God, Faith & Identity from the Ashes

Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors

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"Both the God of consolation and the accusation against God live within me."

In his lyrical eulogy for Eastern European Jewish civilization The Earth Is the Lord’s, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel beseeched his generation and mine to take in deeply that

a world has vanished. All that remains is sanctuary hidden in the realm of the spirit. We of this generation are still holding the key. Unless we remember, unless we unlock it, the holiness of the ages will remain a secret of God. We of this generation are still holding the key—the key to the sanctuary which is also the shelter of our own deserted souls. If we mislay the key, we shall elude ourselves.¹

I have spent my life searching for this key.

This exploration has led me to a deep, rich association and appreciation of the life of Polish Jewry before the Shoah. My mother, from Sosnowiec, Poland, survived a forced labor camp, and my father, from Lutzk—then in Poland, now in Ukraine—survived by deserting from the Russian army into which he had been drafted and fleeing to Uzbekistan. He lost a wife and child and was the sole survivor of a large, extended family. My mother, too, lost a large portion of her immediate and extended family.

My parents met in the Displaced Persons camps near Munich in the American zone of defeated Germany. There I was conceived, and
two weeks after their arrival in the United States, on July 4, 1949, I was born. Yiddish was my *mameloshn*, my mother tongue, and I received a traditional yeshiva education.

Like many children of survivors, I have been haunted by faceless phantoms of dozens and dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins. In the only crumpled photo of a small part of the family that remained, hidden by my mother in the camp, my *zayde* (grandfather) Leibush Lipnicki sports the same potbelly I do. I jest and say I'm carrying the "Holocaust paunch."

I bear the name of two grandfathers, and my life's vocation and avocation has been to recapture their images through my work as an academic and, in most recent years, as a rabbi. This is more than a personal quest. It is my commitment to memory and hope.

At the same time, to make the dictum of the Ba'al Shem Tov taken from Psalm 100 "to serve God with joy" a reality, I edited (with William Novak) *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, now in print for over thirty years.

I relate all this as a preface to the formation of my response to the Shoah. Undoubtedly, my family background and history, in addition to determining my deep connection to Jewish continuity, have informed and formed the rudimentary scaffolding of my theological worldview. Like many survivor families, particularly those who emerged from observant homes, we were traditional but not Orthodox, certainly not in the sense of contemporary Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy in the late fifties and early sixties was not triumphalist. Unlike its present-day descendants, pre-1967 American Orthodoxy remained inner-directed. My primary school, the Yeshiva of Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, had been established after the war as a refuge for many survivor rabbis and for many children of survivors. Yiddish was the primary language of study. For many survivors, these institutions offered insulation from non-Jews as well as ties to the traditions they had inherited and observed in their countries of origin.

The Orthodox rabbis of my early adolescence did not see the Shoah as a caesura, a break, in the covenantal relationship to God. In fact, according to my teacher, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (z"l), the founder of Jewish Renewal, their approach can be called "restorationist." The way to deal with the Shoah, they believed, was to continue the mode of traditional Judaism that had existed before the
Catastrophe, with traditional rabbinic theology seeing the Catastrophe as a result of the sins of Jewish deviance from traditional observance and belief. While this point was rarely explicitly emphasized, a clear anti-Zionism and ambivalence to modernity was evident. In contrast to current Haredi institutions, however, survivor parents insisted on intensive general studies. Later, when I attended one of Yeshiva University’s high schools, religious Zionism was embraced together with rigorous secular studies.

Over the last seventy years, no Jewish ideology, of either the left or the right, has emerged that has not relied on the Shoah as its basis and justification. Ultimately the Shoah has become a projection of our own inclinations and political tendencies. The fact, however, is that the Shoah has no intrinsic meaning. We can only trace the circumstances that brought about the Catastrophe, but there is nothing in the Shoah event itself that adds anything new to the timeless questions about evil in the world. Despite its enormity, it does not alter the basic questions of theodicy and/or our skepticism about the human capacity for brutality. On its most basic level, the singularity of the Shoah can be seen in the success of the perpetrators in galvanizing a multinational mechanized killing operation that would simply not have been possible in previous eras.

The Holocaust created an extremely low bar for Jewish unity: the Jew as victim. Both Zionism and “restorationist” Orthodoxy tried to raise that bar with varying degrees of success. The former created “muscle” Jews by redefining the Jews as victims into Jews as victors, while the latter offered a premodern exit out of the failure of Western Enlightenment. Both of these “solutions” to the future of the Jewish people proved lacking. While the trauma of this most monumental destruction of Jews remains a subterranean feature of Jewish existence, it is not an adequate source of Jewish meaning. All that said, it is probably this trauma that most ties us together as a people. We are amputees suffering from the phantom pain of the loss of one-third of our body. According to the 2013 Pew Study, almost seventy years after the end of the Second World War, close to three-quarters of American Jews feel that remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of Jewish identity. This number is much larger than those who see attachment to Jewish law and observance as a marker for Jewish identity.

The destruction of European Jewry left us with a legacy that both stimulates and stunts us as a people. On the one hand, children
of survivors have overcompensated for their families' losses; and on the other hand, we have yet to discover a way to assimilate this destruction into our deepest psychology.

My own particular theological stance stems from a number of sources.

My mother's God was not the God of salvation, the *deus ex machina* god, who appears in the third act to save the day. It was not the *rebono shel olam*, the traditional master of the universe—except in a deep sense of the Divine found in natural events. Upon hearing thunder and lightning, my grandmother and mother uttered, "*Gott, debarem zikh*," "God have mercy," a pagan-like plea that these natural occurrences pass in safety. "*Gottenyu*," the God of consolation, was my mother's God. The miniscule *gottenyu*, that Jiminy Cricket-like god who accompanies you into the mire and muck, into the mechanisms of destruction, sat on my mother's shoulder. So my mother wasn't a "believer" but rather a person of faith. She exhibited that faith in her deeply empathetic interactions with other human beings.

My father's response to his experiences, meanwhile, was primarily anger and frustration. This, too, without sophisticated articulation, is a theological stance. Channeling anger into the power to take God to task is a time-honored tradition: "You could not possibly do such a thing: to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. You could not possibly do that! Won't the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25).

As their child, both the God of consolation and the accusation against God live within me. The latter binds me to God. As Elie Wiesel once observed, "I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I've been closer to him for that reason."^{2}

My embrace of my mother's immanent God, one found in the world rather than beyond it, may explain my attraction to Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Zeitlin, a Polish-Jewish journalist, public intellectual, and in the latter part of his life, a mystic, perished during a deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka in 1942. His "positive pessimism" was a critique of traditional Jewish theology on the one hand, and a rejection of the promise of Western Enlightenment on the other.

Influenced by Henry James and the phenomenology of religion, Zeitlin declared that the religious experience of what Heschel would
later articulate as "radical amazement" is the key to accessing the Divine. This immanent pantheism, which needs little or no transcen-
dence, supports my perception of the world. Later, my introduction
to Buddhist practices, through my participation in the opening of
the Jewish-Tibetan Buddhist Dialogue with the Dalai Lama in 1989–
90, further strengthened my search for God "within" rather than
"without."

All too often the question "Where was God?" is asked of rab-
bis by so many to justify their loss of faith. This is a red herring. In
effect, you want to know why the God you didn't believe in didn't
reveal itself during the Shoah. The tragedy of the Holocaust is pre-
cisely not in the Divine realm, but rather in the failure of human
beings to behave in the image of God. In the first decades following
the end of the war, we feared examining the failure of European cul-
tural advancement; we did not challenge the premises of the Western
curriculum, its aesthetics, its promise of ongoing progress through
our accession of arts and Kultur, of Bildung, the cultivation of the
truly human. Only in the last decades have we struggled to relate a
history not only of victors but of victims. It is this failure of Western
Enlightenment that has led me and others to the Eastern teachings, in
which true enlightenment is not the product of a social regime but a
result of individual practice.

There is no way to encounter Jewish life, secular or religious,
orthodox or unorthodox, traditionally observant or mitzvah free,
without coming up against the place of God in our tradition. To reject
God demands a commitment to struggle to understand how God has
been perceived throughout Jewish history. Deep within monotheism
lies monism, a sense of the interconnectedness of all things. This is
still the essential credo of a Jew and the path to our renewal.

I have been blessed with remarkable teachers throughout my
life. They have come from all the different parts of the post-Shoah
experience: rabbis and rebels, scholars and teachers, secular and reli-
gious, artists and poets.

What I have derived from their gifts to me is a deep attachment
to the notion of Netzach Yisrael lo yishaker, "The Eternity of Israel
is no lie." Our remarkable response to the devastation of the Shoah
exhibited itself in the very ashes out of which a few of the saving
remnant emerged. The psychic tenacity of the generation of survi-
vors has permitted me to pursue the key to both their existence and
mine. It has permitted me to see the beauty in their lives and the lives of their—and my—forebears in Eastern Europe. It has allowed me to transcend the fascination with the details of destruction to recover a source of energy and vitality that will continue to fuel our Jewish passions for generations to come. Being a seeker of the life before the Shoah has released in me the courage to forge a relationship to the world and to the Divine that is based on the potential of human beings to become fully conscious. It is this consciousness that needs to be directed to the Other and to our planet.