

Moment Truths: Pluralism After the Shoah¹

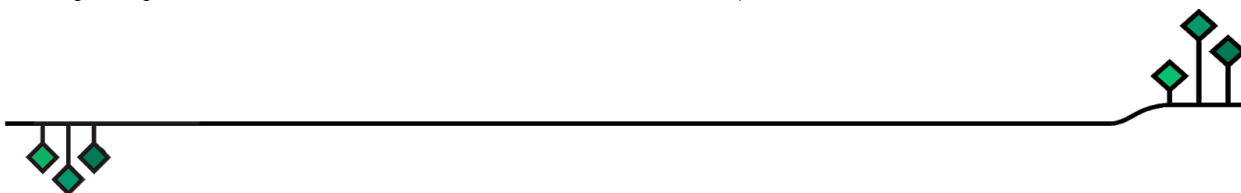
R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

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In the 1970s I wrote that “faith is living life in the presence of the Redeemer, even when the world is unredeemed.” Then, stunned, indeed shattered, by the encounter with the Shoah, I confessed that after Auschwitz, the best one could muster is “moment faiths, moments when Redeemer [God] and vision of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of burning children blot out faith.”² I was trapped between the irresistible force of the persistence of the memory of Exodus and the contact with Israel, the redemption event of our time, and the immovable object of Auschwitz, which cut me off from God and hope. Because I refused to repudiate either truth, I lived with moment faiths. In my mind, I could not wait until some new understanding, some new redemption, could overcome this dichotomy and restore the whole of faith. I longed for the day when we would get back to God and experience steady-state faith and truth again.

¹ Adapted from Irving Greenberg, “Theology After the Shoah: The Transformation of the Core Paradigm,” *Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience*, vol. 26:3 (October 2006), pp. 213-239, available [here](#).

² Irving Greenberg, “Could of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust,” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, (ed.) Eva Fleischner (New York, 1974), p. 27.



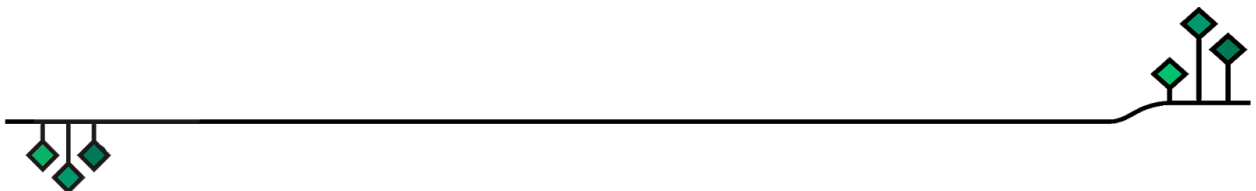
In retrospect, that conception of the nature of truth and of faith is wrong; that understanding lacks the insight of the Holocaust taken at full blast, that is, it does not incorporate the paradigm of brokenness. All truths are moment truths.³ They will remain that way until the coming of the Messiah, that is, as long as the world is flawed and fragmented. Longing for wholeness and certainty is understandable. At this point, however, insistence on certainty represents nostalgia for restoration to a pre-expulsion, pre-Shoah Eden where life without limits and harmony without conflict existed.

We are told that the path back to Eden is barred by the blade of an ever-turning fiery sword. Is it too poetic-after-Auschwitz to see in this image a hint of being thrust into a world, illuminated by the flames of the Shoah, in which all existence and all claims must be viewed with clear-eyed, sober realism, exposed in all their limits?

³ The term *moment truths* does not mean all truths are true for only one brief moment. The moment of a particular truth or system/faith/culture may extend for years, centuries, or millennia in duration. All I am assuming is that the truth is limited by its innate nature and external factors; in a broken world, we can be confident that, sooner or later, there will be an hour, a place, or a group where this assertion/insight/faith will not hold true. The truth's moment may be a second or a millennium; it may encompass large numbers of people over a short time span; it may apply to a limited number of people over an extended time period; it may be valid in specific settings only. A truth may be absolute, but it will turn out to be so only some of the time, for some of the people, within certain limits. Moreover, moment truths' truth may come and go—and return. Truths/faiths may also modify their claims, their inner construction, their equilibrium points, and become true again or extend their truth to this or other groups, under current or other conditions. Permanence is achieved by constant reaffirmation, by inspiring people in future generations, by new insights to heal internal flaws and sicknesses, by redefinitions to deal with ever-changing audiences and *sitz im lebens*.

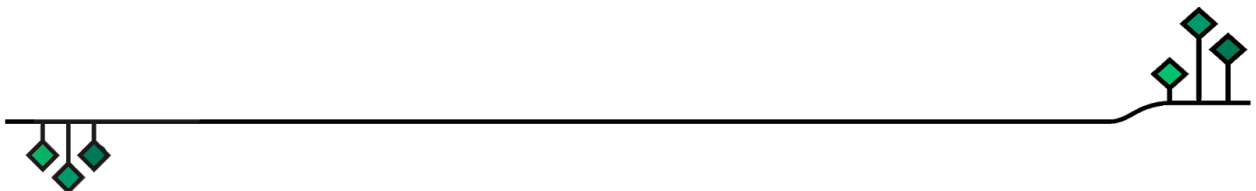
To put it another way, truth is always a compound—a relationship among objective factuality, conceptual correctness, and the teacher/speaker, audience, location, and circumstance under which discourse and communication take place.

Historically, there has been greater resistance to applying these models to religious truths because of the absolute claims made by religions and for fear that all values and morality will dissolve in the process of historical change. This assertion of absolute and unchanging nature does not stand up to the paradigm of brokenness that is seared into our consciousness by our encounter with the Shoah. The absolutist claims do not do justice to the dynamic relationship of the components of truth or to the interaction between the Divine and the human. Nor do they reflect God's continuous renewal of Creation and of covenant. I would argue that the Divine is eternal and revelation is eternal. But contrary to the claims of timeless truth, to the extent that revelation and Torah enter into human culture and discourse and into this broken world, they become moment (e.g., bounded) truths. Typically, they end up broken (if they do not start this way), incorporating wounded, and even evil, elements that must be confronted and corrected. The moment character of a truth may be a blessing, in that it enables a correction in the next moment (whether that interval comes sooner or later).



In the flawed, finite, wounded world that we inhabit, error and limit are incorporated in the essence of the truth. Recognition of this concept is the key to respecting other people; constructive channeling of this insight can prevent the destructive floods that flowed forth from past absolutisms. The only way to wholeness is to heal the world and to work to take the poison out of absolutism without eroding all values and truth in the process. Post-Shoah, the yearning for perfecting finitude, properly harnessed, can fuel the drive for *tikkun olam* (mending the world), politically and economically as well as religiously and philosophically. In the interim, we must tend to our modest gardens of truth and learn to understand faith and conviction in a new light. So the statement “All truths are moment truths” is both a substantive and a methodological dictum. **At the least, in the aftermath of the Shoah, all truth claims are suspect and need to be reexamined, especially if they carry the potential to harm others.** At the most, this principle leads us to de-absolutize and reduce all our truth claims. In the course of becoming more modest, cultures will become more competent, and many past dichotomies will become future continuums.

A case in point, to have faith is not to have certitude of the whole truth. The truth of God’s existence incorporates the experience of God’s absence/nonexistence some part of the time and in some part of the soul. It could be that for the devout or the religiously gifted the truth of God’s existence is known to them 90 percent of the time; for others it will be 50 percent of the time; for others, maybe less. But even for the true believer there will be moment—a child hanging on the gallows, a wicked ruler triumphant, a cancer unchecked—when there is no sign of God to be seen. This is the deepest truth behind messianism—that only when the world is perfect will the true God’s existence be true 100 percent of the time to 100 percent of the people. This is what Isaiah means when he says that “[only] when they will do no harm nor any destruction in my entire holy mountain [the earth], then the land will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 1:9). Every truth

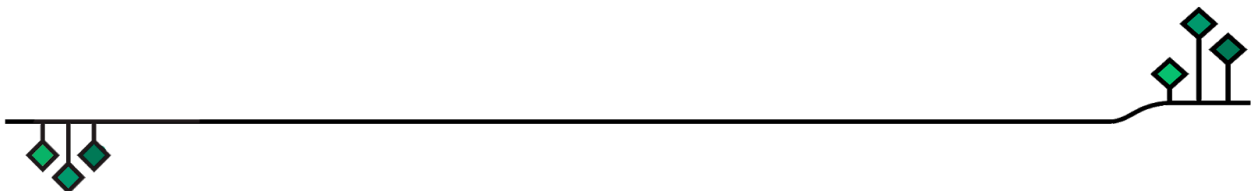


and every teaching must be specified—over what range of the spectrum of the truth is it valid, over what range of time and people does it apply? Otherwise, if applied out of its time or scope, or audience, the truth will be false. Every partial truth pushed far enough beyond its partial scope (e.g., absolutized) will become false; eventually, if it is unchecked, it will turn evil and deadly.

Indeed, I came to see that many of the classic texts in the tradition that are morally objectionable or evil in application are not simply false. Quite often, they are moment truths, but the evil lay in applying them outside of their moment. This understanding of specific conditions that validate and limit truth opens the way to denature evil without having to deny its (moment) truth. The total denial of (partially true) evil texts often convinces those who hold them dear that the deniers do not understand that element of truth that has convinced the believers—so they continue to uphold those texts as totally true. I offer the example of the single most terrible text in rabbinic tradition, which I came to see differently in light of the Shoah: “The best of Gentiles, one should kill.”⁴ Taken literally, authoritatively, this passage is a license for the mass murder of innocents, and I could not countenance it.⁵

⁴ Pesikta Zutarta on Exodus 14:7. See Mekhilta and Rashi on the same verse for a parallel text; Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 4:14 / 66b. See also Massekhet Soferim chapter 15.

⁵ Let it be noted that I read this text literally when I first encountered it. The potential horror in the text haunted me for many years. My fears that it could be used in evil ways intensified as I came to reflect on the power and validity of other religions and on the issues of pluralism. In preparing this article I read the textual sources and usage of this phrase in history. I discovered that, contrary to my fears, the overwhelming, indeed, surprisingly, the unanimous, reading of the text is in its narrowest, nonmonstrous understanding. This pattern starts in the original Talmud Yerushalmi text, which links to the original Massekhet Soferim text (see previous note), where the language used is *ha-kasher she-ba-goyyim harog* (the most legitimate Gentile should be killed). The immediate context supplied is *be-sha’at milhamah harog*—“in a time of war” (e.g. when you face a soldier coming at you to kill you, you may kill first). From the medieval sources of Tosafot (Avodah Zarah 26b, s.v. *ve-lo moridin*) to Mahzor Vitry, siman 527, and the Tosafot Ha-Rosh (Kiddushin 82a), which state self-evidently and exclusively that the laws apply to *sha’at milhamah* (a time of war), to Yosef Karo (Beit Yosef Yoreh Deah 158:1), to the modern Posek Menashe Klein (in Shu”t Mishneh Halakhot 16:134), the statement is firmly placed in the context of war only. On all this, see the treatment in the impressive Ph.D. thesis of Yehezkel Cohen, “The Attitude toward Gentile in Halakhah and in Reality in the Tannaitic Age” (Hebrew University, 1975 [Hebrew]). This thesis is particularly impressive because it is free of apologetics.

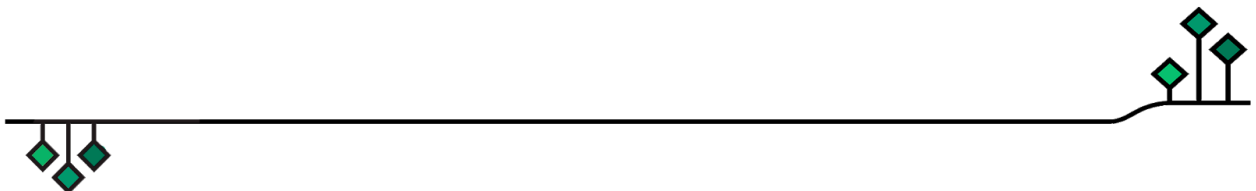


However, over the years, I came to grips with the behavior of the SS guards and functionaries at Auschwitz, especially as revealed at the Auschwitz trials. Auschwitz is the place where human life was so devalued as to condemn people to be murdered en masse and extinguished at whim. The prisoners were dehumanized from start to finish. The incoming prisoners (those temporarily spared from the gas chamber) were shaved (“If you can call it shaving. Our hair was torn out”) and sent to the tattooing station: “There it was made clear to us that we were not human beings but only numbers.”⁶

In this environment, the SS doctors and guards did their selection duty and received their extra liquor ration as their due recompense (p. 56). In this atmosphere, one of the SS doctors, Professor Kremer, participated in a “special action” selection, and, as noted in the sentence next to that report in his diary, he then had an excellent lunch of tomato soup, cold chicken, red cabbage, and “marvelous vanilla ice cream.”

In essence, the only limit on murder and sadism was the inner capacity of the functionary to feel sorry or emotionally unable to act further. Consider the case of arguably the best Nazi functionary in Auschwitz. Of all the defendants, only one, Dr. Franz Lucas, had been “ostracized by his comrades” for his respectful behavior toward the prisoners. “He was the only doctor who treated us humanely,” testified the prisoner witnesses. He was the only one who addressed prisoners by their proper titles; he had actually stolen from the SS pharmacy for the prisoners, bought food with his own money, and shared rations. He was the only defendant who “had helped people from beginning to end; and not only did he not pose as a ‘savior’—very much in contrast to most of the other defendants—he

⁶ Bernd Naumann, *Auschwitz: A Report on the Proceedings against Robert Karl Ludwig Mulka and Others before the Court at Frankfurt* (New York, 1966), p. 88. The following quotes are from this publication, and page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.

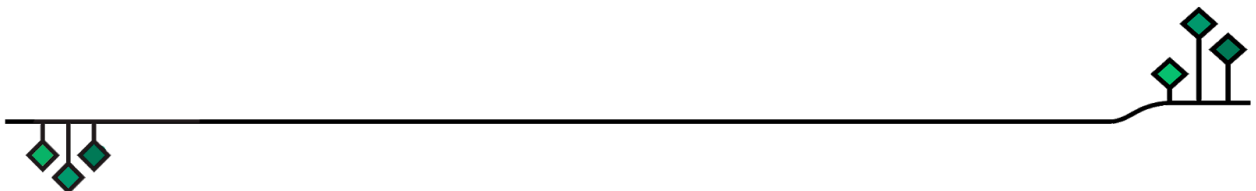


consistently refused to recognize the witnesses who testified in his favor and to remember the incidents recounted by them” (pp. xxv).

A woman deported from Hungary came late in the trial to testify against Lucas. She had arrived at Auschwitz in May 1944, ignorant of the rule at Auschwitz at that time that all mothers with children were gassed upon arrival. To the day of her testimony all she understood was that Lucas had snatched her baby and condemned it to death. She testified angrily: “I held a baby in my arms. They said that mothers could stay with their children, and, therefore, my mother gave me the baby and dressed me so as to make me look older... When Doctor Lucas saw me, he probably realized that the baby was not mine. He took it from me and threw it to my mother” (p. xxx). The woman had never forgiven Lucas for condemning her baby, but the court (judge) immediately knew the truth: “Did you perhaps have the courage to save the witness?” (p. xxx). In response to this question, Lucas was silent.

Ever since I came across such accounts, and whenever I have reread the trial record, a truth emerges from my gut that is knotted and twisted in pain; the truth rises swiftly, chilling my heart and freezing my blood, and then forces itself and bursts outward from my lips: “The best SS functionary in Auschwitz—the one who had pity—deserves to die! Must die!”

We must understand the moment of truth. The guards at Auschwitz in 1944 were less than 1 percent, less than 1/10,000th of 1 percent, of the Gentiles of the world. And we must stand on total guard lest the truth (that one should kill them) be applied 1 percent or 5 percent of the time—in which case it is a license for murder and an idolatrous, evil teaching. If this moment truth is applied one iota out of its time, or place, or people, then every decent person must be alert to disobey it; its authority must be utterly destroyed. Such texts’ truths must be viewed like a cancer cell. Growth is the essence of



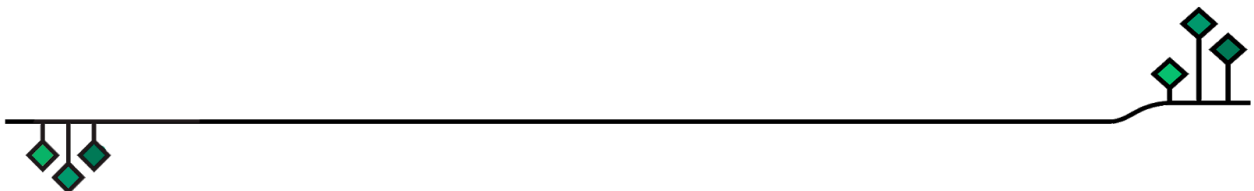
life. But growth out of control—out of its time or place—becomes cancer. If even one cell escapes being destroyed, then it is a carrier of death for the whole body.

This principle is true for so many truths. “Never again” is one of the profoundest truths to come out of the encounter with the Holocaust. But applied by Meir Kahane, one-sidedly—without awareness of the “brokenness” of the Jews and the Jewish tradition—it became a prescription for continuing the Holocaust, in spirit and values, by inflicting violence and proposing to inflict expulsion and even death on innocent civilians, Arabs, and others.⁷

It will take generations to develop the language and rating system of all truths so they can be presented correctly in their moment(s) of truth. This same precision will help us identify the limits of each truth and each religious (or political or cultural) system. This calibration will help each group make room for the truth of the other. Out of self-criticism and self-limitation will come the affirmation of the other and even a concept of partnership with the other to cover all the time, and people, and places that need to be covered. Out of such recognitions will come exchanges in which the best of each worldview can be learned and incorporated into the other. Out of this process of the dissolution of excess claims will emerge the integrity of values held in the presence of clashing cultures and faiths. This articulation is the secret of pluralism, which is neither relativism nor the denial of values.

Indeed, creating the conditions of pluralism is the most prevalent and effective method of preventing pathological absolutism—such as Nazism—from rearing its head. The presence of multiple political and economic mechanisms prevents totalitarian concentrations of force. Wider distribution of the

⁷ On the ideology of Meir Kahane, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Roots of Kahanism: Consciousness and Political Reality,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Vol. 39 (1986), pp. 90-108.



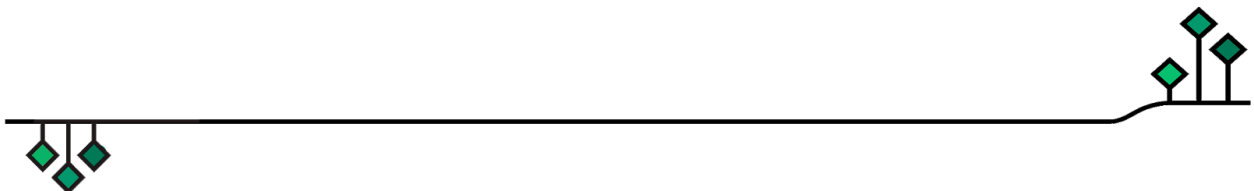
levers of power begins to offer potential victims some assurances against their victimization.⁸ The determination to end the monopoly of force in the hand of oppressors drives the widespread phenomenon of liberation movements, which are initiated by hitherto powerless groups throughout the world. Because power takes many forms, the breaking up of cultural hegemony and of ethical centralization is also desperately needed.⁹ Moral decentralization is insurance against the creation of scapegoats or even of outsiders so isolated that they can be easily victimized.

Perhaps the deepest insight growing out of the systematic application of this analysis is the recognition that all humanly possessed truths—even in divinely revealed systems—are perforce limited. One must spell out in every case the range of a truth's validity, the context of a system's credibility, the limits of all claims. The drive to reach objective truth and to establish the existence of absolute values is not surrendered; it is only given its just limits and thereby protected against potential excesses. In articulating any system, one acknowledges its fragmentariness by stipulating its flaws. This recognition also leads to respect for other systems that may offer corrections—or at least checks—to one's own weaknesses. The other systems or truths also may fill in needed truths or process in areas where one's own system does not function.

There is a deeper paradox here. The group/faith/culture/system that feels fully adequate does not know its own limitations. Therefore, any such entity carries the seeds of totalitarianism and idolatry and is a potential threat to others.

⁸ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York, 1983), pp. 281-311. See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), pp. 163-166.

⁹ See, for example, Jean Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (Minneapolis, 1986), especially the chapter entitled "The Idea of a Female Ethic." For a parallel source, see Eleanor H. Kulendall, "Toward an Ethic of Nurturance: Luce Irigaray on Mothering and Power," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (ed.) Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, NJ, 1983), pp. 187-226. See also "Cultural Feminism" in Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory* (New York, 1993), pp. 65-90.





Pluralism is the living together of absolute truths/faiths/systems that have come to know and accept their own limitations, thus making room for the dignity and truth of the other. This broken truth is the future of truth in a broken world. Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav once wrote that there is no heart so whole as a broken heart. After the Shoah, the world will come to know that there is no truth so whole as a broken truth.¹⁰

¹⁰ Irving Greenberg, "Voluntary Covenant," in *Perspectives: A CLAL Thesis*, published by CLAL—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (New York, 1984), p. 43, n. 60.

