

Faith in God After the Holocaust: An Educational Encounter

■ ■ ■ Jeffrey L. Schein

The theological problems created for Jewish hearts and minds by the Holocaust are enormous. It is indeed difficult to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might" if one entertains even the slightest suspicion that God sat silently by as six million Jews died. Numerous Jewish thinkers have addressed the central question. The responses range from those who feel that faith in God must be retained (Fackenheim, for instance) to those who feel that the traditional conception of the relationship between man and God must be fundamentally altered because of the Holocaust (for instance, Rubenstein).

What follows in this paper is a description of a program designed to help Jews grapple with the theological problems posed by the Holocaust. The program was originally designed for a teen *kallah*. It has subsequently been used in such diverse settings as a camp staff program for Tisha B'Av, a discussion group for Jewish inmates at a prison, and various adult education programs. Each setting demands new adaptations, but the key elements of the program remain constant: that is, the dramatic encounter and the conceptual clarity and simplicity about the theological positions of each of the thinkers.

The Educational Program: An Appropriate Encounter for Jewish Adolescents

My own thinking about an appropriate program about the Holocaust for Jewish adolescents began in the negative. I was most aware of what I objected to in the way theology and the Holocaust are commonly

presented to Jewish teenagers. In looking back on the program, the following criticisms of contemporary Holocaust and theological teaching guided my preparation:

1. The Holocaust is often used (or misused) as a leverage point in moving the Jewish adolescent towards a firmer Jewish identity. The sheer power and drama of the event can shake Jewish teenagers out of their general complacency about their Jewishness. The emotional impact of the Holocaust thus becomes the major focus of the teaching.

But all effective teaching is confluent: That is, it emphasizes both feeling and thinking, and seeks to explore the interrelationship between the two. Only recently have Holocaust curricula begun to do this.

2. Young Jewish adolescents can think about abstract issues of theology. But they cannot think about the issues abstractly. The intellectual gift of conceptual (or, in Piaget's terms, "operational") thinking is fairly precarious for a fourteen-year-old. The theological issues which would emerge in the program need to be presented in a concrete and immediate way.

3. In considering the theological issues, more than the intellectual and emotional development of the student as an individual learner was involved. The sociological context in which their Jewish identity unfolded was also crucial.

Jewish adolescents live in a predominantly secular and/or Christian society. "God" is the subject of numerous jokes, a few decent movies, and a lot of "faithful" Christian proclamations of uncritical belief. Rarely is "God" the subject of thoughtful reflection.

The challenge of the Holocaust to faith in God could, if handled improperly, simply confirm Jewish teenagers in their theological indifference. Any program on the Holocaust has to help build an understanding of various Jewish concepts of God as well as challenge those conceptions in the name of the Holocaust. I wanted students to leave the simulation somewhat awed at the richness and depth of Jewish thinking about God. If these resources were ultimately unable to meet the challenge of the Holocaust, I wanted Jewish teenagers to attribute the failure to the magnitude of the event. I did not want to confirm—even indirectly—the conventional wisdom that belief in God is an unimportant aspect of our Jewishness.

4. Finally, the resources of Jewish theology had to be selected carefully. I wanted to transmit the diversity of different responses to tragedy implicit in various theological positions. For myself, this meant steering away from some of the most contemporary interpretations of the Holocaust. These approaches either take for granted or radically transvalue some of the basic assumptions of Jewish theology (e.g., God cares about human beings,

divine-human communication is possible, etc.). For Jewish teenagers unschooled in "Godtalk," the theologies of Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Eliezer Berkowitz are literally baseless. I wanted to choose four Jewish thinkers whose thinking reflected, as clearly as possible, rudimentary theological positions.

The Kallah

I began my section of the *kallah* (one and a half hours; subsequent experience has shown that this is too long for Jewish teenagers and not long enough for adults) by explaining what I wanted to accomplish in our time together. I shared with the participants my personal feeling that one could not really talk about God and the Holocaust without first focusing on some of the ideas about God we had already developed as individuals. I then asked if anyone had thought about God in the past week. Only a few people raised their hands. The next question was whether individuals felt that there was a God. Almost everyone raised a hand.

The final introductory question was obvious: Why the difference in response to these first two questions? If so many of us felt that there is a God, why did so few of us think about God in the past week? I encouraged students to explain the apparent absence of "God" in our week. Several pointed out that "God" might be apparent in our actions (if we did a mitzvah), even if not in our thoughts. My suggestion to the participants was that we most often turn to God in times of a disaster. We think about the meaning of God in our life when someone in the family dies, when disease threatens our own life, or when a great tragedy—like the Holocaust—affects the Jewish people.

I went on to explain that this afternoon we wanted to try to begin our discussion about God on a non-tragic note. Today was Shabbat. Tradition has it that each Jew has a *neshamah yeterah*, an additional soul, on Shabbat. Out of our beautiful ceremonies, rest, and friendships, came a special sensitivity. I asked the participants to rely on that extra sensitivity as I read through a list of God-beliefs (see Appendix A). Their task was not to analyze but simply to relax and allow their own inner, spiritual selves to respond to whether each statement contained a God-belief they held. I expressed my hope that each of them would at some point in their lives (if not this weekend) be able to give some serious thought to each of the statements. (When the program is not held on Shabbat, it helps to have participants actually check off their answers on a copy sheet. Preliminary music and sensory relaxation techniques might also be of some help in a different context.)

Personal Beliefs and the Holocaust

I next asked the participants to imagine the following: They themselves had survived the Holocaust but had lost their families in a concentration camp. The God-beliefs sheet was then passed out to each of the participants. Everyone was asked to read over the sheet. This time the perspective was not their own personal beliefs, but how they thought they would respond to each God-belief with such vivid memories of the Holocaust coloring their perspective.

This particular group of students handled the task extremely well. While understanding that some individuals might emerge from the experience with God-beliefs unaltered (or even paradoxically strengthened), they immediately recognized that certain beliefs were directly contradicted by the events of the Holocaust. Surely, they reasoned, a God who *could* answer prayer *would* have answered the desperate prayers of the Jews who perished in the Holocaust (belief #5). Other beliefs, like #1 (God directs the happenings in the world), were challenged on the grounds that they were implicitly discredited by the Holocaust. God could have directed the events leading up to the Holocaust, but then he could not be called a "good" God, as indicated in another statement. Some students began to understand some of the even more complex interrelationships between the beliefs. If one believes, for instance, that God intended us never to understand certain things about the world (#7), then one could still believe that God directed the events in the world (#1), or that God's goodness was of a different order than human beings could understand.

At this point in the program, the leader's role is twofold. First, the leader needs to decide at what level s/he would like the discussion to continue. My own sense is that the discussion merited several hours of class time outside of the *kallah*. Sophisticated work has been done by Ellen Charry playing (in an almost mathematical way) with the various permutations and clusters of God-beliefs and their relationships to the four theological positions presented later.¹ For the immediate purposes of the *kallah*, however, the discussion needed to end on an inconclusive note.

Second, the leader serves an important function in providing more comprehensive Jewish contexts for evaluating the various God statements. It is possible, for instance, that God intends certain things to be beyond our comprehension. The leader, however, needs to point out that Jews have always stubbornly held that through the Torah there is a standard of goodness in the world to which even God is accountable. And if these words produce too casual a nod from the participants, the leader needs

1. Available through the Curriculum Resource Center of Gratz College, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

to provide a more complete and more balanced picture through reference to the Book of Job.

The discussion section of the *kallah* focusing on God-beliefs came to a close after fifteen to twenty minutes of discussion. We tried to effect some closure by asking ourselves how many of the God-beliefs might have to be scrapped if one took seriously the religious and moral implications of the Holocaust. After a brief polling, it was decided that at least thirteen of the twenty-one beliefs listed would have to be abandoned or radically modified.

What, then, does one do with the shredded fabric of Jewish faith in God after the Holocaust? I tried to place the event in the context of Jewish and Zionist history. Indeed, precisely because of events like the Holocaust, many sensitive Jews had decided that Judaism had to function through commitments to the land of Israel rather than to the God of Israel, to the "traditions" rather than the "theology" of the Jewish people, and to the "culture" rather than the "religion" of classical Judaism. I shared with them my deep respect for this kind of commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. I took a few moments to explain how my own attachment to Judaism had been shaped largely through my experience in Israel rather than through theological beliefs.

Yet "God" has a long and honored history in the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition itself was in many ways forged in response to tragedy. Perhaps there were, I suggested, ways of retaining a deep personal belief in God even after the Holocaust. At any rate, I indicated that I would like to explore with them the positions of four outstanding Jewish thinkers who felt that belief in God could be sustained even in the face of tragedy.

Encounter with Four Jewish Thinkers

The goal of the encounter was to provide students with an opportunity to interact with the personalities and thoughts of four significant Jewish thinkers. The element of drama was fostered by having each of the thinkers visit the *kallah* and challenge the view that the Holocaust destroyed faith in God. Each thinker tried to present his theological position through concrete situations which were part of the students' everyday life. The students were asked to listen to all four thinkers and to respond to each as a survivor of the Holocaust. After all four had made their visits, participants would be given the opportunity to call any of the thinkers back and challenge what they had said. All challenges, however, had to

be in the form of dialogue. One had to talk to Jeremiah, Gersonides, Elie Wiesel, or Mordecai Kaplan. Participants could not simply talk about their beliefs. The dramatic and dialogic nature of the encounters were crucial if the theological beliefs were to remain comprehensible to early adolescents. The foundations of and some useful techniques for such an approach to role-playing have been well documented by Viola Spolin.²

Conceptual clarity and simplicity were also important. Each thinker based his presentation on a single phrase. As the thinker came forward, he displayed a placard with the phrase in both Hebrew and English. During the course of the presentation, reference was made in a visual way by pointing to the card (sometimes more than once). The four thinkers and their placards were:

Jeremiah:

Mipney Hata'enu Galinu Me-artzeynu

(Because of our sins we were exiled from our land)

Gersonides:

Ain Hashgahah Peratit

(God does not govern the particular details of our lives)

Elie Wiesel:

Shitufim im Elohim be-Ma'aseh Bereshit

(We are partners with God in maintaining the Creation)

Mordecai Kaplan:

Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof

(Justice, justice shall you pursue)

In general, one can say the following of the four thinkers. Jeremiah is broadly representative of the "traditionalist" response to tragedy, Gersonides of the "rationalist" response, Wiesel of the "mystical" approach, and Kaplan of the "naturalist" response.

While these thinkers vary considerably in the depth of their philosophical thinking, they all try to "make sense of" and "think about" the significance of tragedy in ways that Green³ and others have suggested is the hallmark of modern, analytic philosophy. The list of Jewish thinkers who have other approaches to the problems of suffering and theodicy is long. Eugene Borowitz's *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought* (Behrman House, 1983) is a particularly rich resource that can be used to construct other simulations. (Note especially his chapter "Confronting the Holocaust" [pp. 185-218] for this purpose. The positions of such thinkers

2. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963.)

3. Thomas Green, *The Activities of Teaching*. (McGraw Hill, 1971), 9-14.

as Fackenheim, Berkovitz, and Jonas, outlined in this chapter, might be examined for their elements of continuity and discontinuity with the most basic Jewish responses.)

My experience now tells me that using all four characters is an overload on what most participants (teenage and adult) can process. I suggest choosing the three positions with which the individual (or individuals, if a staff is working together on the simulation) is most comfortable (both dramatically and theologically). For reasons I don't completely understand (perhaps it is an idiosyncratic presentation of Wiesel), Kaplan's and Wiesel's positions tend to coalesce in the minds of the participants.

Of the four thinkers, I was personally least familiar with Gersonides. Reading about his life and thought in *Encyclopedia Judaica* and in Husik's *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* was extremely useful. For Jeremiah, I reread the Book of Jeremiah and skimmed over sections of John Skinner's *Prophecy and Religion* (which deals with the life and thought of Jeremiah). I felt sufficiently familiar with the thought of Elie Wiesel and Mordecai Kaplan to present each spontaneously. The key in all instances is for the leader to feel comfortable with the core theological concept s/he is presenting. Wider and deeper exposure to each thinker helps free the leader to be more spontaneous in his interactions with the participants. Such mastery may point to the wisdom of working on the simulation as a staff, so that each individual can involve himself in greater depth with the life and thought of one of the thinkers. The overall goal of the simulation, however, should always be kept in mind. The goal is not to conduct a graduate seminar in theology. An hour or so of study for each character is probably sufficient for most teachers. (The dramatic ability of the leader[s] is, of course, variable, but I can assure everyone that this writer has no great or hidden talent in this area. Any teacher who can do role-plays in a classroom can fit into the presentations.)

What follows is a brief sketch of the presentations made by each of the four thinkers. As characters entered, students were asked to treat each as a guest. They would be given an opportunity to call back the thinkers in order to challenge their positions. Meanwhile, they would have to judge for themselves about the adequacy of each position as a theological solution to the problem of Jewish faith in God after the Holocaust.

Jeremiah (The Traditionalist Response)

Shalom. My name is Jeremiah. I am one of the Hebrew prophets of old. I come to visit you because I want you to know that your questions are not new. You are not the first group of Jews who have encountered suffering

and despair. You are not the first group whose sins were punished by the God of Israel.

It happened in my day, too. People were wailing in the streets. The leaders of the Jewish people had been exiled to Babylonia. The Temple had been destroyed. Nobody could figure out why this had happened. What had we done to deserve such a fate?

Why were we punished? I nearly laughed in their faces. Do you know what went on back then? Everyone had deserted God and His covenant. The priests of the time cared about nothing so much as their own power. Do you think it bothered them if the people on the hillside had to become poor in order to support the priests and the Temple? And I want you to know that the poor, common people were no great bargain, either. What did they put their trust in? It was all the rage in my day to have a figurine of Astarte, the Egyptian Goddess.

Why were they punished? Idolatry! Immorality! Deserting the Covenant! I used to tell my wailing countrymen that the real miracle was not that they had been punished, but that God would, in time, return hope to Zion and restore the Jewish people to their land.

Do you see the sign I brought with me? Do you see what it says? That's right—*Mipney Hata'enu Galinu Me-artzeynu*, because of our sins were we exiled. Tradition credits me with having written that verse. You can find it in the Book of Lamentations. In fact, I don't even remember if I wrote it at all. It's all really very simple. God makes demands of us. If we cannot live up to these demands, there is punishment. It's part of the Covenant with the Jewish people. Everyone is accountable for his actions.

It's as true for you as it was for me...and for the Jews who perished in the Holocaust. How many of you are so righteous? How many of you have never cheated on an exam to get a good grade? Lied to a friend to impress him with an accomplishment you never did?

Wait—just a second—How many of you really observe the Sabbath? I know you do it here, but I mean in your homes. Do you have a Sabbath or a Saturday, watch television or go to synagogue?

Do you think God sees all these flaws in your character and just says, "Ho-hum, another straying Israelite." If there was no punishment for wrongdoing there would be no Covenant. I don't pretend to know why each and every Jew in the Holocaust died. But I do know that God holds us accountable for our wrongdoings. And I know that man does a lot that is wrong. Somehow even the Holocaust was just and fair. Because of our sins, all these tragedies happen to the Jewish people.

Gersonides (The Rationalist Response)

Shalom. I am Levi Ben Gerson. Perhaps only a few of you know me, simply because you have not yet taken the right courses in the history of astronomy and Jewish philosophy. I belong in both. I was a great astronomer of the fourteenth century (learned Christians invited me to their courts to instruct them in the sciences) and a pious and knowledgeable Jew.

I understand that you are troubled by the problem of human suffering, the problem of why so many Jews died in—what do you call it?—oh yes, the Holocaust.

The people in my generation were troubled by this problem too. Many of my fellow rabbis would spend hours trying to console Jews when a young child would die, or trying to explain to an honest, God-fearing Jew why he was still so poor. Why had not God repaid him for his devotion to the Torah? Yes, people were very troubled by this question. But I was always able to give them the simplest of answers. It is the same one that I offer you.

God is not concerned with what happens to each of us as individuals. This is left to us, to our free wills, to the kind of life we live, and to the kinds of communities we create.

God, oh, the egotism of Your creatures! Do you really think that your everyday concerns matter to God? Do you really think He cares that your stomachs are growling in protest against camp food? Does it matter to God whether or not the boy or girl you would like to become more friendly with smiled at you at lunch? Is it important for God to be with you in your time of distress—like when you get a small scoop at the ice cream parlor and are clearly cheated?

There are two things I always do with people who are looking for an answer to this question of why the righteous suffer. First, I always take them with me to look out at the stars and ask, "Is not the God who created such beauty as these too great and distant to be concerned about your individual problems? Isn't it enough to just look up and know that you are part of God's miraculous creation? Doesn't some of your suffering go away when you feel so small under the sky?"

Then I tell my friends that God's plan is the following: He does not come down to us; we climb up to Him. We must elevate ourselves, our character. We must come to see the world as God sees it. Then we will all know how to do justice to one another, then there will be no more tragedies.

Ain Hashgahah Peratit—God does not concern Himself with the everyday details of our life. If He were to help us every time we cried or did not understand something, we would not grow into the wise creatures He intends us to be. God gives us the power to do the good and understand the world. If He interfered with our human abilities to do those things, He would be violating His own plan for the world.

Elie Wiesel (The Mystical Approach)

I've come to share some thoughts with you about the Holocaust. And you see, unlike your last two guests, I speak from experience. For I am a survivor of the Holocaust. My whole life has been shaped by that horrible event. Every word I write is touched by it.

It used to be that I was the angriest of men. I lost my whole family in the Holocaust. The very thought of the event created indescribable anguish inside of me. I was a storyteller then as now. But the only story I could

tell was that of Rabbi Levi of Berditchev. Do you know of Rabbi Levi? He was a great Hasidic rabbi.

The tale goes like this. During Yom Kippur, Rabbi Levi of Berditchev excused himself from services. He went outside and made a personal petition of God. He said:

Master of the Universe, in there—in the *shul*—I ask You for Your forgiveness. Surely I have sinned. But Master of the Universe, You sin even more. Think of all the unjustified and horrible suffering which has come upon the Jewish people. Surely there is no good reason for this. Surely it is in Your power to stop it.

So, Master of the Universe, I have a deal to make with You. I have here two lists. One is a list of the sins which my people have committed against You. The other is a list of Your sins against them. I think You know whose list is longer.

But You teach me to be compassionate as You Yourself are compassionate. So I will make a deal with You. If you will forgive the Jewish people for their sins against You, I will forgive You for Your transgressions against them.

Yes, for many years this was the only story that I could tell. But times have changed now. I don't feel so bitter. I no longer hold God accountable for the Holocaust. Perhaps, after all, He was powerless to stop it. My thoughts turn now to that loveliest and most intriguing idea, taken from the great commentaries on the Book of Genesis. There we are told that You and I, God, are *shitufim*, partners, in the act of creation.

I believe that, and so I believe that God is waiting for us to do something about our part of the world. One ancient mystic suggested that God's relation to man and to the world might be compared to a person locked up in prison. God waits for man to perform just the right good deed which will unlock the door and make the world a fit place—as it must have been once—for God's presence to dwell in. Yes, when we really do become partners with God in creating a new world, perhaps the nightmare of the Holocaust will leave me for good.

Mordecai Kaplan (The Naturalist Response)

You know that all my life I have been teaching *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Lazeh*, each and every Jew is responsible for the welfare of all other Jews. So of course the Holocaust is very painful for me. If I am a member of the great Jewish family, then I can't escape the fact that over one-third of my family was murdered during the Holocaust. Even if I had not lost members of my real family, I would have felt the sting no less.

So why, people ask me, do I still have faith in man and God? Perhaps part of it is that I am an optimist. When the *siḡdur* tells us that "each day the work of creation is renewed," I believe it. I believe that each day is full of new opportunities for living the kind of life described in the Torah—a good life, a religious life, a moral life.

Each of us has the power to pursue justice. The Book of Deuteronomy says it clearly: "Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof" — justice, justice shall you pursue. Why does it say justice twice in the Torah? There are many explanations given. My own is that *tzedek* is written twice to teach us that part of our ability to do justice comes from the power in the world we call God. One *tzedek* is ours; the other is His. Together we have the capacity to change the world for the better.

Not everyone takes advantage of this gift. If everyone did, we would never have Holocausts. But a hundred Holocausts cannot erase the privilege each of us is granted each day in awakening to the potential of making the world a better place.

Follow-Up and Evaluation of Program

After presenting the four thinkers, the participants are encouraged to call back individuals and challenge their views. My experience with various groups is that Jeremiah is almost always called back quickly. Participants challenge his notion that all punishment is just, in the name of innocent children who perished in the Holocaust. Surely, they did not live long enough to have sinned in such a way as to bring down God's wrath. Sometimes this leads to a quite long and extended trek through the notion of corporate responsibility in the Bible, and sometimes Jeremiah is defeated quickly. Gersonides' somewhat dispassionate attitude is usually either amusing or mildly disturbing to different groups. Only sophisticated groups of adults call back Mordecai Kaplan or Elie Wiesel for questioning.

After extending the questions and answers for whatever time is deemed appropriate, the mask of theater is dropped. Individuals are asked which of the four positions comes closest to approximating their own. With adequate time, small group discussions of how the program affected the participants and the reasons for their final choices can provide closure.

My experiences have been largely successful in the various settings in which I have used this program. As I look back over why I chose this particular approach, I realize how deeply impressed I must have been with the story of the University of California at Berkeley professor who used to teach his history of science class by coming to class dressed as the scientist to be discussed each week. Theology is too important to remain an activity solely for theologians. When concepts are simplified and embodied in a living person, theology can come alive for Jewish teenagers and adults.

Appendix: GOD-BELIEFS*

- 1) I believe that God created the world and directs the happenings in it.
- 2) I believe that God has no power to interfere in the affairs of people.
- 3) I believe that the world came into being by accident.
- 4) I believe that God is aware of what I do.
- 5) I believe that God can answer prayer.
- 6) I believe that God punishes evil.
- 7) I believe that God intended us never to understand certain things about the world.
- 8) I believe that my concepts about God differ from the Torah's concept of God.
- 9) I believe that even if there were no people, God would still exist.
- 10) I believe that God decided what is good and what is evil.
- 11) I believe that God gets involved in human affairs when God wants to.
- 12) I believe that God rewards good.
- 13) I believe that God exists independently of, and outside of people.
- 14) I believe that prayer is an attempt to talk to God.
- 15) I believe that the Torah is the word of God.
- 16) I believe that God listens to prayer.
- 17) I believe that "God" is a term that people use to describe their best hopes for humanity.
- 18) I believe God exists only inside of people.
- 19) I believe that praying can benefit the person who prays, even if God doesn't listen.
- 20) I believe that "God" is an idea people use to describe those things beyond human understanding.
- 21) I believe prayer can have an effect on people's lives regardless of what they think about God.

* From *Cookbook of Jewish Ideas* by Ellen Charry (Philadelphia: Bureau of Jewish Education of Philadelphia).

Questions for Reflection
(Schein)

1. Which of the four thinkers in the simulation comes closest to your own theology?
2. What do you find attractive in other Jewish philosophers even if it isn't your overall framework?
3. Given your understanding of teenagers, which of the Jewish thinkers do you think they would have the greatest affinity for and why?

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