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The religious meaning of the rebirth of the State of Israel and its relationship to the holocaust continue to agitate the Jewish mind. In this essay Rabbi Besdin, Associate Director of the Rabbinical Council of America, offers a brief survey of the major positions taken by representative Jewish thinkers.

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

The events of the holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel both intrigue the mind and defy comprehension. They are anti-theoretical in nature, yet are bafflingly interrelated. This essay will distill from numerous studies and symposia¹ apocalyptic and redemptive implications of these two traumatic experiences.

Historically, the Jewish people always blamed itself for all its misfortunes and credited God for its moments of fulfillment. Our sages inculcated this attitude as not only theologically valid, but also as pedagogically calculated to spur the people on towards introspective self-examination, thus leading towards improvement. "Because of our sins we were exiled," the Jew says in his prayers, which precludes self-pity, rebelliousness or melancholy. It induces a determination to rectify one's waywardness and to get on with one's destiny. God expects more from Israel, for they exist as the embodiment of His teachings and as the mentor of all mankind. Their deviation does not concern them alone but, rather, frustrates the Divine plan for all mankind. Their leadership role entails greater responsibilities which, in turn, makes failure more censurable.

These rationales of Israel's tragic experiences hardly seem adequate in face of the magnitude and demonic fury of the holocaust. An entire continent became engulfed in unmitigated evil, involving the complicity of religious, cultural and scientific elements of society. The primary victim was the Jew, who suffered a brutal decimation of his ranks. This is an unparalleled

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experience even for Israel, which suggests Messianic overtones even in its incomprehensibility. Elie Wiesel expressed his stupefaction:²

To me the whole event remains a question mark. I still don't know how man could have chosen cruelty. I still don't know how God could have allowed him such a choice. I still don't know why Jews kept silent. In fact, I know nothing. And frankly, I don't know how one can talk about it.

We stand muted into silence, unable to apply the usual standards of evaluating Jewish suffering and unwilling, as well, to suggest that the victims were deserving of their fate. This represents the great agony of our contemporary Jewish experience.

Matching the holocaust in power and mystery, is the reconstitution of the State of Israel in May of 1948. Only a dogmatic agnostic would fail to see the transcendental overtones of this sudden transformation of Jewish dignity and hope. The unprecedented concurrence of support for Jewish statehood by Joseph Stalin and Harry Truman at the height of the Cold War, the dramatic military victories of the few over the many, the engagement of the mighty British navy by the scarred remnants of the concentration camp who penetrated the determined blockade in cattle boats and rickety freighters—these logistical improbables bespeak the supernatural and the Messianic. The Six-Day War, which restored Jewish sovereignty to our holiest sites and gave the state viability also involved the remarkable concurrence of remote coincidences, all converging towards a particular end. Here, too, as with the holocaust, we perceive the transcendental even as we are baffled by its deeper implications.

II

Are the two events related Messianically and not merely in proximity of time? An attempt to link them seems to diminish the import of both. Israel cannot be the answer for the holocaust. There cannot be any answer, explanation or restitution for a tragedy of such dimensions. No Divine favor can undo unspeakable pain. The holocaust stands in all its inexplicable

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horror and to suggest a redeeming aftermath or causal explanations is to reduce the unfathomable to human categories. Similarly, the State of Israel is a Divine gift of such generous magnanimity, whose splendor would be dissipated by defining it as a reward for a previous deprivation, an intended balancing out of the scale of justice.³

Even as we deny their interrelatedness, we are, nevertheless, compelled to associate them because we experienced them together, sequentially, one seemingly flowing out of the other. In a practical sense, the holocaust created the uprooted remnant which could not return to its previous habitation. Psychologically, it fired a determination amongst the survivors and, vicariously, amongst world Jewry not to accept the tragedy in its brutal finality but, rather, to appropriate at least a small portion of its bitter fruits for the purpose of affirming a positive area of triumph. The holocaust also created feelings of remorse and a softening of heart amongst many in the Christian world who realized the full immensity of the crime which their civilization had perpetrated and who were, consequently, more amenable to the idea of Jewish Statehood.

In any case, the linking of tragedy and redemption is basic Biblical teaching. Isaiah and other prophets related destruction and consolation, the eclipse and sunrise. The *Tochecha*—the terrifying admonitions which Moses directed at the Israelites—were inevitably followed by words of comfort and promises of restoration. Our sages conveyed this pithily with the words,⁴ “On the day the Temple was destroyed, the Messiah was born.” This much is certain, that the anger, frustration and sense of revenge of the survivors were sublimated and galvanized towards a restorative goal. Its potentially explosive and destructive fury was transmuted into a burst of creativity and will-to-live.

III

The theological problem posed by the holocaust is deserving of more serious consideration. It was David Hume,⁵ the British empiricist, who formulated the dilemma as follows:

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If God wants to prevent evil but is unable, then he is impotent; if He is able but is not willing, then He is wicked; if He is both able and willing, why then evil.

The Torah's answer is that God is able to avert apparent evil, is certainly willing to do so but will, at times, choose not to do so. His decision may be dictated by broader considerations of moral import which are not discernable to us. An act is good or evil, not in fragmentary isolation but rather in its contextual frame of reference. Killing is reprehensible but not in *milchemet mitzvah* or in an execution duly decreed by a Jewish court. An amputation to further life and health is similarly not evil. This argument essentially bids us to accept His justice on faith in acknowledgement of man's limited ken of judgment.

Jewish mysticism speaks of God's "self-constriction" (*sod ha-tzimzum*) whereby he circumscribes the all-pervading impact of His will, in order to allow room for man's free will to operate.⁶ God limits His own freedom to intercede, lest it destroy the full range of man's options. If man is to retain his singular status as a being "in the image God" and not merely an automaton, he must be allowed to rebel against God Himself. The inevitable consequences of such a condition are human suffering and seeming or actual injustice, but it cannot be otherwise. Our sages, undoubtedly appreciated this point when they spoke of God's personal commiseration. "When man suffers, what does the Divine Glory say?" My head and arm are heavy (with anguish)." Anthropomorphically, He laments the necessity of sorrow as an inescapable accompaniment to man's glory as a singular being.

Our questing spirits are hardly assuaged, however, by the above rationales. They may be adequate for life's daily situations which are not cataclysmic in their impact and scope. They seem hollow, however, when we deal with a catastrophe which scourged one third of His people with unparalleled brutality. Does not the Torah tell us that He does and has intervened redemptively and that, especially so, when it affects the destiny of His chosen people? Is not our calendar filled with festal moments commemorating His intrusion into history? If so, why was

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this period of horror deemed unworthy of His Redemption? Would the unique gift of man's freedom have been nullified in its innumerable areas of option if the tyrant's nefarious scheme had been blunted in a manner reminiscent of Purim?

IV

There is another principle which, perhaps, most saliently comes to grips with our dilemma. One of the direst of the Biblical imprecations mentioned in the Bible is the threat that "I will surely hide my face in that day for all the evil which they have wrought."⁸ This suggests a suspension of the Divine covenantal dialogue with Israel and a withdrawal of His constant surveillance over its welfare. Israel is left to the turbulence of chance, the accidents of nature and the caprices of history as they affect all other nations. This is an ultimate punishment which is purgative in intent. The covenant, however, dormant remains in effect, with the assurance that He will not allow Israel's extinction. "Even though they will be in the lands of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly and to break My covenant with them, for I am the Lord."⁹ This principle of retribution involving an estrangement from His presence is also operable with individuals as we note in the Psalmists desperate plea,¹⁰ "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever, how long will you hide your face from me."

The opposite pole of God's non-involvement is the reassuring principle of "*nesiat kapayim*" (turning His face unto thee) as clearly stated in the Kohanite blessing,¹¹ "May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace." Here we have the active relationship restored and His participation in human history with Israel as His agency. While the holocaust represents Israel cast adrift, the State of Israel suggests the beginnings of a resumption of the old dialogue, a fraternal partnership in the effectuation of God's purpose in creation. We perceive His closeness in recent events,¹² as if in a dream-like trance, unsure of its reality and fearful for its enduring character. We alternate between exhilaration at the prospects which seem to be unfolding and the fear that if we do not respond appropriately to the spir-

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itual opportunities opening to us, we may frustrate its development through our unworthiness. The Divine role of either withdrawal or involvement is, in itself, a moral posture whose meaningfulness we can only discern in broad outlines.

The Book of Job was included in the Bible canon in order to help us cope with this most difficult theosophical problem. The Talmud even questions the historicity of Job but the basic quandry of justifying God's ways is rooted in daily reality. Why, asks Job, is he subjected to such torment since he has lived righteously. His friends suggest that it is undoubtedly a just retribution for clandestine sins. God suddenly appears, rebukes the friends and upholds Job's righteousness. No explanation for his suffering is given; puny man is challenged by God for his presumptuousness in seeking to understand His inscrutable judgment. Can man otherwise encompass in his intellect the mysteries of cosmic creation? Job is comforted and consoled, not by any explanation but by God's reassuring closeness, that He is near once again. Martin Buber explains:¹³

The true answer that Job receives is God's appearance only, only that distance turns to nearness, that "his eye sees Him," that He knows him again. Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God's address.

The great Hassidic saint, Isaac Levi of Berditchev said:

I do not ask, O Lord of the world, to reveal to me the secrets of Thy ways. I could not comprehend them. I do not ask to know why I suffer but only this; Do I suffer for Thy sake?

In the final analysis, the holocaust remains an enigma whose meaning eludes us. From the depths of our faith, we are reconciled to its metaphysical significance. We fervently pray, however, that "it be for Thy sake," that out of its agony there will truly emerge the ecstasy, testifying that once again His countenance is "lifted up" to us.

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NOTES

1. *Judaism*, Summer 1967, Symposium on "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future": Participants, Emil Fackenheim, Richard Popkin, George Steiner and Elie Wiesel; *TRADITION*, Winter 1965 - Spring 1966, "Representative Works of the Holocaust Literature" by Ben Eilbott, a review of six works; *TRADITION*, Summer 1968, "The Religious Meaning of the Six-Day War": Participants, S. Y. Cohen, N. Lamm, P. Peli, W. Wurzbarger, M. Wyschogrod.
2. *Judaism*, Summer 1967.
3. See Emil L. Fackenheim, *Commentary*, August 1968, "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust," grapples essentially with this dilemma.
4. *Bamidbar Raba* 13. Similarly R. Akiba was cheered when he saw jackels in the ruins of the Temple because now that the prophecy of doom had been fulfilled, the prophecies of consolation and restoration must follow (Talmud *Makkot* 246).
5. "Dialogues concerning National Religion," quoted by C. W. Hendel in *Hume Selections*, New York, Scribners 1927, p. 365.
6. See *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom G. Scholem, Schocken Books, New York, 1941, p. 260-265. *Tsimtsum* originally means "concentration" or "contraction" but if used in the Kabbalistic parlance it is best translated by "withdrawal" or "retreat."
7. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 6:5.
8. Deut. 31:18. See 31:17 and 32:20.
9. Leviticus 26:44. See *Yalkut* 83 "For no nation will be able to utterly prevail over them."
10. Psalms 13:2.
11. Numbers 6:26.
12. See Norman Lamm in *TRADITION*, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 8. "There is a sudden, dreamlike, almost unreal and uncertain confrontation in which the two partners have caught a glimpse of each other's faces and acknowledge each other's faces."
13. Martin Buber, *At the Turning*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952, pp. 61-62.