

The Shoah and Jewish Faith: Voices from the Midst of Tragedy

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Abstract: *There has understandably been a good deal of emphasis on how Jewish faith has been affected in the wake of the genocidal catastrophe of the Shoah. Much less attention has been devoted, however, to how observant Jews were impacted, with regard to their faith, in the midst of the tragedy. Elie Wiesel, for his part, was said to have put God on trial at Auschwitz. It will also be instructive to consider two Jewish leaders, both ultra-orthodox rabbis, who were victims of the Nazi genocide. Their perspectives (unlike post-Holocaust theology) provide a window on Jewish thought while events were unfolding. The reflections of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who was residing in Warsaw at the outbreak of the war, were published in Israel in 1960 under the title Esh Kodesh. The work elucidates what may be viewed as a normative theology of suffering. Another ultra-orthodox rabbi, Yissachar Teichtal, was living in Budapest during the Nazi era. His theology is even more dramatic, rejecting all exilic philosophies, and developing a religious Zionist philosophy. If there is a to be found a merging of the two approaches, it is in the idea of “reconstruction,” on the one hand of the individual, and on the other, of the Jewish nation – the uniquely Jewish concept of tikkun.*

Keywords: Shoah, Holocaust, Theology of Suffering, Religious Zionism, Judaism

The Experience of Observant Jews

When it comes to modern approaches toward religious conviction, God and spirituality, the Shoah has arguably changed everything. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once queried:

And what about my faith...? I would be within my rights to give it up. I could invoke six million reasons to justify my decision. But I don't. I am incapable of straying from the path charted by my ancestors. Without this faith in God, the faith of my father and forefathers, my faith in Israel and in

humanity would be diminished. And so I choose to preserve the faith of my childhood.¹

He also observed, regarding the future of humanity itself in a post-Shoah environment:

... to bring a child into this world was a very great act of faith, for we had all the reasons in the world to give up - to give up on man ... But we did not ... We decided to wager on man and God.²

It is of course pertinent to ask: How has the Jewish people's faith been affected, beyond the Shoah. What is seldom considered, however, is the question of how observant Jews managed to cope with matters of faith in the midst of the tragedy. In this regard, it will be constructive to reflect on the experience of two Jewish leaders, both ultra-orthodox rabbis, and practitioners of the mystical movement in Judaism known as Kabbalah. They are important because they provide religious responses to the Holocaust, not after the fact, but while it was in progress. In contrast with post-Holocaust theology, which clearly has the benefit of hindsight, they provide a unique window on Jewish thought from victims of the genocide.

Holy Fire

After the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939, the entire infrastructure of Polish Jewry was being shattered by the relentless Nazi bombing of Warsaw. In due course, Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira began writing a compilation of weekly sermons to his students that could well be called a theological diary. When it became apparent to Rabbi Shapira that the end of the ghetto and all its inhabitants was near, he buried the book in a canister, subsequently retrieved after the end of the war from the archival records assembled by Emmanuel Ringelblum and the Oneg Shabbat Circle.³ The book was published in Israel in 1960 under the title *Esh Kodesh* (*Holy Fire*).

Shapira was the head of a Hasidic group in Warsaw, whose regular duties involved expounding on the weekly portion of the Torah. His first entry

¹ Wiesel, *And the Sea Is Never Full: Memoirs*, 70.

² Wiesel and Abrahamson, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, 60.

³ Patterson, *Open Wounds: The Crisis of Jewish Thought in the Aftermath of Auschwitz*,

It has been argued by some that the modern State of Israel was born in large part from the ashes of the Shoah, the tragedy of which spurred the international community to propose and support its formal creation. Others insist that, had the Shoah not taken place, the State of Israel would have been born anyway, earlier and even stronger, demographically and politically. In any case, it is fair to point out that it was almost exactly three years (only a relative instant in time) from the end of the Second World War and the Shoah until the modern Jewish nation came into being. In a certain metaphysical sense, the fervent cry of Rabbi Teichtal was indeed answered, and, in the larger view of human history, almost immediately.

The Trial of God

As to the ultimate question of whether there is room for God, philosophically, in a post-Shoah world, we would of course do well to note the deep theological struggles of Elie Wiesel, who, in 1977, wrote a play called "The Trial of God."¹⁷ It was set, not during the Shoah but during Purim in the year 1649. A later adaptation by BBC Television depicted a supposed trial of God by Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz. In it one of the prisoners delivers a poignant speech, relating their suffering, not to the Israelites, but to the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus:

God slew the first born of Egypt and led us out of Egypt. He struck down the firstborn, from the firstborn and heir of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the slave at the mill, He slew them all. Did He slay Pharaoh? It was Pharaoh who said no, but God let him live and slew his children instead. All the children. And then the people of Israel made their escape, taking with them all the gold and silver and jewelry and garments of the Egyptians, and then God drowned the soldiers who pursued them. He did not close the waters so that the soldiers could not follow; He waited until they were following, and then He closed the waters. Did the mothers of Egypt, did they think Adonai was just? Did God not make the Egyptians? Did God not make their rivers and make their crops grow? If not Him then who? Some other god? And what did He make them for? To punish them? To starve, to frighten, to slaughter them? The people of Amalek, the people of Egypt, what was it like for them when Adonai turned against them? They faced extinction at the hand of Adonai; they died for His purpose; they fell as we are falling;

¹⁷ Wiesel, *The Trial of God: (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*.

they were afraid as we are afraid. And what did they learn? They learned that Adonai, the Lord our God, our God is not good. He was not ever good; He was only on our side ...¹⁸

While there is no record of such a trial having taken place at Auschwitz, Wiesel insisted:

It happened at night; there were just three people. At the end of the trial, they used the word *chayav*, rather than “guilty.” It means “He owes us something.” Then we went to pray.¹⁹

In short, God may be omnipotent and all-powerful, but God has not been all-fair, all-righteous, all-just. We are, at the very least, owed an explanation. Still, from Wiesel’s perspective, one must respect divine providence, and in spite of everything, we pray.

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¹⁸ *God on Trial*, directed by Andy De Emmony (2008; United Kingdom: Hat Trick Productions, 2008), DVD.

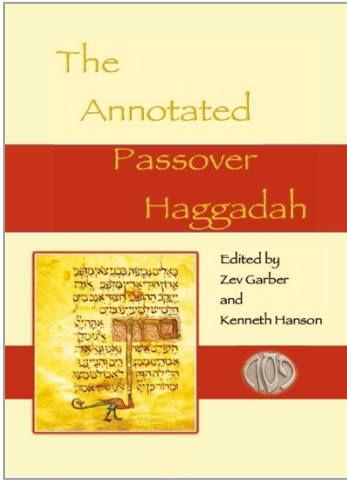
¹⁹ See Frazer, “Wiesel: Yes, We Really Did Put God on Trial.”

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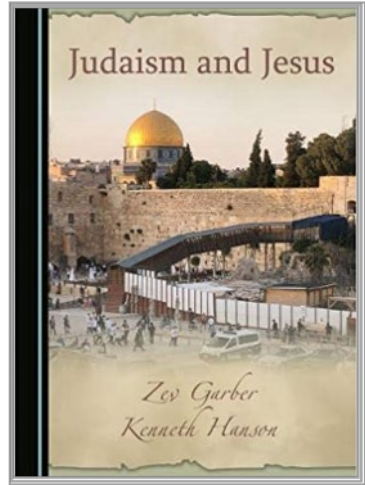
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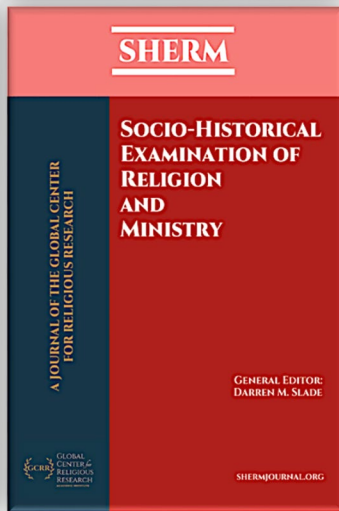
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