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REVIEW ESSAY

BERKOVITS' TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Although the title of Professor Berkovits' book suggests a limited concern with the problem of religious faith only in the light of the horrible events of recent Jewish history, he is, in fact, working on a larger canvas. His purpose in *Faith After the Holocaust** is to present a viable mode of understanding and dealing with the classic problem posed by the presence of evil in the world. While his primary example is the holocaust and the challenge which it has posed for faith in our own time, he fully understands that it is only an example, and not a case that presents unique problems. He shares the anguish of all decent men over the destruction of European Jewry, but he does not make the common mistake of supposing that the holocaust has introduced a new dimension into the classical problem of evil. Even if it is true that the actions of Hitler's hordes were un-

paralleled in all of human history for their cruelty, it does not follow that we are now facing the problem of God's apparent injustice in a unique way. With sound philosophic understanding, Berkovits argues that the dimensions of evil in the world and the depth of human suffering in no way affect the basic issue. If God is both perfectly beneficent and absolutely powerful, then the presence of any unjustified suffering poses a problem. The pain suffered by the Jews of our time is surely greater than that of other periods of Jewish sorrow, and the emotions run higher, but for the sober thinker this in no way affects the basic problem. A just and compassionate God, who has the power to control the destiny of all men, should not permit any evil in the world, unless it is merited. The pain of a single innocent child is no less a challenge to faith, in principle, than the pain of

* New York, Ktav Publishing Co., 1973.

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the millions whose agonies form the melancholy history of our age.

In his approach to this classical theological-philosophical problem, Berkovits rejects the familiar and overly easy solutions which have been offered over the centuries in the vast literature on the subject. He sees, with keen perception, that they are, on the whole, solutions which do not solve anything, that they buy faith at the expense of integrity, or at the expense of ordinary notions of justice and compassion. The view that all suffering must be punishment for sin is dismissed by him contemptuously as a kind of obscenity. To decide that the millions who were tortured and put to death during the Hitler years were all wicked, that the men, women and even the children were all guilty of crimes so great that they merited their gruesome fate, is to be guilty of unspeakable moral perversion. This is no way to defend God. In an expression of admirable force, Berkovits writes, "Not for a moment shall we entertain the idea that what happened to European Jewry was divine punishment for any sins committed by them. It was injustice absolute. It was injustice countenanced by God." That same God condemned Job's friends for their easy answer to the very difficult question of Divine justice and mercy. We owe him no less than the seriousness of thought and the moral sensitivity that He demanded of them.

Neither is Berkovits prepared to accept the medieval philosophic teaching that evil is privation. The standard argument goes that if evil is only something negative, then

God cannot be accused of having made it. Berkovits sees in this, at best, a kind of philosophical ingenuity, but not a serious answer to the anguished question. Men who suffer for no apparent reason will not be satisfied with the philosophic assurance that their suffering is mere negation and is, therefore, without ontological status. This does nothing to lessen the reality of pain, nor does it in any way justify God in the eyes of the ordinary believer. The wild bestiality of the German oppressors was "no mere absence of good. It was real, potent, absolute."

Professor Berkovits is equally vigorous in his rejection of the opposite solution. The deniers of faith affirm that God is detached from the world, if He exists at all. This is a God who doesn't care, for whom human affairs are a matter of indifference, under whose governance there is neither justice nor a judge. This is not a solution to the problem of evil. It is the final rejection of religious conceptions of God, and the substitution for them of a world-picture in which all events are due either to blind chance or rigorous natural causation. No God can be blamed for human suffering, for injustice or the absence of compassion in the world, for there is no ultimate power which is either just or compassionate. Berkovits is fully aware of the force of such an argument when it is based on a reading of the facts of human experience. One of the characters in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* gives strong expression to this view of the world. "The whole earth . . .

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is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent; weakness, impotence, distress attend each stage of that life, and it is, at last, finished in agony and horror." It is not difficult to see why anyone who experiences the world in this dark and dismal way might conclude that it is anything but the product of a just and compassionate power. Without trying in any way to cover over the force of this perception of the world, Dr. Berkovits still argues effectively against it.

He takes great pains to show that this pessimistic view of reality is self-defeating. It has the effect of making all life and all human striving absurd, and, in the process, it results in the denial of all objective status to values. In a world without God there will be no right and no wrong, no good and no evil. There can only be whatever it is that individual men happen to find pleasing. Kindness and cruelty are of equal status in such a world, since all depends on individual preference and tastes. "It is the most uncomfortable aspect of such a position," Berkovits soundly argues, "that—if carried to its logical conclusion—it leads to a justification of Nazism itself. If there is no possibility of a transcendental value reference, if existence as such is fundamentally meaningless and man alone is the creator of values, who is to deter-

mine what values are going to be or what the man-made meaning is to be? . . . In a universe in which all values are based on human choice and decision anything may become such a value." This is a consequence which we men are prepared to confront honestly and seriously. Even those moral philosophers who deny all objectivity to moral values are still determined to preserve the moral distinction between Hitler and his victims. They are unwilling, morally unwilling, to accept the claim that all that separates the oppressor and the oppressed is a difference in personal values. It is monstrous to suggest that, in the last analysis, we have no possibility of sound moral judgment, and that we can only say that each man has the right to create his own values. Yet, it seems to be the case, if we study modern moral philosophy carefully, that, despite their dislike for the position of total moral relativism, it is exactly to that position that naturalistic moral philosophers are inevitably led. Happily, they are better than their theories, and they continue to affirm the classical distinctions between good and evil even though they cannot provide any ultimate sanction for the values which they cherish.

Having disposed of the unacceptable approaches to the problem of evil, Professor Berkovits turns to his own constructive treatment of the problem. From the outset he lays down the rule that a proper response to the holocaust (and presumably to any other instances of evil in the world) can only come from those who were present and

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suffered personally. We must view all other responses as less than perfectly authentic. Both faith and rebellion, he rightly argues, are primarily the prerogative of those who were there. None of us who knew of the events from a distance has the moral or intellectual right to take a final position, to stand in judgment about matters of such gravity. Affirmations of faith are cheap and unconvincing when they come from those who did not themselves endure and witness that ultimate degradation of humanity which occurred in the Nazi death camps. With what justice can we proclaim the supremacy of faith to men who lived through physical, moral, psychological agonies which transcend even the most debased imagination? We, who lived in the comfort and safety of civilization, have not earned the right to preach faith to our brothers whose world was destroyed before their eyes. Those among them who could only rebel against God merit our sympathetic understanding, our reverent regard for their integrity, for their rebellion may be far greater praise of God than a faith which is won at little cost. Neither may we feel free to imitate their rebellion. There is a kind of self-pride, an almost vulgar self-assertion about the public declarations of rebellion that come from men who have not themselves suffered. As Dr. Berkovits puts it, "The disbelief [of those who were there] was not intellectual but faith crushed, shattered, pulverized; and faith murdered a millionfold is holy disbelief. Those who were not there and, yet, readily accept the holocaust as the will

of God that must not be questioned, desecrate the holy disbelief of those whose faith was murdered. And those who were not there, and yet join with self-assurance the rank of the disbelievers, desecrate the holy faith of the believers."

Initially we may question the soundness of this position. If the problem of evil is a philosophical or theological problem, then it must be addressed with sober analytic thinking. Why, then, is it necessary to have experienced the force of evil directly in order to have the moral and intellectual right to formulate a response to it? As we study carefully the approach which Professor Berkovits has worked out to the problem, it becomes clear that he is not willing to grant that it is a purely intellectual puzzle which can be resolved (if at all) by purely intellectual devices. On the contrary, what makes ordinary philosophical approaches to the problem of evil unsound and unconvincing is that they are no more than intellectual. Either they find an answer which is intellectually satisfying, but do so by closing their eyes to ordinary human experience, or they take human experience seriously and in so doing are driven to deny that there is any satisfactory solution to the problem of evil. It is the merit of Berkovits' approach that he carefully avoids falling into either trap. He tries, instead, to show that all reflection on our problem ends in a paradox. We are genuinely confronted with irreconcilable opposites, with contradictories which necessarily exclude each other. Our position is at that point one in which we are

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finally called upon to make an affirmation, to take a stand that goes beyond the limits of what can be established by any argument. Whether we affirm the just and compassionate God of traditional religious faith, or whether we deny such a God because of the apparent injustice and sorrow in the world, we must, in both cases, go beyond what philosophic argument can sustain. This is precisely why we are cautioned by Berkovits not to stand in judgment on those who reacted to the holocaust out of the depth of their own experience. They were reacting authentically to a reality which they could only interpret in their own way. Some saw it with the eyes of a faith more powerful than all the forces of evil. Others could only deny God in the light of the horrors which they witnessed. Both were beyond intellect alone. Both were responding to the challenge and the obscurity of the world which they knew. In both cases they were taking their stand in the face of, or beyond, paradox. This, according to Berkovits, is the inescapable situation of all who confront the mystery of God's place in history. "We adorn God with a great many attributes which mean to describe his actions in history even though they are contradicted by the facts of history. Fully aware of the facts, with open eyes, we contradict our experience with our affirmations."

As the ground for his position, Berkovits introduces several basic elements. To begin with, he argues that good and evil are so related that there cannot be one without the other. Only a being capable of

both has the capacity for either. It is for this reason that he allows himself to make the surprising (and, for some, the troubling) assertion that God is beyond good and evil, that He cannot be either. This is because, by definition, God cannot be evil, from which it follows that, in any strict sense, He cannot be good either. "God, being incapable of the unethical, is not an ethical being. Goodness for him is neither an ideal, nor a value; it is existence; it is absolutely realized being. Justice, love, peace, mercy, are ideals for man only . . . God is perfection, . . . He is all light; on just that account, he is lacking the light that comes out of the darkness."

For man, who is not perfect, whose very nature is finite, and whose whole life can only be striving but never complete realization, there is the possibility of good, only so long as there is also the possibility of evil. God, as the creator of all, is not the creator of good and evil. He is, rather, the creator of the possibilities of both, possibilities which are open to man to realize in his own way. This is a fruitful way to formulate the principle that man is free, that he must be free in order to be man. God is the ground of all being, but man alone is responsible for the manner in which he actualizes that which God created as potential. It follows from this that if God is guilty of anything, it is that He created man. Whether this was a desirable thing to do is hardly a matter which we can settle. Man is here, after the fact of his creation, and all that is open to him is to re-

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flect on his own condition and to strive for the realization of his noblest and most elevated potentialities.

As to God, His situation can only be seen, at least from a human perspective, as paradoxical. If He prevents man from doing evil, then, by virtue of that intervention in human affairs He also prevents man from doing good. Berkovits sets the paradox forth in its full force when he says that God must necessarily withdraw from history. "If man is to be, God must be long-suffering with him; He must suffer man. This is the inescapable paradox of Divine providence. While God tolerates the sinner, He must abandon the victim; while He shows forbearance with the wicked, He must turn a deaf ear to the anguished cries of the violated. This is the ultimate tragedy of existence: God's very mercy and forbearance, His very love for man, necessitates the abandonment of some men to a fate that they may well experience as Divine indifference to justice and human suffering. It is the tragic paradox of faith that God's direct concern for the wrongdoer should be so directly responsible for so much pain and sorrow on earth."

Given the paradox, we can easily enough understand the skepticism of those who turn away from God because they feel themselves alone and abandoned in a world that gives no evidence whatsoever that justice and mercy are built into the cosmic value structure. However, how shall we understand the faith of those who continue to believe in God, who in the midst of

suffering and pain continue to proclaim that God exists and that He is the only and ultimate ground for all true human and humane values? Answering from a Jewish perspective, Berkovits sees God's might precisely in the fact that He does not use His limitless power to deny man's freedom. Despite His compassionate concern with man, God does not prevent men from the exercise of truly free choice. It may pain and grieve Him to see the innocent victimized, but to intervene would mean to turn man into an automaton. "God is mighty, for He shackles His omnipotence and becomes 'powerless' so that history may be possible." In this view, God, like man, shows His strength primarily in self-restraint.

Yet, this by itself is insufficient as a way of justifying faith. Berkovits sees another aspect of Divine power in the mysterious existence and the persistent survival of the Jewish people. Jewish history, he holds, is not explicable in natural categories. By every rule of nature, by all the canons of the history of man, the Jews should long ago have disappeared. Their continued existence, despite their utter powerlessness in a world where power counts, is testimony to a dimension of being which is beyond all that is ordinarily known to men. A people that exists not by virtue of its power, but only by virtue of its commitment to witness to God, provides by its very survival the best of all testimonies to God's presence. This is the central point in the philosophy of Jewish history which Berkovits sets forth. It is

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also the strongest ground he is able to offer in favor of religious faith in a world where so much evil is evident. Jews, from the perspective of their experience, may understandably rebel against God as they contemplate their own melancholy history. For the very same reason they can retain their faith in God, for without God in the world the history of the Jews surpasses all explanation.

If we expect a demonstrative proof that God is good and just, Berkovits does not have it to offer. In fact, he holds that it is, in principle, impossible. What he has tried to do instead is to show that the stance of faith, like the stance of skepticism, has its deepest roots in immediate human experience and in a certain mode of reflection on that experience. We confront an insoluble paradox effectively, not by ingenious attempts to resolve the irresolvable, but rather by trying to discover what it means and what direction it can offer for our lives. That discovery can only come from a confrontation with our own reality, with the world which we know, be it beautiful or ugly. The Jew who confronts his world will be aware of the depth of sorrow and injustice in it. He will also be aware of the remarkable survival of the Jewish people. If the former predominates, he is likely to deny God. If he truly reflects on the latter, he should find it possible to affirm God, no matter how inexplicable the massive evil that he knows.

What Professor Berkovits has offered us is a searching and perceptive variation on a familiar theme.

Evil is explained, though never justified, as a consequence of human freedom. God is understood, though not justified, as permitting evil, because it is a necessary condition for the possibility of good. In this book this familiar theme is presented anew with freshness and insight which helps us to see the power of the argument in a new light. When the special fact of the uniqueness of Jewish existence is added to the old argument, what emerges is a stimulating and helpful treatment of one of the oldest and most painful of all the problems that confront men who are genuinely seeking God.

Having said this, we cannot overlook the fact that even this treatment of the problem of evil, like almost every other, leaves as much unanswered as it has answered. We shall consider only a few of these unanswered questions very briefly. However successful his treatment of the problem which is generated by the evils which free men do to each other, Berkovits has given us no way at all of coping with the more difficult problem of human suffering due to natural causes. Perhaps the holocaust can be fully attributed to the wickedness of men, but what shall we say of the suffering caused by earthquakes, typhoons, disease, and similar non-human agencies. No identifiable human act is responsible for the suffering of the child dying of a malignancy, nor can we charge any man with guilt for having brought about climatic conditions that result in widespread famine. It is evident from the whole tone of his book that Berkovits

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would not resort to the simple explanation that these sorrows are the direct consequence of human sin. He knows perfectly well the biblical and rabbinic texts which make just such an explanation, but he cannot accept them as literally true. Given the seeming arbitrariness of the suffering which such natural disasters cause, it is, indeed, difficult to maintain the simple cause and effect picture. Yet, once we find ourselves forced to give that up we have nowhere to go. Berkovits does not discuss the question at all, perhaps because he has chosen to use the holocaust as his model. It is, however, clear that no treatment of the problem of evil is complete which does not try to come to terms with this dimension of human suffering. It is by far the most difficult aspect of the problem to deal with, the most intractable, the least open to solution. The suffering caused by natural disasters, even more than the evils caused by men, subjects faith to its most severe test. We need thinkers of the stature of Professor Berkovits to help us find our way through the darkness which natural disaster casts over our picture of a just and compassionate God.

Berkovits' representation of God as beyond good and evil also poses some difficult problems. It may be that he would interpret texts that speak of God as having positive moral attributes with the method of Maimonides or other philosophers who deny any positive attributes to God. In that case, we need to know what it can possibly mean for man to imitate God. How can man, whose life consists of striving

for the realization of his values, imitate a God who is the ground of value, but is Himself beyond all value? Berkovits' treatment of the problem of evil is distinguished by his consistent refusal to allow philosophical ingenuity to replace the rich texture of human experience. Yet, when it comes to the canons for the ordering of man's life, He requires us to engage in that very philosophic subtlety which he has previously rejected. Either there is some specific sense in which man can imitate God, or else the ideal of *imitatio dei* is nothing more than a kind of philosophic sleight of hand.

To take a final case, we are forced to conclude that the theory which Berkovits sets forth deals much too casually with the problem of miracles. In the Bible the miracle is the classic case of God's visible control of human affairs. It is the public evidence of the presence of God in history. The oppressed slaves are freed from Egypt only by direct Divine intervention. The Israelites are saved at the sea, again by Divine intervention. And so it goes through a series of such events over many centuries. This seems to contradict the assertion that God is present, but withdrawn. It seems to refute the claim that God's strength is manifest above all in His restraint. Once we see that God can and sometimes does enter into battle on the side of the meritorious, we are forced to ask, with respect to every case of human suffering, why God does not intervene here. It is not sufficient to assert, as Berkovits does, that "All God's miracles occur outside of history.

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When God acts with manifest power, history is at a standstill. The only exception to the rule is the historic reality of Israel." Just what does it mean to speak of miracles as outside history, when they involve events that are part of human history. If the exodus is not history, then what is it? More important, whether historical or trans-historical, it is a saving event at a time of great human need. God heard the outcry of the oppressed masses and chose to come to their aid. This, in itself, gives us a model which forces the question on us throughout subsequent history. Why were they saved, but not our contemporaries? Why should God, by His own testimony, have denied freedom to Pharaoh, yet felt constrained to allow freedom to Hitler? We are very close, after all, to the old Epicurean paradox. If God is both all-powerful and perfectly benevolent, how can we account for evil in the world?

These critical questions are raised, not for the purpose of discrediting the work of Professor Berkovits, but rather to point up again the melancholy fact that, after all our best efforts at solutions, we still have no final and fully satisfying understanding of the ways of God in the world. The defect is surely not that of Berkovits, nor of any other serious

thinker. It is simply our inability to comprehend ultimate things with our finite understanding. This seems to be, in certain respects, the most significant result of Berkovits' study. He is exactly right when he insists that we are dealing with a problem that does not yield to intellectual resolution. After using our intellect to the fullest measure in order to clarify the issues as fully as we can, we are still left with the need to take our stand on grounds that transcend the limits of human understanding. The greatest testimony to the victory of faith is not only the continued existence of the Jewish people, but, as Berkovits so clearly shows us, their continuing witness to the presence of God and to the objectivity of divinely ordained values. We may never resolve fully the philosophical and theological puzzles which evil poses for us. We may never find ourselves in circumstances in which we can be men of pure faith, without any edge of doubt, without any element of rebellion. Yet, our very existence as Jews, our very persistence as a people committed to the search for the holy in a world which is profane, is itself the most powerful answer to our own skepticism. It is an equally powerful response to the skepticism of others.