

Dr. Berel Lang is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus,
University at Albany.

REASONING THE HOLOCAUST: ON GOD AND EVIL IN JEWISH THOUGHT

The need to account for evil in a world ordered by divine justice and understanding provoked Jewish religious and philosophical reflection long before the Holocaust. This “problem” of evil, immediately raised in the phenomenon of human suffering and loss, figured largely in the origins of Jewish philosophy (as in Saadya’s commentary on *Job* [c. 935 C.E.]). The Book of Genesis itself provided an earlier view of the knowledge of good and evil in its synthesis of cosmology and genealogy—the entry into the human world of moral conscience, ensuring that man must subsequently live with his own historical contingency and face judgment for the choices stemming from that¹: a *second* nature which then impelled the Biblical narrative and subsequent reasoning in Jewish ethical thought.

Nothing in that early history, however, defines a *distinctively* Jewish representation of the problem of evil or the connection it assumes between ontology and ethics—the relation between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. The common assumption of the connection between the “is” and the “ought” has been prominent in theoretical and practical ethics for as long as records exist of either, and the twentieth century dismissal of that relation as the “Naturalistic Fallacy” should be viewed in the context of that larger, contrary tradition rather than the other way around.² There could hardly be a stronger incentive for moral reflection (also, admittedly, for moralizing) than recognition of how badly some human lives have fared under a supposedly beneficent and all-powerful ruler.

¹ Cf. Saadiyah Ben Joseph Al-Fayyuni, *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. L.E. Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

² As in G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). Plato’s *Theaetetus* remains a *locus classicus* for both the assertion and critique of this view.

TRADITION

The frequent reminders that righteous people suffer and wicked ones prosper also confront counter-evidence, but even a few local examples—readily available—underscore the imbalance. The experience of debility in illness and pain and then of death’s erasure are both cultural and biological universals. However inventive a society’s rationalized accounts of loss and suffering, those disruptions and their explanations lodge in the social fabric and its “thick” descriptions. Furthermore, the issue these pose in a divinely ordered world surface in subsidiary difficulties as well—for one example, in the problem of voluntary evil-doing: how or whether a person can choose to do evil in full knowledge of its evil. The sophisticated debate in *Job* about the gap between divine justice and human suffering suggests a history in Jewish thought antedating that book’s composition (c. 500 B.C.E.); the “consolations” offered by his comforters as they urge Job to recognize his own responsibility for his suffering—an early version of theodicy—is unlikely to have been invented for the one occasion.

The motivation in Jewish thought for philosophical and religious reflection on the occurrence of evil is thus ample, and if that background presses no more urgently than others, it includes enough specific instances to have fostered the familiar lachrymose view of Jewish history. On the one hand, the world was found “good” on the days of its creation, and except for moments of mystical enthusiasm, later Jewish commentary never disputed that judgment. But at least as compelling was the stark recognition of individual and group suffering in people who seemed to deserve that condition no more (and often much less) than contemporaries who fared better, often much better. At least from the time of Rabbinic Judaism, the issue thus stated would recur in Jewish theological and philosophical discussion: how to reconcile misfortune, suffering, persecution, and exile with the goodness of creation and the role of an all-powerful and beneficent creator.

The internal constancy in conceptualizing evil is, furthermore, an often unnoticed aspect of its cultural past. In contrast to historical variations in other beliefs, few surface in the “normal” representations of evil. The absence from historical accounts of culture of anything like a “history of evil” is notable—against the evidence that conceptions and practices of evil, like other ideas and practices, have altered over time (perhaps even comprising a progressive history). But ethical reflection, in and outside Judaism, has typically emphasized the contrary position, treating evil as all-of-a-kind, effectively settled in character and motivation from its first occurrence. This innate capacity or inclination for evil-doing thus reflects an assumed constancy in human nature, one full-grown at birth. The

disobedience in the Garden and its attempted cover-up seemed effortless—as though, although we know better, it came from long practice. However one understands the Yetser ha-Ra [evil impulse] ascribed to man in the account of Noah, it is understood to persist unaltered in human nature. In contrast to its varied expressions, then, the *character* of evil-doing—the evil in it—is viewed as unchanging. If goodness and justice remain goals to be realized, the option of evil seems both present and constant.

Admittedly, except for the Draconian law of a single and harsh punishment for all crimes, ethical and legal violations and their corresponding punishments are typically distinguished by degrees of severity, both in and outside Judaism. The idea that punishments ought to fit the crime thus appears historically as a bedrock principle in systems of justice, notwithstanding cultural differences on which acts count as crimes or the degrees of their severity. However, the latter reflect differences in the consequence of such acts rather than in the acts themselves. The same disproportion carries over to instances of suffering or affliction in group-histories which are claimed to differ only quantitatively, not qualitatively: more or fewer victims and a longer or shorter period of persecution. Typically ignored here, too, are differences in the quality or character of the evil-doing itself.

Divergent judgments of the same event, furthermore, tend to obscure questions about the judging. A war that is catastrophic for the losers, thus (for them) challenging the claim of Providence, is to the victors evidence *for* that claim. An event can appear from one side as injustice and evil; from the other, as good—with both conclusions based on the same evidence. Survivors of a massacre thank God and cite the outcome as miraculous, but their reaction ignores the theological and ethical implications for those who did not survive and who would not have been thankful at all. That people differ about which acts are unforgivable is still another indicator of the historicity of evil-doing, but this implication, too, often gives way before the conclusion that ultimately, evil-doing and its corollary, suffering, are essentially all-of-a-kind.³

History, however, has a way of undoing the most conscientious assumptions or expectations, and the Holocaust has had just that unsettling effect on moral and religious thought. Evidence of this shift appears in the claims designating the Holocaust as unique or a “novum,” a breach

³ Susan Neiman sees Rousseau as “historicizing” evil, but she seems here to speak about the history of the individual agent, not the structural history of evil as such. See her *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 36-46.

TRADITION

or turning point in moral history in general and in Jewish history specifically.⁴ Such characterizations start out from accounts of the systematic cruelty inflicted during the Holocaust as “indescribable,” “beyond words,” and “ineffable.”⁵ Often these terms are meant as figures of speech rather than literally, but even then a literal core remains: the fact of the Holocaust involves intentional cruelty on a scale that provides a *prima facie* opening for the claims of rupture in moral understanding. Any such claim, moreover, raises historical analysis to a meta-historical level, historical reality then challenging the very framework of theological and philosophical reason—as in the stark question “Where was God in Auschwitz?” “Auschwitz” is in that question a metonym for Nazism, and the related expression, “*After Auschwitz*” underscores the same demarcation: a transformative moment in moral and religious history.⁶

The Continuum

This line of reasoning immediately faces the question of the historical basis for its meta-historical conclusion: if the Holocaust challenges the standard principles of moral reasoning, those principles must have withstood earlier challenges, and the question then is what is now different or novel. I can only outline this comparative historical critique, but the conception of the Holocaust as a moral *novum* presupposes scrutiny of that event in relation to earlier Jewish history; the less dramatic claim of *continuity* between pre- and post-Holocaust moral reasoning (and in the character of evil) emerges then as the principal alternative.

Turning points in Jewish history that bear comparison to the Holocaust are evident: the destruction of the two Temples (586 B.C.E and 70 C.E.),

⁴ For a variety of examples, see Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroads, 1981); Emil Fackenheim, “Leo Baeck and Other Jewish Thinkers in Dark Times,” *Judaism* 51 (2002), 288; and Irving Greenberg, *Living in the Image of God* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 234. In his 2002 Nobel Prize speech, Imre Kertesz speaks of the “break” caused by Auschwitz and the Holocaust (*PMLA* 118 (2003), 607).

⁵ In Sara Horowitz, *Voicing the Void* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); Andy Leak and George Paizis, eds., *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), among others.

⁶ C.f. Werner Hamacher’s concise reaction: “We do not just write ‘After Auschwitz.’ There is no historical or experiential ‘after’ to an absolute trauma. The continuum being disrupted, any attempt to restore it would be a vain act of denegation... This ‘history’ cannot enter into history. It deranges all dates and destroys the ways to understand them.” Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *On Paul deMan’s Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 458-59.

the destruction and disruption accompanying the Crusades beginning in 1096 C.E., the natural disaster of the Black Death (1348-1350 C.E.) and the related massacres of Jews “responsible” for it, the expulsions from Spain and Portugal (1492 and 1497), and the Chmielnicki riots of 1648-49. The numbers or percentages in the community of Jewish deaths incurred in those events are not the only measure of their impact but are at least a starting point. So, for example, the sweep of the First Crusade through Central Europe that began in 1096 is estimated to have caused the deaths of five thousand Jews and proportionate communal disruption. However, the communities evidently overcame the shock of those events with “no substantial discontinuity in Franco-German [Jewish] society as a whole...The towns were quickly resettled, commerce and trade were reconstructed.”⁷ The Jewish suicides in Mainz at this time (individuals choosing death rather than capture) made an enduring impression beyond the local communities, and some contemporary accounts understood the persecutions as a “trial of the righteous” rather than (as others did) a form of collective punishment. Both of these explanations had precedents in Jewish history, and there seems no basis for viewing those events as a *caesura* in the collective moral consciousness.⁸ Similarly, the expulsions from Spain and Portugal involved the dislocation of a Jewish populace numbering, in various estimates, between one hundred and three hundred thousand, with the deaths caused by the expulsions or by the Inquisition at the time estimated (at most) in the thousands. The communal upheaval affecting the Golden Age of Sephardic Jewry was evident, but again, the survival through emigration of the largest part of the group enabled strong cultural continuity among those expelled as well as enrichment in the communities they joined.

In the proportion of its victims, the Black Death of 1348-1350 arguably looms larger than any other recorded catastrophe (natural or man-caused), claiming between a quarter and half of Europe’s populace as victims and approximately the same proportion of Jews (250,000 of 500,000). To that figure must be added Jewish victims of massacres related to the plague—numbering in the thousands—as Jews were accused of being responsible for it by poisoning wells, among other libels. To some extent, because the

⁷ Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Jewish Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 98. See also Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, trans. Dov Bernard Cooperman (New York: New York University Press, 1993), esp. 184.

⁸ In the range of moral consequences, see, for example, Yisrael Yuval’s controversial suggestion of a possible causal connection between suicidal martyrdom (including the killing of their children by Jewish parents) and the medieval emergence of the blood libel (“Ha-Nakamve-haKlala,” *Zion* 58 (1993), 33-90).

TRADITION

plague affected *all* groups in its path, the move from history to meta-history in reflections on it was also diffuse, and in any event, the Polish and Lithuanian Jewish communities, separated from that center, were relatively unaffected by the plague itself. Estimates of the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648 and after refer to victims in the tens of thousands, with a round figure of 100,000 sometimes cited, and up to 300 communities destroyed. The events were referred to at the time by R. Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz as the “Third Destruction,” but even if from within the massacres seemed to warrant that designation, the Jewish communities in Western and other parts of Eastern Europe were relatively unaffected.

Even approximate numbers are unavailable for the consequences of the destruction of the First and Second Temples and the exiles following them. What evidence there is suggests a minimal number of deaths, although in their communal consequences, those destructions had both a more immediate and more enduring impact than the other events mentioned. These enduring effects are echoed in the line in the Musaf prayer “because of our sins, we have been exiled from our land,” which continues to be recited even after the State of Israel’s founding. (This prayer itself argues for continuity in belief insofar as it finds in the exiles not a breach in God’s covenant but evidence of its force.)

The impact of the two Hurbans on readings of Jewish history is not in doubt, then, although this points only more clearly to the question of what relation the Holocaust has to the earlier disruptions, while considering it an unprecedented breach in moral consciousness and conduct in both Jewish and other theological characterizations. It is not only the contracting world and more accessible sources of information that conduce to such a claim. Whatever else is said about it in meta-historical terms, the Holocaust represents a paradigmatic (although not the first) instance of genocide: the intentional, group-sponsored, and systematic attempt to make a “people disappear from the face of the earth”(in Himmler’s 1943 Poznan speech to S.S. officers). Additional, although less essential, features add weight to the distinctiveness: the act of genocide as initiated by a nation closely tied to both the Christian tradition and the Enlightenment, carried on in full view of other nations with those same traditions, and implementing a process of industrialized murder invented for the occasion. It also exemplified what Primo Levi chillingly labeled “useless violence:” violence employed not for a utilitarian purpose, but knowingly and for its own sake.⁹

⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Vintage, 1989, Ch. 5.

Similarly, the radical effects of the Holocaust within the Jewish community itself are not in doubt. The murder of two-thirds of European Jews effectively ended the role of Eastern Europe as a primary site of Jewish communal existence; it was also the death sentence for Yiddish as a living language and culture. Although the Nazis did not succeed in fully implementing their “Final Solution” even with the murder of the six million, they advanced far enough toward that goal to qualify their attack as genocide (in contrast to homicide, genocide need not be complete; evidence of intention suffices for the act). It does not diminish the enormity of the Holocaust to recognize that it left certain centers of Jewish life physically untouched: in North and South America, to some extent in Great Britain, in Palestine, in Asia, and in much of Africa—allowing both for communal continuity there, as well as for those communities’ contributions to Israel’s independence in the post-Holocaust years. Commentators who emphasize continuity in Jewish history view this aspect of the Holocaust as further evidence for their claim—another threat to Jewish existence added to earlier ones that were also thwarted. Only on that basis could as measured a post-Holocaust writer as Eliezer Berkowitz conclude that “We [Jews] have had innumerable Auschwitzes... Each generation had its Auschwitz problem.”¹⁰ Continuity with a vengeance.

On the one hand, then, post-Holocaust Jewish ethical reflection faces the large-scale systematic destruction caused by the Holocaust; on the other hand, it is confronted by evidence of comparable breaches in the moral and religious fabric of past Jewish history and consciousness. Furthermore, although some post-Holocaust Jewish thinkers have claimed that the Holocaust demands a transformative moral and religious response, those claims turn out on examination to be a minority view. This imbalance itself argues for what I call here a “Continuity” model; that is, for a meta-historical claim that the status of evil in Jewish thought remains unaltered even by the Holocaust’s enormity.

This conceptualization of the Holocaust within the bounds of Jewish history has appeared in quite different formulations, with the most prominent of them based on a single thesis: given God’s omnipotence and beneficence, whatever occurs in human history reflects divine intention and is thus justified, or at least more so than any alternative. This doctrine of theodicy (“God-justice” in the term Leibniz coined in 1710) has itself appeared, before and after Leibniz, in diverse religious and philosophical traditions joined by a common foundation: that God, outside history, nonetheless governs it through his qualities of omnipotence and

¹⁰ Eliezer Berkowitz, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 90, 98.

beneficence.¹¹ *Apparent* evil, in these terms, is only that—“apparent,” not actual; in effect, then, evil is always good and justified, whether in specific historical events or in the larger meta-historical framework of world history. Anything not justified would, quite simply, not have occurred.

The most decisive application of this principle is to events which lead to suffering or loss and which, using the principle of justice, are claimed to be punishment for prior wrongdoing. Assertions in Jewish thought of such reasoning are widespread. Maimonides writes as follows in the *Guide to the Perplexed* about this view: “It is in no way possible that He [God] should be unjust...All the calamities that befall men and all the good things that come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment which is no injustice whatsoever.”¹² An earlier, more explicit formulation (cited by Maimonides in the same context) is R. Ami’s: “There is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression” (*Shabbat* 55a). The already-mentioned quote from the Musaf prayer for the new month and festivals expresses the same principle: “Because of our sins, we have been exiled from our land.”

It is not, then, only for reasons of consistency that this punishment-reward version of the Continuum model extends to the Holocaust, and concludes that there too the victims suffered for sufficient reason, a personal or collective wrongdoing of which they were part. For the Holocaust as elsewhere, the claim would apply equally to the children and aged, to the pious and the unbelievers, and to the criminal and righteous.¹³

The severity of this judgment in relation to the Holocaust has provoked sharp objections extending beyond that one event. So, for example, Berkowitz’s categorical dissent: “That all suffering is due to [sin] is

¹¹ G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E.M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

¹² The *Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. 3, Section 17, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 469. Maimonides distinguishes his position here from what he presents as the traditional one, although the difference is contestable. Cf. Section 51, p. 625.

¹³ The Artscroll daily prayer book adds its gloss to the statement: “This is a cardinal principle of Jewish faith. History is not haphazard. Israel’s exile and centuries-long distress is a result of its sins.” *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, trans. Nosson Scherman (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1984), 678. A stronger and more general formulation appears in Rabbi Jonathan Sack’s commentary on the “Declaration of Faith” prayer in *The Koren Rosh Hashana Mahzor*: “Good is rewarded and evil has no ultimate dominion. No Jewish belief is more central than this....” (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2011), 583.

simply not true. The idea that the Jewish martyrology through the ages can be explained as divine judgment is obscene.”¹⁴ Yet, troubling as the model of all evil as just punishment is, its persistence is undeniable. Thus, for example, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the then-Satmar Rebbi, finds Zionism the wrong precipitating and so warranting the Holocaust, which was due punishment for the efforts of Zionism to preempt the Messiah’s role in initiating the return to Zion. In a rhetorical tour de force, Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman brings the same principle to a remarkable point: “In those [pre-Holocaust] days, the Jews chose for themselves two forms of idolatry...socialism and nationalism...A miraculous event occurred: in Heaven the two idolatries were combined into one—National Socialism...[extending] harm to all the ends of the earth.”¹⁵ Another imaginative turn in this reasoning was Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef’s inculcation of Holocaust victims as “reincarnations of earlier souls, who sinned and caused others to sin,” thus justifying the fates also of the most clearly innocent victims.¹⁶ The severe logic of this rationale is clear, but at least one of its implications is even harsher. If the Holocaust is understood as just, then its agents should be not only exonerated but praised: Instruments, in effect, for doing God’s work. How then can one condemn them?

The extremity of this implication might be regarded as exceptional, but even efforts to moderate it turn out to rely on a common assumption. For example, the view that shifts responsibility for historical events from God to man through the gift of free will makes that capacity then responsible for good or evil in human acts. In this variant of the punishment-reward model, man himself becomes the agent of evil-doing, on the basis of his freedom always to do otherwise; for God to intervene in circumstances involving human agency would erase the possibility of moral judgment. Berkowitz writes, “[Human] freedom must be respected by God himself. God cannot as a rule intervene whenever man’s use of freedom displeases him. It is true, if he did so, the perpetration of evil would be...impossible, but so would the possibility for good.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Berkowitz, *Faith after the Holocaust*, 94. See also, e.g., Amos Funkenstein, “Theological Responses to the Holocaust,” in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 311 ff.

¹⁵ Teitelbaum and Wasserman as cited in Yosef Roth, “The Jewish Fate and the Holocaust,” in *I Will Be Sanctified: Religious Responses to the Holocaust*, ed. Yehezkel Fogel (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1952), 58-59. Wasserman’s anti-Zionism extended his imaginative turn of phrase: “Anti-Semites,” he said in the face of the Nazi threat, “destroy the body, Zionists destroy the soul.” He himself was killed at Kovna’s Seventh Fort in 1941.

¹⁶ Reported in *The New York Times*, 7 August 2001, 8.

¹⁷ Berkowitz, 105.

TRADITION

The moral advantage of this shift of responsibility for evil-doing from God to man is obvious, but it also invites the charge of question-begging in the question of whether even free will warrants the cost of a world including events like the Holocaust. The response from theodicy here is also obvious: “Yes, of course: human freedom, whatever its consequences.” And more inclusively: “Better the world as it is—including the Holocaust—than not, better indeed than any other possible world.” This version of the “Continuum” argument avoids fault in the victims but the distinction makes little difference: the victims now are sacrificed for the greater good of the whole. Whatever occurs in history remains justified.

A third variant of the punishment-reward model situates the Holocaust on a continuum of Jewish history in the framework of that history’s redemptive features, pointing to the good that at times comes out of apparent evil-doing and suffering (the “silver lining in clouds” argument). This variant has been applied to the Holocaust with the claim that it was an important, even necessary, stage in founding an independent, Jewish Israel. But this contention has the problematic status of any historical counter-factual claim, even apart from the considerable pre-Holocaust evidence that saw in the then-Yishuv the possibility, even the likelihood, of a Jewish state. The general principle in the folk-wisdom that even in evil there is always some good is doubtfully verifiable either in general or in this particular instance.

A fourth variant of the punishment-reward model invokes the concept of *Hester Panim*, God’s “hiding [his] face,” as preserving divine justice and power, but still leaving room for human suffering. “Hiding” here describes a divine withdrawal from history, allowing the occurrence of events that God otherwise surely would have prevented. Again, that withdrawal does not mean that God wills the events themselves but that He wills man to have freedom of decision. So Norman Lamm writes: “[In a period of Hester Panim]...we are given over to the uncertainties of nature and history where we can be raised...to the crest of the world’s waves—or herded pitilessly into the fierce troughs of life.”¹⁸ Additionally, Berkowitz adds his emphasis on free-will: “...If man alone is the creator of value... then he must have freedom of choice and freedom of decision... That man may be, God must absent himself... He hides his presence.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Norman Lamm, “The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust,” in *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. B.H. Rosenberg and F. Heuman, (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), 191-92.

¹⁹ Berkowitz, 105, 107.

This view has the superficial advantage of dividing history into two parts: the divine, in which God is active; and the human that moves by human decision, with God at those times absenting himself. But that very absence also returns the issue to theodicy: as God chooses to hide (He could not be forced to do so), whatever happens then is intentional—in general if not by specific design, even in relation to the Holocaust. That, too, remains “for the best.”²⁰

These four versions of the punishment-reward interpretation of the Holocaust is one formulation of the “Continuum” view’s thesis that the Holocaust is unexceptional in relation to traditional Jewish thought. A second formulation, also with a strong tradition, offers a substitute for the term “punishment” by explaining human loss or pain as a test. The classic example of this is the Akedah—the binding of Isaac—as God commands Abraham, as a test, to sacrifice his son. Abraham’s anguish is crucial for the test to be a test, and although we do not know what Abraham’s future would have been had he failed the test, the fact that Isaac is finally spared hardly erases Abraham’s suffering before that. Similarly, when Job is tested—expressed in God’s bet with the Satan—the outcome, bringing Job a substitute family and fortune, does not erase Job’s pain in sitting bereft on the ash heap. Conceptually, to interpret suffering and harm as a test has surface plausibility: a just ruler might reasonably test a subject. But where the test causes irremediable harm (as in the two instances cited), it becomes more than only a test. In this model, the Holocaust might be considered to be a test for the survivors, but how can it be a test for the victims?

A variant of the test hypothesis has boldly ascribed a positive value to suffering and loss themselves. At times echoing Rabbi Akiba’s statement that “suffering is precious” (*Sanhedrin* 101a), versions of this go in several directions—with suffering a preface to improvement, suffering as the price for goodness of the whole, or even with the flat denial of suffering itself. On the last of these, Reb Zusya of Anipol said, “I don’t understand why you ask me this question [about my suffering]. Ask it of someone who has known such evil. As for me, this does not apply, for nothing ill has ever happened to me.”²¹ So also Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in direct reference to the Holocaust: “Suffering occurs in the world in order

²⁰ Maimonides attempts to defer this conclusion with the claim that “it is clear that we are the cause of this ‘hiding of the face’, and we are thus the agents of this separation...If, however, his God is within him, no evil at all will befall him” (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 626).

²¹ Cited in Arthur Green, *The Tormented Master* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 175.

TRADITION

to contribute something to man, in order that atonement be made for him, in order to redeem him from corruption, vulgarity, and depravity.”²²

A third formulation of the Continuum position accounts for evil simply by admitting an inability to account for it, citing the limits of human comprehension, with the Holocaust again a principal example. For certain events, the claim goes, human understanding can find no adequate grounds—not because there are none, but because of human incapacity: God’s ways differ from man’s, with the gap between finite and infinite understanding sometimes blocking the understanding of the finite. When human reason finds itself stymied in this way, commitment to God’s beneficence offers a consistent way through.

This admission of incapacity is less about giving God the benefit of the doubt than the benefit of certainty: there must be good reasons for the event, even if we cannot grasp them. Far from questioning providence, it provides blanket acceptance: if we understand the reasons for a particular occurrence, well and good; if we don’t understand them—like the Holocaust—also well and good. This accommodation is epitomized in the formulaic announcement of death in the Jewish community: “Baruch Dayan Emeth,” Blessed is the true judge—uttered irrespective of all suffering in the death or of the deceased’s character. Furthermore, if human incapacity explains the failure to understand God’s role in the suffering of innocents, consistency would require the same limits for understanding more welcome occasions: why should they be more comprehensible—or just—than the former? Thus, a problem of good directly parallels the problem of evil.²³

Notwithstanding the recognition of Holocaust atrocities in these accounts, none demands a revision of the basic categories of ethical understanding; In the Continuum view, the traditional principles and texts of Jewish thought provide adequate justification even “after Auschwitz.” The fact that the sources cited come largely from religious Orthodoxy may be predictable, but similar responses appear in Jewish secular and certainly less-than-Orthodox commentators. Among the most influential figures is Emmanuel Levinas who, recognizing the Holocaust as a “paradigm” of

²² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Kol Dodi Dofek,” trans. L. Kaplan, in *Theological and Halakhic Reflections*, 56.

²³ Hugh Rice, *God and Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92.

suffering and cruelty, finds a parallel in it to “the Gulag and all other places of suffering in our political century;” extreme but still with precedents. (A version of theodicy surfaces for Levinas, furthermore, as for him, God establishes a “template” for moral decision, for which humankind is then responsible).²⁴ Other similarly influential Jewish thinkers writing aside from Halakha also find in the Holocaust’s enormity no breach or transformation in their conceptions of Jewish history. Thus, figures like Martin Buber, Mordechai Kaplan, Nathan Rotenstreich, Gershom Scholem—all deeply affected by the Holocaust but nonetheless finding continuity and precedents for it in Jewish history.²⁵ At a theoretical level, this “Continuum” view reflects a conception of evil-doing for which distinctions among degrees of evil are irrelevant since the slightest occurrence of evil-doing is as much a test of theodicy as any larger one. For a just and omnipotent God, after all, no injustice should take place. Thus, in Berkowitz’s summary: “As far as our faith in an absolutely just and merciful God is concerned, the suffering of a single innocent child poses no less a problem to faith than the undeserved suffering of millions.”²⁶

Against the Continuum

The claim of rupture precipitated by the Holocaust must then argue against the Continuum’s theoretical and practical commitments, with the Holocaust then breaching the traditional conception of divine justice: thus, a quantum jump. The most extreme example of this response can be anticipated: If the Continuum position remained committed to God’s omnipotence and beneficence even in the face of human atrocity, the strongest alternative to that would be to reject those qualities of God’s

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 241. Cf. also Ethan Kleinberg, “Not Yet Marrano: Levinas, Derrida, and the Ontology of Being Jewish,” in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, ed. Edward Baring and Peter E. Gordon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 39-58. Levinas’ oft-quoted phrase that the Holocaust marks “the end of theodicy” is itself conceptually equivocal in its suggestion of the validity of theodicy *prior* to the Holocaust. His categorical statement in a 1982 interview on Israel’s role in the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon that “evoking the Holocaust to say that God is with us in all circumstances is as odious as the words ‘Gottmituns’ on the belts of the executioners” seems clear enough, but then conflicts even with other parts of his “austere humanism.”

²⁵ Buber, in a notable exchange with Mahatma Gandhi and at odds with his own earlier political writings, sharply criticized Gandhi’s recommendation of pacifist resistance to the Nazi persecution. For Scholem, the Holocaust had the unusual consequence of tempering his commitment to Zionism as the *full* answer to the “Jewish Question”—but again, within the bounds of history.

²⁶ Berkowitz, 128.

traditional identity. Additionally, the “death of God” was indeed the reaction in Richard Rubenstein’s *After Auschwitz* and later writings,²⁷ echoing Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and the more current claim by non-Jewish theologians for whom the Holocaust was one item of evidence among others (as in Thomas Altizer, Harvey Cox, and William Hamilton).²⁸ Rubenstein had been influenced by Mordechai Kaplan whose rejection of a transcendent God, following John Dewey, had fully evolved before the “Final Solution.”

Rubenstein’s denial of God opened the question of what basis, if any, remained for Jewish identity, and his later writings seem to have both sought and avoided that affirmation—combining a view of truth and knowledge as functions of power (following Nietzsche and Foucault) with its alleged cultural distinctiveness based on the recent founding of the State of Israel. This substitution of social or political factors for religious principles might serve as a means of Jewish survival post-Holocaust, but it does not connect the aftermath to Jewish history pre-Holocaust or to providing justification for Jewish particularism. Rubenstein later uses the metaphor of “triage” in defense of his view: the value of salvaging what deserves to be salvaged and of discarding the rest.²⁹ That response to the “Jewish Question” must be judged on its own terms, but its emphasis on preservation for the sake of preservation hardly provides a compelling rationale.

A less radical reaction against the tradition of transcendence than Rubenstein’s figures in the work of Hans Jonas who, confronting the Holocaust’s enormity and evil generally, proposes a limitation rather than denial of God’s role in history. It is not, for Jonas, that God in His powers could act however He chooses, but that He is limited by His own prior choices. This qualification differs from the classic puzzles about God’s power (e.g., whether God can create a rock so heavy that He cannot lift it); nor is it the exceptionalism of human freedom that motivates the account. Jonas’ claim is rather that, given God’s own earlier decisions, at

²⁷ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); see also his *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (New York: Harper, 1978). For a fuller analysis of Rubenstein, see Michael Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁸ See e.g. Thomas J.J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); and William Hamilton, *The New Essence of Christianity* (New York: Associated Books, 1965).

²⁹ Richard Rubenstein, *The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

times God could not have intervened to alter its course; thus, an ahistorical limitation of God's powers in human history as well.³⁰ On this view, evil becomes ingredient in existence, part of its unavoidable friction, with responsibility for it when it does occur shared between God and man through constraints of history beyond the capacity of either to overcome. This ascription of divine limitation does not erase moral responsibility (for both these sources) nor is it a version of historical determinism (that the Holocaust *had* to occur as it did). It does, however, limit the claim of God's power, and Jonas is aware of that challenge to the traditional Jewish conception precisely in its conceptual advantages. Jonas at once would preserve a role for God in history and constrain that role by cumulative and thus related actions and events—finally indeed, by the original act of creation itself (although that would require a separate justification which Jonas does not provide).

A second version of the Holocaust as genuinely transformative turns to law or Halakha as amended post-Holocaust because of the Holocaust—innovation in what, on Orthodox terms, is unchangeable. Emil Fackenheim's advocacy of a 614th Commandment—"not to give Hitler posthumous victories"—dramatizes this view to which he ascribes authority equal to the 613 earlier commandments.³¹ Fackenheim defends this on the grounds that those earlier commandments had also emerged in response to historical conditions—and that the Nazi genocide's distinctiveness justified a like response, the command for ensuring Jewish survival thus responding to the goal of Jewish extermination. Fackenheim recognized that this new commandment would require interpretation as to whether a particular threat did threaten Jewish continuity, but this requirement of interpretation had also to be met in implementing other commandments as well.

A third view of the Holocaust as a decisive rupture resembles the Continuum alternative that cites the Holocaust as incomprehensible. In sharp contrast to that Continuum version, however, the turn to incomprehensibility here offers no resolution through God's beneficence. Arthur A. Cohen locates this alternative in a category all its own—imposing onto the Holocaust Rudolf Otto's "tremendum" (best known in Otto's conception of the "Holy")—representing the Holocaust as "beyond the discourse of

³⁰ Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for God after Auschwitz* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 140 ff.

³¹ See, e.g., Emil Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), Ch. 1.

TRADITION

morality and rational condemnation.”³² This radical separation of the Holocaust not only from history but also from moral categories might seem to return Cohen to Rubenstein’s skepticism about even the possibility of a religious covenant. But Cohen rejects anything like Rubenstein’s evocation of a cultural surrogate for transcendence: the “tremendum” if it is anything is transcendent, unutterable but real: evil itself thus positioned outside history and whatever reasoning might be directed to or at it. The evil represented in the Holocaust is no less real than good that has occurred in other contexts, but with no evident means of approaching or reasoning it. This position itself is intrinsically difficult to analyze or parse, although Cohen makes the effort (perhaps inconsistently with his foundation), coming close to what seems a virtual Manicheism: “God describes the limits but man sets them....”³³ For the Holocaust as an event, however, incomprehensibility is the mode; what might have been or was something like a partnership elsewhere seems at this point to have failed or been pushed aside, defying intelligibility or articulation.

Cohen’s reference to incomprehensibility is clearly intended to signify more than the literary figure of the aporia (as in the expressions “Words cannot describe how much I...”). Indeed, he proceeds to describe the Holocaust’s historical context, as in the contrast he draws between the Holocaust and the Jewish expulsions from Spain and Portugal—again, a possible inconsistency reflecting the logical difficulty of saying anything about the unspeakable or unthinkable beyond those terms themselves. The question of what their referents are raises other issues as well, pointing again to the problem of recognition even in claims of the Tremendum’s occurrence; no means is provided independent of individual experience of attesting either to that or to its uniqueness.

Undoubtedly the most widely discussed analysis of evil in relation to the Holocaust is Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Although in that book and elsewhere Arendt views the Holocaust against the background of what is for her the novum of totalitarianism, her characterization of evil as represented in Eichmann but also in Nazism more broadly seems finally to position her in what I have termed the Continuum view. Arendt is rarely referred to as a “Jewish”

³² Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 8.

³³ Arthur A. Cohen, 93.

philosopher³⁴ (even aside from the issue of what criteria demarcate Jewish philosophy as such). Her conclusions on Eichmann's "evil," however, have been both significant and contentious for reasoning the Holocaust, with consequences for both Jewish and broader ethical thought. On the one hand, her characterization of Eichmann's evil and subsequently of evil in itself as "banal" argues against not only the depth but the reality of evil and the possibility of its deliberate choice. On the other hand, Arendt agreed, despite her procedural criticism of the trial in Jerusalem, that Eichmann was criminally responsible for his role in the Nazi atrocities, and she agreed with the court's death sentence. How those two "hands" co-exist—or if they can—reveals much about her conception of evil both in relation to the Holocaust and generally.

Viewed systematically, Arendt's account of Eichmann's banality starts from the contrasting image of *radical* evildoing in a Richard III or an Iago as they knowingly act on evil as a principle. The contrast is evident, in her view, between those figures and Eichmann who, although commonly regarded as a moral monster, turns out to be much less than that, not demonically evil at all. Rather, he is thoughtless, limited to clichés in language and reasoning, in effect a puppet, at most a clown—and thus banal, meaning by that term its conventional associations of "pedestrian" or "commonplace." The term's full weight emerged only gradually for Arendt as she began to find Eichmann's acting as he did to undermine the notion of radical evil altogether. She had initially drawn on Kant's usage for that concept, although it is telling that her earlier examples, in contrast to Kant's, were Shakespeare's imagined creations, not ones readier at hand—from the Holocaust itself—in the "crooked timber of humanity."

Gershom Scholem, a long-time friend, had written critically to Arendt soon after publication of her book on Eichmann; shortly afterward he cut off communication with her entirely. Between those two dates, on July 24th, 1963, Arendt responded to certain points of Scholem's criticism and reported her reconceptualization of evil as what she has come to see its essential banality. "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never radical, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus...It is 'thought-defying'...because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is

³⁴ On Arendt's relation to Jewish sources, see Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 6-13.

TRADITION

its banality. Only the good has depths and can be radical.”³⁵All evil, then, is banal.

Arendt’s step here makes clear the connection of her new conception of evil to the “Continuum” model described above. For if banality is thoughtlessness in contrast to thinking in its full sense, the implication here is that if Eichmann had thought fully—not banally—about what he was doing, he would not have done it. Since all evil is now banal (with no distinction from non-banal evil), then to act otherwise than banally entails not doing evil at all. The source of Eichmann’s having done what he did must then have been his failure to deliberate, a failure to understand or to reason what he was doing. For, again, had he exercised those capacities in his actions, the actions would not have been what they were.

This implication has important ramifications, including the judgment of Eichmann’s guilt. If we apply Arendt’s conception of banality to Eichmann, his actions become the result of thoughtlessness, of his not having understood deeply, certainly not fully, and even demonstrate an incapacity for doing so. Such incapacity would at least raise the question of Eichmann’s responsibility for what he did; for should thoughtlessness, being a clown, or banality be a hanging offense?³⁶

The Continuum model that surfaces here is familiar from the tradition of rationalist ethics in Plato, Spinoza, and Leibniz for whom evil is nothing positive, at most a privation, with those committing it judged to have acted out of ignorance, from not knowing better. This, as in the Platonic contrapositive: “To know the good is to do the good,” drawn from “To do evil is not to have known the good.” In this tradition, reason

³⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove, 1978), 251. Arendt elaborates on this view in her introduction to *The Life of the Mind*—referring the reader there to her Eichmann book—and in the section of that volume; on ‘Thinking’, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1978). Her uneasiness with the “banality” thesis, however, does not substantively change her view; so, e.g., “Ugliness and evil are almost by definition excluded from the thinking concerns. They may turn up as deficiencies...‘kakia’ or the lack of the good” (179). This is the Platonic position, again, which her qualification “almost by definition” hardly reverses. Along the same lines she again cites Shakespeare’s fictional characters as examples of “the few” who “do evil voluntarily.”

³⁶ Recent studies of Eichmann, based on more extensive records than Arendt had access to, have argued for his more sustained and expressed commitment to Nazism than Arendt’s “banality” admits (see, e.g., Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, trans. Ruth Martin (New York: Knopf, 2014)). However, the issue raised in Arendt’s concept is not how forcefully Eichmann spoke for or about Nazi policies, but his understanding of them. Finally, this criticism of Arendt seems directed more (and in my view, more persuasively) at the concept of banality as a moral category than at Eichmann’s capacities.

elides with the Good and/or with God and Arendt goes sufficiently far toward that elision to identify her, and the thesis of evil's banality, in it.

Human agency and responsibility were asserted in the first Continuum position discussed earlier as constant even in a divinely ordered world and irrespective of the conditions imposed on individuals or groups. The Yetser ha-Ra in Genesis asserted the lure of evil—its presence, not necessarily its triumph; thus, its constancy as an option, notwithstanding the good in creation itself. The problem posed by that juxtaposition, however, led to the also constant resolution of theodicy: that whatever happened in history, now including the Holocaust, was ultimately for the best, God and man thus acting in concert. Arendt would certainly reject this verdict on world history, the more so since she pronounces totalitarianism a *novum* in evil's history. But these two opposing tendencies, like their earlier versions in Jewish thought, are no more easily reconciled for her than they had been previously. As the Holocaust, now and since 1945, undergoes a process of normalization, so too, in religious thought, the problem of reconciling those two conflicting claims runs parallel—also blurred by repetition and also, as I have suggested, by the inadequacy of traditional reasoning. To claim that the Holocaust does not pose religious problems is understandable on certain religious grounds, but reasoning the Holocaust in historical as well as in meta-historical terms—facing it in history and as a problem—also seems finally to be to religion's own advantage.