

An Interview With Prof. Gabriel Motzkin

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January 7, 1998, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

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Negative Myth of Origin

Q- Would it be correct to say that the Holocaust has become central in Western culture and consciousness?

M- Yes, I believe that the Holocaust is a caesura in Western culture. Moreover, I believe that people who live after the Holocaust derive more and more their own sense of origin from it. It is a negative myth of origin. What does that mean? It's a story about how the world started, like the myth of creation. Most of our stories in the West are positive ones. Here we have a story that is not positive, but that divides us from all the people who lived before. One of the most interesting things about the Holocaust is that if you look at histories of the Second World War written in the 1940's and 1950's, you'll find that the chapter on the Holocaust is usually somewhere towards the back and is arranged non-chronologically. They don't know where to put it in the story. Today, if you ask the average Westerner about the Holocaust, it is as salient in his imagination, in his or her memory, as the Second World War as a whole. That's to say it has become, if anything, a more important event, and its importance grows and resonates over time. One sees this with the question of the Swiss bank accounts, with the questions of memorials all over the world, with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington - that it is an important event.

Now, what that will mean in the future, I don't know. The Holocaust has obtained quasi-theological significance. That has good and bad aspects, both positive sides and negative sides. However, the importance of the Holocaust in Western culture is extremely clear.

Culture and Morality

Q- But on the face of it, the Holocaust is an event that took place between Jews and Germans; at most, perhaps, it is a European event. How has it become so important an event in America and throughout the entire Western world?

M- I don't think that it is just an issue between Germans and Jews. If it were just between Germans and Jews, then it would not be a central event. But you'll notice that people are beginning to list the other victims of the Holocaust: Gypsies, homosexuals, and other groups that were affected, or that were killed. There's always a drive towards the universalization of this event. Even the neighbors of Germany, when they remember why they fought the Germans — and, after all, they fought the Germans because they were invaded — see their justification as having to do with the Holocaust. The Germans, in this way, take on, to some degree, the role of the pariah that the Jews once had in Western culture. It is very difficult for them to deal with this role of a pariah.

Now that is the specific historical reason why the Holocaust has become important, but there's another reason related to the kind of society in which we live and the justification for democracy. Democracy was under threat in the 1930's. There was a tremendous critique of democracy and modernity after the First World War. That critique of democracy has died out. Why? Because the idea today is that authoritarian regimes are necessarily more inhumane than democratic ones. That has a lot to do with the Holocaust and the view that authoritarian regimes, equipped with modern, technological means, will inevitably be driven to solve their “problems” in radical ways like the Holocaust. That's one reason confining the Holocaust to Germans and Jews doesn't get to the full depth of the issue, but there's another reason too. We must ask ourselves, “What does it mean to be human, altogether”?

The Holocaust raises the possibility that human beings are nothing more than animals. In a way, this is how Germans perceived Jews, and now it has

become a central issue for us. After all, before the Second World War, people believed that culture is redemptive. Thus, if you learned a higher culture, if you studied, if you were an educated person, you were somehow more moral. Now nobody believes that today, not even the people who study culture. This has become a major issue for all the different cultural trends, whether post-modernist or analytic or whatever, that exist after the Second World War: How do you combine culture and morality?

Why is that so? The people who perpetrated the Holocaust were considered to be among the most cultured people in all of Europe, in all of Western history. And yet they did this. That raises the question of what it means to be human. Is there an irreducible element of compassion in being human? What does it mean to engage in such systematic cruelty on behalf of an ideology? That's our issue, and it's an issue that we keep raising because it hasn't died for us. If the Holocaust were simply a solution to the problems of democracy, then we would have said, "Okay, we've solved the problem," and then the Holocaust would recede in time. What's interesting is how the Holocaust keeps being brought up again because it is, as yet, unresolved — the problem that it has raised. I believe that this problem is the problem of being human. We have no coherent idea that we all agree on what it means to be human.

Now, I want to clarify that I didn't use the monuments and the Swiss banks to explain why the Holocaust is a constitutive event. I said that these are signs of the continued relevance of the Holocaust, showing that people pay such attention to it, that it's page one in the International Herald Tribune, that it is an important issue. Why? Now you could say that maybe it has to do with the State of Israel, but I don't think so. I think that for most people, and for most Jews in the West, the Holocaust is clearly a different event than the Holocaust as part of Israeli history. American Jews derive their sense of meaning from the Holocaust in quite a different way than Israelis do because they do not think it leads necessarily to Zionism.

But the Holocaust is an issue that is discussed all the time in the Western press, and I used these things just as examples of the degree to which this issue is prevalent in contemporary society. Now, of course, I may be wrong. In ten years, it may be a dead issue, I don't know. I don't think so, but that could always happen.

Humiliation and Murder

Q- But why has the Holocaust gained so central a place in discussions of modernity and post-modernity and in questions pertaining to the essence of humanity? Why has this not been the case with other genocides or with the war itself, which was also a catastrophic event?

M- I think that the Holocaust has turned into a negative myth of origin. Why not Burundi? Why not Spain and Franco? There were other events. After all, the First World War was an event which in some ways created modernity much more than the Second did, and yet we don't remember the First World War in the same way, despite the mass killing.

I think, though I'm not sure, that the reason why the Holocaust is such a central event is due to a rare particular combination of two factors. I won't say unique, but it's very rare to both kill and humiliate the same mass of people. After all, usually it's enough to humiliate people. You want to keep the people alive you humiliate in order so that you can enjoy their humiliation. Usually the people that you kill, you don't need to humiliate. Now the SS realized this at some point in the Second World War, and actually wanted to engage in mass murder without humiliation. The Germans however, the Nazis, were always caught in the dialectic of seeking to prove to themselves that the Jews were inhumane. After all, one of the things that's so striking about the Holocaust is the degree of perversity that was involved. It's almost a perversity that some people, sad to say, enjoy. Now why is it more perverse than the liquidation of the Kulaks in Russia? After all, Stalin probably killed more people than Hitler did.

Now this is the kind of thing that is ascribed to no other group of murderers that I can think of in history, whether it's the Hutus or the Communists or anybody else. In other words, it's the idea that you will demean the other person by behaving in his presence in a way that you would not behave in the presence of anybody else. This perversity has captured the imagination of so many people in the West. I would like to suggest that they're interested in the Holocaust precisely because of its perversity.

Now wherein lies that perversity? Is it something that was in the actual event? Obviously, yes. The pictures that are always shown of Jews scraping the streets of Vienna, which is not properly part of the Holocaust, but the humiliation and the mass murder combine in memory and fuse into one event, and they clearly reflect how people were demeaned. It's already indecent to demean anybody, because democracy is founded on the idea of human dignity. After you demean them, you kill them — that is super-derogatory. Now that also has happened in other places and at other times in history. I don't claim uniqueness here, but rather extreme rareness, and that is already quite enough for our culture because we're living in proximity to this event. After all, what Ghengis Khan did is millions of miles away and light years removed from us, although I believe in some cases it must have been just as horrific.

The Effects of the Holocaust on Western Culture

Q- Where can these changes be felt in the deeper levels of culture, such as literature and philosophy?

M- Well, I think one of the great problems of post-war cultures, the problem of cosmopolitanism, is specifically an issue for Jewish culture. We forget that Zionism and all the other movements in the pre-war years arose in a general culture in which Jews were cosmopolitans. For Jews specifically, the Holocaust has raised the question of whether they should draw inwards - there is a tendency to pull inward than to reach out to the world. Jews have questioned the conditions under which modernity can exist, and especially

after the Holocaust, they have placed a much lower value on European culture.

As for philosophy as a whole, many of the most important post-modernist thinkers of our time, such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas or Jean Francois Lyotard, have thought at great length about the meaning of the Holocaust in terms of our ability to speak and to say certain things. Whether we can have a value-free discourse at all, what it means to take up a position, and how we articulate sentences. One of the things that has happened is that people have become skeptical as to the power of language itself to contain values.

In addition, there is a tremendous movement of dissemination of the Holocaust in Western culture. You will be talking to other people who will tell you about the way in which the Holocaust has affected African-American literature and other kinds of literature. It's true all over that people use the metaphor of complete destruction, or complete abasement, because it gives them a standard. While for us the Holocaust is above all an issue of the possibility of the complete destruction of our people, and since most other people have not been destroyed, the Holocaust gets translated into the language of complete, collective humiliation of a people.

Jews have “enjoyed” the time since the Second World War — a time when it is unacceptable to be antisemitic — because the Jews have always been already completely humiliated, and so they are, in a way, almost quasi-living saints. This, of course, will pass, because at some point Jews will return to being ordinary people and they will be exposed to the antisemitism of the past in a quite natural way. Nonetheless, I think that the Holocaust will remain as one of the great cautionary tales. However, it's much more than that.

I would like to return to this myth of origin idea and how it effects our culture. Where does it begin and where does it come from? Is it Troy? Is it the American Revolution? Is it the first Zionist Congress? I think for most of us the

idea is that we come out of chaos, we come out of the storm, like we come out of some Wagnerian Goetterdaemmerung, some kind of twilight of the gods in which the world collapsed. Somehow we have created order on the basis of that chaos. Between the pre-order that existed before and us, a tremendous gap exists. For us Jews it's obviously the case, but even for non-Jewish Americans who come from areas in which they hardly ever see Jews, they identify not only with the Americans against the Germans, but today with the Jews. In other words, there's an empathic identification with the victim, which is true of everybody but the Germans, and even of a lot of Germans themselves.

Christian Meier once said that the Holocaust becomes for us Germans less understandable as time goes by. Why? To some degree they have taken on the position of identifying with Jews and understanding the Jewish point of view. They're not about now to justify the SS and to take on the SS point of view, especially since the German voice, the Nazi voice, was stilled after the Second World War. We don't know what ex-Nazis thought about what went on because they obviously shut up after the Second World War or tried to explain themselves away. One of the other points about the Holocaust is that Nazi ideology collapsed almost entirely and immediately after the war. In his book, *Durch die Erde ein Riss* Eric Loest describes how it took one week for him, an enthusiastic Nazi, to get out of it. Another German historian said it took him two to three months to break away from Nazism. These are very short periods. Think about how many years Jews or persecuted Christians maintained their ideology. Think about how many convinced Communists remain in Eastern Europe. Nazism collapsed entirely and immediately.

The connection between the Holocaust and Nazism is important. Nazism, as it expressed itself in the Holocaust, advanced the suggestion that "we" create a different kind of civilization, in a way that Communism, despite its cruelty, did not. Nazism was based on the idea that there is no universal conception of humanity, that we do not belong to a common human species, that nobody does. Therefore, the people who lived under Nazism believed that they were

creating a different kind of world-order, a different kind of civilization from the bottom up, with a different idea of how humans reproduce, live, eat, use people, and maintain inter-personal relations. After the Nazis were defeated at the end of the Second World War, that civilizational plan was destroyed. Nobody is serious about becoming a Nazi today. And because of that, because that civilization was really destroyed, that meant that we suddenly are separated by the looming specter of "Nazi Civilization" from whatever pre-Nazi civilization was all about. Now the emblem of that for our culture is the Holocaust because for us this event is the antithesis of what that civilization was like. We read Nazism through the Holocaust. We never read about Nazis, let alone about Germans, without thinking about the Holocaust. Nobody does. And because of that, those two terms are coupled in our minds. This means that we are a new event after the Holocaust. In other words, it means that I am a post-Holocaust, post-war person, a postwar post-Holocaust person, and so is everybody else.

The Roots of the "Final Solution"

Q- With your permission, we would like to move to a different subject and ask about the roots from which the "Final Solution" emerged.

M- First of all, I want to make it very clear that I agree and disagree with Daniel J. Goldhagen. Although I think that his phenomenological datum is correct, his historical explanation is garbage. I'll put it very simply: Yes, Nazis enjoyed killing Jews. Yes, people did volunteer and were enthusiastic. All of that is true. No, the Germans were not possessed of an eliminativist antisemitism since the sixteenth or the nineteenth or whatever century. No, their antisemitism was not discernibly stronger in the pre-war years than that of any other group in Europe, such as the Poles, Romanians or others. Therefore, the historical explanation about the intensity or the character of German antisemitism has to be rejected. That's why I've always been uncomfortable with the study of the "roots" of the "Final Solution". However, the phenomenological datum is correct, and that is very important in my opinion.

The functionalist-intentionalist debate is related to this issue. Functionalists, such as Hans Mommsen, do not place an emphasis on antisemitism, but certainly the people who did it had a fantastic picture of Jews. I also think, however, that the other side is true, that like in anything, the chain of events carries you along. But I think there's something deeper here, and this is, I think, a really central point. I think that the Nazis had to establish an ideal, negative other that they had to destroy, and the Jew filled this role. They created the Jew in order to destroy him, but this was not a result that simply grew out of previous antisemitism. Previous antisemitism made the Jew available as an enemy, but the actual demonization of the Jew was something that I believe took place in this way only under the Nazis. Not that the Jews had not been demonized in medieval times, but they had been demonized as the other from a Christian perspective. The Nazis had a positive doctrine, they wanted to create a new civilization, and they used this demonization to create their own civilization. This demonization makes the Nazi attitude to the extermination of the Jews intentional, but it doesn't make it intentional in terms of previous antisemitism. It means that there is a new kind of antisemitism that in some sense has no roots. It has roots, of course, but in another sense it's something new. For example, we have a new relationship, a new friendship; it's something new. It has roots in our lives, but not everything can be traced. As a result of creating this ideal other, you then proceed to affirm yourself through the act of destroying the other. This is your justification for being. So destroying the Jew is the ultimate justification of Nazism, in a funny way.

Q- Do you mean that the Jew, according to this view, represents the opposite of the desired world?

M- It's not like the capitalist, who represents the world that was for the need to destroy that world. According to Nazi ideology, the Jew simply represents the force of evil, like in a computer game. It's a very shallow ideology, Nazism; it doesn't have much to it. And because it's a shallow ideology, you have a demon that is simply the opposite of whoever you are. This is after all what

the Germans learned in the First World War. You can talk a lot about how the Germans felt humiliated, debased, and how they had to affirm themselves through acts of violence towards others. Yes, all that was true, and I think much of it would have been true, even if the Nazis had never come to power in Germany.

Suppose the Nazis had not come to power in 1933, and some other group had taken control. We would not have had the Holocaust, we would not have had the extermination of Jews, but we would have had a strong authoritarian, militarist Germany that would have been interested in revising Versailles, and would have attempted to do so through violent means. This regime would certainly have been, to some degree, antisemitic as well. I think that would have been true of any regime that would have come to power. But this last radical act of elimination is a historical singularity. A historical singularity does not mean that other acts like this did not occur before. It simply means that it's extremely rare and is in some sense uncaused. Now does that let Germans off the hook? No, because we, in our world, are constituted in such a way that we employ universal morality to judge. Now that is one of the great debates that exist in post-war culture, whether there is a universal morality. Whether or not each group has its own morality - women, minorities - whether you can apply universal criteria of judgment. After the Holocaust we do not want the existence of any possible world in which the Holocaust would be permissible or good. So in that sense, all our relativisms in terms of which we analyze the world are always bounded because we have one universal example, a negative myth of origin, a negative universal. You see, we can't say, oh well, it's okay, the Holocaust. That's, I think, a very big point. And that's true of all the relativist discourses that I know.

Relativistic Discourse and Religious Consciousness After the Holocaust

Q- On the other hand, relativistic discourse also arises out of Auschwitz. Does this mean that it emerges from there, but also gets stuck there?

M- Yes, our relativism also emerges from Auschwitz, and stops there. It emerges from there because we've learned to be skeptical about universalism and at the same time we have a hidden nostalgia for universalism. You can find this in the writings of someone like Jacques Derrida, for whom there is the memory of a system in his work. They talk all the time about the traces, traces of Jewish tradition. They're ruins, and they want to find a way of relating to traces and ruins that is not romantic. It's not as though they praise the ruin, like the romantics, and yet it's the memory of an impossibility, in other words that Jews would not have been killed, that's the impossibility. This impossibility is related to the discourse of relativism because it says that I can no longer speak in a universal voice. However, I refuse to let anybody speak in that kind of relative voice which would make the Holocaust a permissible event, in some discourse.

Q- Is this insight related to a religious consciousness of some kind? You seem to have hinted at this earlier.

M- Well, I don't know. Is the Holocaust connected to something religious? There are all kinds of books that have been written about the Holocaust in every kind of discourse. The fact that Jews enjoy such a high prestige in Catholic theology today is directly related to the Holocaust, and the same can be shown for all the Christian churches. Not one of them takes the theological position vis-a-vis Jews that was prevalent before the Holocaust. That's generally true, and you'll notice that it's truer today than it was in the 1950's and the 1960's. There's a tremendous difference in Catholic theology between Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II, but Pope Pius really did not know what to do. There was so much silence in the 1950's because the people who were still in positions of intellectual power, the pre-war generation that had grown up with pre-war categories, could not speak with the same voice that they had spoken before the Holocaust. They could not adopt a new voice because they themselves, and all their categories, came from before 1939. I think Pope Pius XII, a very mature man by the time the Holocaust had occurred, is a classic example for this kind of silence.

Q- How do you understand the possibility of faith in God after the Holocaust?

M- I think that for somebody like myself, a person who to some degree has a spiritual consciousness or a spiritual life, or did when I was younger, belief in a moral God is impossible. Belief in a moral God is impossible because of the old problem of evil in the world. How does God permit evil? Now Boethius, in the sixth century, had a good answer. He said that the great miracle is good and not evil. Of course we know that people are evil, the fact that there is any good at all must be a sign that God exists. Now this sounds like a very nice message when you read it in a little book, but not when you think of all the accumulative injustice that was caused by an event like the Holocaust. Accumulative injustice is not unique to the Holocaust - it occurs here and now every day, but we do not sense it so sharply.

We cannot believe in God because we cannot believe in the balance of good and evil. Since we cannot believe in that balance anymore, we feel that whatever supreme power may exist, it cannot be in any way a power that is all-loving. It's not just my idea, it's a very simple statement, best formulated in our own time by Rabbi Kushner, that God cannot be both all-loving and all-powerful. Some people have therefore preferred the all-loving God, but the all-loving God has been a limited god. Therefore, He's not a god in the sense in which our God is a transcendent religious God. If you believe in a transcendent God of the traditional Jewish variety, then you must believe that God is very evil. He's either indifferent or evil, and in terms of our tradition, being indifferent is the same as being evil, it's the same thing. Therefore, you have to fundamentally give up on the belief in God.

In the camps people learned how easy it was to die, so they often ran to the "fire", or something like that, because they wanted to get it over with. That simplicity of death, the idea that human life has no spiritual content because it can be liquidated, is why the great problem of post-war culture is the problem of the existence of the spirit. Is there any spirit? Is there any consciousness?

That was the real threat of Communism and of capitalism, from our point of view. I hesitate to say this, since Communism and capitalism are so different in their idea of freedom, but in terms of their spiritual value they are the same movement. They're the same movement in that they both advocate the supremacy of matter over spirit.

The Possibility of German-Jewish Dialogue

Q- I would once again like to close with a different topic: Can you say a few words about the "German-Jewish symbiosis", as it has been called? Did it exist? Was it nothing more than a fantasy?

M- You asked about the German-Jewish symbiosis. There's a great question about the existence of a German-Jewish culture before the Second World War. Obviously, German-Jewish culture before the war is just a memory for us; it's something we study. We can be romantic about it, ponder whether the Germans and Jews enjoyed it, and think about its significance. I'm not going to deal with that because I think that's a historical issue and it's of no consequence right now for us. The question is how does German-Jewish culture before the war affect our current dialogue with Germany and our self-understanding, both as Jews and as Germans?

I speak as a Jew, of course, but you can look at the issue from exactly the opposite point of view. Now, I believe that German-Jewish dialogue today is completely influenced by the Holocaust. Obviously, it means that in the end we cannot reach identity in dialogue. For example, if you talk to a close friend, or to a girlfriend, you seek identity. Now maybe the fusing of two people through friendship is an illusion in any human relationship. However, the German-Jewish dialogue is salient because the function of the Jews for the Germans, and the function of the Germans for the Jews must, in any logical order, be a different function. In the end, we fulfill a different function for each other. I speak now as a Jew, but the same thing is true in reverse. Therefore, there can be a dialogue that is influenced by this fundamental difference. You can talk a lot, and quite concretely, about what this difference is, of course.

Many Germans have approached me as an icon of forgiveness. Since I'm a Jew, and I must know something about Judaism, I'm always asked for my expertise. Of course, this is not a correct assumption. In their eyes, I am imbued with some kind of special radiation by being Jewish.

When I was a little boy growing up in Los Angeles, whenever I saw a German in the street, I looked at him to see if he was a Martian. I assumed that their eyes were different and that they somehow were weird people, because obviously they had done something very strange, very weird, very inhuman, and so they couldn't be human beings. In a German-Jewish dialogue we try to get over that because it's no good. It's not good to be mentally ill in this way, either through denying or demonizing the other. However, our new-found humanity is based on the fact that we have incommensurable experiences of the past. In that incommensurability, there's a moment of silence that cannot be covered by any amount of words. However, this doesn't mean we shouldn't talk. I think for me, my contact with Germans, and I can only speak for myself, has been extremely important. These relationships have enabled me to understand the humanity of the other, and this is one of the most important lessons that we can learn in life, especially in a virtual world in which human beings seem to disappear into a computer. We must confront this concrete humanity of the other all of the time by confronting the humanity of the other in her or his otherness, and in letting them be someone else with a different experience of reality. That's a hard lesson.

Q- Thank you very much .

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.