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THE IMPOTENCE OF EXPLANATION AND THE EUROPEAN HOLOCAUST

All the wisdom of all the philosophers, said Dostoyevsky, cannot explain the death of one innocent child. How, therefore, dare one attempt to explain the deaths of one million one hundred thousand children? Any statement would be an understatement. Yet the holocaust embraces a basic paradox. It imposes silence but demands speech. It defies solutions but requires responses.

Abraham, the first Jew, was commanded by God to surrender his child in a holocaust (*olah*, Genesis 22:2). Isaac, Abraham's son, was saved. But throughout centuries of Jewish history the children of Abraham were not so fortunate. For example, rabbinic literature recounts a story of a mother and her seven sons who were brought before an emperor. He demanded of each that he serve idols. When each one refused, he was executed. Before the youngest was executed his mother said to him:

> My son, go tell Father Abraham: You bound one son to the altar, but I have bound seven; from you intention alone sufficed. But from us death was demanded.[1]

Perhaps Abraham perceived that in some future time, the descendants of his son Isaac would, like their father, be survivors of a Holocaust they could never hope to understand but to which they felt obliged to respond. Though Isaac was spared, Abraham nevertheless sought to provide his descendants with two complementary ways of responding to radical evil in a world ruled by the beneficent and just God of Abraham.

Within the life of Abraham one encounters a polar approach to the problem of evil. On the one hand, when God commands

Abraham to take his son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice, Abraham obediently obeys with no murmuring, with no protest. And yet this is the same Abraham who protests God's plan to destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gemorrah, hurling the words at God: "Will the judge of all the earth not do justly?" (Genesis 18:25). This dialectic within the personality of Abraham characterizes two complementary religious attitudes to the problem of evil.

The Abraham of the sacrifice of Isaac episode dwells on a level of faith where the question of theodicy, of how the good God can allow evil, does not arise. A Hassidic story illustrates this point.

Once the famous Hassidic master, Shmelke of Nicholsberg and his brother went to see their master, the Maggid of Mesrich. They asked him to explain the ancient issue of why the evil prosper while the good suffer. His response was, "Go to Hanipol. There you will find Rabbi Zusya smoking his pipe. He knows the answer to your question." The two brothers traveled to Hanipol where they found Rabbi Zusya sitting in his study, smoking his pipe. They said to him, "Tell us, what is the meaning of suffering? Why do the good suffer while the evil prosper? Why must we bless God for the evil as well as for the good?" Zusya, laughing, answered them: "This you ask me? I cannot know. For in my life suffering and visitations of affliction have never been my lot. God has only given me the good and I have always blessed his name for it." Upon hearing this, the two brothers left. For each of them knew that Zusya of Hanipol had not known one moment in his entire life that was not without pain and suffering.[2] Or, as Wolfe of Zhitomir said, for the true believer there are no questions, for the non-believer there are no answers.

This approach to suffering also characterized Rabbi Akiva, whose motto was "precious are afflictions."[3] The Talmudic description of his death reiterates the attitude of a level of faith on which the problem of theodicy does not arise.

> The Romans took Rabbi Akiva out to be tortured to death. They ripped his skin from his body with combs of steel. It was then time

> for reciting the *Shema*. The pain disappeared from Akiva's face as he began to recite the words of the prayer. Even the Roman torturing him was amazed. How could a man not feel pain? A smile came from Akiva's bleeding lips and he said, "All my life I have recited the words 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.' Only now as I perish for God's name have I really fulfilled the commandment. Only now have I really loved God with all my soul." Akiva began to recite the words of the *Shema* and an angel came down from above and drew his soul from his body with a kiss. And the martyred Rabbi Akiva died with the word *Echad* on his lips.[4]

It is this stance of faith which, to quote Rashi, has one say: "Even if You annihilate us, we shall praise You forever."[5]

The portrait of Abraham passively accepting suffering and injustice is not the only one which emerges from the Biblical account. He is also portrayed as the vehement protestor of the way in which God runs His world. Abraham thereby established a precedent to be followed by many of his descendants.

The prophets protested. Habakuk, for example says: "Lord, how long shall I cry and You will not hear, even scream about violence and you will not save . . . Why do you hold your tongue when the wicked devours the man that is more righteous than he?" (1:1-3). When did Habakuk say this? The Midrash suggests an answer.

> Habakuk drew a figure of a circle and stood in the middle of it and said to the Holy One, blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, I shall not stir from this place until Thou declarest to me how long Thou wilt continue to show forbearance to the wicked in this world?" The Holy One blessed be He replied: "You have cried out to Me but you have not doubted Me. As thou livest, I shall answer thee and cause thee to understand. I show forbearance to the wicked in this world so that they may come back to me in repentance and their willful sins will then be reckoned as unwitting sins . . ." When the Holy One lets the righteous envision the trials that are to come upon Israel, the righteous stand up and protest to Him.[6]

Moses, the greatest prophet also protests. Habakuk was brazen in defending the innocent. Moses, like Abraham, goes further and defends even the guilty against God's wrath. God plans to exterminate the Jewish people for the sin of building the Golden

Calf. Moses intercedes and convinces God rather than the people to repent. God changes His mind and does not punish the people with death.[7] The rabbis comment upon such a phenomenon as follows: "God says, 'I rule mankind. Who rules Me? — The righteous. For I make a decree and they annul it.' "

Job, when he had nothing else to lose, protested to God. In rabbinic times the school of Rabbi Ishmael cultivated protest:

> "Who is like unto Thee among the mighty (*elim*) O Lord?" (Exodus 15:11). Said Rabbi Ishmael: Read rather, "Who is like unto Thee among the silent (*elmim*). O Lord — seeing the suffering of His children and remaining silent?"

As the Midrash concerning Habakuk stated, these protests elicit from the guts of faith and are not mere skpetical asides. Protests to God come out of love for and disappointment with God. In our own times Elie Wiesel voices the view of Jewish protestantism. He writes,

> "You are blaspheming," he repeated gently, as if he were envious, as if he would have liked to blaspheme as well. God's victory, my son, lies in man's inability to reject Him. You think you're cursing Him, but your curse is praise; you think you're fighting Him, but all you do is open yourself to Him; you think you're crying out your hatred and rebellion, but all you're doing is telling Him how much you need His support and forgiveness.

Only after Jacob struggles with God is he called "Israel." Israel is a people by virtue of its eternal struggle with God to make Him remain faithful to His covenant, to force Him to run His world with justice and to temper His justice with mercy.

Perhaps the greatest protester of all was Levi Isaac of Berditchev who stood in the center of the circle he had drawn and brought a suit for breach of contract against God. The Talmud says that Israel are the *tefillin* of God. And so one day in the midst of his prayers Levi Isaac said to God:

> Master of Worlds, when a simple Jew drops his *tefillin* he picks them up and kisses them. Lord — Israel are your *tefillin*. They lie in the

dust. Do what even the simplest Jew knows he should do — Pick them up. Pick us up and redeem us.

In another time of great persecution Levi Isaac said to God:

We have had enough of suffering. If to be a chosen people means to experience incessant suffering, then Master of the Universe, choose someone else!

To this point it may be concluded that neither response of Abraham—submission nor protest—provides a viable solution to the problem of the suffering of the innocent and of the prospering of the wicked. The level of faith which characterizes the attitude of submission does not even recognize the problem. It cannot, therefore, provide a solution to the problem. The attitude of militancy, of protest, evokes a response, but offers no solution. As these two Abrahamic responses to evil prove adequate responses but inadequate solutions, one may move closer to a more acceptable response by shifting the focus from an anthropocentric one to a theocentric one. A tale about Levi Isaac will serve as a transition point between the two perspectives.

Immediately after the Day of Atonement was concluded Levi Isaac returned home from the synagogue. He hammered a nail into his *sukkah* and sat down to study. A knock was heard at the door. The rabbi opened it. There stood the town's tailor, shaking with fear.

You should be home eating your breakfast, said Levi Isaac. Why are you here?

Because, said the tailor, I have committed a grave sin this day.

On the Day of Atonement, said the rabbi. What did you do? What did you say?

Still shaking, the tailor recounted his deed,

I came into the synagogue last night ready to repent of my sins and to implore God for forgiveness. I picked up the prayer book and

> opened it. Neither did I understand the difficult Hebrew words, nor could I imagine how to correctly pronounce some of them. And so I wrapped myself in my prayer shawl and said a prayer of my own to God. I said, "Master of Worlds, I know I have committed many sins this past year.I may have cheated my customers. I was not as careful in performing ritual obligations as I might have been. For all this I am deeply sorry and I sincerely promise to try to make amends and to improve in years to come. But You, Lord, You have committed many grievous sins. You let babies die. You permit wars to rage on and people to suffer and to die. So let us make a deal. If you forgive me, I'll forgive You."

Upon hearing the story Levi Isaac flew into a rage.

> How could you let God off so easily? You had Him in the palm of your hand. You asked only for your own absolution when you could have forced Him to redeem the world.

The assumption of this apparently simple tale is that God can be guilty of sin. This was certainly the assumption of Levi Isaac. For on another occasion he is reputed to have asked, "Why is the Day of Atonement called in Hebrew by the plural form *Yom Ha Kippurim?* "Because," he answered, "it is a day of atonement for man *and* for God."

The notion that God sins has rabbinic roots. Some rabbinic sources suggested that God requires atonement for having unjustly diminished the originally larger size and power of the moon. The idea that God can sin and man can repent for God leads to the Kabbalistic notion that man has the power to redeem the *Shekinah,* God's presence in the world. In redeeming the Divine presence in the world, man, in effect, secures his own redemption. For the redemption of the *Shekinah* and of man are interlaced. The Midrash says:

> Once a prince was betrothed to a princess. A certain day was appointed for festivities before the wedding. The prince was looking forward to his wedding joy. The princess was looking forward to her wedding joy . . . So does the Holy One blessed be He, look forward to redemption for Israel and Israel awaits redemption for the Holy One blessed be He.[12]

Seen from the perspective of God, from the perspective of

a God who needs man to redeem His Presence in this world, the problem of evil takes on a different dimension. Look at man through the eyes of God, read the pages of the Bible, and you will find that it is a chronicle of God's hope and man's frustration of that hope. The Bible is the story of God's continued disappointment with man. Is it not, therefore, without a profound sense of tragedy that God must view our world and the plight of His children in the world? One can barely imagine the anguish of a father who loses one child. What can one say about a Father who loses six million children?

After the destruction of the Temple the question was asked: Is God callous to the fate of His people? The Midrash has God responding, saying,

> Is not My Temple destroyed and My children thrown into chains I am in anguish, as it is written: I am with him in anguish.[13]

God knows that man resents His rules, His controls, His laws, as any child resents too much parental care and guidance. And so God says: "Whosoever sheds the blood of man, *by man* (and not God) shall his blood be shed."[14] In other words, man will handle his own affairs. God will not interfere. As the parent who watches his child misuse his freedom, learn the hard and sometimes tragic way, God must painfully view the sight of His falling, stumbling, bleeding child. And like a parent, He must share in the affliction of His children; He must feel the grief they feel.

The Baal Shem Tov once noted that when a father teaches his son to walk he holds his hands and walks away, steps backwards. The child then stumbles and falls until he reaches his father. God does likewise. He steps away from us so that we may learn to walk, to live, by stumbling our way toward Him.

Martin Buber, reworking Hassidic notions, such as that of the Baal Shem Tov, has suggested that during the holocaust years there may have been an "eclipse of God." In an eclipse the sun still shines. Something has come between the sun and the world, preventing the rays of the sun from reaching the earth. Something may come between God and the world, preventing the

light of God's presence from shining upon the world in its proper intensity.

The eclipse of God idea is a response but is not a solution to Auschwitz and the theological problems it engenders. The ways of God remain unjustified. There is no theodicy. God remains in darkness, in hiding, eclipsed. However, as the Baal Shem taught, once man begins to apprehend that God is in hiding, He is no longer truly eclipsed.

We still await God's explanation of why even one innocent child had to perish at Auschwitz. What is often forgotten, however, is that God may be asking man the identical question and awaiting his response.

NOTES

1. *Gittin* 57b, *Lamentation Rabbah* 1:53.
2. *Sefer Matzmeach Yeshuoth.*
3. *Jer. Shekalim,* Chapter Five, 49, 6. See Midrash on Psalms 94:2; *Bava Metzia* 85a.
4. *Berakhot* 61b.
5. Rashi on Psalm 44:10; see Ibn Ezra on Psalm 44:23 and *Midrash on Psalms* 5:5 to Psalm 5:2-3 and 78:7 on Psalm 78:34.
6. *Midrash on Psalms* 77:1; see also the famous tale of Honi the Circle-Drawer in *Ta'anit* 19a and 23a.
7. Exodus 32:7-14.
8. *Moed Katan* 16b.
9. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael,* ed. Horowitz, p. 142.
10. *Gates of the Forest.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966, p. 33. See also Byron L. Sherwin, "Elie Wiesel and Jewish Theology," *Judaism,* Winter 1969.
11. *Chullin* 60b, *Yalkut Shimoni,* Genesis 1:9.
12. *Midrash on Psalms* 14:6.
13. *Ibid.,* 20:1.
14. Genesis 9:6.