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LOGOTHERAPY AS A RESPONSE TO THE HOLOCAUST

INTRODUCTION

No event, save the destruction of the Temple, has had such a shattering effect on Jewish life and thought as the holocaust. With the exception of atheists, who could use the holocaust as proof that there is no God, and the devoutly religious, who could point to the holocaust as an indication that any salvation for the world is possible only through faith, the status quo has been demolished.

Responses to the holocaust have been varied, including a radical reformation of Judaism into a non-theology or paganism, as well as the reorientation of Judaism around a 614th commandment — never to let the holocaust recur and never to allow Jewish ranks to dissipate through cultural assimilation.

This essay proposes yet another response to the holocaust, a response with broad implications for the ultimate lessons mankind can learn from the human abyss reached in the Nazi tyranny.

I

The response is that of Dr. Viktor E. Frankl. Frankl's experiences in the four concentration camps he survived, and the human heights which he reached in that setting, are almost legendary.[1] The problem one faces in appreciating Frankl's courage is that his heroics seem almost super-human, a model of reaction reserved for a saint.[2] If, indeed, Frankl's is an almost transcendental reaction, it makes for good reading, and

little more. Realistically, however, a response to this bestiality must be measured in terms of its pragmatic application, whether it affords the man in the street another possibility in his dialogue with life. Frankl affords this possibility, not in his personal story, rather in the philosophy of life which is projected in his Logotherapy.

Logotherapy, as Frankl sees it, is the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, overarching the Freudian and Adlerian schools. Logotherapy is an approach to life which asserts that the primary expression of the human person is to be seen in the striving to find a meaning in one's existence. Unlike his predecessors, who asserted the primariness of pleasure and power, respectively, Frankl insists on the importance of meaning for existentially viable life. Historically, Frankl's views predate the atrocities of the Second World War. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the holocaust was the vital force which thrust logotherapy onto the intellectual scene, both as a psychological system and as a philosophy of life. The experiences of the concentration camps showed logotherapy to be more than grandiose preaching, and the pathos with which Frankl presented his case after the holocaust was the vital ingredient giving logotherapy a universal audience. World War II made the world more receptive to the deeply human cries of men like Frankl. That Frankl has translated his pathos into a system of life leads us to consider logotherapy as a response to the holocaust.

II

The most prevalent tone in all of Frankl's work is a basic and unshakeable optimism. Logotherapy begins with the notion that life possesses an objective, unconditional meaning in any and all circumstances, and in spite of all conditions, even suffering and death. The critical reader of Frankl is likely to be disenchanted by the overemphasis placed on the value of suffering and the meaning of death. Frankl, however, is less bothered by the meaning to be found in love or work, in health and pleasant conditions. Man's greatest problems are encountered in suffering and tragedy, and unconditional meaning can have validity

only if this meaning can be inserted into the suffering situation. By giving meaning to suffering, Frankl is in effect saying that all life has meaning.

Frankl is a realist. Having lived through indescribable tortures and witnessing unbelievable cruelty, he is aware that most of man's life is spent not in the peaks of pleasure, but either in the nebulousness of spiritual mediocrity, or in the existential vacuum of meaninglessness. A sound approach to life must take into account these situations, else it would be geared to a precious few people, if not to a precious few moments. Logotherapy is for the man in the street, and Frankl pays prime attention to the man in the street in his empirical approach to life.

Logotherapy puts great emphasis on man's freedom. Man is able to meet any situation in the fullness of his human potential, and to react in the freedom of expression which is known as a human response. One of the ways man exhibits this freedom is in the stand he takes toward his fate, or his suffering. Man remains forever free to decide what his stand will be in spite of the most dismal circumstances. Undoubtedly the suffering situation might negate the possibility to be creative, but human values are possible also in the realm of attitudes. Attitude is the key, not only to the personal situation, but to logotherapy itself. The optimistic attitude Frankl takes to life dictates a meaning to suffering. Logotherapy tells man not just to endure suffering, but to find a meaning in it. Suffering, says Frankl, is what gives life its form and shape. Suffering is a part of life, and the right kind of suffering is the highest achievement that has been granted to man. In suffering, man transcends the physical situation into the noetic dimension, deciding in this self-detachment on the direction of his life. In the camps, Frankl repeatedly tried to convince the inmates their suffering had a meaning. If one had a book to write, or a loved one waiting for him, Frankl showed the meaning potential in survival. More important, even in the face of imminent doom, Frankl did not shrink from insisting on the meaningfulness of life. He would insist that every lived moment experienced by man remained in the world, even after death. To Frankl man's past cannot be

erased from being but is instead the really meaningful aspect of being. How man has lived, how he has faced his suffering, can never be erased. His life is in the world, it remains in the world. Having been is the surest form of being. Man's past is his true future. This was Frankl in the concentration camps, and this is Frankl in the logotherapeutic clinic, trying to assuage the grief of a widow who has lost her husband after one year of marriage. What you experienced in that one year is and can never be taken away. And, because it is here forever, it forever remains a part of you.

Death, too, has meaning. Death is the final imprint man makes on his life—it is the monument of his life. Death rounds out life to its natural conclusion. It is the culmination of the becoming process. Frankl vehemently opposes euthanasia as it denies man the possibility to die his death. In death, man may transcend his self attitudinally, becoming, in that moment, an individual worthy of life. (Compare "Even if one is completely wicked all his life but repents at the end, he is not reproached with his wickedness."[3])

III

In his attempts to elicit meaning out of potentially life-stopping situations, Frankl manifests an optimism which radiates throughout his logotherapy. Thus, suffering is not necessarily a tragic situation, for man can give meaning to his life by the way he meets his suffering. True, man can never fully know the real meaning of his suffering. He can only invest his suffering with meaning. Ultimately, the real meaning of suffering cannot be uncovered in a this-worldly dimension, but belongs, in Frankl's words, in the super-world, in the next higher dimension or what theologians might call after-life. Man can never be sure of the meaning, but he is not asked to live in meaninglessness. He is asked to bear his incapacity to grasp the unconditional meaningfulness of the cosmos, of his own particular situation, as it is a super meaning. It is an optimtistic orientation which underlines Frankl's repeated insistence on the meaningfulness of life. Logotherapy is not bothered by the state of

unsureness about the particular meaning or the cosmological meaning. Man can, at one and the same time, be half sure and whole hearted, as Frankl is fond of quoting Allport. Perhaps one might add that in being sure, man is likely to be more mechanistic and less human, not striving and transcending as he is in search of the meaning.

Frankl's approach to death again points to his positive orientation, his affirmation of life. Without death, life would not be complete, he says. If man lived forever, he could constantly postpone the demands of the day with the argument there will always be a tomorrow. But the spectre of death negates this argument, and the existential fact that any moment not used suffers its own existential death imposes an imperative for action on man in every moment of his existence.

The optimistic streak goes on. Man is guilty, but only in the face of guilt is it logical to talk of improving. Guilt implies a responsibleness for trespass, for if man is not responsible for the act he cannot be considered guilty. Responsibleness implies the free-willed decision of man, else he is not really responsible. That man is considered guilty is thus nothing less than an assertion he can erase the guilt.

Imperfection is a virtue in life. If man were perfect, if it were possible to be perfect, man's uniqueness would be destroyed, for there would be the common ground of perfection shared by man. The uniqueness of each individual inheres in the imperfections, and makes for the meaningfulness, the uniqueness and singularity of every existent being.

Man alone of all creatures retains the possibility of committing suicide. He alone can take his own life. Logotherapy transforms this into a positive feature of life. Since man can, at any time, terminate his life, his decision to remain alive is his way of saying "yes" to life. Since man is the only creature who can terminate his life, he is also the only creature who affirms life.

Why does boredom exist? Why is man plagued by the vacuity of having no task to perform? Logotherapy intervenes with its eternal optimism. If man did not feel the anguish of boredom, how could he become motivated to use all the time at his disposal usefully? Boredom is thus a necessity to motivate man

into action.

Logotherapy, it may be said, turns life on its head. It refuses to capitulate to any situation except capitulation itself. In theory and therapy, it maintains that suffering gives meaning to life, that death can be a human act, that guilt is a positive force for man, that imperfection is a virtue for human endeavor, that the possibility of committing suicide is a uniquely human phenomenon, that boredom is a useful vacuum to elicit meaning. In short, logotherapy sees potential in every human fact and circumstance, meaning potential for man to actualize.

IV

It remains for us to discover what logotherapy makes of the holocaust. Does the basic optimism which permeates logotherapy spill over into the holocaust, or is this the terminal point for optimism?

Because man can say "no" to life, he can also say "yes." More important, this yes is a meaningful human response. This point, extended a bit, reads as follows; because man can be diabolically evil, he can also be virtuous. If man could do no evil, his good deeds would be no virtue. The price man pays for having been granted free choice is the potentiality for evil. Frankl repeatedly avers that he prefers a world in which such phenomena as Hitler are possible. The possibilities for Hitlers are at the same time possibilities for saints. Such a world of choice is more preferable to a programmed world of conformism or collectivism, where man is forced to act as object of conditions, and his deeds are neither virtues nor vices.

Beyond the phenomenon of Hitler, Frankl makes clinical capital of the concentration camp experiences. The camps showed Freud to have miscalculated the human essence. Freud said that if any number of strongly differentiated human beings were subjected to equal amounts of starvation, the increasing desperation for food would blot out all individual differences, to be replaced by the uniform expression of the desire to feed the hunger. According to Frankl, the concentration camps proved Freud wrong. Scientifically the mind boggles at the

thought of trying to establish a clinical situation in which Freud's thesis could be corroborated, yet the camps were, however unfortunately, a perfect setting to test Freud's hypothesis. In the camps, many people did degenerate into the innate camp bestiality, yet others transcended the conditions of the camp, exhibiting traits of saintliness that have become legend. There was not a uniform expression of the desire to satisfy hunger. Instead, there were men who sacrificed their own spoon of soup to help others get a foothold on life. The differences between the camp saint and the normal inmate resided in the realm of choice. Man is a deciding being, and the camps proved this fact of humaness once and for all. Man ultimately decides for himself. himself.

Today, when Frankl is challenged to defend his notion of man's free will in the face of biological, sociological, and psychological determinants, he uses camp experience to defend his position. Man's destiny is shaped by his determining conditions, but nowhere has man been as constricted as in the camps. Still, man showed his capacity to brave and resist the worst conditions. For Frankl, the holocaust is empirical validation of man's freedom, and thus life's meaning.

Frankl faced the holocaust in great despair, yet his affirmative stance toward life did not allow despair to become resignation. Frankl did not question God. He saw the holocaust as the accident of man's free will, and, at the same time, as the testimony to man's powerful alternatives. Today, he continues to affirm life in his untiring preachments about the meaning of life. He sees his approach as a continuation of Akiba's affirmation of life "even if He (God) takes thy soul."[4] The holocaust transformed all his affirmative preachments into living reality, and Frankl's ability to find meaning in the holocaust reinforced his ability to endow all life with meaning.

V

If we are to take inventory of the manifold responses to the destruction and havoc of the Nazi tyranny, and judge how they fit into Jewish thought, we will have to take more serious cog-

nizance of Frankl's response.

And if we are ever able to judge whether anything positive has come out of the shambles of the crematoria, it is likely the life-affirming system known as logotherapy will shine as a monument to the potential of man which was formed literally out of the dust and ashes of the gas ovens.

In a word, the credibility of logotherapy today is in large measure a result of the abyss which man experienced more than two decades ago. If logotherapy is successful in convincing man of his meaning potential, it will have resurrected from the past the human qualities that were slaughtered with the crudeness and mechanics of the beast. More than being a 614th commandment, it would become a rededication to life itself, and a reaffirmation of the positive potential in life.

NOTES

1. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning,* New York, Washington Square Press, 1968, pp. 3-148.
2. Irving Halperin, *Messengers from the Dear,* Philadelphia, Westminster Press, p. 32.
3. *Kiddushin* 40b.
4. *Berakhot* 61b.