IN SEARCH OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE FOR THE HOLOCAUST

Pinchas H. Peli

THE CONTENTION THAT the Holocaust is without precedent in all of Jewish history, is, it would seem, true—if not from the point of view of the scope of the destruction (whether in absolute or relative terms), then certainly when one considers the explicit declaration of the goal and the precision of the planning which preceded it. From the general human perspective as well, the Holocaust embodied a thoroughly new combination of elements: For the first time sophisticated technological methods—the pride of the modern era—were used to serve the basest and cruelest designs.

Many argue[1] the Holocaust is unique, not only because it is the most ugly and powerful incarnation of evil in modern times, but also because it undermines certain accepted theories of historiosophy, sociology and anthropology. These and other disciplines are only just beginning to come to terms with this fact. Very few feel in all their being the full horror of the atrocities. Very few are driven by a sense of urgency to conceptualize and comprehend the Holocaust, if only to prevent—if possible—it happening ever again.[2] All will agree that this is a most difficult, depressing and repellant task. However, a lack of desire—or ability—to engage in that task does not diminish the urgency and the necessity of doing do. For the believing person, and for faith

Pinchas H. Peli is Senior Lecturer in Jewish Thought and Chairman of the Department of Hebrew Liberature at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba.

1 See Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, New York University 1970, pp. 69–70. Other peoples and races were killed in the Second World War, and their number even exceeds the number of Jews killed. Their deaths, however, and the destruction of various ethnic groups during and after the War are essentially different from the ideologically-motivated and premeditated extermination of the Jews; the latter began with the 'scientific' literature and research which preceded the Holocaust and which drew on traditional antisemitic literature, and ended with the actual execution of the plan—which sometimes went against the best interests of those who carried it out. The so-called 'holocausts' of the forced labor camps in Russia, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the massacres in Indonesia and Bangladesh, and the like—in each of these cases the essential differences between that 'Holocaust' and the Jewish Holocaust are manifest, although there are, of course, similarities and, perhaps, overt and hidden ties between them, as well. See also, Saul Friedlander, "The Historical Meaning of the Holocaust" (in Hebrew), *Molad*, spring 5735 (243–244) pp. 328–340; Norman Lamm, "Teaching the Holocaust", *Forum* 1976 (1), p. 57; the anthology, *Out of the Whirlwind*, edited by Albert R. Friedlander, New York 1968, p. 462 ff; and, from a non-Jewish perspective, Marcel R. Dubois, *Christian Reflections on the Holocaust*, pp. 4–5.

2 One of the few serious attempts that have been made in this direction was the four-day symposium held in St. John's Cathedral in New York City, in June 1972. It was organized by Professor Irving Greenberg, chairman of the Jewish Studies Department at City College of New York, and focused on the topic, 'Auschwitz: The Beginning of a New Era'. A similar conference was organized at the same time by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

Conservative Judaism 32:2 (Winter 1979)

in general, the need to grapple with one particular problem out of the many involved is imbued with special urgency. This problem is expressed in its simplest form by the unsophisticated masses as the question, Where was God during the Holocaust?

The question, even in this simplistic and almost trite formulation, is not so simple as it may seem at first glance. Embodied within it are also the following questions:

1) *What was God's role* before *the event, that is to say, did He take part in the decision to let it occur (if "A person does not raise his little finger here below without it being decreed from above"[3]) If He did, the question is–why?*
2) *What role did God play* during *the Holocaust, that is to say, was He there in the midst of the horrors and the terrible suffering? If so, the question then is–how could He (and He 'is a merciful God'[4])?*
3) *What was God's role* after *the Holocaust, that is, now that the world has returned to normal, that daily routine has been restored, that we once again go to the synagogue and fulfill His commandments, as if nothing had happened to shake our faith in God since time immemorial (do we not say in the prayers: "Our God and God of our fathers"[5]). If this is the case–how can it be possible?*

From the time of the Holocaust and to our day, many have tried to avoid the question (in both its simple and more complex formulations) and to deny its urgency. Some sought to do this by removing the Holocaust to 'another planet',[6] to another plane in time and space. Because of its tremendous existential and emotional impact, it is difficult to conceptualize or consciously to comprehend the Holocaust; There were those who sought, therefore, to set it at a distance, to repress it, to transfer the whole period between 1938 and 1944[7] to metahistory or metageography. The very term 'Holocaust', in Hebrew *shoah*[8], helps one to uproot those years from the regular flow of normative human history. This subconscious repression—among Germans, Austrians and their followers, it has

3 *Babylonian Talmud, Hulin* 7 b.

4 One of the thirteen divine attributes by which the God of Israel was revealed (to Moses) in Exodus 34:6–7, in the prophetical writings (Joel 2:13 and Johah 4:2), and the hagiographa (Psalms 86:15 and 103:8, Nehemiah 9:17, Second Chronicles 30:9 and more), and in the prayer book.

5 An expression which appears frequently in the prayers and whose source is in the Bible, e.g., Deuteronomy 26:7, etc.

6 The Holocaust as occurring on 'another planet'—was used by the author K. Izetnik, who has written several novels on the Holocaust, in his testimony at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

7 The Holocaust began, in an open and organized fashion, on Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938, even though discriminatory laws were promulgated before that, as soon as the Nazis came into power.

8 The source of this expression is the Bible (Proverbs 3:25, Isaiah 10:3 and 47:11), where its meaning is a 'sudden natural catastrophe'. According to historian Yoav Gelber, the expression came into common usage in Palestine; in Europe, the word 'destruction' (hurban) was used at first. In the letters of the Gerer Rebbe, one of the first refugees from the Warsaw Ghetto to reach Palestine in 1940, the term used to describe what happened in Poland is 'the scandal' (sha'aruriah), or *Mikhtavei Kadesh*, Tel-Aviv 5720 (1960), p. 64. The English word 'holocaust', today the accepted translation of the term 'shoah', is derived from sacral terminology, where it is used to describe a type of sacrifice, the burnt offering, which was entirely consumed on the altar.

recently become a conscious and deliberate repression—has enabled many to gaze with equanimity at the green grass growing over Theresienstadt and Treblinka.

Borrowing from this metahistorical and metageographical approach, metaphysics and theology, too, are ready to propose a 'demonization'[9] of the Holocaust, or other theories that temporarily or permanently free God from bearing the responsibility for what happened during the Holocaust. These attempts can, perhaps, provide momentary escape from a direct and painful confrontation with the problem that cannot but trouble the Jew who believes or wants to believe, every time he comes into contact with his Creator in prayer or the fulfillment of mitzvot. Sooner or later he will sense the hypocrisy of pretending, for he knows that God is truthful and hates falsehood and therefore one cannot deceive him.[10] He will recall again and again that the entire Torah and all the prophetical writings are a reminder to "remember days of old, seek the meaning of every generation."[11] Beyond abstract theological speculation, the Jew is required to search for the meaning of the historical events he participates in or is witness to, though it be a difficult and painful search. It is his obligation to extract the moral lesson from the events and reach conclusions[12] on the basis of what he sees happen; this is the meaning of the verses which begin "and ye have seen" (Exodus 19:4 and 20:22, Deuteronomy 29:1, etc.)

It is not always possible to arrive at a reasonable explanation of what has happened. Indeed, the greatness of many historical events lies precisely in the fact that they remain a mystery—except to Him who "calls the generations from the beginning"[13] and before Whom all mysteries are revealed. But if, in the case of the Holocaust, there can be no explanation,

---

9 See especially Richard L. Rubinstein, who uses the Holocaust as the basis for a radical Jewish theology, along the lines of the Christian 'God is Dead' theology, in his book *After Auschwitz*, Indianapolis 1966, particularly pp. 153–154. Cf. Professor Yirmiyahu Yovel's article, "The Holocaust as a Component of our Self-Identity" (Hebrew), *Haaretz* Daily Newspaper, 8 April 1975; and Haim Shatzker, "Trends in the Understanding of the Holocaust in Israeli Society" (Hebrew), ibid.

10 Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, 696: "Because the Holy One, blessed be He, is truthful (Rashi comments: He accepts truth and hates falsehood), therefore there is no deceit in Him" (the point is raised with regard to fixing the formulae of prayer).

11 Deuteronomy 32:7. It is not necessary to furnish examples of the idea that God directs the world and history, inasmuch as it is a constantly recurring theme throughout the Pentateuch, Prophets, rabbinical literature and the prayer book.

12 By reaching conclusions from experience, one comes, to a certain extent, to an understanding of the problem of the existence of evil in the world. The issue is presented clearly and is well-supported by source material in the brilliant essay by Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik "Qol Dodi Dofeq'. In this essay Rabbi Soloveitchik divides the evils of human existence into two types. One is fateful forced existence, in which man wonders about evil, cannot understand it and thereby suffers complete paralysis of thought and action. The other type is teleological existence, in which man confronts evil, grapples with it and from it comes to certain conclusions about his goal as a human being. The essay can be found in *B'sod Hayahid v'hayahad: Selected Writings of Rabbi J.D. Soloveitchik*, ed. Pinhas Peli, Jerusalem 5736; see especially pp. 333–347.

13 Isaiah 41:4. This is the feeling the author of Job wishes to convey when he silences *Job who demands* explanations. For additional discussion, see below.

there can be a response[14] and the possibility of learning from the event, based on the recognition that the event does have meaning. This meaning is neither outside God nor outside history; and in any case it is not outside or beyond language, which must serve to express meaning.

And this brings us to the problem on which our discussion will focus: to find a religious language in which we can express our understanding of the Holocaust.[15] Let us stress immediately—we are not referring to theodicy. Any attempt of that kind—and such attempts do exist, as we shall see further on cannot, as it might seem at first glance, answer the three questions we derived from the trite formulation, Where was God during the Holocaust? Moreover, it would seem that in every attempt at theodicy on our part (we who were not in the Holocaust), there is a measure of hubris and arrogance that sometimes borders on sanctimonious cruelty, that does not agree with the spirit of Jewish prayer[16] nor the Jewish characteristic par excellence—as formulated and developed by the Sages—"a merciful people, the descendants of merciful people."[17] Any vindication of God implies the ascription of guilt of one kind or another to the Jewish people; the humility and empathy we feel regarding the victims of the Holocaust prevent us from easily accepting this approach.[18] In our search for a religious language suitable for the Holocaust, we do not intend to explain—much less to justify or excuse. Nor do we have in mind a sacral language, but rather a descriptive vocabulary borrowed from the sphere of religion (as distinct from the quantitative terminology of statistics, for example, or the qualitative evaluations of history and politics) with which we can describe the Holocaust. We hope that such a language at the very least will enable us to arrive at the question J.C. Magnes posed in his lecture at the opening ceremony of the 1945 school year at Hebrew University. (His treatment of the subject is one of the most penetrating ever written in the theology of the Holocaust, even though it was proposed before the full scope of the destruction had become known).[19]

---

14 An anthology of material relating to this subject, entitled *Readings for Religious Responses to the Holocaust*, ed. Pinhas Peli, was published by the School for Overseas Students of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1973. Some material from the anthology will appear further on in this article.

15 The problem of 'religious language,' which is central to classical theology and philosophy of religion, has received special attention in modern empiricist and analytical philosophy. See the interesting anthology, *Words about God*, ed. Ian T. Ramsey, New York 1971 and I.T. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, New York, 1975.

16 See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, New York 1954; Jacob Y. Petuchowsky, *Understanding Jewish Prayer*, New York 1972; and Yosef Heineman, *Prayer in the Thought of the Sages* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 5720. Unlike Christian prayer whose main theme is "Let Thy will be done", our forefather Abraham is not prepared to justify the judgement by saying "God, You are just", and instead asks difficult questions.

17 Yebamoth 79a; Baitza 326.

18 See the introduction to Eliezer Berkovitz, *Faith After the Holocaust*, New York 1973, pp. 3–6 and note Berkovitz' valid reservations below.

19 J.L. Magnes, "For Thy Sake are We Killed the Day Long" in *In the Perplexity of the Times* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1946, pp. 43–50.

Magnes put his question—not accidentally[20]—in the mouth of the great lover of Israel, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, in the following form:

> *"I do not ask, Master of the Universe, that You reveal to me the mysteries of Your ways–I could not comprehend them. I do not want to know why I suffer; my only desire is to know if I suffer for Your sake."*

It would seem that this, 'for Your sake', is also too much to ask when we seek a starting point for a vocabulary appropriate to the tremendous impact of the Holocaust. For us it is enough to reformulate the end of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak's question thusly: "I do not want to know why I suffer . . . but only if You know that I suffer." That is, can we continue to speak with each other as "I—Thou" or "I/He/Thou"[21], as we were taught to do by Jewish tradition until the Holocaust—and if so, how? In talking of religious life it is impossible to accept Wittgenstein's logical prohibition on the use of metaphysical sentences which are not descriptive sentences.[22] The believer, at least in the Judaism of prayer, Torah, and mitzvot, which keep him at all times in the presence of God, will examine Wittgenstein's argument and maintain: what is impossible to speak about, must be spoken about! This speech, however, must not be mere prattle or verbiage; it is spoken in God's presence, and a person must 'place his soul in the palm of his hand before he opens his mouth.[23] And if he lacks a descriptive language he must strive to find one or to create one. This, then, is the pressing and difficult problem of finding a religious language suitable for the Holocaust;[24] on its solution depends, to a certain extent, the very existence and continuity of the two-way communication between man and God which is the essence of the Jewish experience from the Bible onwards.

The language we are seeking will be required to address itself to and deal with things that actually occurred, whose existence is not open to

---

20 The character of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, well-known in popular Hasidic tradition as a lover of Israel and their defender who brings their complaints before God, appears frequently during the Holocaust, including the belletristic literature of the period. Cf. Isaac Manger, "Brogez", in *Lied un Balade*, Tel-Aviv: Letzte Naias (5704), p. 459, and Uri Zvi Greenberg, "At the end of roads stands Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev and demands an answer from on-High" in *The Streets of the River* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv 5711, pp. 271–275.

21 In the Jewish tradition, communication between man and God is always in the second person form of address "Thou" ("The person praying should always see himself as standing facing God's presence"—Sanhedrin 22a). Sometimes it is a direct "I—Thou" as in Buber and Rosenzweig (see M. Buber, *I and Thou* Edinburgh 1970) and the booklet by Rivka Horowitz, *On the Composition of Buber's 'I and Thou'*, for Rosenzweig's contribution to this terminology). Sometimes man's relationship to God is not direct but passes first through a stage of awe-preceding-love, a kind of "I-He-Thou"; see J.D. Soloveitchik, *"The Lonely Man of Faith", Tradition* vol. VII, No. 2, summer 1965, pp. 5–67.

22 Quoted in Joseph Schachter, *Judaism and Education Today* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv 5726, pp. 28–29 and Judaism: *An Anthology* (Hebrew), ed. Joseph Bentwich, Tel-Aviv 5728, p. 7.

23 "A man's prayer is not answered except if he place his life in his hand"—Taanith 8a.

24 On the difficulties of religious expression in general see Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Part one, end of chap. 50.

doubt, events which were part of human history and therefore known to God and in which He participated, actively or passively.

According to any Jewish conception of God, it is impossible to remove Him, for an hour or forever, from history and from the world He has created and in whose existence and fate He is involved.[25] The search for a religious language with which to describe the Holocaust is based on the assumption that it was not mere coincidence, nor even a combination of historical and political circumstances, in the usual 'way of the world'[26]—but rather that the Holocaust had meaning for God who sees and knows all (even when, willingly or unwillingly, He hides His face). God cannot remain outside the meaning of the Holocaust and in any case not outside the language human beings use to express that meaning or the lack of it.

Again, this meaning is not in any sense a justification. Meaning can also be negative. Today, it seems, it is an open question whether or not Job actually became convinced, accepted the judgement and was resigned to it, after he heard God speak to him from the storm.[27] The Biblical text does not say; it leaves us only with God's words, thus keeping Him, right or wrong, in the picture. And from that to our question: In what language did God speak—or did we speak to and about Him—from within that storm which raged between 1938 and 1945, or, if you wish, 1933 and 1948?

During the Holocaust and in the years that followed it, many attempts were made to grasp the meaning of the Holocaust in religious terms.[28] These attempts can be categorized according to a few archetypal models drawn from the treasure-house of Jewish thought, primarily from the Bible—which is, naturally, the main source of religious thought on all that relates to the understanding of God and His ways. These models may aid us in our search for an appropriate religious language in which to elucidate an approach to the Holocaust. The common denominator in all these attempts to create a typology of the Holocaust is the shared concern with theodicy, that is, with vindicating God or justifying language, which is all that we are seeking.

Between those who are ready to give up in advance any possibility of

---

25 Cf. A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, New York 1955, pp. 235–248 and 412.

26 As opposed to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, the Jewish People and the State of Israel* (Hebrew), Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv 5736, p. 410 ff. and ibid, p. 92: "Historical events—for humanity in general and for the Jewish people in particular—are indifferent in themselves from the point of view of any religious evaluation."

27 For the various solutions suggested for the riddle of Job from Jewish, Christian and literary perspectives, see *The Dimensions of Job*, ed. Nahum Glatzer, New York 1969.

28 See the works of Fackenheim, Berkovitz, Rubenstein cit. as well as several chapters from Peli, op. cit. See also the chapter entitled "The Holocaust and Contemporary Judaism "and Jacob Neusner's article in *Understanding Jewish Theology*, ed. Jacob Neusner, New York 1973, pp. 177–194. See also the selected bibliography relating to "The Meaning of the Holocaust from a Religious Perspective" at the end of the anthology *I Believe* (Hebrew), ed. Mordekhai Eliav, enlarged edition, Jerusalem 1969.

a solution[29] and those who are ready to announce that the Holocaust 'proves' there is no God[30]—a whole spectrum of religious responses exists. Categorizing them according to the models mentioned in passing above, we can present some of the main ones as follows:

Model A: The First Adam

The model here is clear and simple: the formula of sin and punishment. Adam, who sinned by violating God's command, is expelled from the Garden of Eden and is punished. This is a classical pattern which appears frequently in the Bible (although, it will be said, this is not an exclusive explanation of the existence of evil, of every kind of evil; alongside it is the other classical model expressed in the question "why do the righteous suffer?").

One can raise some immediate objections to this model:

1) Does there exist a sin enormous enough to justify such a punishment as the death of six million human beings, who were gathered together from different countries to be killed only because they shared one characteristic—they were Jews. Therefore, the sin that brought retribution upon them must be connected with that one common characteristic—i.e., their Jewishness.

2) If only a part of those who were judged sinned—and how could it be possible for them all to have committed the same sin, when they consisted of religious people and secularists, believers and heretics, men and women, old people and young people, nationalists and assimilationists, Hasidim and Mitnagdim—if only some sinned, what about the innocent, why were they punished?

These two questions—and the bold attempt to apply the model of sin and punishment to the Holocaust—have been answered and commented on in the rabbinical writings and religious literature of the last generation. The answers are not limited to a vague general declaration that "You are just no matter what come upon us, you acted wickedly"[31], but point explicitly to the nature of the sin which led to the destruction. This type of

---

29 It is the opinion of Rabbi Issachar Jacobsohn (*Deot*, spring 5722) that "regarding the problem of the Holocaust, we must give up the idea of arriving at a rational explanation, in order to remain believers, fearing the Lord and doing what is right . . . Job taught us to believe in God, to trust in a divinity that seemed to him immoral. Perhaps it is possible to use what Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gvirol wrote in *Keter Malkhut*, with a slight change of words: "I run away from You to You"—'from You', from a divinity whose ways I cannot understand, I run to my unshaken faith in God, Blessed be He . . . Our generation requires a resilient faith and demands much from the believer. Human reason cannot comprehend the catastrophe and the fate of one-third of our people, but our faith in God remains unshaken as Job showed his generation and ours."

30 Material dealing with this subject has been collected in Alexander Donat, "A Voice from the Dust: "Wanderings in Search of God" (Hebrew), *Yalkut Moreshet*, (21), Sivan 5736; see also the response of Moshe Unna, "Who Shall Heal Thee", *Yalkut Moreshet* (22), . .Kislev 5737.

31 This quotation from the confessional prayer for the Day of Atonement is followed by the long lists of sins in the "Ashamnu" and "Al Het" prayers. Vindication of the judgement does not free one from the responsibility of seeking out the sins which brought on the judgement. By seeking out the sins, one arrives at a vindication of the verse, "The Rock!—His deeds are perfect, Yea, all His ways are just."

literature abounds in allusions, citations and quotations from Scripture, rabbinical works and pious texts. The second objection is answered by citing the well-known principle that when God's anger is kindled, the righteous suffer along with the wicked[32], and the righteous individual is judged along with the wicked community.[33]

Three main sins are mentioned in this context:

a) *The sin of Zionism*, i.e., the attempt to hasten the final redemption by immigrating to the land of Israel en masse before the coming of the Messiah. The attempt is construed as a breaking of the oath God made the people of Israel swear, that they would not 'climb the wall' (or 'go up [to the land of Israel] like a wall [i.e., all together]' nor rebel against the nations among whom they were dispersed and with whom they lived all the time they were in Exile.[34] The breaking of the oath by the people of Israel caused God to let them become fair game for all, as He on His part was no longer bound to protect them. This idea is developed with passion and in great detail by the Satmer Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum. As he presents it in his various books,[35] the issue is clear: because the Jews sought to end the Exile before the appointed time, the Exile 'finished them', as punishment for having tried to hasten the process of redemption.

> *"In every generation before this one, whenever trying times came upon the people of Israel, they sought to discover why this was so, what sin had caused it, so that they could repent and return to God, blessed be He, as we have learned in the Bible and the Talmud . . . But now in this our generation, there is no need to seek out the sin which has brought the trouble upon us, for it is stated explicity and openly by the [talmudic] Sages. They told us specifically what they had learned in the Bible, that breaking the oath not to 'climb the wall' and not to try and hasten the redemption would cause God to*

---

32 See Baba Kama, 92a and in the Mishna, Negaim 12:6 ("Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor") and Succah 56b.

33 See at length Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, Chap. 3, Paragraphs 1–2; ad. loc., Lehem Mishneh, and the source in the Babylonian Talmud, Kedushin 406; it is possible that this is what Rabbi Akiba was referring to when he stated (*Pirke Avot*, 3:18):"

34 Rabbi Yosi in the name of Rabbi Hanina (Ketuboth IIIa) said: Those three oaths (written in the Song of Songs 3:5)—what were they? One, that the [children of] Israel should not 'climb the wall' (Rashi: together, with force). Two, the one that God made Israel swear, that they would not rebel against the nations of the world. Three, that God made the nations swear, that they would not oppress Israel excessively . . . Rabbi Eliezer said, God said to Israel: If you keep your oath—good; if not—I will let you become fair game for all, like the wild deer and antelopes.

35 "Sefer Vayoel Moshe . . . An Explanation of the Laws Pertaining to the Three Oaths, etc. . . . that I gathered and selected from reliable and clear sources thanks to the mercy of God and the merit of my holy fore fathers and teachers . . . [by] Yoel Teitelbaum . . . Second edition with supplements, Brooklyn 5721." The book, which was written in a caustic style bordering sometimes on outright hatred of Israel and enmity for the Zionists, caused a furor in religious circles. A great many responses to the book, opposing it and objecting to it, were published, notably by Haim Lieberman, *Der Rebbe und der Satan* (in Yiddish), New York 1949; Shmuel Hacohen Weingarten, *"Hishbati Etkhem: Studies and clarifications on the Subject of the Three Vows* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 5736; Rabbi A.H. Zimmerman, "On the Three Vows", *Hatzofeh* (daily newspaper) (Hebrew), 10 Elul 5733. After the critiques had been published and after the glowing victory of the Zionists in the Six Day War, the Satmer Rebbe once again took pen in hand and wrote *On Redemption and Transformation*, Brooklyn 5727, which strengthened his thesis that Zionism bears direct responsibility for the Holocaust.

let the Jews be fair game for all their enemies, just as the wild deer and antelopes are fair game to all hunters. And because of our many sins, this is what happened. The sectarians and heretics made all kinds of attempts to break that oath. They 'climbed the wall' and demanded for themselves sovereignty and freedom before the appointed time, which is equivalent to hastening the redemption, and they convinced many Jews to support the profane idea. . . . It is not surprising therefore that we have witnessed this immense manifestation of God's anger . . . and during the destruction even the most saintly and pious people were killed on account of those who had sinned and caused others to sin . . . and the divine wrath was most fearsome and terrible to behold."[36]

The punishment for hastening the redemption did not end with the Holocaust, according to the Satmer Rebbe, but has continued with the establishment of the State of Israel and the victories of the Six Day War. Rabbi Teitelbaum is not alone in his attempt to tie together the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel, though he is the only one who interprets both as part of the same punishment and divine testing.

"And those of the Children of Israel whom God let remain alive, in accordance with His oath that He will never totally destroy them, were also punished with a bitter and trying punishment, with that creation of Satan which has succeeded in acquiring impious sovereignty; this He has done in order to put the people of Israel to a great test. . . . We have not yet realized that all the troubles and tribulations which have come upon us were the result of those wicked people's sin. . . . and now whoever has a brain in his head can recognize the truth: that it is the transgression of those who lead others astray with the impure idea of Zionism, and it is all the deeds done for the sake of that impure idea, that have brought down on us all troubles and suffering."[37]

Even after the Six Day War, when it seemed that the State of Israel had had more miracles than trials and punishment, the Satmer Rebbe did not change his mind:

"And because of our many sins, now, too, this abomination is being done in Israel–that there are those who think and say that there were miracles and wonders performed as it were by God, just like the miracles accompanying the Exodus from Egypt, and they do not see that these things only increase the impure strength of the Zionists, who are a thousand times worse than the Golden Calf, inasmuch as the Golden Calf did not constitute complete heresy and Zionism does."[38]

Besides the above approach which claims that the sin of Zionism 'justifies' the Holocaust both apriori and aposteriori, we find another sin—none other than its exact opposite—indicated in a different example of the 'sin and punishment' model:.

b) *The sin of opposition to Zionism.* According to this approach God remembered the people of Israel in their exile, and a call went out for them to

---

36 *Vayoel Moshe*, p. 5.
37 *ibid.*, p. 8.
38 On Redemption and Transformation, p. 19.

leave the Exile and immigrate to the land of Israel; yet most Jews did not heed these signs of the coming redemption, and stayed where they were. Since the people did not want to end the Exile, the Exile finished them. This approach is most vividly expressed in the book, "Happy is the Mother of Sons" ('Em Habanim S'mehah'), by Rabbi Isachar Solomon Teichthal.[39] In contrast to the Satmer Rebbe's book, written and published many years after the Holocaust, Rabbi Teichthal's book was written and printed in Hungary while the Holocaust raged. The author wrote with full knowledge of what was happening;[40] the book is subtitled "b'amek akhor"—"in the vale of trouble." It was written, as that phrase suggests, in the hope that the Holocaust would not be complete, that there would be a "door of hope"[41] out of the "vale of trouble" (Hosea 2:17).

Rabbi Teichthal's argument is clear and well-supported by numerous citations from midrashic sources and pious texts.

> *"And after I have placed before you, my brother–the reader of this book, the words of the Sages and holy men of former times, you will see that already eighty years ago the Holy Spirit awoke . . . that we should return to the bosom of our mother [the land of Israel] and embrace the stranger no more, but rather devote all our strength and money and possessions to bur holy land in order to raise it up from the dust, build it up and improve it and raise the prestige of our kingdom . . . and to awaken our brethren the children of Israel to purchase property in the land of Israel from the Arabs. A special opportunity arose when the Sultan was involved in the [First World] War and in need of money, and was ready to sell the land of Israel, Transjordan and Syria for nearly nothing . . . if only they had influenced the people of Israel and persuaded them to participate in it–then how many thousands of Jews would have settled in the land of Israel, and how the land would have developed! How many Jews would have been saved thus from death, and, given life, could have saved more Jews, thereby fulfilling the injunction 'to save those escaped from death'! But because they opposed it–and not only opposed it but awakened such hate for the building of our land in the hearts of simple, pious Jews, that anyone who opened his mouth to speak of it or became excited about it himself, was considered disgusting and despicable. Thus they truly sowed hatred and disgust for our precious land . . . and fell into the sin of the twelve spies [whom Moses sent to spy out the land, Numbers 12–13] about whom it was said [Psalms] they spoke rebelliously against their God and despised the holy land." And what was their fate?–that they caused generations to lament their deed. And these [who oppose Zionism] have*

39 "Sefer Em Habanim S'mehah, regarding our redemption and the rescue of our souls from this final exile after we will do all that the Creator of the universe, our God and God of our fathers, has required of us and has commanded us with regard to the approaching redemption . . . written by . . . Issachar Teichthal . . . I prepared the manuscript of this book on the eve of the third day of Passover; I have seen this year 5703 [*1943*] in this capital city . . . 'in the midst of this vale of trouble' something of the terrible 'birthpangs' of the messiah' [i.e. the suffering which will precede the messianic age] which have come upon us during the present Second World War, and may God favor us that we end it with 'a door of hope'—to see the salvation of Israel and God's return to Zion speedily in our days, Amen . . . Budapest 5703."

40 The feeling of approaching disaster, as the destruction of Hungarian Jewry became more and more imminent, comes across very clearly when one compares the 'Second Preface' that the author added while the book was being printed with the 'First Preface'.

41 *Em Habanim S'mehah*, pp. 13–14.

caused even more lamentation; [because of their opposition] we have arrived at the situation we are in today and have stressed this abomination in the house of Israel, endless trouble and sorrow upon sorrow–all because we despised our precious land."[42]

These things were spoken and written from the heart, with the fearful atrocities of the Holocaust happening before the author's eyes as his book was being printed. He leaves the analysis of the past and moves on to concentrate on the present, continuing the same line of thought:

"Now we, the Children of Israel, are in great distress, God save us quickly, and suffering has become a matter of course; new troubles appear not from day to day but from hour to hour, so that if I were to recount them, all the pages in the world would not suffice, and I leave it to those who will write of it (later . . . But the main thing, to my mind, is to remember that we are in great trouble, with each new day's trouble greater than the day before–therefore now, certainly, we need the merit of our holy land to protect us and preserve us and save us from these straits . . . Our holy land will plead our cause so that He will remember us speedily with words of salvation and mercy, because our strength if failing. . ."[43]

The two theses cited above as examples of the 'sin and punishment' model are the complete opposite of one another; withal they both are based on authoritative texts from the halakhic and aggadic sources and from ethical and homiletic literature. It is interesting that both were written by learned rabbis raised in the same socio-cultural milieu of Hungarian Jewry. They both wrote what they did out of a deep spiritual urge, after they themselves witnessed and experienced the Holocaust. Perhaps this last point may somehow attenuate the cruelty inherent in the very act of vindicating God's judgement, justifying what occurred.[44] However, the polar contradiction between the two conceptions of the sin which led to the punishment we call the Holocaust, calls into question the validity of the theological assumptions on which the 'sin and punishment' model is based. In spite of this, the model has served as the point of departure for other explanations. Of the many trans-

---

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

43 *ibid.*, p. 22. Like A. Avihayil, *The Meaning of the Holocaust from the Perspective of Faith* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 5729, and others who see neglect of the Land of Israel as the sin which caused the Holocaust, Rabbi Teichthal bases himself on the words of Rabbi Jacob Emden (known as the "Ya'avetz", 1697–1776), who wrote in his version of the prayerbook as follows: ". . . this is the sin of our ancestors which caused generations to bewail it, and this is the cause of our suffering in our exile, so that not once but many times others sought to destroy us, and in every generation we had no peace because we forgot about living in the land of Israel. Not even one out of a thousand was moved to go there and settle. It seemed to us as we lived in security in the diaspora, that we had found ourselves another land of Israel and another Jerusalem. Therefore all these troubles have come upon us—while we dwelt in Spain and other countries."

44 The author of *Em Habanim S'mehah*, Rabbi Teichthal, died in the Holocaust "and was killed for the sanctification of the Divine Name on the tenth of Shevat 5705, God avenge his blood" (this additional note appears in second photocopied edition of the book, New York 5729). He who so desired to reach the land of Israel did not realize his dream while his opponent, the anti-Zionist Satmer Rebbe, was rescued from death by the Zionists, left Hungary on the famous train arranged for by Rudolph Kastner and reached the land of Israel. After living there for a few years, with the end of the war and the Israeli War of Independence, he moved to America and founded a Hasidic court. Today his congregation of hundreds of Hasidim in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is a center of outright opposition to Zionism and the State of Israel.

gressions and backslidings singled out in those other theories as having caused the Holocaust, we will mention only one more:

c) *The sin of assimilation*. Those who point to this sin see a direct correlation between the processes of alienation from and denial of Judaism that European Jewry had undergone since the Haskalah (Enlightenment), and the destruction of that Jewry in the Holocaust. The connection between the two is proven, in this case as well, by citations from traditional sources and attempts to theologize sociological processes. As an example of the latter, some have seen the principle of 'measure for measure' ("midah k'neged midah"—from the divine system of reward and punishment) at work in the fact that the decrees of destruction originated in Germany, the cradle of the European haskalah; this fact is taken as proof of the organic connection between the sin and its punishment.

Rabbi Menahem Immanuel Hartoum wrote along these lines:

> *"This denial of the principles of Judaism merits, from the Jewish point of view, the most severe punishment, 'measure for measure'; however, according to the same concept, God does not strike immediately, but rather, since He is slow to anger, gives the sinner a lot of time (in which) to repent. This is what has occurred in this case as well. According to the Sages, the rains preceding the [Great] Flood fell at first lightly, as rains beneficial for agriculture, in the hope that mankind would repent; they were sent as a final warning. Just so, in this case, God brought retribution on the assimilating Jewish people in a mild form, which occasionally had beneficial effects (such as the rise of the Zionist movement in the wake of the antisemitic outburst in France). Yet the relatively small and limited persecutions did not cause the people of Israel to repent, to give up their illusions regarding civil equality, assimilation, etc. And then the drop of rain became a flood . . .*
>
> *". . . It was not mere coincidence that God used the German people as His agent, to punish His people [It was not accidental that] the very country in which assimilation had reached its greatest proportions, in which the civil equality between Jew and non-Jew was complete, in which Jews had participated successfully in all aspects of German national life, in which the Jews had reached the peak of their identification with their adopted country–that it was this country which reminded the Jews in the most cruel and extreme manner that–despite their assimilation, despite their denial of their own nation's principal values, despite their acceptance of another religion, despite the sacrifices they made, in all good faith, for their adopted country–they were a foreign element in the state, to be persecuted and destroyed."*[45]

This argument is to a certain extent parallel to the first two approaches, in that it designates the Exile as the factor which produces the power that destroys those who live in it (whether the Jews reject their Exile or accept it). This argument, however, is formulated differently from the others: If the Holocaust had not brought about the physical annihilation of the Jews, they would in any case have suffered spiritual annihilation. Thus the Holocaust merely anticipates a situation which might have arisen and been even worse

45 *Deot* (Hebrew quarterly), Winter 5722.

for the victims themselves, who died (albeit against their will) as Jews; rather they die as Jews than have themselves and their children and grandchildren go on living as non-Jews.

Rabbi Hartoum's version of this idea was written some years after the Holocaust, in an effort to extract from the event lessons for the present, the argument first appeared, however, even before the Holocaust. One of the heads of the great Lithuanian Yeshivot, Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman, quoting the "Maggid of Kelem", wrote that "the sin of the new Shulkhan Arukh proposed by Geiger [the father of the Reform movement], will bring upon us another code of laws to the detriment of all the people of Israel, and in it will be written: Kill the best of the Jews! Kill the best of the Jews! God preserve us and save us!"[46] (Rabbi Wasserman was later killed in the Holocaust). In the introduction to his book of responsa *Ahiezer*, written on 3 Sivan 5739 (21 May 1939)—at the very beginning of the Holocaust, when no one could yet imagine what proportions it would later reach, the famous rabbi of Vilna, Rabbi Haim Ozer Grodzinsky, linked the Nuremberg laws and the burning of synagogues with the fact that these occurred in the countries in which the Reform movement "had struck root."[47] The correlation is presented as unassailable proof in a book by another great Lithuanian rabbi, Rabbi Jacob Israel Kanyevsky, who was known in the yeshiva world as "the prodigy from Staiplah" (he lives now in Bnai Brak). Rabbi Kanyevsky wrote that "we see in this the finger of God, because the rejection of Judaism's precepts in an organized fashion, and the decree ordering the extermination of the Jews (God save us), both came from the same evil country."[48]

It is interesting to note here that this vindication of God's judgement does not remain in the realm of theology but sounds instead like a popular or even secular sociological argument.

We find echoes of the same argumentation in the words of one Leibele Brodsky, a simple man of the shtetel, who stood on Kol Nidre night in the provisional synagogue in the ghetto and said:

> *"Tell me, Jews, what if Hitler had given the Jews the choice that all the other enemies of Israel gave us in all other times and places–the choice between conversion and death?– Would the alienated Jews of our generation, the unbelievers, pass the test, as other generations passed it? Only a few would have sanctified the Name of God in public, would have preferred death to conversion.*
>
> *"This time it is not a matter of religion but of 'blood', or 'race'. There is no way to*

---

46 See Elbanan Wasserman, *The Footsteps of the Messiah* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 5702, p. 61. The Maggid of Kelem, in whose name these ideas are brought, is Rabbi Moshe Isaac Darshan (1828–1899), a famous itinerant preacher, disciple of the founder of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter. For additional material about him, see S.Y. Gliksberg, *Hadrashah B'yisrael* ("Homiletics in Jewish tradition") (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv 5700, pp. 453–456.

47 *Ahiezer*, responsa, Vilna 5699.

48 *Hayyei 'Olam* (Hebrew—"Eternal Life"), 'a collection of sayings to strengthen faith and worship of the Creator', Rishon LeZion, 5732.

escape. The believer, the heretic, the assimilated, the convert and his descendants down to the third generation, Jews who had forgotten they were Jews, Jews who hated other Jews, gentiles who had had no idea that they were of Jewish origin–all these paid the price of their Jewishness in blood. All paid the penalty, all suffered the consequences. 'The people of Israel are responsible for one another." Is not the finger of God in the ideology of race? Is this only chance, only coincidence?"[49]

Another formulation of this argument justifying the punishment, this time without the religious component, can be found in the speech delivered by Isaac Tabenkin, Socialist-Zionist secular ideologist, at the 26th Zionist Congress:

"I feared a Holocaust, yet I knew there would be one. I fear assimilation even more. Is there anything worse than the destruction of the Jews? Assimilation is part of the destruction of the Jews. A Jew who has been killed–has not assimilated."[50]

As with the preceding arguments, one can raise several immediate objections to this one. Did the punishment achieve the intended effect? Did assimilation cease, or, perhaps, did it increase after the Holocaust? Did not the Jewish people become much poorer spiritually *after* the Holocaust?

Furthermore, every argument based on the 'sin and punishment' model places us in the peculiar position elucidated by Eliezer Berkovitz in the foreward to his book, *Faith After the Holocaust*.[51] We who were not in the hell of the deathcamps, how can we justify what happened, when among those who were there, some did not justify it. And even if there were some who justified it—what they are permitted to do is forbidden to us, since "We are not Job . . . We are only Job's brother," and the brother of Job cannot speak for Job, can express neither opposition to nor justification of the judgement, as if he were Job himself.[52]

This is perhaps one of the reasons that those who seek a theodicy of the Holocaust are not satisfied with the model of the First Adam, with the delineation of cause and effect within the framework of 'sin and punishment', but seek alternative models.

Model B: Cain Kills Abel.

God endowed human beings with free choice, with the capacity to choose life and the good or evil and death. This idea was given formal expression in Jewish law: "Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn towards the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If one wishes to turn towards the evil way and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so."[53] What happened in the Holocaust, therefore, is not God's responsi-

---

49 *Ani Ma'amin* (Hebrew—"I Believe"), ed. Mordechai Eliav, p. 28.
50 Y. Tabenkin, in the proceedings of the 26th Zionist Congress.
51 *Faith After the Holocaust*, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973.
52 *ibid.*, pp. 3–5.
53 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Repentance", chapter 5, Paragraph 1.

bility but rather the responsibility of man, who used his God-given potential of free choice and chose evil. It was man who set himself up as king of the world, after chasing the God of justice and mercy from it; in the kingdom of man alone, the Holocaust can and did take place. God asked Cain after he had killed his brother Abel, "What have you done?" But Cain avoided taking responsibility, acted pretentiously and asked in return, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Holocaust is therefore not God's problem but man's; and man transgressed the word of God and refuses to accept the responsibility for his actions. In this manner Abraham Joshua Heschel transfers the problem of the Holocaust to the human realm:

> *"Our world seems not unlike a pit of snakes. We did not sink into the pit in 1939, or even in 1933. We had descended into it generations ago, and the snakes have sent their venom into the bloodstream of humanity, gradually paralyzing us, numbing nerve after nerve, dulling our minds, darkening our vision . . . The outbreak of war was no surprise. It came as a long-expected sequel to a spiritual disaster."*[54]

In this approach Heschel is faithful to his view that the Bible is not man's theology, a book about God, but rather God's anthropology, God's concern for man.[55] The Holocaust is but another chapter—a dark and painful one—in the divine anthropology.—Man has failed again! Cain and Abel came into the world and were given the potential to establish the human race, to build the world, and to live long and well in it; yet instead—"And Cain rose up against Abel and slew him." (citation: Gen. 4:8) The entire guilt lies with Cain.

Yet even the Sages are not willing to accept this argument as it stands. They composed many stories and midrashim around this affair, the first murder in the world. Why did Cain kill Abel, they asked, and tried to discover his motives. And they answered: because of conflicting interests in matters of religion, property, rivalry for a woman and other reasons.[56] But if Cain is guilty (and accepts his punishment), what was the murdered Abel's sin? Why did he die? If the Nazis exercised their human freedom of choice and chose evil, why were particularly the Jews their victims? Heschel responds that the Jewish people is "God's stake in this world", witness to God's presence in the world and is, therefore, the first to be attacked by those who deny His presence and scheme against His guidance.[57] The Sages, however, are not willing to accept that argument either. They are not willing to free God of responsibility for Cain's 'free' act.

> *"Thus spoke Cain: 'Am I my brother's keeper?* You *are the guardian of all creatures, and*

---

54 "The Meaning of this Hour" in *Man's Quest for God*, New York, 1954, pp. 147–151.

55 See A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, New York 1955, p. 412.

56 See, for example, Genesis Rabba 22:7.

57 From this one arrives at the idea of the 'servant of the Lord' who suffers for the good of the whole community, as in "Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains he carried; whereas we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4), which is interpreted as referring to the Jewish people's fate among the nations of the world.

yet you demand account of me?!' What is this like? It is like a thief who stole some vessels in the night and didn't get caught. In the morning, however, the watchman caught him and said to him, 'Why did you steal the vessels?' He replied, 'I am a thief and did naught but exercise my skill. You are a watchman, your duty is to guard at the gates, why did you not use your skill? Thus spoke Cain, 'True, I killed him, but You created in me the evil inclination. You guard all creatures, so how could you allow me to kill him? It was You who slew him! . . .'[58]

Model C: The Binding of Isaac.

Many other models, taken from the Bible and from Jewish thought in subsequent generations, have been proposed in an attempt to anchor the Holocaust in Jewish tradition. Upon close examination, however, one discovers that the differences between the reality and the model outweigh any apparent similarities. Take, for example, the model of the Binding of Isaac, which is widely used in Holocaust literature and appears in the last words of those about to die (where these have come down to us).[59] Despite the empathic link we sense between—"Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest" (Genesis 22:2) and the victims of the Holocaust 'whom we loved'—how farfetched is the comparison! Can one imagine that it is God who commanded the binding—and sacrifice of six million? And who heard the command? Did Hitler's troops hear what Abraham heard? And finally, where was the angel who cried at the last moment, "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him!" (Genesis 22:12)—?

The story of the Binding of Isaac, according to the plain reading of the text or according to the midrashim composed about it, does not fit the Holocaust, neither from the perspective of Abraham nor from the perspective of Isaac. The use of verbal images from the story to describe motifs in the Holocaust is not a new phenomenon, however; it has many precedents in the history of Jewish martyrdom, in the poems and descriptions of the Jews who sacrificed themselves for their faith.[60] But it would seem that any comparison of this sort would only strengthen the supposition we made at the beginning of this essay, that the Holocaust stands alone, in its uniqueness and particularity in the whole of Jewish history and martyrology. The Holocaust and the story of the Binding of Isaac, with all the mystique inherent in it and the abundant commentaries written about it, will always remain two distinct and separate worlds.

Model D: Job.

Another Biblical model that comes to mind as a matter of course and is,

---

58 *Sefer Ha'aggadah*, part 1, chap. 19, p. 101, based on the Tanhuma midrash on Genesis, Genesis Rabba, chapter 31.

59 This image appears frequently in eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust. See, for example, M. Eliau, op. cit., pp. 45, 62 et al.

60 The rich and fascinating material on this subject has been assembled by Sholom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (trans. Judah Goldin), New York 1967. (originally published in *Alexander Marx* (Hebrew section) New York 1950, pp. 471–547.

indeed, frequently used is that of Job. The model can be formulated in various ways (and we have already mentioned it is essentially invalid to use, because we are only "Job's brother"; not Job himself). But beyond all the doubts and the attempts to deal with the central problem of the apparent lack of justice in God's behavior which fill the book of Job, the intention of the book is clear: as God finally convinces Job, there is no reason for man to make the effort to comprehend God's ways, and, in view of that fact, it is best that man keep silent. (Job 40:3—Behold, I am of small account, what shall I answer thee? I lay my hand upon my mouth.") If anyone can and ought to ask questions, it is God who asks man and not the other way around. (Job 40:7—"Gird up thy loins new like a man; I will demand of thee and declare thou unto me.") Man must be satisfied knowing he will never understand the ways of God (Job 42:3—" . . . Therefore have I uttered that which I understood not, things too wonderful for me, which I knew not . . .") and may take comfort in the fact of contact with God (Job 42:5—"I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee.").

Model E: Silence.

Silence in the presence of amazement is indubitably a legitimate religious response. Indeed, the power of the question we posed and our respect for the victims obligate us to respond with silence. But, in order that silence remain meaningful, it cannot be the silence of absolute shock which leads to paralysis of thought; rather it should be a silence which one can put into words and which *then* itself demands silence. This was Job's silence, silence which came after speech and not in place of it. Another example of just such a thundering silence is Aaron's silence after his two sons died "when they drew near before the Lord" (Leviticus 16:1).

> *"When the sons of Aaron died, he [Moses] said to him: Oh my brother! Thy sons died only that the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, might be sanctified through them. When Aaron thus perceived that his sons were the honored ones of the Omnipresent, he was silent, and was rewarded for his silence, as it is said, 'And Aaron held his peace' (Leviticus 10:3). And thus it says of David (Psalms 37:6): 'Be silent before the Lord, and wait patiently [hith-hollel] for Him, though He casts down many slain [halalim] of thee, be silent before Him.' And thus it was said by Solomon (Ecclesiastes 3:7): '[There is . . .] a time to keep silence, and a time to speak': Sometimes a man is rewarded for his silence; at others a man speaks and is rewarded for his speaking."*[61]

This kind of silence cannot alleviate pain nor provide solace for the troubled soul. On the contrary, it contains some note of the heroism born in suffering. In this manner the Sages explained the verse in Moses' song of Praise to God (Exodus 15:11), '"Who is a mighty (*elim*) one like unto Thee,—Who is like Thee among the silent (*ilmim*)—"Who is like Thee, mighty in self-restraint [literally: and hard]' (Psalms 39:9), that Thou didst

61 *Babylonian Talmud*, Zevahim 115b.

hear the blaspheming and insults of that wicked man and keep silent?"[62] God Himself, as it were, ordered Himself to keep silent, just as He orders those who love him to silence, when they come before Him with difficult questions.

> *"When Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters [of the Torah]. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand [i.e., is there anything wanting in the Torah that these additions are necessary]?' He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each little heaps and heaps of laws.' 'Lord of the Universe,' said Moses, 'permit me to see him.' He replied, 'Turn thee round.' Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of Rabbi Akiba's disciples and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master, 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied, 'It is a law given to Moses at Sinai', he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is my decree.' Then said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his reward.' 'Turn Thee round, 'Said He: and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the marketstalls. 'Lord of the Universe,' cried Moses, 'such Torah and such a reward?!' He replied, 'Be silent, for such is My decree!'"*[63]

Here we have silence which comes not from shock and the inability or the lack of desire to question and wonder. Rather, on the contrary, it comes as an answer to the question, as a response to the wondering. This silence comes to crown the mystery, the very same awesome and powerful mystery of the Giving of the Law at Sinai, or of the apparently unjust and cruel fate of Rabbi Akiba.

This answer to our question—silence—is the most difficult of all those proposed so far. At the edges of this silence, as it were, doubts begin to gather. Yes, I must keep silent. But, can it really be that this is God's decree? Can this be possible? Has anyone in our day explicitly heard the command which was given to Moses, 'Be silent!'—? Do we have in our day a Moses who could say to the bereaved Aaron, "Thy sons died only that the glory of the Holy One, 'blessed be He, might be sanctified through them"? Is there anyone today who could know unequivocally what Aaron knew, that 'his sons were the honored ones of the Omnipresent'?

If the answer to these questions is in the negative—or even in doubt—then the silence is no silence. And our first question is still unanswered: Where was God during the Holocaust?

Model F: The Eclipse of God

Those who sought an answer found one: God 'hid His Face.' The period of the Holocaust was a period of "the eclipse of God," in Martin Buber's

62 *ibid.*, Gittin 56 b.
63 *ibid.*, M'enahoth 29 b.

modern formulation,[64] similar to the eclipse of the sun or moon. This model, too, is taken from the Bible, whether it is seen as one of the theological mysteries, a basic attribute of God being that He is sometimes hidden and sometimes revealed, or whether it is viewed as punishment for the sins of mankind.

Thus we find in Isaiah (45:15): "Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself!", and in Deuteronomy (31:17–18): "Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide My face that day for all the evil which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods." The same fearful feeling that man experiences during the eclipse of God is expressed in many verses in the Psalms, especially in Psalm 44 (e.g., verse 24: "Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord! Arouse thyself, cast not off forever. Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?."

Without entering into the theological dilemma of whether God is in eclipse because of His essential nature or because of our sins,[65] something in us already rebels against the very application of such terms to the Holocaust. This terminology will not enable us to avoid the piercing question: where was He?, when the answer is: in hiding, in eclipse. The question remains: why did He go into hiding just at the time He was needed more than ever? Did those who suffered and died resign themselves to His eclipse at just that moment? Could they accept the fact of His absence with philosophical detachment, with theological equanimity?

Here is a section of the translation of the testimony of one German, as presented to the International Military Tribunal at Nuremburg:

> *"I, Hermann Friedrich Graebe, declare under oath: From September 1941 until January 1944 I was manager and engineer in charge of a branch office in Sdolbunow, Ukraine . . . on 5 October 1942, when I visited the building office at Dubno, my foreman Hubert Moennikes . . . told me that in the vicinity of the site Jews from Dubno had been shot in three large pits, each about 30 meters long and 3 metors deep. About 1500 persons had been killed daily . . . Thereupon I drove to the site . . . Armed Ukrainian militia drove the people off the trucks under the supervision of an SS man; who carried a dog or riding-whip. They had to put down their clothes in fixed places, sorted according to shoes, top clothing and underclothing. I saw a heap of about 800 to 1000 pairs, great piles of underlinen and clothing. Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells and waited for a sign*

64 See Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, New York 1952, and Emil Fackenheim, "On the Eclipse of God" in *Quest for the Past and the Present*, Boston 1968, pp. 229–243.

65 For a clarification of the theological issue of the Hidden God, see the preceding footnote and Berkovits, op. cit. p. 94 ff.; also André Neher, *Bekhol Zoth* (Hebrew—"Despite Everything"), Jerusalem 5737.

from another SS man, who stood near the pit, also with a whip in his hand. During the 15 minutes I stood near the pit I heard no complaint nor plea for mercy. I watched a family of about 8 persons, a man and a woman, both about 50, with their children of about 1, 8 and 10, and two grown-up daughters of about 20 to 24. An old woman with snow-white hair was holding the one year old child in her arms and singing to it, and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The couple were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about ten years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head, and seemed to explain something to him. At that moment the SS man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. . . . I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying already motionless on top of the bodies that lay before them . . ."[66]

The German man's testimony continues and describes everything in detail, great detail. We would have been interested to hear what the father said to his ten-year-old son, as he stroked his son's hair and pointed to the sky. Did he tell him that there is a God in Heaven who knows what is happening and who went out, temporarily, for a lunch-break and will return shortly? Did he explain to him that complex term "Deus Absconditus", the hidden God, and tell him why He was hiding just at that moment?

The order to fire given by the SS guard prevented us from hearing exactly what the father said to his son when he pointed to the sky. His words went down, together with the father himself and all the members of his family, into that pit near the city of Dubno, a pit 30 meters long, and 3 meters deep.

Model G: The Death of God.

Similar to the theory of the 'eclipse of God' is another theory, more extreme, which talks of the 'death of God'.[67] This theory—thus one must understand it—does not remove all possibility that God exists nor even that He revealed Himself to human beings and to the people of Israel. This is not an argument along the lines of "there is no judgement and no judge" ("Lait din v'lait dayan"—*leviticus Rabba*, p. 28), nor is it like that statement of the fool in Psalm 14:1 and 53:2, who says to himself "There is no God". Those, too, are perhaps legitimate arguments, but they are strictly outside the realm of the religious language for which we are searching. The 'God is Dead' theology, which appeared in Christian thought and to a lesser extent in Jewish thought,[68] posits that God once did exist, but at a certain moment He ceased to exist, receding into a kind of permanent eclipse.

All of the Christian 'God is Dead' theology, which is based on the madman's declaration in Nietzsche's book,[69] is completely and absolutely op-

66 Quoted in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (English edition), volume 8, p. 867, of the article on the Holocaust.

67 See, Bernard Murchland, ed. *The Meaning of the Death of God*, New York, 1967.

68 See Richard L. Rubinstein, *After Auschwitz*, Indianapolis 1966.

69 Frohliche Wissenschaft, published in 1882.

posed to the historical "Living God" of Judaism. Emil Fackenheim[70] has suggested that although we may accept this possibility as a 'midrash', it cannot be taken as a solution or final answer to our problem.

But even if this response relates to God at one horrible moment during the Holocaust, we have answered only one of the three parts of our original question. The other two parts—where was God before the Holocaust and where is He now, after the event?— are still unanswered. If "our God" is dead—what happened to "the God of our fathers"? The midrash which recounts how the Patriarchs and Matriarchs interceded with God on behalf of the people Israel at the time of the destruction of the Temple[71]—does it not put in doubt, from the Jewish point of view, the very possibility of seeing God, only through the eyes of one specific individual or one specific moment in history? The very name of the God of Israel implies all times, all tenses—He was, is, will be. The God of the Jews, the Creator of the world and its guide, He who made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, must always remain, if not within history, at least above it. Even when He is in eclipse, He continues to exist; and one can reach Him, one can penetrate the clouds with which He has surrounded Himself. He is the God of our ancestors in the past and our Living Redeemer in the future. He is bound (in spite of Himself!) to the Jewish people. He is still to be found among them, among their descendants who continue to act and create as Jews, who continue or wish to continue to stand before Him in prayer as Jews—even after Auschwitz.

The place of silence

Therefore, though it may well be that we shall never be able to justify the Holocaust or to comprehend it—resigning ourselves to this fact does not free us from the obligation, the need to find a suitable vocabulary, so that we can talk about it and give it an appropriate meaning in religious language—that is, the private and esoteric language of those who believe (just as there exists a private language between two lovers). This is not the language of the marketplace in which one can express anything and everything. And even when we find such a language, silence will still be a part of it. Unlike scientific language and merely informative messages, religious language is filled with meaningful silences, in the sense of (Psalm 65:2) "Praise waits in silence for Thee" (cf. Psalm 62:2). Here is silence as part of conversation, silence that incorporates a relationship with a 'thou' ("for Thee")—but not silence that ends all communication and removes all possibility of discovering meaning.[72]

Truly, when we come to ask for an explanation, for the answer to our

70 *God's Presence in History*, p. 77, where Fackenheim brings as an example the story, excepted from *Night* by Elie Wiesel, about God in the form of a Jewish boy hanged on the gallows.

71 *Ptihta to Lamentations Rabba, Sefer Ha'aggadah*, part 1, chap. 7, p. 6.

72 On the important role of silence in Jewish religious language from the Bible to the Holocaust, see André Neher, *L'exil de la Parole*, Paris 1970, and his Hebrew work, *Bekhol Zoth*, op. cit.

question "why?", we have no recourse but to wrap ourselves in silence. But the reality of the Holocaust exists and continues to influence our lives today, and we cannot pass over it or obscure it with silence. We have no choice but to reach for those levels of language which will enable us at least to answer the question "what?"—That is, what happened in the Holocaust? How can we describe it on a metaphysical, religious plane, beyond the statistical, historical, sociological and political terminology already at our disposal?

We have posed the question in the sphere of religion, but it has meaning and it is crucial outside that sphere as well, for it touches on the roots of our very existence and experience as Jews, as Jews who carry on an age-old tradition in which the language is inextricably intertwined.