

## The Problem with God

Both the Torah and postbiblical or Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism (not to mention Christianity) present their own understandings of God as the “God who acts in history,” whose caring concern for Jews (and Christians) was ultimately expressed at Sinai (and Calvary), for reasons largely unknown to His human children. No longer acceptable or comforting to this Jew, however, when juxtaposed to the *Shoah* is the midrashic, that is interpretive, understanding of a God who, sadly, went with His children into exile and slavery in Egypt and rejoiced, gladly, with them when they celebrated their liberation from that slavery and bondage, but was seemingly absent between the years 1933 and 1945, or more specifically, between 1939 and 1945. No amount of contemporary religious rationalization can overcome the enormity of the loss of Six Million Jews—more than 150 members of my own family. Little, if any, comfort, it seems to me, can be derived from the idea that Providence prevented that number from escalating higher. If truth now be told, for some among us today, not only were Six Million of our Jewish brothers and sisters murdered in the *Shoah*, as well as Five Million non-Jews, but the historically traditional notion of God also died in the concentration and death camps that now puncture the landscape of Europe. *What is now demanded in the realm of theological integrity is a notion of God compatible with the reality of radical evil at work and at play in our world, a notion that, also, admits of human freedom for good or evil—without the fruitless appeals to a God who “chose” (?) not to act because He could not act.* To continue to affirm the historically traditional notion of faith in God as presented by both Torahitic and Pharisaic-Rabbinic traditions (as well as Christianity) is to ignore the *Shoah* with all of its uniqueness and to ignore those who, like myself, continue to feel the pain of family loss, yet want to remain committed to Jewish survival—not because God wills it, but because without even this most fragile of moorings, we are cut off from our battered community.

Such a different and differing understanding of God is, however, contingent upon accepting the *Shoah* as a radical extension of preceding Jewish history and experience, although a number of earlier destructions in Jewish history many now be seen as indicative of a need to change the understanding of God even at those times (as a few individuals seem to have considered). Not that it *should* have happened, but that it could and did happen, given the centuries of antisemitism and the pre-prepared environment that preceded it. Debates may still rage within both Jewish and Christian scholarly and religious circles as to the necessary, sufficient, or proximate causes of the *Shoah*, but for this child of a survivor-escapee and children of other survivors, armed with even a minimal knowledge of Jewish history and tragedy, the *Shoah* is literally "something else" and must be so regarded or ignored. How else, then, to understand the shift from pre-Christian cultural and social antisemitism to and through Christian religious and theological antisemitism to and through the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment political antisemitism to the "biological" antisemitism of the Nazis from which no Jew could escape, including the members of one's own family? How else to understand the very modernity of the *Shoah* as the historically-validated marriage of bureaucratic excellence and technological perfection that perceived *Die Endlosung*, the "final solution" (to the Jewish problem), within the realm of human possibility? How else to confront the pain of loss, daily self-evident, and even haltingly, begin to make some sense of it?

Such an understanding is, likewise, contingent upon accepting a notion of God as other than historically and traditionally presented and understood by both Judaism and Christianity. One possible source of Divine affirmation, to the degree to which such affirmation is either desired or acknowledged as desired, lies in the concept of a "limited God" who could neither choose nor reject action during the dark years of 1933(39)-1945, who could not have responded to those humanly created and crafted processes of destruction even if He or She had wanted to do so. Notions of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the like quickly fall by the wayside. The alternative possibilities, it seems to me, are a God who was ignorant of the designs of His or Her German children and their European cousins, and impotent to act even after learning of their plans. Or a *limited God* whose own nonknowledge and limited power precluded both foreknowledge and interference. The very *technology* of Nazism has forever shattered the easy appeal to a God who will, somehow, curb the limits of human intellect and action for evil or good and, in the

future, prevent a repetition or recurrence of the *Shoah* or *Shoah*-like genocides. If anything, the reverse is now possible: Having let the genie of destructive technology out of the bottle of human ignorance, our best hope of containment for Jewish and human survival lies not in the heavens above but in our ability to educate the next generation to evince the same intellectual expertise and curiosity to creative measures as have thus far been evinced to destructive measures.

Where, then, do we begin to construct such a theological understanding of God that addresses these realities? Where, then, do we now begin to find such a God?

I would propose we begin with a Creator God, but, equally, with an understanding of that creative process significantly different than previously presented—at variance, to be sure, with the Torahitic and postbiblical Pharisaic-Rabbinic (and Christian) presentations of God. So be it, then.

All human experience tends to confirm the idea of the creator-creation relationship, whether that relationship is sustained, on-going, or severed after the initial point of contact. Simply put, *it makes more sense to believe in a Creator God who initiated a process of creation by which the world as we know it—not as we would wish it—came to be*; our own desire, as children to parent, as subjects to ruler, as students to teacher, as congregants to rabbi, is for that relationship to be on-going and sustained, whether or not such is actually the case. For the scientifically minded, the question is not whether the so-called gaseous hypothesis or big bang theory more adequately describes the creation of the world or universe—or any other postulated theory for that matter. That there exists (or existed) an *Initiator* worthy of our respect, admiration, acknowledgment, adoration, praise, appreciation, thanksgiving, or what have you is the proper purview of the religionist or the theologian—whether or not that Initiator continues to manifest interest in His or Her creation, whether or not that Initiator can communicate with Its creation, whether or not that creation can communicate with its Initiator. (The specific context of such communications is the subject of Chapter 3, “The Crisis of Prayer.”)

The “logic model” of creation, which makes the most sense to me, which I would therefore present, and which seems to address the *Shoah* specifically and all human and Jewish tragedy generally is the following: For reasons always and forever unknown to humanity, the initiating, creator God chose to initiate a creative process by which the world or universe as we know it, and as we presently understand it, came to be. Prior to that moment, or series of moments I know not

which, only God Himself or Herself existed. The phrase that best describes that act of creation for me, therefore, is that God “withdrew into Himself or Herself,” leaving a formless, chaotic void (echo of biblical tradition) wherein that creation—world, universe—would, ultimately, come to be. In so doing, however, as born out by the experience of human history, not only Jewish, in the very act of creation, an *impenetrable* barrier arose, one that could not be transcended in action, word or thought by either God or humanity, both of whom are, in fact, limited. Whether or not the erection of this barrier was by accident, or as a by-product to this initially creative act, or by design, so committed was (and is?) God to allowing this creation the fullest possible freedom in the exploration of its own potential, I know not which. Besides, it ultimately remains a moot question; what is at issue is not the reason behind this barrier, but that this barrier exists and cannot now or ever be transcended by either God or humanity as borne out by the realities of history.

Thus, one shifts one’s focus in a variety of directions all at the same time: The issue is no longer God’s interest, lack of interest, indifference, or hostility toward the humanity community. *Since the initial act of creation, God can no longer interact with His or Her creation, transcend the barrier if you will, even if He or She would wish to do so.* Nor can humanity equally transcend this same barrier asking, pleading, begging for Divine intervention. *Human tragedy, therefore, the Shoah included, is fully, totally, and completely the result of human action or inaction.* After creation, we human beings are, ultimately and absolutely, responsible for the past, present, and future of this planet and for the populations that reside on it. Historically naive appeals to Deity for succor spring from the non-recognition that such a barrier truly exists. Evidence of supposed Divine interaction results from perceiving the realities of historical situations through prefocused theocentric lenses. “I saw the hand of God saving me because I knew I would see the hand of God saving me.”

The alternative view to this, for this child of a survivor-escapee, confronts the very arbitrariness of the Deity and raises far more questions than it even remotely attempts to answer. If God did, in fact, rescue the Jewish people from the hell of Egyptian slavery, why not rescue us from the hell of Auschwitz or Buchenwald or Maidanek or Mauthausen? If God did, in fact, redeem the Jewish people from our exile in Babylonia, why not redeem us after our exile in Riga or Kovno or Lidice or Lvov? If God saved us after our departure from Spain only 450 years before, why not save us after our departure from the

cities, towns, villages, and countries throughout Eastern and Western Europe, where we have lived for over 1,000 years and from where we were taken to ghettos and on to concentration camps and murderous death?

Could it be that God did not rescue, redeem, save us during the *Shoah* because God *chose* not to do so for reasons either unfathomable or too monstrous to contemplate? Could it be that we, somehow, *merited* such punishment as the result of our own errant way or the ways of the rest of humanity, serving, once again, as their *korban*, their sacrificial offering? What possible sin or sins had we or they committed that necessitated the deaths of so many innocents along with the guilty, especially children, Jews and non-Jews alike, in ways so horrific as to border on the unspeakable and unbelievable?

Or could it be that God did not rescue, redeem, save us during the *Shoah* because God *could not* do so, however much God wanted to do so? Again, the impenetrable barrier. Much as I would want to believe God *wanted* to redeem our Jewish people during the *Shoah*, the full weight of the evidence indicates that God did not do so. And such desire without resolute action, to my way of thinking, equates with impotence. Better, perhaps, to maintain the illusory notion that God wanted to do so but was unable to do so rather than accept the notion of a God who could not or would not do so. But, if anything, the thoughts contained within this book are, equally, an attempt to confront those very illusions that have, heretofore, provided—again to my way of thinking—a false sense of both hope and security oft-times with tragic results. As the child of a survivor-escapee, then, religious illusions, too, are casualties of the *Shoah*.

To be sure, the position just suggested parallels that of the European, and American to a lesser degree, philosophical and religious existentialists who gained currency during the 1960s and early 1970s. For them, the universe as we know it and experience it is one of random accident and chance, God playing no part whatsoever in its on-going day-to-day processes, despite however much we would like it to be otherwise. The oft-echoed response to human tragedy “Why me?” or “Why us?” becomes, instead, “Why not you?” either singularly or in the plural. In such a universe, it is not that such and such a specific tragedy *must* happen, but that, given everything that constitutes humanity, such and such a tragedy *can* happen and, given past human history, has, more often than not, happened. Our naturally human desire of wanting to be spared such tragedy for ourselves and our families, although understandable, is, therefore, inconsistent and illogical. Sadly, human tragedy is, thus, the result of the very arbitrariness

of our universe, not the arbitrariness of God, the “luck of the draw”; God now becoming irrelevant in the process.<sup>2</sup>

Recognition of the validity of this understanding does nothing to diminish either the religious nature of humanity or humanity’s response to the universe. But it, too, like the aforementioned understanding of creation, goes a long, long way toward moving beyond the false and illusory hope of attempting to reconcile a loving, interactive God with the tragedy of the *Shoah*. It, also, removes forever from all human understanding the naive and infantile idea of an interactive God protective of His or Her human children.

Almost immediately, however, the secondary question arises: “Could, therefore, such a tragedy as the *Shoah* have been prevented, given this understanding of its entirely human character?” In theory, it could have been averted; in practice, given the sad state of our knowledge of human behavior under the most adverse and extreme of conditions, it is highly unlikely. Having not learned the lessons of previous examples of genocidal behavior, there is little in human experience, to this point, to suggest that, prior to Adolf Hitler’s ascension to the chancellorship of Germany in 1933, following his published vision of the future in *Mein Kampf* in the mid-1920s, the *Shoah* could have been averted. All of which is to say absolutely *nothing* about God. Could humanity have spared itself repeated excesses of genocidal behavior? Perhaps. Could God have, somehow, intervened to spare us these tragedies, in particular the *Shoah*? Not at all.

At this point, with what then are we left in our halting attempt to understand God and God’s relationship to planet earth and its inhabitants? With a limited God initiating a process of creation, but, in all candor, unable to move beyond a barrier imposed by that very act of creation. Although more fully explored in Chapter 3, our *initial* response, therefore, must be one of recognition, acknowledgment, and thanksgiving, even while recognizing that any such verbal response moves not at all beyond human hearing: “Thank you God for initiating a process whereby I came to be” may prove, definitively, the only legitimate form of prayer, directed inward rather than outward, enabling me to perceive myself far more humbly than history has thus far indicated has been humanity’s perception of itself. It may, also, enable me to realize the essential equality that inherently exists among all creation, not only human, and to begin to think and develop strategies that emphasize this equality rather than the ego- and power-oriented systems of both past and present if our planet is to survive.

Thus, when this understanding of creator God is juxtaposed with the *Shoah*, a lesson to be learned presents itself, starkly and dra-

matically: *Humanity cannot, now or ever, depend on God to and for its very survival, but must depend upon itself and its very willingness to develop interdependent links as the only reasonable opportunities and possibilities for that survival.*

What of our *need* for God? Does not what has thus far been written entirely negate that need? To be sure, what is now negated is an understanding of God inconsistent with the realities of history, especially the tragic history of the *Shoah*. My *need* for God is that need to recognize this fundamental truth of the universe and, somehow, to release from deep inside of me that caring and compassion which will ensure that genocide, even as it is now being practiced, will not continue ever again to haunt humanity. Having been the inheritor of the *Shoah*, I cannot allow myself the luxury of silence in words or actions in the face of genocide. What was for my family could very well be again for my family if those who would orchestrate such scenarios are permitted free reign against others in the human community, if their murderous schemes and designs are allowed to go unchecked.

Thus, we must accept, because the *Shoah* demands that we accept, the reality that *humanity is free* to do to itself anything and everything of which it has always been capable; and only humanity, through whatever systems of checks and balances it alone is capable of devising, can save itself. The oft-quoted rabbinic dictum "Everything is foreseen, but free will is given" made sense only in a world where the rabbis' understanding of God was that of the historically traditional ideas and ideals expressed early on in this chapter and in the Introduction. Having presented anew the understanding of a limited, creator God, everything is no longer, nor has it ever been, foreseen or preordained! Free will, the ability of humanity to continue to explore all aspects and facets of its potential, for evil *and* good, is, evidently, the result of the creative process itself, which, once initiated, remains unchecked unless we ourselves decide to check it. Subject to our own passions, ruled always by both head and heart, we are, ultimately, constrained only by our finitude and the finitude of others, but not by appeals to a supposed "Higher Power."

Evil, too, is equally part of this same creative process initiated by God. It is, however, solely and totally the result of our own doing and devising. It is not that we humans are inherently evil; it is that we are, like the very process of creation itself, creatures of potential for good and evil, unfettered by Divine chains. Human evil, therefore, must be equated not with death or natural disaster, the former always

a certainty and the latter always a possibility, but with those actions that result in the destruction of persons or groups without either their consent or their desire to participate in their own demise. Such destruction of others that causes pleasure or pain to its initiators *is* evil and must be so regarded as such. Such human evil cannot be stopped either by appeals to God or by intervention of that same God, but only by humanity's own willingness, through education and moral and legal safeguards, both to stop it once started and prevent it from ever having been started.<sup>3</sup>

Equally, too, blaming this limited God for human evil or for the potential for evil that resides in all humanity is both pointless and fruitless. Having already recognized God's inability to intervene or interact in human affairs, how can we fault God for what we do to ourselves? To be sure, some among us would fault God for having "endowed" us with the capacity for evil. But that, too, is a misreading of the creative process initiated by this limited God who was not fully knowledgeable about the so-called end result of creation when it came to us human beings. Human potential is synonymous with human energy, and when coupled with, but not necessarily ruled by, either mind or heart, destruction is as likely a result as is any other possibility.

Limiting God as the *only* religiously rational answer to the horrors of the *Shoah* likewise gives rise to the whole question of Divine eternity, but this question, too, becomes moot. An eternal God no longer involved with or capable of involvement with this creation is of little concern to humanity. A limited God of limited life's duration, even one shortened by or after the initial act of creation, although an intellectual possibility, does nothing to change the reality of what continues to transpire on this planet. Like the aforementioned existentialism of the early 1960s and 1970s, the "God is dead" movement somewhat popular on college campuses during this same period was more an exercise of words and language rather than a confrontation with either creation or evil historically or contemporarily considered. Affirming the limited nature of God precludes any meaningful discussion of God's eternity from the vantage point of understanding the *Shoah*.

Let us, therefore, leave this limited God, no longer, if ever, responsible for the *Shoah*, whose responsibilities to humanity ended with the initial act of creation, and address the singularly unique historically traditional understanding of the relationship between God and the Jewish People, that of the *Brith* or covenant.



## Notes

1. To regard the former as a *singular event* incapable of repetition still remains problematic: Why one and not the other? Did God, somehow, therefore, expend whatever energy committed to human interaction on the *Pesach* liberation and have none left during the *Shoah* even though Jews and Christians regard *all* prior rescues as Divine interventions?

2. Such an explanation is equally applicable to a "theology of natural disaster," whereby such devastating events as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, and the like are no longer seen as the result of the "active hand of God," but rather possibilities within the world of the possible.

3. The work of such thinkers as Israel Charny, Jerusalem, and Franklin Littell, Philadelphia, about the need for a "genocide early warning system" is hereby acknowledged and appreciated. Much, much more work, however, needs to be done in this area, foremost among which is the fullest exploration of the international legal ramifications of such a system and its impact upon individual nation-states.