

*Thoughts on the Holocaust*

Christians and Jews alike honor Elie Wiesel for many reasons, but not the least of them is the way he - like a prophet of old - has forced philosophers and theologians to ponder the impact of the Holocaust on their conceptions of God and human nature. He is not so presumptuous as to claim that he has answers to the mind-boggling questions. I certainly do not have them either, but I do want to put an end to what I consider truly sophomoric efforts by others to illuminate a darkness that is simply impenetrable.

I should say at the very outset that whenever I write about the Holocaust, I do so with fear and trepidation. For me it is like writing about the unknowable. People who experienced its horrors have a right to relate the facts, what they saw and heard, what they did, how they felt, how they reacted. They may also indulge in generalizations about the behavior of fellow victims and about what they think precipitated the indescribable tragedy. I indulge them even the right to curse or bless God.

What I cannot tolerate are attempts by historians to be judgmental about the martyrs and to decide whether their behavior was saintly or villainous. When these historians also are ignorant of the nature of Jewish life in the countries of Jewish suffering and of the content of the Jewish tradition throughout the ages, they articulate views that I often find offensive. And when anyone tries to explain why God permitted it to happen, I virtually scream. I respect the drive of those who believe in God to discover why God behaved as He did. Yet I would much rather submit that the answer is beyond man and leave it at that. Intellectual honesty sometimes demands that we admit that we cannot know what will never be known until God Himself tells us.

Why God acted or failed to act as He did is beyond us. But certainly it was not our sins that caused the Holocaust. Only non-

Jews caused it. Our sin, if any, was our blindness in not anticipating it and our inertia and silence while it was happening.

True, we may have sinned as a people and as individuals. But is the punishment commensurate with the gravity or heinousness of the sin? We would resent a human judge who acted in this way. Can we not, therefore, ask whether the Judge of all the earth should not be at least as just as a human judge?

I know many a colleague who still maintains that God punished us. I wish they would shut their mouths once and for all. Not only are they talking nonsense but they are also relieving the Christian and Moslem worlds of guilt. And they are justifying another Holocaust, for we are less righteous now than we ever were. (Even as I write this I feel myself screaming within me.)

For Jewish philosophers of all ages the problem of evil generally was one with which they could hardly cope. And there are some today who superficially or with depth still write on the subject, which is given the impressive name "the problem of the theodicy." Somehow, prior to World War II the answers may not have satisfied but we could live with the paradox that a benign God might create evil for a purpose known to Him, and we tolerated its continuance at least until the end of days. Most of the rationalization was ridden with doubt, but somehow religious faith was not shaken massively.

However, the death of six million Jews - millions of others - because of the indescribable bestiality of Hitler was too tragic a phenomenon not to upset all prior views. One simply could not believe that God would not intercede to save. The result was either a denial of God or total resignation to Him, because any hypothesis other than His existence made life meaningless. One chose God because it was the only viable alternative.

I wish that I had the infinite wisdom necessary to give a satisfactory answer. I shall delude neither myself nor anyone else by suggesting that I am even close to an explanation. If I did, I could make myself immortal - I would be as immortal as the Infinite because I fathomed His ways. But one explanation I must reject, and from that rejection perhaps one will discover a ray of light that will ennoble our lives and experiences.

The one explanation, which I first heard from the lips of Martin Buber, and thereafter from many Jewish thinkers, traditional

and nontraditional, is that the period of the Holocaust was a period of *Hester Panim* for God. He simply hid His face - He turned away from man, and man and his id ran amok, with the resulting devastation. The notion is suggested in Deuteronomy. (*Deuteronomy* 31:18) At times God, so to speak, withdraws from His preoccupation with His covenanted people and havoc follows.

I do not know how I had the hutzpah thirty years ago to argue with Martin Buber. But I did, and now that I am older, I can be even more daring.

I cannot accept the idea that an omniscient, omnipotent God would ever make Himself unaware of what is happening on earth. Perforce He must know everything at all times. To take literally the biblical expression that God hides His face is to make too anthropomorphic a judgment. A God who is so petty as to yield to pique is too ignoble a God for man to worship! The verses in Deuteronomy that suggest the notion must mean something else.

I cannot imagine that Martin Buber was a literalist with regard to other anthropomorphic passages in the Bible. Would he be so literalist with regard to Moses' wish to see God's face and God's reply that only His back could be seen? Maimonides gives this passage a magnificent allegorical interpretation. Why then must we moderns become literal with regard to similar passages of the Bible and portray God as playing "hide-and-seek" with us?

If we are unequivocal in our commitment to the idea that God knows all and can do all because He is omniscient and omnipotent, then we must assume that He knew what was happening but intentionally did not act. And why He did not act is simply beyond us. Perhaps from His not acting we may learn something about His refusal to interfere with the freedom of will of even maniacs like Hitler, but then we would have to admit that He sets a bad example for me. He ordered us not to stand by idly when innocent blood is shed. Why did He? I repeat - Job's answer is still the best. It is a no answer. We do not know, but "though He slay me, I still trust in Him." (*Job* 13:15)

Yet does the phrase "hiding the face" have no meaning for us? Of course it does, but not to provide the reason for God's behavior during the Holocaust.

If we bear in mind one profound insight of Hirsch's and Heschels, we will find meaning in the phrase. They suggested that

the Bible is not a book to be used by humans primarily to arrive at an understanding of God.

It is not a textbook of man's theology. It is rather a textbook of God's anthropology. It tells us how God sees man. Thus, for example, we do not really know why God denied Adam the right to eat from one specific tree in the Garden of Eden, but we know how Adam defied God. We do not know why God favored Abel's offering and not Cain's, but we know how Cain reacted. We do not have much detail about the sins of humanity before the Flood, but we know with what arrogance new generations conspired to frustrate God. Similarly, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah are only subtly suggested, but the response of Abraham when told about God's plan became a model for all mankind. That is what one means when one speaks of the Bible as a guidebook not to help us fathom God but rather to see ourselves - how we are and how we ought to be.

With this as our premise, it is not unreasonable that God tells us, in the Bible, what He will do under certain circumstances - not because it accords with His Being or His Justice but rather to help us see ourselves as if in a mirror.

Therefore, He told us that the day would come when we would betray Him and ignore His law. We would be punished, but even the punishment would not make us fully aware of our guilt. We would not fathom the meaning of our suffering, or sense our guilt, or take the steps necessary to achieve true penitence and a return to Him. We will hide. We will fail to see and to hear. Our hearts will be obtuse; our eyes blind and our ears deaf. And God's hiding from us will mirror our hiding from Him. Perhaps that will help us to visualize the character of our own performance and we shall be stimulated to make amends.

That is what the text tells us. God said that even when Jews reflect in their misery upon the cause of all their suffering, they will not blame themselves, but rather God, His absence, His neglect (*.Deuteronomy* 31:17). How else could God teach them to reflect more profoundly, the better to discern their existential situation, than to hide Himself, which He does (*ibid.* v. 18). Perhaps as He hides, we will recognize that this is what we are doing, and we will open our ears to hear, and our eyes to see.

Now, that is precisely what happened in our lifetime and is continuing to happen. God did not hide. It was, rather, we who had lost our capacity to hear. Our self-centeredness prompted us to hear only what we wanted to hear, and God's hiding mirrored our behavior in the hope that we would see ourselves as we are and change our ways.

Were our ears not deaf during the Holocaust? We refused to listen to reports that were being transmitted to us, in ways direct and indirect, that Hitler had become the greatest human butcher in world history. We now know so much more about our deafness at that time.

First we doubted the veracity of the reports. Then we assured ourselves that we could do nothing. Lastly we even weighed - with unforgivable self-centeredness - the price of rescue against the cost of prolonging the war. We were so coldly calculating instead of hearing - simply hearing the flames of the crematoria. It was not God who hid His face but we who had hidden ours.

But it did not start with World War II. Why didn't Jews hear what was happening all about them in eastern and central Europe from almost the beginning of this century, and why were they deaf to the call of Zionism and its messianic implication? Why did they cling to the fleshpots and decline to act as the situation warranted - with emigration to Israel and the development of the land? Why did they wait so long before realizing how vicious was the voice of the anti-Semite all about them? And indeed, are we not listening to that same voice today, or are we not hiding from it?

Similarly, the United Nations, which was born as a result of World War II, has overwhelming evidence that a large bloc of its members seek the genocide of Jews again. Yet has it the capacity to listen? It does not hear or fathom anything but that which it wants to hear.

All of the resolutions of its Security Council with regard to Israel are so indescribably vile that the mere thought of them makes the heart sick.

If we had listened in the United States to the calls of distress that were coming from the ghettos for more than a generation, we might have solved our urban problems long ago.

If university administrators and faculty had listened to the complaints of students when they were first expressed, we would not have had the avalanche of campus upheavals.

If parents had listened to their own children in their teens and shared their concerns and forebodings, we would not now have hundreds of thousands in revolt against our every cherished value and institution.

The truth is that even husbands and wives do not listen to each other - each hears and knows only what he or she craves, and without the art of listening to each other, their marriages must end in divorce.

As a matter of fact, how can we ever ask God to listen to us when we do not hear Him when He speaks to us! All that is happening in and to Israel may very well be His address to us, inviting us to recognize His role in our redemption, and cautioning the rest of humanity not to permit continuing injustice to the Jew to catapult the world into another global war and the annihilation of all mankind!

All of us must learn to listen. God does not hide His face. Rather does He mirror our hiding - our burying of our heads in the sand like ostriches.

If we are to save ourselves and all mankind, we must open our ears and our eyes. If God hides His face, it is because He wants to remind us that we are hiding ours!

That also describes how I felt when I recently read a volume edited and published by Prof. Geoffrey Hartman of Yale. It is entitled *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspectives*. As I reflect on what happened, I fault myself for not having been more articulate and more indignant than I was about that which the President of the United States said and did. I must have hidden my face to the horrendous implications of any attempt to "bury the hatchet" or to "come to terms with the past."

Suddenly I experienced a *deja vu*. In 1985 I accepted the President's explanation that forty years after the war, the time might have come for a reconciliation with the enemy, precisely as forty-odd years earlier I accepted President Roosevelt's explanation that to save the victims of Nazi tyranny would prolong the war and victimize many innocent American soldiers. I said to myself: "How

many times must it happen before I detect the sham and stop hiding my face?"

It has been said that one of the deepest moral quandaries of modern times is the tension between world Judaism's need to remember the crimes of the Holocaust and post-Nazi Germany's need to forget. Bitburg represented the President's surrender to the latter need, while everything that he is now doing to meet the former need will hardly help Germans to remember.

For Elie Wiesel's role in the matter, Jewry must be everlastingly grateful. And we must also thank God that, in this instance, Wiesel did not have to stand alone. Christians and Jews proved equal to the challenge with him, and Prof. Hartman's book attests to the pluses and minuses of a historic affair called Bitburg.

In any event, we have nothing more to say other than that God's ways are unknown to man. We will never be able to explain why He permitted the Holocaust to happen. Those who think that they have an explanation only make Him look worse, and I would rather plead ignorance of His ways than blaspheme Him. All I do know is that He wishes me to live righteously. His command that I be righteous must ever be the lodestar of my existence, even if I cannot account for or justify or rationalize His inscrutable behavior during the Holocaust.

Yet what does one do with the countless references in our sacred literature and our liturgy to the fact that disobedience to Him is the cause of disaster befalling us? And were we not promised that we would be rewarded of our righteousness? Was that not God's commitment in the covenant - His side of the "bargain" ?

How does one reconcile these facts with my rejection of any explanation for God's behavior during the Holocaust? I am sure that the question is still better than any answer one will receive. Yet reply I must, but with caution that in this connection too, I have no completely satisfactory rationalizations.

Many of our sages resolved the dilemma by saying that the reward for obedience and the punishment for sin are otherworldly. In another realm of existence God will fulfill His word. This view became especially central in Christian thought. Other sages did not deny the validity of this approach, but since the Bible speaks of this-worldly rewards and punishments, and not of otherworldly

ones, one has reason to ask why one cannot see any connection on earth between virtue and God's bounty, on the one hand, and vice and God's wrath, on the other.

With the biblical statements which affirm the connection one can make one's peace and say that the blessings and the curses are meant for the group. If Jewish society and the Jewish state, and not only single individuals, fulfill God's will, then there will be peace and plenty. Otherwise, the consequences will be unbearable.

A basic truth is contained in this caveat - and even if the biblical language is hyperbolic, nonetheless the powerful language was intended to make Jews realize that only a just society can long endure, while a corrupt one must disintegrate. History has proven this to be generally true. Therefore, if one is not too strict a literalist, one can discern a message of lasting significance in the Torah.

This would certainly apply to the second paragraph of the Shema (*Deuteronomy* 11:13-17). In it the Jewish people were told that if they obeyed the Law, God would do everything necessary to make their sojourn in the Promised Land a blissful one. For failure to obey the Law, however, they would perish. This promise and warning were addressed to the group - the people - the state and society.

Professor Lenn Goodman of the University of Hawaii has suggested that there is no promise in this passage that God will reward the people for obedience to His Law. All that is said is that if they obey the Law, and if God rewards them, then they should be careful not to become smug because of their bliss and forget the Lord who made it possible. (*Deuteronomy* Chapter 8) Otherwise they will be punished. His suggestion makes good sense, but there are other passages which definitely make the promise to reward obedience.

One possible answer to our question is to say that to an immature people God had to speak as one does to children. For a mature people, however, the obedience itself is its own reward, as the verse in Leviticus expresses it: "I will be your God, and you will be my people" (*Leviticus* 26:12). The thought of a mutual love affair for profit is horrendous to sensitive people, and, therefore, for the truly mature, the service of God for a promised benefit is equally



unthinkable. "We must not serve God in order to receive a reward," said our sages in Ethics of the Fathers. (1:3)

But what about the emphasis in our prayers on the connection between our sins and our exile, which incidentally encouraged our persecutors in the last two thousand years to do what they did? They said that they were simply fulfilling God's wish. This was widely held Christian doctrine.

To this I give what may appear to be the view of a schizoid person. I do not see that on earth the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished, but I do believe that it is excellent exercise for a religious person to practice introspection and ponder that perhaps, when he is made to suffer, God is trying to teach him something that will make him an even better servant of man and God than he presently is. Yet, while he may think well of himself, he may never attribute other people's misfortunes to their sinfulness.

Especially troublesome is the High Holy Days prayer that tells us - on the basis of a Talmudic text (*See Talmud B. Rosh Hashanah* 8a) - that the days of judgment are the occasion for our being sentenced, "Who will live and who will die." We find it impossible to reconcile our overwhelming experience with the literal interpretation of that prayer. We discover that the most righteous are not sentenced to life and the most wicked do survive to the following year. God's ways remain inscrutable. Then why utter a prayer with whose literal meaning we cannot identify?

Needless to say, we forget that the prayer book was never intended to be a textbook in systematic philosophy or theology. Prayer is generally in the category of poetry - not logic. It is very much the product of moods, and logical coherence is not its hallmark. But so many thoughts are suggested by the prayer that who would dare to excise it!

It teaches us how flitting life is - how frail we are - how many are the threats to our existence. Then why not make the years and the days count!

It teaches us that our deeds do make a difference. One added good deed by one person can swing the balance of the survival of humanity and not only for the individual self.

It teaches us that in the imponderable "bang" of the universe, a still small voice can still be heard.

It communicates a sense of awe and trepidation, which in the modern age we need badly to reduce our arrogance and our self-assurance that we are the complete masters of our fate and captains of our destiny.

It induces a sense of solidarity with all mankind, the creatures of one Creator, who must one day account to Him for that which they did with the gift of life.

For centuries that prayer did all of this - and not only for Jews to whom its imagery was real but even for those who saw in it only the multiple meanings and reminders.

One last word. As the Bible still inspires those who take it literally as well as those who see in it much allegory, so the liturgy can inspire those who take it literally and those who see more than words in the text but also spirit, awe, adoration, commitment, and solidarity with fellow Jews in the service of God and man.