

**INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM: COURSE SYLLABUS
FROMM INSTITUTE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING
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GOD AND THE HOLOCAUST

Harold Schulweis, "The Bias Against Man" (1963)

Axel Springer is a German, the owner and publisher of the largest chain of newspapers in post-war Germany, a man with a compelling conscience. He takes his son to Bergen Belsen to place flowers at the grave of Anne Frank, and before they leave he whispers to his son: "Dig the earth with your fingers until you find some bones of human bodies. Take one of these bones with you and place it where you can always see it, where you will never be able to forget what we have done to the Jewish people."

Can I do less with my own son? Yet, when it comes to telling the story of the years of atrocity (and tell it I must) to my children, to my congregation, to the community at large, I am torn by ambivalence. On the one hand, I feel compelled to tell the terrible truth that we were witness to a nightmare of civilized criminality, to man's awful capacity to hurt and to destroy. On the other hand, I grow steadily uncertain -- not over the psychological need and moral obligation to remember those black years, but whether it is enough to stop there; whether it is sufficient to relate the disaster and end it there.

As a father who must tell his children why and what and how this unspeakable outrage was visited upon his people, I find myself wondering: "What am I doing to their morale, to their will to live as Jews in this world, to their trust and belief in God and man, to their moral strength?" For, after the lesson is over, the nightmare reviewed each year with greater detail and more evidence, I remain perplexed.

"Do I lay a terror upon their hearts, a stone of fear; do I unwittingly cast the shadow of the 'undelivered punch' across their destiny?" I grow uneasy with the suspicion that I may myself be leading my people to succumb to a view of history raised to the heights of metaphysical fatalism. "This is the way of the world. This is the way it was, and is and will always be. "We and "they". We who suffer and they who persecute." Against my every intention, I seem to endow hatred of the Jew with an immortality and ubiquity, and prepare the ground for acceptance of the Jew as the world's eternal victim. My teachings boomerang upon me. I am haunted by the moral wisdom of the Rabbi of Ger: "...whatever one thinks, therein one is; one's soul is utterly and completely in what one thinks; and so much a man dwells in baseness. He will certainly not be able to turn, for his spirit will grow coarse and his heart stubborn, and to this he may be overcome by gloom. What would you? Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way -- it will always be muck. Have I sinned, or have I not sinned -- what does Heaven get out of it? In the time I am brooding over it, I could be stringing pearls for the delight of Heaven...."

Memory is an ambiguous energy; it can liberate or enslave, heal or destroy. The use of memory carries with it a responsibility for the future. How we interpret the Holocaust holds serious consequences for the character and morale of our children, not only for the Jewish child but for the non-Jewish child as well. I am, therefore, concerned with the reaction of Jews and non-Jews to the revelations of the Holocaust. How effective, how constructive has been our way of relating the atrocity?

Elie Wiesel , *Night*

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw wreathed of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as

long as God Himself. Never.

A Jew Today Our people has lost many of its children. We are alone, terribly alone. And sad, terribly sad. We are entering ever more difficult times. The era ahead of us will be critical. And yet, and yet ... We owe it to our past not to lose hope. Say what you will, despair is not the solution. Not for us. Quite the contrary. We must show our children that in spite of everything, we keep our faith-in ourselves and even in mankind, though mankind may not be worthy of such faith. We must persuade our children and theirs that three thousand years of history must not be permitted to end with an act of despair on our part. To despair now would be a blasphemy--a profanation.

Richard Rubinstein, *After Auschwitz*

I believe the greatest single challenge to modern Judaism arises out of the question of God and the death camps. How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept. [Camus] refuses...to see man as inevitably and inescapably guilty before God. He accepts the tragedy, the inevitability, and the gratuitous absurdity of suffering, but he refuses to consent to its justice. He would rather live in an absurd, indifferent cosmos in which men suffer and die meaninglessly but still retain a measure of tragic integrity than see every last human event encased in a pitiless framework of meaning which deprives men of even the consolation that suffering, though inevitable, is not entirely merited or earned. ...We concur with this choice of an absurd and ultimately tragic cosmos. We do so because we share with Camus a greater feeling for human solidarity than the Prophetic-Deuteronomic view of God and history can possibly allow. We part company only with his atheism. It is precisely because human existence is tragic, ultimately hopeless, and

without meaning that we treasure our religious community. It is our community of ultimate concern. In it, we can and do share, in a depth and dimension which no secular institution can match, the existence Camus has so well described. We have turned away from the God of history to share the tragic fatalities of the God of nature.

Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*

What does the Voice of Auschwitz command? Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. A secularist Jew cannot make himself believe by a mere act of will, nor can he be commanded to do so ... And a religious Jew who has stayed with his God may be forced into new, possible revolutionary relationships with Him. One possibility, however, is wholly unthinkable. A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work.

Irving Greenberg, *Jews & Judaism in the 21st Century*

How can we talk about God, again, after such an event [the Holocaust]? My answer is that you *can't* talk about God. You can only re-create the image of God. And if you can re-create the image of God, like you can re-create yourself, that is the statement of God's presence...After the Shoah, the Jewish people didn't talk about God. What they did was to recreate the image of God...

The next step for the Jewish people is to take power. The real issue is not, "Where was God in the Holocaust?" but rather, "Why didn't God stop the Holocaust?" Richard Rubinstein, whom I admire, had the courage to say, "God is dead." But if you don't believe that, what do you answer? I believe the answer is that God was saying, "I am not going to save you. This is *tzimtzum*, divine self-limitation. I'm asking *you* to stop the Holocaust. You are human, the partner in the

covenant. Take responsibility.” Taking power is the fundamental transformation of all religion now. We can no longer be a religion that says, “God will save you.” God’s own message is that you have to take responsibility. If there was ever a time God was going to intervene miraculously, it was during the Holocaust. So if God didn’t do so then, He must have intended for us to take responsibility....The Jewish people overwhelmingly understood that. That’s why they arose and declared the State of Israel. Before the war, the majority of Reform and Orthodox were anti-Zionist. After the war, overwhelmingly, the Jewish people became Zionist, and understood that taking power is the only way you can live, the only way to combat genocide....The establishment of the State of Israel was the turning point for Jewish religion and Jewish history. It was the turning point for all of us. That affirmation, that taking of covenantal responsibility, that carrying out the great redemptive act states, in the face of the contradictory evidence of Auschwitz, that hope is not dead, that life is still stronger than death. This statement – the building of Israel -- was done by all Jews.

David Hartman, “Auschwitz or Sinai?” (1982)

One of the fundamental issues facing the new spirit of maturity in Israel is: Should Auschwitz or Sinai be the orienting category shaping our understanding of the rebirth of the State of Israel? There are important differences resulting from the relative emphasis we place on these two models.

In the 20th century we have again become a traumatized nation. The ugly demonic forces of anti-Semitism have horrified our sensibilities. We can never forget the destruction of millions of Jews in World War II. Many, therefore, justify and interpret the significance of our rebirth in terms of Jewish suffering and persecution. One often hears in speeches in the Knesset and at the UJA fund-raising dinners phrases such as: “Never again will we be vulnerable. Never again will we expose our lives to the ugly political forces in the world. Our powerful army has eliminated the need to beg for pity and compassion from the nations of the world”.

While I respect and share in the anguish expressed in these sentiments, I believe it is destructive to make the Holocaust the dominant organizing category of modern Jewish history and of our

national renewal and rebirth. It is both politically and morally dangerous for our nation to perceive itself essentially as the suffering remnant of the Holocaust. It is childish and often vulgar to attempt to demonstrate how the Jewish people's suffering is unique in history.

Our bodies have painfully tasted man's indifference and inhumanity to his fellow man. We have witnessed in our own flesh the moral evil present in human society. But this should not tempt us to become morally arrogant. Our suffering should not lead us to self-righteous postures, but to an increased sensitivity about all human suffering. Nonetheless, there are individuals obsessed with the trauma of the Holocaust who proclaim that no one can judge the Jewish people. "No nation has the right to call us to moral judgment. We need not take the moral criticism of the world seriously because the uniqueness of our suffering places us above the moral judgment of an immoral world". Those who make such statements judge others, but refuse to be judged. In so doing, a basic Judaic principle is violated: no one may judge if he refuses to be judged himself.

Although it is right to appreciate the dignity that comes with power and statehood, with freedom from the inconsistent and fragile goodwill of the nations of the world, it is a serious mistake to allow the trauma of Jewish suffering to be the exclusive frame of reference for understanding our national renaissance.

Israel is not only a response to modern anti-Semitism, but is above all a modern expression of the eternal Sinai covenant that has shaped Jewish consciousness throughout the millennia. It was not Hitler who brought us back to Zion, but rather belief in the eternal validity of the Sinai covenant. One need not visit Yad Vashem in order to understand our love for Jerusalem. It is dangerous to our growth as a healthy people if the memory of Auschwitz becomes a substitute for Sinai.

The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover the absolute demand of God; we discover who we are by what we do. Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of God in history. Sinai creates humility and openness to the demands of self-transcendence. In this respect, it is the antithesis of the

moral narcissism that can result from suffering and from viewing oneself as a victim.

The centrality of mitzvah in Judaism shatters egocentricity and demands of the Jew that he judge himself by the way he acts and not by mystical myths regarding the purity or uniqueness of the Jewish soul. *Na'aseh ve-nishma* ("We will do and we will understand") was the response of our people at Sinai. We understand ourselves through our doing.

Sinai does not tell us about the moral purity of the Jewish nation, but about the significance of aspiring to live by the commandments. Sinai permanently exposes the Jewish people to prophetic aspirations and judgments. Jews were never frightened for the failure to implement covenantal responsibilities. Immediately after the account of the revelation at Sinai, we are reminded of Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant in the vivid description of the Golden Calf incident. Sinai teaches us that there is no meaning to election without judgment - there are no privileges without demands.

Sinai requires of the Jew that he believe in the possibility of integrating the moral seriousness of the prophet with the realism and political judgment of the statesman. Politics and morality were united when Israel was born as a nation at Sinai. Sinai prohibits the Jewish people from ever abandoning the effort of creating a shared moral language with the nations of the world. The rebirth of Israel can be viewed as a return to the fullness of the Sinai covenant - to Judaism as a way of life. The moral and spiritual aspirations of the Jewish tradition were not meant to be realized in Sabbath sermons or by messianic dreamers who wait passively on the margins of society for redemption to break miraculously into history. Torah study is not a substitute for actual life, nor are prayer and the synagogue escapes from the ambiguities and complexities of political life.

The Jewish world will have to learn that the synagogue is no longer the exclusive defining framework for Jewish communal life. Moral seriousness and political maturity and wisdom must come to our nation if we are to be judged by the way we struggle to integrate the Sinai covenant with the complexities of political realities.

The establishment of the modern State of Israel has removed us from the insulated world of the ghetto and has exposed Judaism and the

Jewish people to the judgment of the world. We can no longer hide our weaknesses and petty failings. We live in total exposure.

We must therefore define who we are by what we do and not by any obsession with the long and noble history of Jewish suffering. In coming back to our land and rebuilding our nation, we have chosen to give greater moral weight to our actions in the present than to noble dreams of the future or to the memories of our heroic past.

In choosing to act in the 20th century rather than wait for perfect messianic conditions, we permanently run the risk of making serious mistakes in our moral and political judgments. We must, therefore, respond maturely to anyone who is critical of our shortcomings. The time has come for us to free ourselves from the exaggerated rhetoric of moral superiority (“no one can teach us morality”) and to face the awesome task implicit in the Sinai covenant.

The prophets teach us that the state has only instrumental value for the purpose of embodying the covenantal demands of Judaism. When nationalism becomes an absolute value for Jews and political and military judgments are not related to the larger purpose of our national renaissance, we can no longer claim to represent the Judaic tradition. Rather, we have ironically become assimilated while speaking Hebrew in our own country.

In being open and appreciative of criticism, regardless of its source, we demonstrate that we seek to walk humbly and responsibly before the Lord of all creation, who demands that Israel bear witness to the demands of justice within an imperfect world.

It is important to remember that the Jewish people did not go from the suffering conditions of Egypt directly into the land. We first went to Sinai, made a covenant with God, and pledged absolute allegiance to the commandments. We spent years in the desert casting off the mantle of the suffering slave. After we overcome the humiliating memory of slavery and persecution and understood that we were called to bear witness to God’s kingdom in history, only then did we enter the land. The memory of suffering in Egypt was absorbed by the conventional normative demands of Sinai. We were taught not to focus on suffering outside of its normative and moral implications.

Because of Sinai, Jewish suffering did not create self-pity but moral sensitivity: “And you shall love the stranger because you were

strangers in the land of Egypt”.

Auschwitz, like all Jewish suffering of the past, must be absorbed and understood within the normative framework of Sinai. We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai.

Harold Schuwleis, *For Those Who Can't Believe*

The Holocaust mocks my faith. For at the core of that faith is the conviction that God breathed into the nostrils of human beings an inviolable human soul, that God created the human being in His image and in His likeness. The taunting dissonance between that faith and the facts of the Holocaust disturbs my belief.

The theological crisis wrought by the Shoah is radical. Not whether God is dead but whether we are dead; not whether God exists but whether goodness is real or merely the invention of human conceit.

Where was God while all this took place? Elohim was in Auschwitz. We can adduce morally neutral factors -- economic, political, military -- that can be traced to the impartial energy of Elohim. ...But where was Adonai in Auschwitz?

I direct attention to the tens of thousands of non-Jews, Christian believers and non-believers, young and old who came from every walk of life to risk their lives and those of their children and saved Jews pursued and persecuted by the Nazis and their collaborators. Some of these rescuers live among us. I have met many of them, and I have read validated accounts of their actions by Jewish survivors in every land in which the Nazis tread. I have looked at the faces of these ordinary human beings, made of flesh and blood like our own, who hid people of another faith and another tradition in their own closets, attics, sewers, pigsties, holes in the ground. It is important to know of the risks to life itself by these non-Jews who forged passports, falsified baptismal certificates, and organized underground safety and escape routes.

Where was Adonai in the Holocaust? Adonai was in Nieuvelande, a Dutch village in which seven hundred residents rescued five hundred Jews including one hundred Jewish children. The entire population of

Niuvelande acted as rescuers. Every single household took one Jewish family or at least one Jew into their home. No one feared being informed upon by his neighbor because everyone was implicated in the crime of concealing a Jew. Adonai was among the simple folk, the house painters, bakers, postmen, who met frightened children at the trains and gave them food, shelter and love in their own homes. Adonai was in Le Chambon Sur Lignon whose citizens hid and protected five thousand Jews under the inspired leadership of Pastor Andre Trocme. Adonai was in the rat infested sewers of Lvov where Polish sewer workers hid seventeen Jews for fourteen months.

...with this unheralded evidence of moral heroism brought to light you can correct the distortion of history that no one cared, that no church helped, that there was no conspiracy of goodness in the lands where the Nazi shadow fell. That canard not only distorts the past but cripples the future because it is used to insist that there were no allies, are no allies and will be no allies to call upon. That dismissal of the evidence of rescue, however small, helps twist history into a metaphysical fatalism that ordains anti-Semitism as an eternal recurrence. Beneath the cry "never again" is whispered a deeper pessimistic verdict on all Jewish history: "ever again".

The bending of history into a bifurcating metaphysics that violates the memory of the good, destroys the hope for the possibilities of the future. It serves no honor to the victims and martyrs of the Holocaust to transmogrify its incomparable tragedy into a polarizing philosophy. Paralyzing pessimism is not the lesson to be learned from the art of memory. Memory must keep an eye on the future. If it is blind to its moral potential, memory leaves in its wake a dark and paralyzing depression. It is not necessary to falsify the past in order to sustain the morale of our children. It is necessary to unearth the reality of goodness so that children can retain "the basic trust" that the psychologist Erik Erikson maintained was essential for their vitality.