Part One

Reflections on Holocaust Representation and the Nonrepresentable

Theoretical Considerations

By Way of a Prologue

> The ultimate mystery of the Holocaust is that whatever happened took place in the soul.
>
> —Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence*

In the last twenty-five years more than forty books have been published on the problem of Holocaust representation. Most of them deal with the problem of representing evil, atrocity, and trauma. Few if any address the issue of why the Holocaust in particular poses such a representational problem. Why, for example, do we not find similar volumes on the problem of Armenian Genocide representation, Siege of Leningrad representation, or Rape of Nanking representation? What exactly are we representing in the effort to represent or re-*present* the Holocaust? And why should it be so problematic? Neither the suffering nor the degradation, neither the brutality nor the trauma of the Holocaust, was unique or unprecedented: sadly, evil and atrocity, terror and trauma, have long been part of the human experience. Why, then, does the *Holocaust* pose a problem of representation? Could it be that it calls for something otherwise than representation?

In *The Writing of the Disaster* Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) offers his statement of the problem and what might be beyond "Holocaust," as well as a tentative response: *"The unknown name, alien to meaning: The holocaust, the absolute event of history . . . where the movement of Meaning was*

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swallowed up, where the gist, which knows nothing of forgiving or of consent, shattered without giving *place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied. . . . How can it be preserved, even by thought? How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought? In the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry."*[1] What is the *absolute* that Blanchot invokes? Perhaps a trace of it lies in the assault on the absolute, on the Good that exceeds the ontological coordinates of history, "outside history, but historically so,"[2] as Blanchot puts it, the Good that makes history matter and that stirs both in the soul and from beyond the soul, both in the event and from beyond the event—the Good, therefore, that exceeds representation. Perhaps that is how the movement of Meaning, of what is essential to the life of the soul, gets swallowed up in this singular assault on the soul. And yet, Blanchot creates an opening in *"the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry"* as a reply to the problem of Holocaust representation, for its countlessness is precisely what escapes the ontological categories. But what is this countless outcry? What is it fleeing from? It flees from a mode of thought that would think the Holocaust, from word to outcry, from representation to . . . what?

"The survivors," writes Dori Laub, "did not only need to survive so they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus come to *know* one's story."[3] The imperative is a moral one: to know one's story is to know what must be done, beginning with telling the tale. Telling the tale is required in order to survive because the telling of tales was itself under assault. However, "the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling and, therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails"[4]—not because of some post-traumatic reticence on the part of the survivor but because of "the fleeing silence" that Blanchot invokes. Thus, says Laub, "what precisely made a *Holocaust* out of the event is the *unique* way in which, during its historical occurrence, *the event produced no witnesses.* Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible *and* deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims."[5] Hence the *fleeing* silence.

Does the fleeing silence not give voice to the assault that eludes thought, since thought—at least as it is understood in the Western speculative tradition—belongs to the ontological categories that shape the very notion of representation? Do we not here come up against something otherwise than representation? Here is the problem: if representation is about *knowing* as

comprehension—if it is more about epistemology than about responsibility—then it is not about the Holocaust. If it is about knowing, then it is about universalizing, so that the singularity of the extermination of Jews and Judaism is lost in the universal. Emil Fackenheim (1916–2003) states the problem this way: "How can thinking be both philosophical and Jewish? If it is rational, it makes values universal and only accidentally Jewish. If specifically Jewish, then it undermines the detachment and universality required of philosophy."[6] And yet, he writes, "It is precisely *because* of the uniqueness of Auschwitz, and *in* his particularity that a Jew must be at one with humanity."[7] Thus there is something to be affirmed, if not in the voice then through the voicelessness that attends to the "countless cry" of the assault on the body and soul of Israel.

The upshot? Any attempt to address the problem of Holocaust representation, including this one, is itself a representation of the Holocaust and therefore problematic. If that is the case, then such a reflection must come up against the nonrepresentable that eludes speculative thought. What follows, then, is a kind of reckoning, what in Hebrew is called a *cheshbon nefesh*. And so it must be: the Holocaust is nothing if not profoundly personal to anyone who collides with it: it singles me out, from beyond the ontological realm of speculation, to summon me to an absolute ethical responsibility, and not to an empathetic cry of pain. Here Eric Kligerman notes, "Although the process of identifying with the Other may start as an honest desire of the spectator to attain empathic identification with the victim, such a vicarious experience risks degenerating into an illusion of being the Other . . . where the act of facing the horror of the Holocaust would potentially lead to a cathartic encounter with its remnants."[8] In other words, if empathy or the knowledge of "what it was like" is the aim of representation, then representation ultimately undermines responsibility. Therefore, instead of the safe distance of either a speculative or a cathartic approach, this inquiry seeks to confront implication and complicity. At times, then, it may depart from the detached scientific method that since Aristotle has driven the project of knowledge and analysis, of comprehension and appropriation. But what other tools, it may be asked, do we have at our disposal? The short answer is this: we have at our disposal the mode of thought that the Nazis set out to obliterate. We have Jewish thought.

And so I shall attempt to break free from the ontological, totalizing categories of what Blanchot calls "guardian thought" and embrace the categories of Jewish thought that came under assault when the movement of Meaning gave way to a fleeing silence. My examination of the existing

attempts to address the problem of Holocaust representation has led me to conclude that, generally speaking, they succumb to the thinking that produced an absolute assault on the absolutes of Jewish thought, an assault on categories such as creation and commandment, revelation and responsibility. In other words, generally (but only generally) speaking, the way in which the problem of Holocaust representation has been addressed so far—and I tremble at these words—plays into the hands of the thinking that resulted in the Holocaust itself. I may do no better. Such is the risk taken in any venture of this kind.

Naming *It*

> We are in the presence of a crime without a name.
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> —Winston Churchill, speech given on 24 August 1941, cited in
> Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*

"To approach the representation of the events," Andrea Liss observes, "is also to confront the difficult act of naming them."[9] What, then, are we attempting to name when we speak about the *Holocaust*? How shall we represent it? What image can capture it, if it can be captured at all? What shall we call it? The Nazis called it "the Jew War" or the "War against the Jews."[10] Hitler himself called it a "war of extermination."[11] If nothing else, the War against the Jews was a war against the absolute; from a Jewish standpoint, it was a war against two absolutes: the first and the sixth utterances at Mount Sinai: "I am God" (Exodus 20:2) and "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). What, then, shall we name this crime of extermination that the Nazis deemed the Jew War and undertook as an assault on these two absolutes? Shall we refer to it, with Paul Celan, simply as "that which happened?"[12] Is it the Holocaust? The Shoah? The Churban? The Final Solution to the Jewish Question? The *Judenvernichtung*?

Since we are addressing the problem of Holocaust representation, let us start with the word *Holocaust*. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940–2007) demonstrates an understanding of its transcendent nature, saying, "To speak of a 'Holocaust' is a self-serving misinterpretation, as is any reference to an archaic scape-goating mechanism. There was not the least 'sacrificial' aspect in this *operation,* in which what was calculated coldly and with maximum efficiency and economy (and never for a moment hysterically or deliri-

ously) was a pure and simple *elimination*."[13] How can the term *Holocaust* be construed as *self*-serving? Because to construe it as a sacrificial offering is to justify it and therefore absolve ourselves of the sin of indulging in issues of representation. Above all, it relieves us of issues of responsibility, which are precisely the issues of representation: confining our concern to such things as aesthetic convention, the limits of imagination, and working through trauma, we undertake various analyses of Holocaust representation in a flight from our responsibility for the Event.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi has also commented on the problematic nature of the term *Holocaust*:

> Even the rubric under which the horrors of those years are subsumed—the *Holocaust*—may be regarded as something of an evasion through verbal encapsulation. It is derived from the Greek word for whole-burnt and meant, presumably, to suggest the extent and even the "manner" of the death of the Jews of Europe. Yet the word *holokautoma,* which refers in the Septuagint to the "burnt offering" in the Temple of Solomon, raises problems through the sacrificial connotation that it attaches to the death of the Jews of Europe and which is, unfortunately, consistent with a prevailing Christian reading of Jewish history.[14]

The sacrificial connotation is problematic because it implies a kind of atonement and therefore something necessary, if unfortunate, about the Event. It is problematic also because it casts the deaths of the Jews in the mold of martyrdom, which, Fackenheim maintains, the Nazis denied the Jew by making the Jew into a Muselmann drained of the divine spark and therefore of any capacity to choose or reject martyrdom (more about the Muselmann later).[15] Although Fackenheim hesitates to call them martyrs, he accepts the Hebrew term *kedoshim* when applied to the Jews murdered by the Nazis. The word *kedoshim,* he correctly points out, does not mean "martyrs"; it means the "holy ones." It refers to "the many—the infants, the *Muselmänner,* and all the countless and nameless one who, without ever knowing what was happening, were murdered in the twinkling of an eye. . . . What then is the holiness of the *kedoshim*? *They suffered vicariously for their parents and their grandparents, but by no means, however, for their sins and their vices but, on the contrary, for their virtues and their saintliness, the fidelity with which they survived as Jews . . . the fidelity of all the past Jewish generations, way back to Sinai*."[16] In a word, "the *kedoshim* suffered vicariously for God."[17]

This insight runs very deep indeed. It underscores the singularity of the problem of Holocaust representation as a representation of suffering for God, suggesting that the one in whom the divine image has been erased might nonetheless suffer for the divine—there lies *the fleeing silence of the countless cry*. Nevertheless, even if we view the murdered as the *kedoshim,* to situate the Holocaust within the parameters of sacrificial offering would amount to drawing it into the parameters of self-absolution and thus take it outside the parameters of representation. For the act of sacrifice or martyrdom is representable, as the history of Western art demonstrates, and, once representable, it is absolving. That is why Ezrahi calls our attention to an overarching difficulty in Holocaust representation as "something of an evasion." Is it possible that through the very use of the word *Holocaust* we represent it in order to avoid it, slipping into a kind of psychological denial of the Holocaust? Is there something beyond "Holocaust" that must be sought here?

The effort to represent the Holocaust often becomes an effort to relativize and thus trivialize it, incorporating it into the many agendas that go under the heading of tolerance, social justice, and anti-bullying. Says Alvin Rosenfeld, "As the mass murder of millions of innocent people is trivialized and vulgarized, a catastrophic history, bloody to its core, is lightened of its historical burden and gives up the sense of scandal that necessarily should attend it. . . . The more successfully it enters the public mainstream, the more commonplace it becomes. A less taxing version of a tragic history begins to emerge—still full of suffering, to be sure, but a suffering relieved of its weightiest moral and intellectual demands."[18] The *weightiest* of the Holocaust's moral demands extend back to the absolute, divine prohibition against murder, to the ancient demands of Judaism (later taken up by other traditions). As for the intellectual demands, although obvious, they are often ignored, for they include the demands of the study of history, religion, philosophy, languages, cultures, and many other areas. Relieved of its weightiest moral and intellectual demands, the Holocaust is relieved of its Jewish demands. Thus de-Judaizing the Holocaust, one may ward off perceptions of external reality that would be upsetting and withdraw attention from the stimulus, so that the arousal of negative affect is diminished.

There are, as already pointed out, other terms for the event. In Hebrew it is *Shoah,* a noun that suggests many things. In contrast to the sublime sacrificial connotations of *Holocaust, Shoah* means "abyss." It also means "pit," "destruction," and "ruin." Sharing the same root is another noun, *shav,* which translates as "lie" or "nothingness," suggesting that, as

an assault on creation, the Shoah returned creation to the chaos and the void, the *tohu vevohu,* overcome in the act of creation (Genesis 1:2). Karla Grierson describes the outcome of this assault as "denatured nature."[19] Survivor Camille Touboul sees it in the absence of the natural world at Auschwitz: "Nature always has grass quivering in the wind, insects crawling among the pebbles, the cries of birds, a corner of the sky. Here there is nothing. An immense plain as far as the eye can see, receding into an unknown nothingness."[20] This nothingness, this *shav,* of the anti-creation extends beyond the time of the Holocaust and into the time of afterward, as Primo Levi (1919–1987) indicates: "The world around us," he says of his emergence from Auschwitz, "seemed to have returned to primeval Chaos, and was swarming with scalene, defective, abnormal human specimens."[21] These are the creatures who mirror the image not of the Creator but of the Chaos opposed by the Creation; these are the inhabitants of a brave new land, such as the one that the Germans made out of Eastern Europe. There, says Levi, "it was more than a sack: it was the genius of destruction, of anti-creation, here as at Auschwitz; it was the mystique of barrenness."[22] The anti-creation is the creation of nothing out of something, a return to the void of what strives to overcome the void.

Further, the verb *shah,* which shares a root with *Shoah,* means to "become desolate," to "be devastated"; the *hitpael* form, *hishtaah,* is to "wonder," to "be astonished," or to "gaze in wonder or awe." Thus, when Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) once asked a friend about his first impression of Auschwitz, his friend replied, "I found it a spectacle of terrifying beauty."[23] What can this aesthetic mean for our understanding of the *Shoah*? Exceeding the parameters of genocide, it is the systematic imposition of the abyss upon the world, turning the world over to the pit. It is the lie made truth, the unreal made real, the return of the world to the nothingness that creation now struggles to overcome. It is the astonishment not over what is unimaginable but over everything imaginable. Far more difficult than the representation of the unimaginable is the representation of everything imaginable.

Then we have the word *Churban.* In ancient times the most devastating events to plunge the Jews into the abyss were the destruction of the two Temples, first in 586 BCE and then in 70 CE. In Hebrew this "destruction" is known as the *Churban.* It is a cognate of *cherev,* the word for "sword"; both derive from the verb *charav,* which means to "destroy" or to "lay waste." A special term used to refer to the devastation wrought by the destruction of the Temple, *Churban* pertains to the darkening of the Divine Presence in the world, without which there is neither good nor evil, but only what

is. It pertains to a radical assault on the Divine Presence through a radical assault on the Jews. Therefore, the Yiddish language uses this same word to refer to history's most devastating assault on God through the extermination of His Chosen: the Churban. It is a word that attempts to situate the destruction within the contexts of sacred history, which is already otherwise than representation, inasmuch as sacred history is the history of the incursion of more than all there is into the midst of all there is.

The Churban, moreover, has a date: it is the Ninth of Av, or Tisha B'Av. It is the day of the destruction of both Temples, as well as numerous other catastrophes in Jewish history.[24] On that date World War I began, a war that paved the way to the Third Reich; on 22 July 1942, the eve of Tisha B'Av, the first of the mass transports to Treblinka pulled out of Warsaw. In the time of the Churban in Europe, what Dan Cohn-Sherbok calls the Third Churban,[25] the Jews themselves took the place of the Temple. Like the Temple, they signify the presence of the Holy One in the world; like the Temple, they were consigned to the flames. In the words of Elie Wiesel, "with each hour, the most blessed and most stricken people of the world numbers twelve times twelve children less. And each one carries away still another fragment of the Temple in flames."[26] Yes, the children—they were the designated first targets in the Nazi war against God. Says Wiesel, "It was as though the Nazi killers knew precisely what children represent to us. According to our tradition, the entire world subsists thanks to them."[27] I have just one correction to his insight: it was not *as though*. In his diary from the Vilna Ghetto scholar and archivist Herman Kruk (1897–1944) often refers to the Gestapo's "Jew Specialists," such as the infamous Dr. Johannes Pohl, director of a department known as *Judenforschung ohne Juden*, that is, "Research on Jews without Jews."[28] It was their assignment to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the Jews and Judaism, with Jewish texts and teachings, and to use their information to destroy Judaism.

If, as it is written in the *Tikkunei HaZohar*, children are "the face of the Shekhinah,"[29] it is because, gazing into the eyes of a child, we catch a glimpse of the Divine Countenance and the Commanding Voice that the Nazis systematically set out to obliterate. Because children are the face of the Divine Presence, the Nazis rooted out that presence by creating realms that were void of Jewish children. "In the ghetto streets no children played," writes Yehiel De-Nur (1909–2001), the survivor and novelist known as Ka-tzetnik 135633. "In the ghetto there were no children. There were small Jews and there were big Jews—all looking alike."[30] In his memoir, George Lucius Salton (b. 1928) recalls the moment when, upon his liberation

from Wöbbelin, he saw children for the first time in more than six years. They were German children: "The Jewish children had all been gassed."[31] According to Jewish tradition, moreover, only the prayers of our children reach the ears of God, "for the outcry of children," says Jacob ben Wolf Kranz (ca. 1740–1804), the Maggid of Dubno, "is formed by the breath of mouths unblemished by sin."[32] But one wonders whether this outcry ever reached the ears of the Holy One; with the extermination of the children it is as though God had been rendered deaf. And once rendered deaf, He is rendered irrelevant. Thus, in the assault on the children the Nazis attained their deicidal aim.

If the annihilation of the children is central to the Nazis' deicidal aim, so too is the obliteration of prayer. Indeed, just as the Shekhinah is associated with the community of Israel, so is she associated with prayers of Israel. The Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760), the founder of Chasidism, teaches that "when a man begins the Amidah [the prayer at the center of the liturgy] and says the opening verse: 'O Lord, open Thou my lips!' [Psalms 51:17] the Shekhinah immediately enters within his voice, and speaks with his voice."[33] Therefore, the annihilation of the Indwelling Presence—the Churban—required the annihilation of prayer. "Never before was there a government so evil that it would forbid an entire people to pray," Chaim Kaplan (1880–1942) records in the diary he kept in the Warsaw Ghetto.[34] Never before had a government undertaken such an assault on the Holy One *as a policy of state*. Central to that assault is the assault on the testimony to the Holy One manifest in prayer. "Only when you are My witnesses," it is written, "am I God, but when you are not My witnesses, I—if one dare speak thus—am not God" (*Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* 12:6; see also *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 33:5).[35] The Nazis understood that both the Source and its seekers, both God and His witnesses, had to be destroyed.

We understand, then, why the Nazis transformed places of prayer into latrines, stables, scrap depots, and other such facilities. Often they were not content merely to desecrate the places of prayer; they put them to the torch, with praying Jews inside, and thus consigned God Himself to the flames. The assault on the place of prayer is an assault not on a building or a space but on the encounter between God and the soul that characterizes prayer: in order to assail God, the Nazis launched an attack on the prayer that is itself divinity. Chaim Kaplan bears witness to this assault. On the eve of Tisha B'Av 5700 (1940), he writes, "Public prayer in these dangerous times is a forbidden act. Anyone caught in this crime is doomed to severe punishment. If you will, it is even sabotage, and anyone engaging in sabotage is

subject to execution."[36] Note well: the Nazis deemed prayer *an act of sabotage*. Why? Because prayer affirms the divine, transcendent authority behind the commandments of Torah, beginning with the prohibition against murder. Only where there is a place for this absolute, divine prohibition does the Divine Presence find a dwelling place in the world, and only where there is a dwelling place for the Divine Presence is there a place for prayer.

So the term *Churban* provides its own inkling of what must be represented and why it is not representable: it is the radical assault on the Holy One, on holiness, on the Shekhinah as she is driven into exile, on the absolute prohibition against murder. What must above all be represented and is above all nonrepresentable is this *absolute*. Indeed, this absolute is tied to what is final about the *Endlösung* or Final Solution, another term for this event that some would represent. Final Solution to what? To the *Judenfrage,* the Jewish Question: *die Endlösung der Judenfrage*. But what exactly is the Jewish Question? Why does it require a Final Solution? And what does it tell us about the problem and even the wrongheadedness of Holocaust representation?

The term *Jewish Question* was first used in Great Britain around 1750; it appeared during the debates surrounding the Jew Bill of 1753, which enabled Jews to become naturalized citizens of England through application to Parliament.[37] The phrase became a familiar one in the German-speaking world with the publication of *Die Judenfrage* in 1843 by philosopher and historian Bruno Bauer (1809–1882); some of Karl Marx's (1818–1883) most notorious anti-Semitic statements came in his reply to Bauer, where he wrote, "What is the profane basis of Judaism? *Practical* need, *self-interest*. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? *Huckstering*. What is his worldly god? *Money*."[38] For Marx and other anti-Semites, the Jews did not suffer any oppression at the hands of the nations, but rather the nations were oppressed by the conniving Jews. Early on, then, the Jewish Question was not the question of how to assimilate the Jews under a program of civil rights for all; no, it was the question of how to get rid of the Jews and Judaism altogether. Although *die Endlösung der Judenfrage* is a distinctively Nazi phrase, the desire for a Final Solution to the Jewish Question did not originate with them.

The total, absolute solution to the Jewish Question could come only with the total, absolute elimination of the Jewish Question. In other words, the question had to be not only resolved but also eliminated. For the Nazis, as long as a single Jew was alive, the question was alive: every Jew and all memory of the Jews had to be annihilated in the *Final* Solution to the Jewish Question. Thus, in 1942 the Nazis trekked to Tromsø, Norway, 217

miles north of the Arctic Circle, to send the seventeen Jews residing there to Auschwitz; one does not venture into the Arctic out of economic envy, xenophobia, racial animosity, ethnic prejudice, or the longing to find a scapegoat. No. Because the God of Abraham is omnipresent, the assault on the God of Abraham had to be omnipresent. Jewish teaching and testimony was the designated target of the extermination project, for Jewish tradition is itself a manifestation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The total elimination of the Jewish Question is, indeed, an elimination of the Jewish God. The Hebrew word for "question," Wiesel reminds us, "is *she'elah,* and the *alef lamed* of God's name are part of the fabric of that word. Therefore God is in the question."[39] To eliminate the question—to finally resolve the Jewish Question—is to eliminate God.

So what is the Jewish Question for which the Nazis systematically sought a Final Solution? It is not a question of what to do with the Jews, precisely; rather it is a question of what to do with the infinite ethical demand that they represent by their very presence in the world. Because the demand is infinite, it cannot be settled or assimilated, dominated or domesticated. " 'The jews,' " Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) reflects, are "the irremissible in the West's movement of remission and pardon. They are what cannot be domesticated in the obsession to dominate."[40] And if they cannot be domesticated, they must be annihilated. Thus, Lyotard outlines the history of anti-Semitism: "One converts the Jews in the Middle Ages, they resist by mental restriction. One expels them during the classical age, they return. One integrates them in the modern era, they persist in their difference. One exterminates them in the twentieth century"[41]—which is the final solution to the Jewish Question. What is said of the Jews, moreover, can be said of God: He cannot be domesticated. One makes God into a Christian or a Muslim, He resists by mental restriction. He is expelled and replaced by the "I think" in the classical age, He returns. He is integrated into a cultural phenomenon in the modern era, He persists in His other-ness. One exterminates Him in the postmodern age by exterminating His people. And so we have the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. The representation of the Final Solution must, if possible, represent the irre-missible, indomitable, inassimilable, ethical absolute signified by the very presence of the Jews.

Thus, the annihilation of the Jewish people termed the *Judenvernichtung* is the annihilation not only of a people but also of a millennial teaching and tradition. It is the annihilation of the questions that constitute the true Jewish Question, the question put to Adam—"Where are you?" (Genesis

3:9)—and the questions put to Cain—"Where is your brother?" (Genesis 4:9) and "What have you done?" (Genesis 4:10). That is what makes the Final Solution a *Judenvernichtung*. The representation of the *Judenvernichtung* is a representation of what was targeted for annihilation in the annihilation of the Jews, which is what eludes representation. It eludes representation because it belongs to a metaphysical realm that is otherwise than being, whereas representation belongs to the ontological landscape of all there is. The term *Judenvernichtung* refers to more than mass murder; least of all does it signify "man's inhumanity to man," a trite and meaningless combination of words. The *Judenvernichtung* is neither one instance of inhumanity among others nor one horror among others. It designates an assault on the very metaphysical category, the ethical category of human sanctity, that makes other horrors horrific.

Taken together, the various terms for the Holocaust—Shoah, Churban, *Judenvernichtung,* and so on—are one, much as God, Israel, and Torah are one. They harbor not only a memory but also the summons to remember, the summons to which we are tasked to answer, "*Hineni!*—Here I am!" Indeed, we are summoned to do more than remember—we are summoned to act. The task for the artistic word and image is to represent the nonrepresentable "Commanding Voice of Auschwitz," as Fackenheim calls it. "Jewish opposition to Auschwitz," he argues, "cannot be grasped in terms of humanly created ideals but only as an *imposed commandment*. And the Jewish secularist, no less than the believer, is *absolutely singled out* by a Voice as truly *other* than man-made ideals—an imperative as truly *given*—as was the Voice of Sinai."[42] There lies the difficulty posed for any representation of the Holocaust: to make heard the Commanding Voice silenced in Auschwitz, a Voice that yet commands precisely in its reverberating silence. Once again, we come up against the question of what to call it.

Naming Auschwitz

And praised. *Auschwitz*. Be. *Maidanek*. The Lord. *Treblinka*. And praised. *Buchenwald*. Be. *Mauthausen*. The Lord. *Belzec*. And praised. *Sobibor*. Be. *Chelmno*. The Lord. *Ponary*. And praised. *Theresienstadt*. Be. *Warsaw*. The Lord. *Vilna*. And praised. *Skarzysko*. Be. *Bergen-Belsen*. The Lord. *Janow*. And praised. *Dora*. Be. *Neuengamme*. The Lord. *Pustkow*. And praised . . .

—André Schwarz-Bart, *The Last of the Just*

"In order to understand ourselves and to illuminate our trackless way into the future," writes Leo Strauss, "we must understand Jerusalem and Athens."[43] Among the matters Strauss understood best was the tension between Athens and Jerusalem. Whereas the former, he explains, signifies "free inquiry," the latter signifies "obedient love."[44] If the difference between Athens and Jerusalem lies in free inquiry over against obedient love, it lies in autonomous self-legislation over against divine commandment. And if that is the case, then one may trace a path leading from Athens to Auschwitz, where no one was ever more autonomous, more self-legislating, than the Nazis and no truth ever under a more radical assault than the truth of a divinely revealed commandment. What began with modernity's thinking God out of the picture ended with shoving the Jews into the gas chambers. Philosophy turns its ear to Auschwitz and hears only a sound and a fury signifying nothing, hears only the screams of the children and the silence of the Muselmann. And it is paralyzed.

In contrast to this paralysis we have the Israelites' response when Moses presented them with the Torah: "All that the Lord has said, we shall do and we shall hear" (Exodus 24:7). This is precisely the response to the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz that must now be made. The path to truth, then and now, lies in *acting,* out of love, in response to the revealed word, for only by thus bringing the Commanding Voice to life through our deeds can we ever hope to hear and understand it. Insisting that the path to truth lies in the "free inquiry" of reasoned reflection, philosophy would first deduce the right path and then take a first step. In the words of Strauss, "by saying that we wish to hear first and then to act, we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem."[45] In the twentieth century, Athens was superseded by Auschwitz. The implication for our reflection on Holocaust representation is that, if we are to oppose Auschwitz, we are summoned to think in the categories of Jerusalem, not of Athens. It is not for nothing that the word *Auschwitz* heads the litany of names echoing from the anti-world in the defiant prayer with which André Schwarz-Bart (1928–2006) closes his novel *The Last of the Just*. It is because, as Brett Kaplan has understood, "the word 'Auschwitz' takes on a more than synecdochal force when it comes to represent not only all other camps, but all other horror."[46] It is a name that appears in numerous titles of books that deal with the Holocaust and its representation. What, then, are we naming with this name?

The town of Auschwitz has existed since the thirteenth century, when it was originally known as Ośpenchin. Since the fifteenth century it has been called Auschwitz in German and Oświęcim in Polish. In the

late Middle Ages and Early Modern periods the town prospered as a center of trade until it was destroyed in 1655 with the Swedish invasion of Poland. By the end of the nineteenth century Oświęcim prospered once again as an important rail junction, which would serve the Nazis well in the twentieth century.

One more item of interest: Elie Wiesel relates a tale of two Chasidic masters, Rebbe Elimelekh of Lizensk (1717–1787) and Reb Zusia of Onipol (1718–1800), who were known for their travels throughout Eastern Europe to spread the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov: "One day they arrived in a little town as dusk was falling. Noticing an inn, they went inside, hoping to spend the night there. Exhausted, they lay down behind the stove, which was the customary place for wandering beggars. Soon the place fell silent. And dark. All of a sudden, they woke in a panic, overcome by an inexplicable fear. So violent was their fear that they left the inn and the village in the middle of the night. The name of the place: Oushpitsin—better known to our generation as Oświęcim, or: Auschwitz."[47] Thus, the two Chasidic masters fled the place from which their descendants would be unable to flee.

Consider, too, the following from French philosopher Fabrice Midal, who flees not only from the site but from the very word: "Auschwitz. It is difficult for me to write the word itself. It seems to me impossible to know the order of the letters. I must look at it several times. In the end I do not want to know. Is it because this word designates a site where order has disappeared forever?"[48] No synecdoche here. No metonymy. No aesthetic tools of representation. Ironically, grimly, the name *Oświęcim* brings to mind the Polish verb *oświecić,* which means to "enlighten" or "illuminate." Throughout how many nights was Oświęcim illuminated by the flames of the crematoria? How might the word *Auschwitz* illuminate our ignorance?

I am reminded of a remark that Yehiel De-Nur made to me in the summer of 1991, as he related the story of how the Israeli prosecuting attorney Gideon Hausner (1915–1990) pleaded with him to testify at the trial of Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962): "I told him, yes, I was there. I saw the beatings, the exhaustion, the starvation, the smoke rising from the chimneys, and the ashes raining down. I saw men humiliated and mutilated, reduced to non-men. But that is not Auschwitz. What Auschwitz is, I tried to explain to him, I cannot say." Can it, indeed, be said?

In the end, Hausner got De-Nur to agree to testify. When the time came for him to take the stand on 7 June 1961 in Session 68 of the trial, he attempted to say what Auschwitz is:

Witness Dinur: I do not regard myself as a writer and a composer of literary material. This is a chronicle of the planet of Auschwitz. I was there for about two years. Time there was not like it is here on earth. Every fraction of a minute there passed on a different scale of time. And the inhabitants of this planet had no names, they had no parents nor did they have children. There they did not dress in the way we dress here; they were not born there and they did not give birth; they breathed according to different laws of nature; they did not live—nor did they die—according to the laws of this world. . . . They were clad there, how would you call it . . .

Q. Yes. Is this what you wore there? [Shows the witness the prison garb of Auschwitz.]

A. This is the garb of the planet called Auschwitz. And I believe with perfect faith that I have to continue to bear this name [Ka-tzetnik] so long as the world has not been aroused after this crucifixion of a nation, to wipe out this evil, in the same way as humanity was aroused after the crucifixion of one man. I believe with perfect faith that, just as in astrology the stars influence our destiny, so does this planet of the ashes, Auschwitz, stand in opposition to our planet earth, and influences it. If I am able to stand before you today and relate the events within that planet, if I, a fall-out of that planet, am able to be here at this time, then I believe with perfect faith that this is due to the oath I swore to them there. They gave me this strength. This oath was the armour with which I acquired the supernatural power, so that I should be able, after time—the time of Auschwitz—the two years when I was a Muselmann, to overcome it. For they left me, they always left me, they were parted from me, and this oath always appeared in the look of their eyes. For close on two years they kept on taking leave of me and they always left me behind. I see them, they are staring at me, I see them, I saw them standing in the queue . . .

Q. Perhaps you will allow me, Mr. Dinur, to put a number of questions to you, if you will agree?

A. [Tries to continue] I remember . . .

Presiding Judge: Mr. Dinur, kindly listen to what the Attorney General has to say.

[Witness Dinur rises from his place, descends from the witness stand, and collapses on the platform. The witness fainted.][49]

If Midal could not name Auschwitz because the very word signifies the collapse of order, De-Nur himself collapsed in his attempt to name it. Can this witness's attempt to say what Auschwitz is be construed as an instance of Holocaust representation? Saul Friedländer has said that "the limitations which weigh on the literary and artistic representation of the *Shoah* reappear in the domain of historical interpretation."[50] Do those limitations also weigh on the courtroom testimony of a witness who would undertake his own representation of the Holocaust? Does this literary figure not venture into the domain of historical interpretation? I think he does. But he does far more than offer evidence at a trial.

Indeed, this testimony encapsulates the issues of Holocaust representation. Something unspeakable weighed on the witness, something he could not speak, the weight of the entire "concentrationary universe."[51] In Auschwitz, writes Jean Améry (1912–1978), "It was not the case that the intellectual . . . had now become unintellectual or incapable of thinking. On the contrary, only rarely did thinking grant itself a respite. But it nullified itself when at almost every step it ran into its uncrossable borders. The axes of its traditional frames of reference then shattered."[52] As De-Nur tried to speak it, even as he tried to think it in "a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition," to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995),[53] that universe swept over him from beyond uncrossable borders and sent him into a swoon in his attempt to narrate a time outside of time, a time that cannot be thought. Time is a key. "Time there," De-Nur testified, "was not like it is here on earth. Every fraction of a minute there passed on a different scale of time." Elsewhere he says that time "on planet Auschwitz revolved around the cogwheels of a different time-sphere."[54] That different scale of time, that different sphere, belongs to none of the circles of heaven or hell, where a principle of justice rules; as Primo Levi has said, "for us the Lager is not a punishment."[55] In Auschwitz, the Jews served no sentence: they were not "doing time." Outside of time, Auschwitz can be located within the landscape neither of being nor of nothingness: in that

anti-space-time more was real than was possible. The cogwheels turned and twisted, but not according to the measure of time that belongs to creation.

"Time in Auschwitz", says survivor and psychiatrist Eugene Heimler (1922–1990), "was not divided into minutes, hours, and days."[56] There is no sun "like the one that shines upon Majdanek," as the Majdanek Anthem goes,[57] because the Majdanek sun does not trace the time of the orbit of the sun placed in the heavens to rule the day. Human time, life time, is measured according to human relation; hence, the Jews measure time not from the first day of creation but from the sixth day, the day of the creation of Adam, which is Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. In Auschwitz, however, there is no judgment, no punishment, nothing but the chaos and the void of the arbitrary in a time radically out of joint. In Auschwitz, the time of one's life, the time of human relation, came under a radical assault. Recall one of the most chilling lines in all of Holocaust literature, when an inmate informs the young Eliezer in Wiesel's *Night* that in the camp "there is no such thing as father, brother, friend. Each of us lives and dies alone."[58] Thus, the witness testifies before humanity to an anti-time in an anti-world void of humanity. Here we have a clue to the problem of Holocaust representation as a problem of relating the destruction of all relation.

Because human relation is made of language, this rupture of time, which is a rupture of the real, is a rupture or breakdown of language. For De-Nur, who tried to put Auschwitz into words, there was a literal breakdown of language, a breakdown that was part of his testimony. Lea Wernick Fridman has a sense of this "rupture of language" running through the witness's "representations of the Holocaust."[59] Fridman, however, misses the *Holocaust* in her discussion of its representation through language. For the rupture of language that distinguishes the Holocaust belongs to the rupture of the divine image in which the human being is created as a "speaking being" (a *medaber* in Hebrew, *not* to be confused with the Greek *zoon phonate* or "speech organism").[60] It is a rupture not only of a speech process but also of a divine commandment, not only of an aesthetic endeavor but also of an ethical absolute. Hence, the survivor's sense of an absolute ethical obligation to the dead ruptures his life, his ego, his entire sense of identity.

In the late spring of 1945 Yehiel De-Nur, now an escapee from Planet Auschwitz, lay dying in a British army hospital in Italy. But before succumbing to death, he resolved to fulfill a promise made to the dead whose ashes had been cast to the winds. He asked for pen and paper. Some two weeks later, the patient produced the manuscript of the first Holocaust novel, the first attempt to name Auschwitz, *Salamandra* (*Sunrise over Hell*

in the English edition). He also made a miraculous recovery, as though his testimony to and for the dead had released him from the grip of the Angel of Death. He entrusted the book to Eliyahu Goldenberg, a member of the Jewish Brigade. Noticing that the manuscript had no name on it, Goldenberg asked, "Who shall I say wrote this?" To which came the reply: "Who wrote it? *They* wrote it! Put *their* name on it: Ka-tzetnik!"[61] As his character Harry Preleshnik, the persona of the author, says in *Phoenix over the Galilee*, "My name was burned with all the rest in the crematorium at Auschwitz."[62] How, then, are we to name this site of the burning of names?

And yet, as the site of the burning of names, Auschwitz and its dead summon the survivor by name from the depths of a human relation that extends beyond the time of the living. "I owe the dead my memory," says Elie Wiesel. "I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary."[63] This point is crucial in the matter of Holocaust representation as a representation of Jewish history. Jewish history entails handing down a metahistorical "message" or *meser* in Hebrew, a message concerning ethical responsibility as an expression of a higher relation. This view of history transforms the one to whom the testimony is handed down into a witness and a messenger. It means that the living remain in a relationship with the dead; only if we are in such a relationship with the dead can the transmission of their memory be ethically charged, and not just a matter of academic curiosity or aesthetic engagement. Wherever Auschwitz is named or represented—if, indeed, it can be represented—we have the representation of an absolute ethical demand that devolves upon the ego and deposes it.

Notice in this connection that in his attempt at the Eichmann trial to say what Auschwitz is, De-Nur turned to relating something of his story—the story of his responsibility, the story of the abrogation of his ego—confirming an observation from Michael Bernard-Donals in his book on Holocaust representation: "To witness is to forget yourself; it's being in the position of forgetting who 'I' am, because to say 'here I am' is to cast yourself out of phase with yourself, to make the speaking self noncoincident with its own language—with testimony—and with the position from which it speaks—the event, the 'here.' "[64] This forgetfulness of the "I," this abrogation of the ego, signifies the realization of the ethical demand that somehow penetrates the heights eclipsed by the ashes of Israel. It is what Levinas calls a "breakup of identity, this changing of being into signification, that is, into substitution, is the subject's subjectivity, or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability."[65] For De-Nur, the heavens went mute, so that the cry of

those marked for death "split the heavens," as it is written in *Sunrise over Hell*, "but Heaven remained lofty and silent as though God had deserted its temples."[66] And yet the injunction broke through the heavens and devolved upon him through the eyes of the Jews on their way to the gas chambers. Even the silence of God harbors a divine imperative, one that finds its way into Holocaust representation as the nonrepresentable.

De-Nur's repeated refrain of "I believe with perfect faith" is also worth noting: it is the Hebrew phrase *ani maamin b'emunah shlemah,* from the Thirteen Principles of Faith found in Maimonides's (1135–1204) commentary on the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 10).[67] The Thirteen Principles are recited in the prayer known as the *Yigdal,* which has become part of the Jewish liturgy of prayer. Invoking this liturgical utterance, De-Nur chooses Jerusalem over Auschwitz. In this connection, Ezrahi poses a salient question: "In what conceivable language can a Jew speak *to* God after Auschwitz, and in what conceivable language can he speak *about* Auschwitz?"[68] But, for a Jew, to speak *about* God is to speak *to* God; it is a form of prayer in reply to a summons. One form that it takes, as we have found, comes at the end of Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just.* If one is to say what Auschwitz is, perhaps it can only be said in a prayer, in reply to a summons. As Blanchot states, "The question concerning the disaster is part of the disaster; it is not an interrogation, but a prayer, an entreaty, a call for help."[69] What Blanchot says of the question concerning the disaster may also be said of the question concerning the representation of the disaster. Or is it to be said in a swoon, realizing that the call for help comes both from the human and from the beyond? Is that when De-Nur finally "said" what Auschwitz is? Is that how Planet Auschwitz is to be represented? Is that how it is to be spoken? And what becomes of language and all that we thought we knew about language in the attempt to speak it?

Terror has undone time, and with it that being that is the life of the human being, the being of the word. The attempt to speak the Holocaust, to put it into words its extremity, opens up a situation in which language works against itself. "This contradictory quality of the extreme," explains Michael Rothberg, "the fact that it always exceeds language but always inhabits it, also constitutes its implication in the everyday. This implication represents in turn the traumatic potential of extremity."[70] The issue, however, is not so much about extremity as it is about what is beyond extremity, beyond the beyond, a presence within language from beyond language, a presence that constitutes the meaning of language. The problem of Holo-

caust representation, then, opens up new possibilities for an understanding of language. If it is a "new" understanding, however, it has ancient roots in the Jewish tradition.

Post-Auschwitz Implications for an Understanding of Language

> Come, let us go down and confuse their language . . .
>
> —Genesis 11:7

Holocaust scholar Dorota Glowacka has astutely observed that "what Holocaust testimonials bear witness to first and foremost is this abyssal, *Babelian* condition of post-Holocaust speech."[71] The survivors who would bear witness to and thus offer some "representation" of the Holocaust attest to Glowacka's assessment. In the case of Primo Levi, Daniel Schwarz points out, "language is the protagonist of [his] books, the means by which he seizes light from darkness. For him, it is the means of creation and understanding, the one antidote to chaos,"[72] and chaos always lies in a confusion of tongues. If language is a protagonist, it is a protagonist in much the same sense as the dead are the protagonists of Holocaust testimonies: language itself lies among the dead. Here the survivor does indeed confront a "Babelian condition" of speech. It is a condition that is both rooted in the event and that follows the event into its aftermath.

There are ancient Jewish teachings on the "Babelian condition" that may help us to fathom this distinctively contemporary, post-Holocaust dilemma of representing the Holocaust through language. The Holocaust transpired in a place and a time of a bloody tearing of meaning from words. The Nazis never spoke of killing people but only of "resettlement," "special treatment," and "processing units." In that anti-world something primeval seeped through the ontological fabric of a discourse that belied reality, a "confusion" or *bilbul,* that characterized the collapse of the word at the Tower of Babel, which was literally the Tower of "Confusion." Just so, according to Levi, the carbide tower in Buna was deemed the *Babelturm,* or Tower of Babel. "Its bricks," he writes, "were called *Ziegel, briques, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglak,* and they were cemented by hate."[73] Hate is a defining feature of the tearing of word from meaning; it cannot happen without hate. Hate *is* the tearing of word from meaning and therefore of human from human.