

An “Italian Citizen of Jewish Race”: Primo Levi on Belief, Blasphemy and Becoming a Jew

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Abstract: *While religious belief is not a dominant theme in Levi’s Holocaust writing, over the course of a forty-year writing career this longstanding nonbeliever offers a number of thoughtful reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust. The first half of my paper examines the Jewish identity of the young Levi, as well as the isolated thoughts on God, faith, and religion found in *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947). While that early work deliberately focuses on day-to-day exigencies amidst the unrelenting struggle for existence at Auschwitz-Monowitz, it still raises provocative questions about prayer and belief in the context of the Holocaust. In his later writing and interviews, Levi digs deeper and with greater frequency into matters concerning God and the Holocaust. From the recurring charge of “blasphemy” to his career-long characterization of his unlikely survival as a matter of simple luck rather than Divine Providence, my paper goes on to examine the later Levi’s increasingly subtle reflections on matters related to God and the Holocaust. Finally, I look at the later Levi’s repeated insistence that the years of persecution brought with them a newfound understanding of himself as a Jew. By examining his thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, my paper demonstrates that Levi’s scattered reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust are both challenging and well worth our careful, continued study.*

Keywords: Primo Levi, Holocaust, God, Faith, Jew

Introduction

Primo Levi, a self-described “Italian citizen of Jewish race,” was twenty-four years old when he was deported to Auschwitz-Monowitz in 1944. Written largely in 1946, his harrowing account of his time in the camp, *Survival in Auschwitz*, is one of the earliest and most enduring examples of survivor testimony. While this early work contains few reflections on God,

faith, and the Holocaust, it is not altogether silent on these matters; matters Levi would explore further in his writings and interviews in the 1970s and 1980s. The first section of my paper reviews Levi's early life, until the time of his deportation to Auschwitz in February 1944. Particular attention is paid to the young Levi's Jewishness. The second part of my paper focuses on the eleven months Levi was a prisoner and slave laborer. Concentrating primarily on recollections in *Survival in Auschwitz*, we see that while that early volume devotes little space to questions concerning God and religious faith, what it does have to say on this topic is powerful and provocative.

The third section of my paper explores Levi's more extended treatments of questions concerning God and the Holocaust in the 1970s and 1980s. It is in his final book, 1986's *The Drowned and the Saved*, and several interviews of the period, that one finds Levi's most sustained and thoughtful reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust in general, and the impact of the years of persecution on his own nonbelief specifically. The later Levi writes: "The experience of the Lager [camp] with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my nonbelief. It prevented, and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of Providence or transcendent justice."¹ Finally, my paper examines the effect of persecution and imprisonment on Levi's own Jewish identity. In a thought-provoking 1986 interview he observes: "If it hadn't been for the racial laws and the concentration camp, I'd probably no longer be a Jew, except for my last name ... [but] at this point I am a Jew, they've sewn the Star of David on me and not only on my clothes."² By examining Levi's thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, my paper endeavors to consider an infamous story from a fresh perspective.

Youth

Primo Michele Levi was born in 1919 in Turin, Italy. His ancestors immigrated to Italy centuries earlier to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Of course, being from Italy sets Levi apart from most Holocaust victims and Holocaust writers. More than once he noted that being an Italian speaker unfamiliar with Yiddish was a marked disadvantage at Auschwitz. While his mother's side of the family was more religious than his father's, Levi was raised

¹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145.

² Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 67–68.

no earthly reason had established that I was different and inferior ... In making me feel a Jew, it helped me to recover a cultural inheritance which I previously did not possess.”⁴³ Of course, it is no coincidence that Levi here refers to his belated “cultural inheritance” as a Jew, rather than anything religious.

Finally, it is well to note that Levi’s discomfort with others attempting to force a Jewish identity upon him extends well beyond the years of persecution. He was famously outspoken in his condemnation of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and was roundly criticized, especially by conservative Italian Jews, for this perceived disloyalty.⁴⁴ In an interview with the newspaper, *La Stampa* Levi said that he felt “anguish and shame” at Israel’s actions, and confessed to a friend: “Sometimes I wonder if I belong to the Jewish people at all.”⁴⁵ Three years later, during a successful lecture tour of the United States, Levi “was puzzled by why the Americans had made such a song and dance of his Jewishness. He was a chemist as well as a writer; Judaism was just one of the things that interested him. To friends in Turin, he complained that the Americans had ‘pinned a Star of David’ on him.”⁴⁶ Revealingly, during the New York portion of the lecture tour, Levi warned the book publicist escorting him in the city that he “did not want to be pigeonholed in New York as a Jewish writer: [adding] ‘I don’t like labels—Germans do.’”⁴⁷

Concluding Remarks

In his final book, 1986’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi reflects: “I too entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and have lived to this day.”⁴⁸ While religious belief is not a dominant theme in Levi’s Holocaust writing, we have seen that over the course of a forty-year writing career, this nonbeliever offered a number of thoughtful and provocative

⁴³ Mendel, “Primo Levi and the Jews,” 61.

⁴⁴ Following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Levi—who objected above all to Prime Minister Begin’s appeal to Jewish victimization under the Nazis in his explanation of Israeli military action—published an open letter against Begin in the newspaper *La Repubblica*. The letter, which demanded that Israel withdraw its troops from Lebanon and cease construction of settlements in occupied territories, led to considerable hostility toward Levi from Jewish friends and strangers (including Elie Wiesel). “Italy’s conservative Jews were furious with Levi. Who was Levi to judge? He was not acquainted with any of the distinguished Israelis in politics and his knowledge of Palestinian politics was non-existent. An icy contretemps developed between Levi and his pro-Israeli friends” (Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 399, 402, 416).

⁴⁵ In Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 402.

⁴⁶ Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 442–43.

⁴⁷ Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 433.

⁴⁸ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145.

reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust. Even the early Levi's dispassionate and detailed account of his year of imprisonment and slave labor, *Survival in Auschwitz*—which devotes scant attention to such topics—raises penetrating questions about the problematic character of religious belief and prayer in the context of the Holocaust.

In his post-*Survival* writing and interviews, we find Levi digging deeper, and with increasing frequency, into matters concerning God, faith, and the Holocaust. From the recurring charge of “blasphemy” which he directs both at religious believers and nonbelievers, to his career-long characterization of his unlikely survival as a matter of luck rather than Divine Providence, the later Levi explores matters related to God and the Holocaust with increasing regularity and subtlety. And as we have seen, the notable idea that the years of persecution brought with them a newfound self-conception as a Jew is also a recurring one in Levi's later works. By examining his thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, I trust I have made the case that Primo Levi's scattered reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust are thoughtful, provocative, and well worth our careful, continued study.

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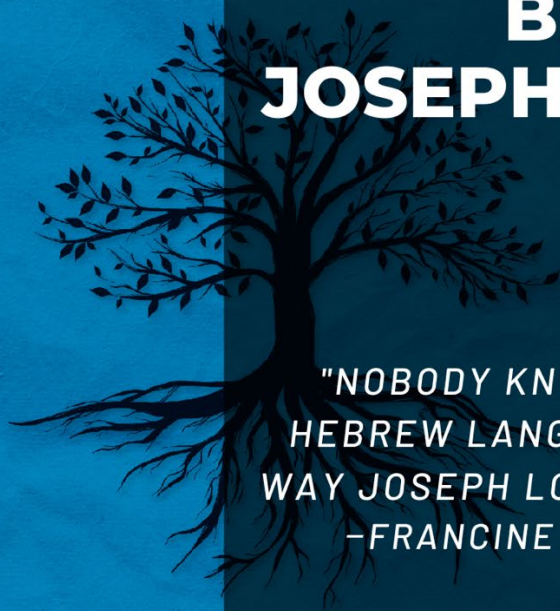
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