



After the Darkness: Revisiting Post-Holocaust Theology and Ethics

Lecture 3: A God Who Grows More Hidden A World Whose Future Is Open

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I. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and the Three Eras of Jewish History

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg (1933-), “The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History” (1981)

- A. During the Biblical era, the covenantal relationship itself was marked by a high degree of divine intervention... Overt divine intervention expressed itself in the events of Biblical history. When Israel obeyed the Lord, it was victorious. When it strayed, it was defeated. Defeat, itself, was the best proof that disobedience had taken place. Thus, the setback to Joshua’s invading army at Ai—coming as it did after the great victory at Jericho—was quickly traceable to the sacrilegious taking of booty by a man named Achan. “Stand and see the salvation of the Lord,” says Moses. “God will fight for you and you will hold your peace.” These words precede the splitting of the Red Sea, the triumphal moment of the Exodus when divine power finally and completely shattered Pharaoh’s human might, underscoring the ultimate weakness and relativity of all human power. This overwhelming divine might was the best proof of God’s presence and God’s existence. Human power denied God’s might. At this moment of divine triumph, Israel saw the great hand, feared the Lord, and believed. The covenant may be a partnership but it is very clear that God is the initiator, the senior partner, who punishes, rewards and enforces the partnership if the Jews slacken. In the stinging words of Ezekiel, “You say, we will be as the nations...As I live, says the Lord God, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with poured out fury...I will rule over you” (3).



- B.** The Rabbis' fundamental theological breakthrough was a kind of secularization insight. The manifest divine presence and activity was being reduced but the covenant was actually being renewed. God had not rejected the Jews, but rather had called them to a new stage of relationship and service. From where did the Rabbis draw the authority to take charge of Jewish religion and destiny, to expand required observance in every area of life, to shape new institutions and to legitimize the use of their minds and reason as the key source for deriving knowledge of "what does the Lord require of thee?" The unspoken, oft-used axiom is the unfolding of the covenantal model. The Jewish people, the passive partner in the Biblical covenant, is being urged to assume a new level of responsibility by its divine counterpart. If Israel's phylacteries praise God as the *echad*, the unique one, its God also wears phylacteries which contain the praise of Israel: "Who is like your people, Israel, one unique nation in the earth?" The Divine Partner becomes more restrained, more hidden, more intimate in relationship to the Jews.

In the Biblical period, God's presence was manifest by splitting the Red Sea and drowning the Egyptians. In the Second Temple siege, God did not show up, like the cavalry in the last scene of a Western movie, to save the day. God had, as it were, withdrawn, become more hidden, so as to give humans more freedom and to call the Jews to more responsible partnership in the covenant. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said that God's might, shown in Biblical times by destroying the wicked, is now manifest in divine self-control. The *Ethics of the Fathers* say: "Who is mighty? He who exercises self-restraint." God allows the wicked to act without being cut off immediately. The great Biblical praise of God as "great, mighty and awesome" found in Deuteronomy is used as the model of divine praise for the opening of the central Rabbinic prayer, the Amidah, the standing, silent prayer, *but the meaning is reversed*. God's might is expressed in allowing human freedom instead of punishing the wicked (5).

- C.** The key Rabbinic insight that led to the transformation of the covenant after the destruction was the understanding that God had become more hidden. God's withdrawal respected human freedom and was a call to Jews to assume a more responsible partnership in the covenant. If God was more hidden after the destruction of the Temple, how much more hidden must God be in the world after the Holocaust? Thus, religious activity itself must be profoundly immersed in the secular, where God is hidden. In fact, this has been the primary thrust of Jewish activity since 1945 (9).



- D.** If God did not stop the murder and the torture, then what was the statement made by the infinitely suffering Divine Presence in Auschwitz? It was a cry for action, a call to humans to stop the Holocaust, a call to the people Israel to rise to a new, unprecedented level of covenantal responsibility. It was as if God said: “Enough, stop it, never again, bring redemption!” (11)
- E.** Here we come to the paradox of the Rabbis’ insight. After the destruction, God was more hidden but the divine presence could be found in more places. If the divine presence resided on Jerusalem’s holy mount, then the hidden God could be found everywhere. So synagogues could be located anywhere. By this logic, the God who, after the Holocaust, is even more profoundly hidden must be found everywhere. The divine is experienced neither as the intervening, commanding One of the Bible, nor the law-giving Partner of the Rabbinic experience but as the everpresent Presence of our era. “I [God] am with him in trouble” (Psalm 91:15) means that where Israel suffers, God is present, suffering with God’s people. The answer to the question “Where was God at Auschwitz?” is: God was there starving, beaten, humiliated, gassed and burned alive, sharing the infinite pain as only an infinite capacity for pain can share it (11).

F. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a

“וַיִּתְּצוּ בְּתַחֲתִית הָהָר”, אָמַר רַב אֲבָדִימִי בַר חֲמַא בַר חָסָא: מְלַמֵּד שֶׁכֶּפֶה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עָלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא — שָׁם תִּהְיֶה קְבוּרַתְכֶם. אָמַר רַב אֲחָא בַר יַעֲקֹב: מִכָּאן מוֹדְעָא רַבָּה לְאַוֲרֵייתָא. אָמַר רַבָּא: אִף עַל פִּי כֵן הַדּוּר קִבְּלוּהּ בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ, דְּכָתִיב: “קִיְּמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים” — קִיְּמוּ מֵה שֶׁקִּיְּבִלוּ קִבְּרוּ.

“And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: the verse teaches that the Blessed Holy One overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: From here there is a substantial caveat to the obligation to fulfill the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them” (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews ordained what they had already taken upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.



II. A World Allowed to Be

John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity* (1994), p. 45.

We tend to believe that if we had been in charge of creation we would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunsets, but eliminated germs and staphylococci. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal. Exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate, making evolution possible, are those that enable cells to become cancerous and generate tumors. You can't have one without the other. In other words, the possibility of disease is not gratuitous, it's the necessary course of life.

III. The Image of God and the Reality of Unspeakable Degradation

A. Midrash Tehillim 17

אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי בשעה שאדם הולך בדרך, איקוניא של מלאכים מהלכין לפניו, ומכריזין ואומרים תנו מקום לאיקוניא של הקב"ה,

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi says: "When a person walks on his or her way, a procession of angels walks before him or her and says, 'Make way for an image of the Blessed Holy One.'"

B. Samuel Rajzman, *An Account Before the American House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1945, describing Treblinka*

Because little children at their mothers' breasts were a great nuisance during the shaving procedure, later the system was modified and babies were taken from their mothers as soon as they got off the train. The children were taken to an enormous ditch; when a large number of them were gathered together they were killed by firearms and thrown into the fire.



Here, too, no one bothered to see whether all the children were really dead. Sometimes one could hear infants wailing in the fire. When mothers succeeded in keeping their babies with them and this fact interfered with the shaving, a German guard took the baby by its legs and smashed it against the wall of the barracks until only a bloody mess remained in his hands. The unfortunate mother has to take this mass with her to the ‘bath.’

Only those who saw these things with their own eyes will believe with what delight the Germans performed these operations, how glad they were when they succeeded in killing a child with only three or four blows with what satisfaction they pushed the baby’s corpse into the mother’s arms.

C. Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust” (1974)

Judaism and Christianity do not merely tell of God’s love for man, but stand or fall on their fundamental claim that the human being is, therefore, of ultimate and absolute value. (“He who saves one life it is as if he saved an entire world” – B.T. Sanhedrin 38a; “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son” – John 3:16.) It is the contradiction of this intrinsic value and the reality of human suffering that validates the absolute centrality and necessity of redemption, of the Messianic hope. But speak of the value of human life and hear the testimony of S. Szmaglewska, a Polish guard at Auschwitz, about the summer of 1944. The passage (from the Nuremberg trial record) deserves commentary:

WITNESS:...women carrying children were [always] sent with them to the crematorium. [Children were of no labor value so they were killed. The mothers were sent along, too, because separation might lead to panic, hysteria—which might slow up the destruction process, and this could not be afforded. It was simpler to condemn the mothers too and keep things quiet and smooth.] The children were then torn from their parents outside the crematorium and sent to the gas chambers separately. [At that point, crowding more people into the gas chambers became the most urgent consideration. Separating meant that more children could be packed in separately, or they could be thrown in over the heads of adults once the chamber was packed.] When the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers was at its height, orders were issued that children were to be thrown straight into the crematorium furnaces, or into a pit near the crematorium, without being gassed first.



SMIRNOV (Russian prosecutor): How am I to understand this? Did they throw them into the fire alive, or did they kill them first?

WITNESS: They threw them in alive. Their screams could be heard at the camp. It is difficult to say how many children were destroyed in this way.

SMIRNOV: Why did they do this?

WITNESS: It's very difficult to say. We don't know whether they wanted to economize on gas, or if it was because there was not enough room in the gas chambers.

The sheer volume of gas used in the summer of 1944 depleted the gas supply. In addition, the Nazis deemed the costs excessive. Therefore, in that summer, the dosage of gas was halved from twelve boxes to six per gassing. When the concentration of the gas is quite high, death occurs quickly. The decision to cut the dosage in half was to more than double the agony.

How much did it cost to kill a person? The Nazi killing machine was orderly and kept records. The gas was produced by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schadlingsbekämpfung m.b.H. (German Vermin-Combating Corporation, called DEGESCH for short.) It was a highly profitable business, which paid dividends of 100 percent to 200 percent per year (100 percent in 1940 and 1941; 200 percent in 1942, 1943) to I.G. Farben, one of the three corporations which owned it. The bills by Zyklon B came to 195 kilograms for 975 marks = 5 marks per kilogram. Approximately 5.5 kilograms were used on every chamberload, about fifteen hundred people. This means 27.5 marks per fifteen hundred people. With the mark equal to 25 cents, this yields \$6.75 per fifteen hundred people, or forty-five hundredths of a cent per person. In the summer of 1944, a Jewish child's life was not worth the two-fifths of a cent it would have cost to put it to death rather than burn it alive. There, in its starkest form, is the ultimate denial.

In short, the Holocaust poses the most radical counter-testimony to both Judaism and Christianity.



D. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011)

By the 1890s, lynching fever gripped the South, spreading like cholera, as white communities made blacks their primary target, and torture their focus. Burning the black victim slowly for hours was the chief method of torture. Lynching became a white media spectacle, in which prominent newspapers, like the Atlanta Constitution, announced to the public the place, date, and time of the expected hanging and burning of black victims. Often as many as 10 to 20,000 men, women, and children attended the event. It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black victims — burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Postcards were made from the photographs taken as black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera. They were sold for 10 to 25 cents to members of the crowd, who then mailed them to relatives and friends, often with a note saying something like this: ‘This is the barbeque we had last night.’”

E. Parul Sehgal, Review of Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (NYT, February 26, 2019)

[Historian Stephanie] Jones-Rogers reveals how the violence of slave-owning women especially could go unchecked, particularly when the victims were black children. She gives the example of Henrietta King. As an 8- or 9-year-old, King was accused of stealing candy. Her mistress wedged King’s head under a rocking chair. For about an hour, she rocked back and forth on King’s head while her young daughter whipped her. King’s face was mutilated. For the rest of her life she was unable to eat solid food.

