture, but not believe. If a

³⁸ Danzger, *Returning to Tradition*, 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 334.

person did not believe in God prior to a traumatic experience, it cannot be expected that their perspective would have changed through an experience where God does not seem present. One such example comes from Sylvia Rothchild's *Voices from the Holocaust*. Marika Frank Abrams, originally from Hungary, was raised as what could be called a "cultural Jew." Her father was not observant, and found that his "Jewishness was in his way."⁴¹ Her mother, however, considered herself to be observant. But Abrams was raised non-observant, and mentions that "when [she] was growing up [she] always had a Christmas tree."⁴² She therefore qualifies as a cultural Jew in origin. As she is a woman, she would not have attended *cheder*,⁴³ and judging by her description of her upbringing, even if she had had the chance to go, her parents likely would not have sent her.

Abrams says nothing about how her faith was affected while she was in Auschwitz, but she does talk about her faith once she immigrated to America. While she did not keep her faith a secret, per se, it was not something that she advertised either.

I didn't say I was [Jewish] and they didn't realize that my accent and experience and the way I look and feel couldn't be anything else. My Jewishness is so important to me that I didn't realize they didn't recognize me.⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that although she is not technically an observant Jew, her Jewishness is still very engrained in her. Perhaps it is for this reason that she and her family attend the Reform Synagogue. As I said above, Reform Judaism is rather liberal in its practices. It could be seen as a way to be a practicing Jew without becoming overly religious. However, for Abrams, "there is really no place in the [Reform] community where [she is] really at home."⁴⁵ She does not feel at

⁴¹ Sylvia Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ *Cheder* is the Jewish school that young boys attend. Danzger associates it with Chasidic Judaism. It is not available for women.

⁴⁴ Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 316.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

home in the services at her family synagogue, and while she does enjoy Orthodox services she feels out of place. “I’m not an observant Jew and I’m not a religious person.”⁴⁶ This might not necessarily constitute unobservant-unobservant, but things are rarely so cleanly cut. The feeling of not belonging is understandable and not surprising, and it is almost tragically beautiful that she feels so compelled to attend synagogue. In stark contrast to Abrams’ own beliefs, her son is practicing, and was involved in a very religious kibbutz.⁴⁷ I would argue that her son could be considered Ba’alei T’shuva. He returned to Judaism in a big way, in part because of his mother’s experience and belief.

Maintaining Observance

The story of Dr. William Glicksman is also one that Rothchild has in her book. He was born in Poland and went to a *cheder* there. Originally this would have classified him as an observant Jew, although it seems he was more secular in his beliefs. While his education was Jewish, Glicksman did not think of it as a religious education, because “the minute you were born you were in a hundred-percent Jewish atmosphere. You didn’t need any school to educate you religiously. The home, the street, the social and cultural life told us who we were.”⁴⁸ This shows how deeply ingrained his Jewish identity was in terms of an ethnic background. Glicksman went on to become a history teacher in a *cheder*, get married, and have a child. He was thirty-five when Poland was invaded. He was a firm believer in the Zionist movement and used his political beliefs to help him through his time prior to going to Auschwitz.

Once he was in Auschwitz, it was not as easy to continue practicing his faith. This, however, did not stop Glicksman. It inspired what he calls “spiritual strength” and it was this strength that helped him survive:

⁴⁶ Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 319.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

We never forgot for a minute that we were Jews. We didn't need the religion. We didn't need the Hebrew school. We kept the calendar in ourselves. How did we express it? On a Friday night we sang quietly 'Lecha Nerannenah'⁴⁹, not loud, we sang quietly while sitting at our workbenches. We knew the prayers by heart like we knew our own names. [...] This is how we lasted until the evacuation on January 18.⁵⁰

Glicksman's beliefs are fascinating; it is important to note that while belief might not have gotten him through his time at Auschwitz, the rituals certainly did. Some examples of this are keeping track of the calendar, singing psalms, and saying the *Kaddish* for people who died. All of these acts gave him the strength to survive.

Glicksman moved to the United States in 1946. He worked as a translator and was married by February of 1947. Glicksman and his wife had a son in 1953, and his son is a nonreligious, but practicing, Jew, and therefore qualifies as culturally Jewish. He is a part of an Orthodox congregation despite his religious beliefs.⁵¹ Glicksman's son was clearly influenced by his father. Here is an example of the next generation being influenced by the survivors of the Holocaust, and how that experience leads to a return, in some form or another, to the faith.

Jack Goldman is another example of an observant Jew who continued to be observant after the Holocaust. He was from Germany, but was arrested as a Polish Jew in 1944. He "was brought up Orthodox. It was something nice, something beautiful. It was not something [he] hated at the time."⁵² Prior to his imprisonment in Auschwitz, Goldman practiced his faith. Once he was interred, however, this changed. He began to question God, and began to wonder about how the Holocaust could happen. As he watched people die daily, he began to get into arguments with his father about continuing the rituals in the camps. He says that he is "only [...] admitting

⁴⁹ This is Psalm 92:1 put to music.

⁵⁰ Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 238.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

it because I regret having hurt him. At the same time I felt stronger in my Jewishness.”⁵³ This was a common occurrence, one that Elie Wiesel also went through during his time in the concentration camps, as we will discuss below.⁵⁴ Goldman describes how the Nazis at the camp in which he stayed had no problem with fast days, because it meant that the Jews did not have to be fed. There were other Jewish traditions that did not fit so well into life in a concentration camp:

It was a shock, coming from an observant, Orthodox home, to eat nonkosher food, to work on Sabbaths and holidays. We had talked about it in religious class with the rabbi before our arrest. The rabbis said, ‘You eat whatever you get. You don’t ask whether it is meat, or where the meat comes from. Your job is to remain alive.’⁵⁵

The fact that Goldman’s rabbi told him this is integral. Ultimately, for this Orthodox rabbi, the commandments did not matter if the person in question was dead. It was about survival at all costs.

In 1946 Jack Goldman immigrated to the United States. He worked for a while in the army, and for a long time was not observant. This changed, however, as he aged, as he realized that since he was technically living in exile he had to show his faith. Goldman continued to have Friday night suppers and to light candles, and he goes to Saturday morning services, but he does not force his children to participate. He had learned that many people had turned away from Judaism because of this pressure. He says that he “believe[s] you have to be positive about Jewishness. You can’t run away from it. You can’t hide it.”⁵⁶ It is for this reason that Goldman is an example of an observant, though not necessarily believing, Jew. He is observant for the sake of continuing the faith; he feels obligated. This is an example of secularization within post-

⁵³ Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 158.

⁵⁴ This experience was documented in Wiesel’s memoir *Night*.

⁵⁵ Rothchild, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 158.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

Holocaust Judaism, as Goldman practices because it ties in with his cultural understanding of self rather than because it is something in which he firmly believes. Goldman's way of practicing Judaism is a movement, on his part, of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, and this is what is at the core of the secularization of Judaism.

Conclusion

What is particularly interesting and frustrating is that no one fits exactly into the chart established above. Jewish people who decide to practice do not decide to do so because they believe, necessarily, but because they feel an obligation to their "Jewishness." It is a question of how to reconcile, on the one hand, wanting to feel connected to the roots of a person's family and core belief system, and on the other hand, feeling abandoned by God in a time of need. This is the epitome of a crisis of faith. In addition, the *Ba'al T'shuva* movement was strongly influenced by the Holocaust. In some ways it could be said that many of the people in the Post-Holocaust generation are also *Ba'alei T'shuva*, though not officially defined as such.

Chapter Three

There are a number of different thinkers who have written philosophical works about the Holocaust; these include Emil L. Fackenheim, Elie Wiesel, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Eliezer Berkovits. While all four philosophers were alive during the Nazi regime, Fackenheim and Wiesel lived through the Holocaust within Nazi Europe, whereas Heschel and Berkovits did not. This means that among these four philosophers, there were a number of different viewpoints on the philosophies and theologies of the Jews at the time. There were many questions being asked at the time, mostly about where the future of the practice of Judaism lay.

Fackenheim and Wiesel

Fackenheim came up with one option, which he calls the 614th commandment. While the name he gave this idea sounds a little sacrilegious, the premise is simple: If someone identifies as a Jew, then they are Jewish. In order to properly be Jewish, it is necessary to follow the commandments. This is Fackenheim's method of stopping Hitler from winning posthumously. Jews need to continue to practice Judaism, even in the smallest way, or those who survived the Holocaust did so in vain. Daniel Rynhold writes that, "The mere decision to identify as a Jew, even if not adhering to one of the religious interpretations of Judaism, is to perform a *mitzvah*,⁵⁷ and therefore a religious duty."⁵⁸ This means that it is not only important to tell the stories of the Holocaust, but also to continue to be Jewish by practicing the rituals, even in a cultural sense. This can be seen in the stories of survivors who felt the need to practice again, even if they did not believe, but because they felt obligated to continue practicing the religion. Elie Wiesel wrote

⁵⁷ *Mitzvah* is the Hebrew word for "commandment".

⁵⁸ Daniel Rynhold, "The Problems of Evil," in *Modern Judaism*, eds. Nicholas de Lange and Miri Freud-Kandel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 320.

that, “While not all victims are Jews, all Jews are victims,”⁵⁹ and what that means for many Jews is that orthopraxy is what is important. There is a fundamental belief that the laws of the Hebrew Bible have to be followed in order to fulfil the Israelite covenant with God,

In *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, Fackenheim mentions that the Holocaust is “unprecedented” rather than “unique.” “Historians are obliged, so far as possible, to search for precedents; and thoughtful people, by no means historians only, are obliged to ask if the Holocaust itself may become a precedent for future processes, whether as yet only possible or already actual.”⁶⁰ What Fackenheim is suggesting is that the Holocaust changed the way the world worked. Specifically, it changed the human condition. “Prior to the Holocaust, the human condition, while including the necessity of dying, was seen as also including at least one inalienable freedom – that of each individual’s dying his own death.”⁶¹ Auschwitz in particular changed that, because it took away the freedom that Fackenheim mentions. The experience of being in a concentration camp made people into a new kind of being; a *Muselmann*,⁶² similar to the Living Dead. This was a foreign concept, as the treatment of human beings that was happening was unprecedented. By taking away the right to die, the people who were called *Muselmann* had literally nothing left. They were alive, but they did not really exist, because there was nothing left for them to live for.

Maurice Friedman talks about the Holocaust as a “touchstone of reality”. He talks about such touchstones as being the significant moments in life. These can be similar to a crossroad,

⁵⁹ Elie Wiesel, “Foreword,” in *Jews and Christians After the Holocaust*, ed. Abraham J. Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), xi.

⁶⁰ Emil L. Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶² *Muselmann* is German for Muslim; it was first used in print by Primo Levi and was a derogatory term to refer to concentration camp prisoners that were close to death. It is unknown how this relation came to be.

where one fork or the other must be chosen. They can also be the big events that happen, but as Friedman writes:

A touchstone cannot be passively received. It must be won by contending, by wrestling until dawn and not letting the nameless messenger go until he has blessed us by giving us a new name. Walking on our path, we encounter something that lights up for us – an event, a teaching, a breathless view of nature, an hour of unusual calm. Touchstones of reality are like insights, except that they are closer to events. To touch is to go through and beyond subjective experiencing. The very act of touching is already a transcending.⁶³

Friedman goes on to say that there are both negative and positive touchstones; the Holocaust is the perfect example of a negative touchstone. Friedman observes, however, that if negative touchstones are treated the way Elie Wiesel treats the Holocaust, they do not necessarily have to be a completely negative thing:

What is most impressive about Elie Wiesel, indeed, is that he has been able to take this negative touchstone of reality and, without glossing over or denying it in any way, make of it the most positive and meaningful affirmation of life.⁶⁴

Wiesel talks about his belief in a number of different ways; what comes across most prominently, however, is that it is impossible for him to believe without also not believing. Dan Cohn-Sherbok wrote about Wiesel's beliefs in an article called "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust" in 1990:

...the Holocaust is inexplicable with God, but it also cannot be understood without Him. Auschwitz made it [possible for Wiesel to trust God's goodness, but it also made questions about God more important. In this regard, Wiesel has been heard to remark: 'if I told you I believed in God, I would be lying; if I told you I did not believe in God, I would be lying.' Wiesel is thus at odds with God because the only way he can be for God after Auschwitz is by being against Him – to embrace God without protest would be to vindicate Him and legitimize evil.⁶⁵

⁶³ Maurice Friedman, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel: You Are My Witnesses* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1987), 91.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 91.

⁶⁵ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," *Religious Studies* 26, no. 2 (Cambridge University Press: 1990), 277.

In my view, this fits perfectly with Fackenheim's 614th commandment; if Wiesel were to believe in God in a post-Holocaust world, he feels that it would be almost as if God would be guilt-free, but not believing means that the Nazis triumphed. So Wiesel is both believing and non-believing, and he tells his story in such a way that people listen.

Rynhold writes that, to Fackenheim, "philosophy could not be immune to history. We have here a historical event that ruptured the history of philosophy and theology, both Jewish and otherwise."⁶⁶ In Friedman's terms, this "rupture" is essentially a "touchstone." In my opinion, the imagery of a "rupture" is more appropriate, in this context; Friedman talks about positive and negative touchstones, but when something ruptures it is violent and jarring, which is exactly what the Holocaust was.

Kiddush haShem

The concept of *Kiddush haShem* is one that has a long history. Rabbi Moses Maimonides spoke of it in his writings, and it comes up a number of times in history. *Kiddush haShem* is the idea of honouring the name of God through death. This concept is contrasted by the idea of *Kiddush haHayim*, or honouring God through life.

Kiddush HaShem is performed in three ways: (a) a Jew sacrifices his life when others attempt to make him abandon the Jewish faith, (b) a Jew gives his life to save a fellow Jew, and even more so – to save a group of Jews, (c) a Jew dies while fighting to defend other Jews. Maimonides rules that if a Jew is killed, even without any overt attempt to make him abandon the Jewish faith, but because he is a Jew, he is considered a martyr.⁶⁷

This description, especially the last sentence, means that every Jew who died during the Holocaust is a martyr. This is referred to as passive *Kiddush haShem*, and it is a way to honour

⁶⁶ Rynhold, "The problems of evil," 319.

⁶⁷ Rabbi Shimon Huberband, *Kiddush haShem: Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland during the Holocaust* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1987), 247.

the dead. The difference between active and passive *Kiddush haShem* is that in order to actively honour the name of God, the person in question must be threatened with losing his or her faith.

The idea of martyrdom was one that was severely affected as a result of the Holocaust. As Pesach Schindler writes in his article “The Holocaust and *Kiddush haShem* in Hassidic Thought”:

In Jewish martyrology of the past, the Jew had the option of choosing life, most likely, by rejecting Judaism. The martyr of the Holocaust, without life options before him, and counter to the expectations of his murderer, did indeed choose the manner in which he would accept and prepare for his death.⁶⁸

What Schindler means here is that the main difference between the martyr pre-Holocaust and the martyr during the Holocaust is that whether or not the latter rejected Judaism, they would still die. Once that became clear, it was a matter of deciding to die in God’s name, rather than passively dying at the hands of the Nazis.

Fackenheim’s writing about *Kiddush haShem* deals mostly with *Galut* Judaism or “Judaism in exile.” According to him, this is something that often occurs when Christians try to convert Jews. When Fackenheim discusses the issue of conversion in the post-Holocaust world, he accuses Christians of “trying in one way what Hitler undertook in another.”⁶⁹ This is significant because it ties in with Fackenheim’s idea of the 614th commandment.

Whether or not *Kiddush haShem* was acceptable during the Holocaust was a highly debated issue among rabbis of the time. Michael L. Morgan, in his book *Dilemmas in Modern Jewish Thought*, wrote about Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, from the Kovno Ghetto, who permitted *Kiddush haShem*. “But to advocate suicide is to encourage a lack of trust in God and thereby to encourage the Nazis in their attempt to eradicate the Jewish soul together with the Jewish

⁶⁸ Pesach Schindler, “The Holocaust and Kiddush haShem in Hassidic Thought,” *Tradition* 14, no. 1 (Rabbinical Council of America: 1973), 89.

⁶⁹ Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers*, 126.

body.”⁷⁰ Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, who was martyred in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, wrote that, “This is a time for sanctifying life and not a time for martyrdom,”⁷¹ which goes against what Maimonides wrote. This shows that there was not just one school of thought on this matter; opinions were varied, and methods of *Kiddush haShem* varied as well. In his book, Rabbi Shimon Huberband talks about a number of different situations of martyrdom, many of which involve defiling the sacred. One such example is from September 1939, when German officers drove up to the Synagogue in Piotrkow and removed more than thirty Torah scrolls and left them in a vacant lot to be destroyed by the natural elements. The scrolls were rescued by a man named Avrom Vayshof, who was martyred for his actions.⁷² This act of martyrdom is considered *Kiddush haShem*, because Vayshof died fighting for his faith. While there was a debate between whether or not *Kiddush haShem* was acceptable, generally it was not encouraged during the Holocaust. Huberband discusses “how Jews endangered themselves and sacrificed their lives while attempting to save synagogues and Torah scrolls which the evil ones set on fire.”⁷³ He gives many examples of Jews performing *Kiddush haShem* in Poland, all of which are moving and powerful testimonies. There are stories of Jews being beaten after refusing to shave their beards, Jews risking their lives to rescue the Torah scrolls, and even Christians fighting on behalf of the Jews. The majority of these stories end in death, as that is what is necessary to be a martyr in the traditional sense.

Abraham Joshua Heschel and Eliezer Berkovits

Eliezer Berkovits talked about the Holocaust in terms of God “hiding his face.” Berkovits retained a traditional Jewish faith despite the Holocaust, and used this imagery to do so. “God

⁷⁰ Michael L. Morgan, *Dilemmas in Modern Jewish Thought: The Dialectics of Revelation and History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 79.

⁷¹ As seen by the author at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre on February 28, 2014.

⁷² Huberband, *Kiddush haShem*, 249-250.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 248.

may punish us or may show indifference to us for a time (He may ‘hide His face’), but He still remains God in the full sense of the biblical image of God.”⁷⁴ This shows that Berkovits has a very complicated set of beliefs. He claims that God’s hiding of his face is so that the free will of humans can be exercised.⁷⁵ This can be seen as problematic since God is not held responsible for what happened. It makes the Holocaust very difficult for certain survivors to deal with, because for them it seems easier to blame God than face the fact that human beings were the cause of such suffering. Perhaps it is for this reason that the increasing secularization of the Jewish rituals is so prevalent; it is a way to practice the religion without having to believe in a God that has failed an entire generation.

God’s “hiding of his face” is not a new idea, however, as “the manner of its formulation testifies to the fact that there was a full realization in biblical and Talmudic times that there is indeed undeserved suffering in history.”⁷⁶ This happens frequently in biblical scripture as well. The Israelites lose many battles because God “hid his face”, like in Micah 3:4: “Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly.” Generally, God’s “hiding his face” happens because God is disappointed or angry at the Israelites. In a modern context, it would make sense that God would continue to hide his face at certain points in history.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, who lived in Poland as a young man, but left before the Nazis began to deport Jews, did not have the concentration camp experience.⁷⁷ He did, however, write about the nature of humankind and how God is experienced, which is imperative when looking at Judaism through the Holocaust. Heschel has a different idea from Berkovits when it comes to

⁷⁴ Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 347.

⁷⁵ Rynhold, “The Problems of Evil,” 318.

⁷⁶ Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology*, 355.

⁷⁷ Friedman, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel*, 7.

God. He says that trying to understand God is impossible; it is not a question of human beings in search of God, but God in search of human beings.⁷⁸ He argues that “all creative thinking comes out of *an encounter with the unknown*. We do not embark upon an investigation of what is definitely known, unless we suddenly discover that what we have long regarded as known is actually an enigma.”⁷⁹ If God is unknowable, then the right questions are not being asked. It is not a question of “why would God allow this to happen,” because that implies that humans are able to understand how God works and thinks.⁸⁰ Heschel talks of it more in terms of oneness. “God, to Heschel, is One, and ‘one’ means not just the only God, but unique, incomparable, indivisible. ‘One’ means that God is alone truly real, uniting mercy and law, that He is within us and within all things.”⁸¹ This, however, does not mean that all is God or that all is one. Heschel talks about it as a panentheism, or all-in-God theology:

Evil is divergence and confusion, that which divides man from man and man from God, ‘while good is *convergence*, togetherness, *union*.’ [...] But there is here no radical dualism of good and evil, natural and supernatural. In responding to God we find Him near to us. The world is not cut off from God, for his presence lingers, and through this presence we may sanctify all physical life and raise it to the beyond.⁸²

Heschel is saying here that community is one way that people can overcome the presence of evil; this was the case in many of the Jewish ghettos that were established during the Holocaust. Emmanuel Ringelbaum was a Jewish historian who was relocated and died in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1944. He described the ghettos as a place where “everything is forbidden but we do it anyhow.”⁸³ This, as well as the Yiddish idea of *iberlebn*⁸⁴ expressed the feeling that existed in

⁷⁸ Heschel uses “man” instead of “human beings.”

⁷⁹ Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology*, 82, emphasis in original text.

⁸⁰ The use of “thinks” here goes directly against Heschel’s idea that God is unknowable; the wording is anthropomorphic, but unfortunately there is no other good way to put it.

⁸¹ Friedman, *Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel*, 44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 44-45, emphasis in original text.

⁸³ Seen by the author at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre on February 28, 2014.

⁸⁴ *Iberlebn* should be translated here as “to overcome,” or “to outlive.”

the ghettos. There was a hope that ultimately the Nazis would be defeated, and the Jews would be freed.⁸⁵ This meant that people who lived in the ghettos still married and had children, and they continued with their lives as much as possible; this also seems to be what Heschel is advocating. If evil is divergence and confusion, then the opposite of that would be doing what is quotidian, as much as that was possible at the time.

Conclusion

What happens in Jewish philosophy and theology as a result of the Holocaust is that the writers tend to use wording that is rather violent: Fackenheim uses “rupture,” Berkovits talks about the biblical notion of God “hiding his face.” While the latter is not violent in itself, it is almost always associated with Israelite loss in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore has aggressive connotations. This violent imagery makes sense, then, because the Holocaust was an incredibly violent event. It is appropriate, perhaps even necessary, to discuss Jewish theology in these terms, because anything else makes the tragedy seem trivial, and that is adding insult to injury. Heschel and Berkovits talk about the Holocaust and modern Jewish theology in a way that, while still containing some violent wording, does not seem as harsh as the “rupture” that Fackenheim writes about. Perhaps this is because they did not have to go through the horrors themselves.

⁸⁵ Seen by the author at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre on February 28, 2014.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

The world that is manifest in the aftermath of the Holocaust is quite different from the one that went into the Holocaust. There were many consequences that developed because of this tragedy, including in part the theologies and philosophies of Jewish thought. The philosophers that were examined in an earlier chapter influenced later Holocaust philosophers and theologians such as Irving Greenberg, whom I will discuss below. Zionism and the State of Israel are also factors to consider with regards to changes in the post-Holocaust world. However, a large portion of this chapter topic is the secularization of Judaism, and how cultural Jews continue the traditions despite not believing in God.

It is often said that the cause of secularization within a faith is modernity.⁸⁶ While that can be a fair conclusion, when it comes to Judaism, it is not the only factor at play. As has been determined, part of the secularization of Judaism happened as a result of the Holocaust. One cannot come to a singular conclusion about the Holocaust; it is too complicated for that. All that can be said is that it was, indeed, an event that changed future affairs.

There was a fundamental shift in the way the world was understood after the Holocaust. Concentration camps changed the way that human beings understand each other and the way that the Jewish people understand themselves. Emil Fackenheim writes that “the events that are associated with the dread name of Auschwitz still pass human comprehension.”⁸⁷ A lack of comprehension does not mean that the event that occurred was not life-altering; it was, and it is. In a way, the Holocaust makes victims of everyone; those who lived through it are very clearly

⁸⁶ Stephen Sharot, “Judaism and the Secularization Debate,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 3 (Oxford University Press: 1991).

⁸⁷ Emil L. Fackenheim, “On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern-Secular World: Philosophical Reflections in the Light of Jewish Experience,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (MIT Press: 1967), 195.

victimized, but so too are the children of survivors.⁸⁸ All generations who come after the survivors are victims and it is in this way that it was all-encompassing. There are descendants of Holocaust survivors who are getting their grandparents' numbers tattooed on their arms,⁸⁹ which perhaps could be seen as passing the "survivor" torch to the next generation. By this, I do not mean that grandchildren of Holocaust survivors are victimizing themselves. Instead, by referring to the children of survivors as victims I mean to convey the devastating impact of growing up in a family in which parents are psychologically damaged by their experience in concentration camps.

Many different Holocaust writers have described the devastation in various ways, but one of the most powerful ways is how Irving Greenberg puts it; he calls the Holocaust an "orienting event."⁹⁰ This wording evokes a particular image, without insinuating anything negative or positive. In my view, Greenberg succeeds where Fackenheim does not. Though the concepts are similar, Greenberg's "orienting event" allows for positive results from tragic events, whereas Fackenheim's "rupture" conveys a more final, destructive image. David Singer writes in "The New Orthodox Theology" that Greenberg and Fackenheim's theologies were similar, and they were greatly influenced by Elie Wiesel.⁹¹ What comes from all of these writers is just how unbelievable the Holocaust was. The understanding that these were acts committed by human

⁸⁸ This idea can be seen in many pieces of Holocaust literature, but the most notable example is Art Spiegelman's two part graphic novel *Maus*. It tells the story of Spiegelman's father's experience in the Holocaust, but it also deals with Spiegelman's inability to connect with his father as a result of that experience. Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1991) and *Maus: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1991)

⁸⁹ This movement is very popular among Millennials, although it is seen as controversial within more conservative branches of Judaism as tattoos are forbidden in Leviticus 18:28. It seems to be a question of either honouring one's ancestors or honouring the law.

⁹⁰ Irving Greenberg, "Religious Values After the Holocaust: A Jewish View," in *Jews and Christians After the Holocaust*, ed. Abraham J. Peck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 66.

⁹¹ David Singer, "The New Orthodox Theology," *Modern Judaism* 9, no. 1 (Oxford University Press: 1989), 42.

beings is not an easy one to accept in this day and age, nor was it as easy in the 1930s. As Greenberg writes:

So powerful was modernist ideology that the victims would not believe that this was being done in the twentieth century – and could not take appropriate evasive action. The claim of the overall good (that is, prosecuting the war effort to its maximum) was used as the excuse not to bomb the death camps or to make special efforts to save the Jews.⁹²

It is for this reason that many people did not leave when things took a turn for the worse in Europe. It was not seen as something worth worrying about at the time; there was a new government and they had expected things to change. Perhaps this shows how people are unable to realize how bad things can get until it is too late.

While it is undeniable that the Holocaust was terrible, it also led to some good things. From the depths of the Holocaust sprung hope. It was at the core of Fackenheim's 614th commandment: keep the other 613, and continue the faith. Michael L. Morgan gives a few examples of this hope:

First, we notice that Jews today cling to Jewish survival and identification; they underwrite Jewish hope; they show guarded optimism in human goodness or at least in human capacity but an optimism nonetheless. This conduct can be interpreted as responsive to the Holocaust.⁹³

The fact that there are Jewish communities in cities such as New York and Montreal show this determination to keep the faith alive. Many of the Jews discussed in an earlier chapter consider themselves Jewish because they feel they need to be, and not necessarily because they believe; this shows that the Holocaust changed what being Jewish meant. Irving Greenberg talks about post-Holocaust theology as being a “voluntary covenant”; God broke the covenant made with the Jews by not caring for them during the Holocaust, and so in order to keep some sort of

⁹² Greenberg, “Religious Values After the Holocaust,” 69.

⁹³ Michael L. Morgan, *Dilemmas in Modern Jewish Thought: The Dialectics of Revelation and History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 84.

connection with God, Jews are participating in a voluntary covenant with God.⁹⁴ David Singer writes about Greenberg's theology, and makes a number of observations regarding how Jews in post-Holocaust society live:

As evidence of [a] voluntary covenant, Greenberg points to such elements in the post-Holocaust situation as the willingness of Jews to have children; the refusal of Jews to consciously assimilate; the continued concern of Jews for one another; the rebuilding of institutions of Torah study; and the establishment of the State of Israel.⁹⁵

The establishment of the State of Israel as a manifest fruit of the Zionist movement⁹⁶ was one of the most consequential results of the Holocaust. This movement shows that there was a need for the Jewish people to find a place where they could exist without fear. It is an example of how the Holocaust made them stronger. It was a horrible tragedy, and it prompted other nations to support the establishment of a Jewish state.⁹⁷

The Jewish hope can also be seen in the movements that stemmed from the Holocaust. The most notable of these is the *Ba'alei T'shuva*, which I discussed above. The fact that this movement existed at all, let alone became popular, shows that Judaism rebounded in a big way. The phenomenon of returning to the faith, which occurs with the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, as well as within the counterculture movement of the 1960s, is further evidence of Judaism's resilience.

Perhaps the best example of Jewish hope is the concept of *Kiddush haHayim*. In contrast with the earlier concept of *Kiddush haShem*, *Kiddush haHayim* is about conserving life. As

Pesach Schindler writes:

⁹⁴ Singer, "The New Orthodox Theology," 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁶ The modern Zionist Movement began in 1897 in Switzerland by a journalist named Theodor Herzl. Herzl's idea was that Jews could only be safe in their own political state, and so the Zionist movement advocated for a purely Jewish homeland. This was partially achieved in 1947 by the establishment of the State of Israel.

⁹⁷ In 1947, the newly formed General Assembly of the United Nations established the State of Israel as one of the U.N.'s first official acts. There were 51 countries included in the General Assembly, and all of them voted in favour of this. Included in this number were Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, and Australia, among many others.

Rabbi Simcha of Parsischa taught that a Jew involved in the process of life, as a partner of God in creation, bears witness to God's greatness. Therefore, 'when a Jew dies, a member of God's chosen people, the Lord takes the loss to heart, since this represents one person less to glorify and sanctify His Name.'⁹⁸

To fulfil the biblical covenant from Genesis, it is important that Jews continue to worship God; in order to do this it is necessary for them to stay alive and participate in *Kiddush haHayim*. While Schindler does not go so far as to say that survivors of the Holocaust perform this act, I will. Gene Klein, a survivor of the Holocaust, used *Kiddush haHayim* theology inadvertently during his time in Auschwitz. Klein told himself that "if the Nazis kill me, they win. If I stay alive, I do," and this was how he survived.⁹⁹ While *Kiddush haHayim* and *Kiddush haShem* are concepts that are much older than the Holocaust, interpretations of them have changed significantly since that time. Schindler talks about Rabbi Nahman, who made the distinction of what exactly *Kiddush haHayim* was. Nahman describes it as feeling and experiencing the pains of death and torment without actually dying.¹⁰⁰ This understanding is not the mentality that was used during the Holocaust. There, the interpretation of *Kiddush haHayim* was to stay alive at all costs. This idea could be taken so far as to say that any writing about the Holocaust is an act of *Kiddush haHayim*. As time goes by, more and more Holocaust survivors die of old age. When the day comes that there are none left, all that will remain are the stories told by their children and grandchildren.

Greenberg points out that religious tradition faces serious issues as a result of the Holocaust. He writes that both Judaism and Christianity are "religions of redemption," and that

⁹⁸ Pesach Schindler, *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1990), 70

⁹⁹ Emily Tess Katz, "Holocaust Survivor Gene Klein Recounts Haunting Experience Fighting To Stay Alive Against The Nazis," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/25/holocaust-victim_n_5212846.html?&ncid=tweetlnkushpmsg00000055, accessed April 25, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Schindler, *Hasidic Responses*, 70.

they profess a compassionate God. This, obviously, was challenged during the Holocaust.

Greenberg writes:

[The Holocaust] is counter-testimony which undercuts the persuasiveness of both [Christianity and Judaism] and contradicts the hope they offer. Thus the absolute worthlessness of Jewish life in 1944 (children were burned alive to save one-half of a cent's worth of gas) is the devil's testimony to the lack of value in the human. Similarly, the degradation of the humans in the camps testifies that the human is a thing to be used up.¹⁰¹

The author expresses a concern that avoiding discussions of the horrors of the Holocaust by Jews and Christians undercuts the credibility of these religions.¹⁰² It is nearly impossible to reconcile the idea of a compassionate and loving God with the horrors of the Holocaust, especially if that God is supposed to be omnipotent and omniscient. In an attempt to resolve this, the idea of the voluntary covenant comes into being. The voluntary covenant is an idea that Greenberg coined; it says that the original biblical covenant between God and the Jews was broken by the Holocaust, and so in order to continue practicing the religion, Jews must make a voluntary covenant, wherein they practice Jewish rituals because they want to rather than because they are obligated to do so.¹⁰³

The immigration of European Jews to various parts of the world allowed for the spread of what some would call "Yiddish culture." Dan Diner writes about this:

Beyond all other specificities, [the Holocaust] assumes a special importance because of the fact that its main victims were persons of Jewish descent. This fact does not automatically assign the Jewish victims some kind of superior moral standing, as compared with other victims of Nazism. Rather, it holds an important psychological and cultural fact: namely that the Jews continue to occupy a special place in Western consciousness.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Greenberg, "Religious Values," 71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 180.

One of the most important things that is mentioned within Holocaust studies is that this genocide was not a “traditional” genocide, if such a thing exists. It was an extermination of a people for a seemingly arbitrary reason; with other genocides, it was a matter of race based on geographic location. With the Holocaust, however, it was a matter of discrimination and oppression based on a belief system that doubled as an ethnic identity.¹⁰⁵ This meant that even if a person did not consider themselves Jewish, but their parents or grandparents did, the person could be sent to a concentration camp. This marks the first time that hatred of this nature had happened on such a grand scale. It is for this reason that “the ethnic or national component in Jewish identity may be the focal one for the majority of Jews in both the diaspora and Israel, but it is expressed through symbols taken from the religious heritage.”¹⁰⁶ Therein lies the key to secular Judaism. While it is not exactly what Fackenheim was discussing with the 614th commandment, it is similar. It ends up being a question of what is more important: orthodoxy or orthopraxy. It would seem, at least for some secular Jews, that the answer is the latter. Stephen Sharot points out that “rather than [rejecting] religious symbols, most contemporary secular Jews tend to reinterpret them, and this has meant that a level of religious observance has continued even among atheists and agnostics.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore it can be seen that the continuation of Judaism happens, though not necessarily in the way that people would expect.

In summation, the Holocaust was an all-encompassing tragedy. It affected not only Jews, but also society as a whole. The Holocaust contributed towards medical knowledge. The state of Israel was established and provided a homeland for Jews. There are strong Jewish communities in big metropolitan areas, as well as many prominent Jewish figures. Yiddish words have been

¹⁰⁵ This is only taking into account the Jewish victims. There were, of course, many other victims of the Holocaust who were not Jewish, and the reasons for their deaths were equally unwarranted.

¹⁰⁶ Sharot, “Judaism and the Secularization Debate,” 257.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

incorporated into every day English speech, and movies and books are still being written about the Holocaust. The way that people think about religion changed, as well; many of the survivors mentioned in an earlier chapter were religious because they felt that they had to be, and not necessarily because they really believed. The movement back to faith came with later generations, and it was the *Ba'alei T'shuva* movement that the most influential. It is this movement that brings along the hope for the future, and the reminder that some things cannot, and should not, be forgotten.

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