

Jewish Philosophical and Theological Responses to the Holocaust

During the Holocaust some six million Jews were murdered and Jewish life in Europe was virtually destroyed. The overwhelming nature of the Nazi atrocities and the Jewish losses in the Holocaust has compelled the post-Holocaust generation to search for answers to the following questions: Why did this happen? How could God have let this happen?

Some Jewish thinkers have found meaning in traditional Jewish responses to human suffering. Jewish sources often assert that tragedy happens to the Jewish people as a punishment for their sinfulness. There are several variations on this theme. The first ascribes the cause of the Holocaust to Jewish sin but does not specify which. The second view states that the Holocaust happened as a result of the rise of Reform and other non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. The third position contends that Zionism was the sin that caused the Holocaust, as the Jews should have waited for the Messiah rather than proactively try to build a Jewish state in Palestine.

Four biblical models are often mentioned in response to the existential questions brought on by the Holocaust. The first is the "Binding of Isaac." By comparing the victims of the Holocaust to the biblical Isaac, the Jews are seen not as sinners (as in the aforementioned positions), but rather as innocent victims who were sacrificed as a test of their Jewish faith. The second model is the image of the "Suffering Servant" used by the prophet Isaiah. Those that compare Holocaust victims to God's "Suffering Servant" see them as bearing the weight of the sins of others. God is even viewed as sharing in the torment of those righteous sufferers, and rewarding them in the world to come. The third biblical model calls up the idea of *Hester Panim*, or God's hiddenness. Some believe that God "hides" Himself in order to tolerate sin in the world, and along the way people are hurt by that sin. Others assert that there is no explanation for God's hiding. The last biblical model brought up in response to the Holocaust is the "Job" analogy. Job, who was not a sinner, was dealt great suffering as a test of his belief in God's existence; the Jewish victims of the Holocaust are seen as confronting a similar situation.

Some Jewish thinkers have rejected these traditional responses to human suffering in favor of more original responses. Both Eliezer Berkovits and Arthur A. Cohen adopt the "free-will" defense, which states that humans have free-will to do as they please, whether good or evil, and thus it is not God who caused or even allowed the Holocaust, but human beings. Unlike Berkovits and Cohen, Emil Fackenheim does not remove God from the Holocaust. In effect, he places God at the scene of the crime itself—Auschwitz—but says that he cannot understand exactly what God was doing there. Whatever God's intention, Fackenheim believes that the Holocaust should be considered a new occasion of Divine revelation, and that a proper response to it is the adoption of a 614th Jewish commandment: not to allow Hitler a posthumous victory by letting Judaism die out.

Not only does Richard Rubenstein remove God from the Holocaust, he removes Him altogether, based on the Holocaust. Rubenstein argues that the horrors of the Holocaust prove that God cannot exist. Unlike Rubenstein, Irving (Yitzchak) Greenberg still believes in God. However, he observes that the Holocaust destroyed the traditional covenant between God and the Jews. Greenberg suggests that in its stead, the Jews have taken on a new, voluntary relationship with God in the wake of the Holocaust. Arthur Cohen goes even further than Greenberg and suggests that not only must the Jewish people redefine their relationship with God, but they must redefine their notion of God altogether. Perhaps, claims Cohen, God is not all-powerful and all-knowing, and thus was neither responsible for the Holocaust, nor could He have stopped it from happening.

Finally, there are those Jewish thinkers who have chosen to keep silent, as the only thinkable response to the unthinkable.