

A Jewish Theology for Post-Holocaust Healing

By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

Between our theology and our history a major contradiction tears at us. The Bible starts and continues with a reiterated affirmation in the goodness of creation and the exalted role of the human being. However fallen, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve do not lose their divine image. "If a man be put to death for a sin worthy of death, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt surely bury him in the same day" (Deut. 21:23). Following a midrashic parable, Rashi explains the verse by noting that God and the human being are "as twins," and that consequently the, vision of the hanged thief defaces God's own image. Divinity and humanity intersect.

Further, Rabbinic theology is largely positive; the sages do not present a sour-faced piety: "Divinity rests upon us, not through melancholy nor indolence, but through the joys of fulfilling the divine imperative." The psalmist announces, "Serve the Lord with joy, come before Him with song and exultation." Schopenhauer was not entirely wrong in characterizing Judaism as essentially optimistic. The predominant Jewish view of human nature, while far from naively optimistic, favors an original innocence which, even if fallen, has the capacity to right itself. "Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?", God asks Cain. "If thou doest not well, sin coucheth at the door, and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over, it" (Genesis 4:6-7). If Judaism is not optimistic, it is decidedly melioristic.

Despite that theological orientation — biblical and Rabbinic — Jewish history, as remembered, portrays a contrary view of the world and of human nature, a record of humiliation, degradation, and torture. And the Holocaust evidences a historically unprecedented expression of unconditional hatred of us, an unrelenting hostility that will settle neither for conversion nor surrender of wealth, but only for total extermination. The optimism and religious humanism of Judaism is sorely tried. The dissonance between Jewish theology and Jewish history is not readily harmonized.

The evidence of Jewish tragedy lends credence to much of secular wisdom that reveals a jaundiced view of human nature, a naturalistic version of original sin. Following the views of Thrasymachus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Nietzsche, George Santayana in his *Dominations and Powers* wrote:

In human nature generous impulses are occasional or reversible, they are spent in childhood; in dreams, in extremities, they are often weak or soured in old age. They form amiable interludes like tearful sentiments in a ruffian, or they are pleasant self-deceptive hypocrisies acted out, like civility to strangers because such is in society the path of least resistance. Strain the situation, however, dig a little beneath the surface, and you will find a ferocious, persistent, profoundly selfish man.

Sigmund Freud's view of human nature is similarly morose: "people view their neighbor in order to gratify their aggressiveness, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him." Tear away the mask of his social persona, and his native viciousness is revealed. Scratch a saint, find a villain; beneath each Gentile, an anti-Semite lurks. Some may conceal their venom better than others, but at the root, all belong to the same species. So too Anna Freud doubted the reality of altruism. For her, the very enjoyment of the act of self-sacrifice belies the selflessness of altruism. The term "altruism" is a 19th century afterthought.

This dominant view of human nature is a challenge to the theistic humanism central to Judaism. The pessimism is more provocative than questioning the literal belief in the sun standing still at Gibeon.

Not whether the biblical miracles are true or false but whether the Bible's view of human nature is real, taunts the credibility of Judaism. What is the presumed character of this neighbor we are mandated to love as ourselves, and what is ours? Do we and our teachers educate our children to reality, or do we mouth Pollyanna platitudes, wistful sentimentalities that have no ground in real life?

Jewish instruction teaches us that the downgrading views about human nature are wrongheaded. They contain a profound bias against humanity, a defamation of human character. We want to believe them to be in error. But wanting to believe them wrong is not enough. Is there any shared empirical evidence that would contradict their verdict, that would exemplify the dignity and decency of human beings?

For Jews, the Holocaust remains the crucial test for the basic trust embodied in the Jewish worldview. Could there be found in that darkness at least 36 sparks buried among the husks? One of the first books on the subject of righteous Christians during the Holocaust, *Their Brothers' Keepers* by the late Philip Friedman, was recently republished by the Holocaust Press. It was a rare and early revelation of a tragically muted part of Jewish history. It tapped for the first time a well for Jewish moral theology and character education. Simply told, the book offered evidence that there were people from all walks of life, and in every country the Nazis contaminated, who transcended their own safe community of fate and faith to risk status, possessions, and indeed their lives in the process of saving the lives of Jewish men, women, and children.

Thousands of such stories remain largely unrecorded. These brave acts, performed by ordinary people in extraordinary times, refute the growing post-Holocaust cynicism and pessimism presented to the world as objective, scientifically validated evidence of the unrelieved darkness of human nature. The lives of the rescuers help repudiate arguments that a single person caught in the web of totalitarian evil could do nothing except to cling to the wheels of the system. The lives of these rescuers demonstrate the falsity of the generalization of human nature as essentially selfish and cruel, and the untruth that complicity with the savage predator was and is the only real alternative.

There are those who persist in trivializing this rescuing behavior. Some remain committed to the "scientific" bias that baser motives lie beneath self-sacrificing behavior. Others dismiss the entire matter of altruistic conduct as unimportant because of the small number of people who earn the title "righteous." We have also heard "revisionists" who seek to reduce the numbers of Holocaust victims so as to minimize the massiveness of the atrocity; both arguments join in a trivialization of profoundly significant events.

The Bible does not minimize the significance of good people. Ten alone at Sodom and Gomorrah would spare the cities: But we ask, "How many were there?" One answer is quite simply that no one, until this day, knows how many Gentile rescuers there were. No systematic, active study has ever investigated the number or identified these human saviors. But one must appreciate how significantly intertwined the behavior of good and evil is to, form a balanced view of human nature: evil men are brought to justice, so must heroic rescuers be raised to high honor.

The praiseworthy work of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem has recognized 6,000 people (representing 3,500 rescue stories)' since its inception in 1953. Those acknowledgments come through the initiative of surviving Jews, who cared enough to fill out forms and applications recommending their rescuers. But there are countless numbers of survivors who, for all kinds of reasons, have not filed the forms for their rescuers. The Jewish world waits passively for such revelations. An active search for

rescuers who are characteristically too self-effacing to come forth to claim recognition can only be conducted by an active search of the world Jewish community.

In regard to the issue of numbers, the "conspiracy of goodness" is rarely noted in these reports of rescue, behavior: As more than one rescuer has revealed, to save a Jewish person or family required "accomplices" who formed an informal network protect, hide, feed, and heal the hidden and the hunted. If, properly, we condemn those who were passive and watched the destruction of the innocent, should not those who held their tongues and would not inform against their rescuer neighbors, despite the threat to their well-being, and the bribery of food, drink, and money for information, be praised and remembered?

The heroism of the rescuers is, not fully appreciated until we turn to ask ourselves what we expect from others: Would I rescue a pregnant woman, a hungry child, an aged couple, give them food and shelter; dispose of their refuse, care for them in their sickness — persons of another faith and fate than my own — knowing that revelation of my "crime" would bring disaster upon me and my family? However answered, the question points to the need for self-scrutiny and highlights neglected issues like the wisdom and ethics of altruism and its ability to be taught.

Not everyone can bear to look at the skeletons in the graves of the Holocaust. There are Jews and Christians, for many psychological reasons, who are fearful of entering a cave with no exit, of visiting a past that weighs them down with morbidity and guilt. One must confront that part of history if one is ever to emerge into, the light, if lessons for the future are not to be wasted. The witnessed and confirmed evidence of the rescuers may enable, one to look at villainy through the lens of the righteous. For there are no heroes without villains, no Pastor Trocme without Eichmann, no Anna Simiate without Klaus Barbie.

This past November, Cardinal O'Connor of New York held a special mass in honor of two Catholic Poles who for years hid a family of Jewish sisters in a narrow pit. He explained to, his parishioners, that this couple's acts were extraordinary Christian behavior, but took care to add that the majority of Christians did not lift a finger to help Jews, and that many sided with the persecutors. The presence of the two Christian rescuers, I am convinced, encouraged the Cardinal to point to the tragic transgressions of Christian apathy and conspiracy. The presence of heroes makes it easier to identify the villains, even if they are frighteningly close to you. The Talmud frequently observes that to testify against oneself, to "make oneself evil," runs counter to human nature. It runs counter to the nature of groups to hear only the condemnation of their churches, saints, families, leaders. Defensively, the accused — particularly the heirs of the Holocaust either cover their ears, or seek to justify their ancestors by finding fault with the victims, or accept the guilty verdict and live up to that vile reputation. It requires compassionate wisdom to uncover the ears so that they may hear without self-vilification.

We seek evidence of God and His goodness. No nobler proof of His benevolence can be found than in the behavior of those heroes who remained loyal to His image. Reward and punishment are in God's hands. As we are not exempt from bringing the lawless to justice; we are not exempt from honoring and rewarding the good in this, world. We have a moral obligation to adopt those who adopted our families. We have a moral obligation to reach out to them in the late years of their lives and to help them here and now. Few people or faiths possess a history such as ours. We have witnessed the unspeakable depravity of the human condition. The traumas of that revelation have crippled the sensibilities, of modern conscience and paralyzed its hope. We have as well witnessed the goodness of human beings. The attitudes and behavior of these rescuers belie the power of pessimistic philosophies and psychologies. We have locked in our memories the truths that help

restore human Compassion, and strengthen the basic trust so indispensable for the vitality of our children's futures. A post-Holocaust world needs the healing that confirms the healthy view of human nature, basic to Judaism. To this end the Foundation to Sustain the Righteous Christians has been formed to identify, the unaccounted, to bring to world attention unacknowledged rescuers, to embrace them while there is still time.

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