

After the Holocaust

Re-Defining Postmodern Jewish Thought

by

Ori Z Soltes

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For Three Pillars of Friendship:

Peter Corsell

Adrian DeLuca

Mark Smith

... et amicitia semper adhuc omnia vincit

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Preface

Prologues and Acknowledgments

True confessions: This volume is intended to be a direct successor to my book on *The Question of Modern Jewish Thought*. It exists as a separate volume because of the Holocaust. If we could imagine the twentieth century without that event, then perhaps the question of what constitutes “modern Jewish thought” and in particular the matter of thought regarding how Jews fit into the larger non-Jewish world would simply have moved slowly forward, with perhaps an answer to that double query that had not arrived in the centuries between the time of Columbus or the time of Spinoza or the time the United States came into being, and today. Those centuries were marked by the sort of progress to which humans are often subject: one step forward and a second step backward.

Thus, in a forward step, conditions converged by way of an era of revolutions to yield a handful of decrees—from the first of those by the Hapsburg Emperor, Joseph II, in 1782; to that issued after the French Revolution, on September 28, 1791; to that put forth by Prussia in 1812—that made it possible for Jews to move from the periphery into the mainstream in the cultural and socio-economic reality of Western and Central Europe for the first time in fifteen centuries. This was, in large part, a function of new religious crises in Christendom that yielded serious questions regarding the nature and even existence of God as that term had been understood for so many centuries: all-powerful, all-good, interested and involved in human affairs.

But the emergence of race and ethnicity as categories for diverse human groups helped push Jews back toward the edges by the middle

of the nineteenth century. Most famously, by 1789, Wilhelm Marr's pamphlet essay on "The Victory of Judaism over Germanism" became a best-seller across the German-speaking world, while only a few years later, the French journalist, Edouard Drumont, penned his book, *La France Juive*, in 1886. In both cases, Christians were warned of the danger to their societies if the Jews were allowed to move more deeply into the mainstream. The enthusiasm for their rants clarified the principle, where Jewish participation in society is concerned, of one step forward and another giant step backward.

As the nineteenth century pushed toward its last decades, the accumulated expressions of romantic nationalism that had spread across much of Europe pushed simultaneously in opposite directions. The diverse linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups that comprised the Hapsburg Empire, for instance, were eager to exit that compendium, each seeking to assert its own mode of national self-expression culturally and self-realization politically. Conversely, the diverse polities that had for so many centuries developed their particular dialects and cultural footprints in the Italy of post-Roman antiquity were being encouraged to come together as a new, united Italy, rather than to continue thinking of themselves as Florentines, Venetians, Milanese, and the like.

Given the rejectionist perspective of the likes of Marr and Drumont (and others), Jews naturally asked where and how they might fit in to everything. So aside from religious and ethnic self-definition—and apart from trying (and largely failing) to sidestep both, through conversion to Lutheranism or Catholicism—some Jews began considering an active nationalist sense of Judaism. This notion yielded thinkers like Theodor Herzl whose emphasis was political and driven by a concern for physical Jewish survival in the context of increasing, often violent expressions, from Tsarist Russia to France, of anti-

Semitism. Conversely, it yielded thinkers like Ahad Ha-'Am (Asher Ginsberg), whose concern was for the spiritual and psychological survival of Judaism, driven by a sense of how fragmented Jews had become, with new and diverse versions of its religious sensibilities—Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Scientific; Hasidic and Meenagdic—and cultural identities. Thus for Herzl, almost any site for a viable Jewish state would do; for Ahad Ha-'Am, only *Eretz Yisrael* would do, with or without full political independence, given that the historical Jewish homeland of Palestine was under Ottoman governance.

And so on. Had the Holocaust not taken place, perhaps this kind of diversely shaped modern Jewish experience and with it, thought, might have continued to evolve, with new threads in the ongoing weave, and contending hopes and disappointments with regard to finding a solid place within the heart of the world. Perhaps even some form of an independent Jewish state might have emerged, whether in *Eretz Yisrael*/Palestine or some other among the suggested alternative locations that, one way or another, presented themselves, such as Argentina or Northwest Australia (Uganda had already been proposed and both rejected by the Zionists and withdrawn by the British, in 1903).¹

¹ A competing plan to get Jews out of Tsarist Russia and its pogroms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and bring them to Argentina to become cowboys and farmers was primarily supported by the very wealthy Baron Hirsch, an English Jew. (See Scliar's *The Centaur in the Garden*, below). Later, in the 1930s, the so-called Kimberly Plan sought to rescue Jews from the explosively expansive anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany. The Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization was formed in London in July 1935, to search for a potential Jewish homeland and haven. The League, a non-Zionist organization led by Isaac Nachman Steinberg, ended up negotiating with the pastoral firm of Michael Durack in Australia in late 1938-early 1939 for a body of semi-arid land—about 16,500 square kilometres (6,400 sq mi)—in the Kimberly region, extending from

But the Holocaust *did* happen, and with it, among other things, whatever degree of certainty Jews had that they could simply find their way in the current world, dissipated. And because the *tremendum* of the Holocaust extended well beyond Jewish experience and Jewish thought, it marked a kind of terminus for the illusion of a simple upward trajectory for humanity and not only for Jewish aspirations. So what follows, in the eight decades since, is better labeled “postmodern” — and therefore this volume wrestles with the question of what constitutes *postmodern Jewish thought*. In practical terms, this means both wrestling with the Holocaust itself as an issue and wrestling with the eternal question of what and how it means to be a Jew in the (primarily Western) world — in part informed by the fact of the Holocaust and its implications, theologically, anthropologically, and sociologically, and also resonating from the specifically post-Holocaust context in which the State of Israel was in fact born.

There is a lot to chew on, as always, and more questions than answers.

* * * * *

I would once again like to offer my thanks to my splendid teaching assistant, Walker McCarthy, who has read through every page of what turned out to be a bigger project than either of us imagined it

the north of Western Australia into the Northern Territory, in which about 75,000 could and would take refuge. Ultimately the plan failed both because Australians were not interested in having an apparently semi-separate Jewish enclave within their domains, and because the Zionist movement had picked up enough pace also not to be interested. It might be noted, incidentally, that back in 1825, the so-called Ararat idea was drawn up by Mordecai Manuel Noah. Noah’s plan led to a semi-autonomous Jewish enclave on Grand Island, around Buffalo, NY, but the Jewish settlement did not end up lasting very long. So, too, Stalinist Russia, of all places, created a Jewish Socialist Republic—Birobidzhan—out in the Siberian oblast, in 1931, which never developed as planned—although the entity still exists today, minus much of a Jewish population

would be when I lassoed him in to helping me out. His good taste in discerning better and worse sentence structure, his quick eye in spotting typos, and his intelligence in determining appropriate index items were all invaluable, as are all of his general questions, comments, and his bright, smiling disposition.

I would also like to dedicate this book to three friends—and guess what, not one of them is Jewish! which seems peculiarly and particularly appropriate, somehow, for a narrative that wonders, in part, what it means to be Jewish in a world that is not. Peter Corsell was a student of mine years ago at Georgetown—the first time I taught a version of a course on Modern Jewish Thought—and we became great friends, and have remained so ever since. We *still* joke about Martin Buber, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Mordecai M. Kaplan—and he is uniquely positioned to turn the page toward postmodernist Jewish thinking.

Through Peter I met Mark Smith, whose legal skills are only matched by his sense of humour and his generosity to my family, as my sons grew up, and to me. Nobody better than he can parse definitional complexity, and thinking about thinking, whether legal or literary. Through Peter, I also met Adrian DeLuca, whose skill at deciding a lunch place over many months and years is almost matched by his basketball skills over those same months and years, and by his smile—who, among other things, was an invaluable help way back when with technical issues on an earlier book—and whom I have started to have the pleasure of watching grow his own brood of beautiful sons, as he tries to keep up with them and with Selina's management of those four men in her life.

Add this trio of friends to my own wife, stunning sons, siblings, (and a few other close friends), and you have the substructure of my own life.

Introduction

The Holocaust Between Modern and Postmodern Jewish Thought

In wrestling with definitions as we are—what is “postmodern?” what is Jewish?” what is “thought?” and what happens when we put all three terms together?—perhaps it behooves us to begin by remembering at least two important issues regarding the term “Jewish” before we even launch into the other two terms and the agglomeration process of all three together. The first is historical and the second conceptual. We have all no doubt been to Passover Seders in which reference is made to “the Jews in Egypt.” But the group discussed in the biblical narrative is called “Israelites” not “Jews”—in fact the word “Jew” appears nowhere in the Hebrew Bible. Nowhere. Abraham is called a Hebrew—a term with socio-economic, not religious or ethnic implications.¹ The descendants of his grandson, Jacob-Israel, were called Israelites—it was they who moved from Canaan to Egypt, remained for generations and were eventually pressed into some kind of servitude there, and whose escape from Egypt, to Mt Sinai, and to the Promised Land of Canaan, is recounted in the biblical narrative.

The descendants of those Israelites, united as a Kingdom of Israel under Saul, David, and Solomon, ended up separated by a civil war about five years after Solomon’s death, and after the northern

¹ *‘eevree* comes from a Hebrew-language root that means “to pass”—a reference to the fact that Abraham and his clan were itinerant herders of flocks; the only piece of real estate that they came to own was the field on which the Cave of Machpelah was located, which Abraham purchased for 400 shekels from the local landlord, Ephron the Hittite (Gen 23).

kingdom was swallowed up by the Assyrians, the remaining fragment, called Judah, carried forward through exile to Babylonia, return under the Achaemenid Persians, and further, through half a millennium of internal schism and questions regarding what it means to be a God-obedient Judaeen. This is the sort of troubled stage onto which Jesus of Nazareth stepped. Within a century after his death—and not much before that—the consummate schism within the Judaeen community had emerged: those whom I label “Judaeans for Jesus” who are becoming Christians, and those I label “Judaeans not for Jesus” who are becoming Jews.

The Hebrew Bible will be canonized in 140 CE; the Christian Bible in 393-7, at the Council of Hippo. The definitive statement of Jesus as fully divine and fully human will be articulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Thus when we look for the beginning point of Judaism in pure historical terms, we cannot reach back more than about two millennia: the labels for the two thousand years between Abraham and the early second century CE are Hebrew, Israelite, and Judaeen labels, in turn—not, *per se*, “Jewish.” Those two millennia cannot be ignored, of course: they form the foundation of the edifice of Judaism, but they are not the structure itself. That structure is erected as diasporic, shaped by a canonized Bible, guided by a long, written-down rabbinic tradition, and punctuated by an evolving cycle of life-cycle and annual celebrations and commemorations.

Moreover, as Judaism and Christianity are emerging as siblings from the same parent, but each considering itself the legitimate child and the other the bastard, the Church refers to itself as *versus Israel*—“true Israel.” So both the Jewish and the Christian traditions look back at those two Abraham-Jesus millennia as foundational parts of their history, even as the two traditions obviously diverge in how they

interpret those millennia toward their respective historical beginnings.

Moreover, there is another feature of their competition in the centuries that follow, which is political, not spiritual. As each lays claim to being the legitimate continuation of the Hebrew-Israelite-Judaean tradition, each also therefore lays claim to the political legitimacy—*religio licita* status—conveyed upon Judaeanism by the Roman conqueror, Pompey the Great, in 63 BCE. The opposite concept, *superstitio*, means “[political] subversion.” Neither sees itself as properly labeled by that term. Given the fact, however, that the pagan Roman leadership knew very little about Judaeanism, much less about the religious distinctions between its offspring, Judaism and Christianity; and given that in Latin (as well as Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, and other relevant ancient languages), “Judaeanism” and “Judaean” could not be distinguished from “Judaism” and “Jew/ish”—and that therefore Judaism would seem to be the direct heir of Judaeanism, by its very name, whereas Christianity would not be—whereas, on the contrary, the word “Christianity” would tie its practitioners to the *christhood* (“anointed [condition]”), of Jesus, crucified for the political subversion of calling himself (or being called by his followers) “king of the Judeans” when only the Roman emperor could be understood as such—given these factors, it is not surprising that early Christians were persecuted as political subversives, particularly in the third century, where Judaism, accepted as a *religio licita*, was not.²

² The idea of the return of a Davidic leader to deliver the Judeans, as the original David had delivered their Israelite ancestors from the Philistines—and anointed (*mashiah* in Hebrew; *khristos* in Greek) was increasingly pervasive as the Second Temple period wore on—culminating with the question of whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was that individual. Disagreement over the answer to that question was the primary initial basis for the schism within Judaeanism that would ultimately separate the community into Judaism and Christianity. To call one’s self a

The climax of such persecution came under Diocletian, between ca 285 and 305.³ And by the time Christianity's condition reversed, when under Theodosius, ca 380, it became the official faith and *only* accepted *religio licita* throughout the Empire, not only was Judaism's situation significantly reduced—ultimately, almost by definition, to *superstitio* status—but several centuries of competition for legitimacy had produced a profound hostility from Christians toward Jews.

That hostility would be codified by the eventually canonized texts of the Gospels and their patristic and later scholastic interpreters, all of which underscored the mistaken idea not of *Judaean* but of *Jewish* culpability—and conversely, of Roman innocence—in the matter of Jesus' crucifixion. Long after the political conditions of the late-empire-become-early-medieval-Europe had shifted, the religion-based hostility toward Jews would continue to flourish, expanding the various verbal and visual vocabularies of anti-Jewish sentiment across most of Christian Europe for fifteen centuries. Dwelling as islands within vast Christian (and Muslim, and other) seas, Jews remained viewed as potentially dangerous. By the time of late eighteen-early nineteenth century Emancipation, long-held hatred of the Jews could not and did not simply disappear with a few decrees.

"Christian," and therefore associating one's self with an individual who had been crucified as a political subversive because of the idea that he and/or his followers saw him as the *khristos* would cause one to be thought of as politically subversive.

³ For my fellow pedants, two brief notes: the most distinct persecutions came, briefly, under Domitian, in the mid-90s and more substantially under Septimius Severus (205-8), Decius (249-50), Gallus (251-3), and culminated with the Diocletianic persecutions of ca 285-305. As for the Jews, they were briefly persecuted by the Emperor Hadrian in 135-8, after the suppression of the Bar Kokhba revolt—not because he cared about their religion, but because he saw a relationship between their religion and their annoying political ambitions toward independence—but otherwise enjoyed the advantage of retaining *religio licito* most of the time, until the time of Theodosius.

The intensity of long-developed distaste for Jews helps explain the turn to race and ethnicity and then to romantic nationalism as instruments for the ongoing marginalization of Jews—from restricted public attainments within a given polity to private expression. And the specifics of a changing view of what Judaism might be leads to the second, conceptual, part of our definitional question regarding “Jewish.” When we are exploring Jewish thought in the modern and then postmodern era, are we referring to Judaism as a religion, an ethnic group or race, a nationality, a body of customs and traditions, a civilization? And how does the matter of conversion into or out of Judaism affect our discussion? Given in particular the urge of upper middle-class German Jews in the nineteenth century to convert to Christianity as a means of finding their way into the cultural and/or socio-economic mainstream, how might such individuals’ thought be considered with regard to the “modern Jewish thought” rubric?

How might these definitional issues be addressed as we follow the Jewish experience through the crucible of the Holocaust and out the other side into the realm of *postmodern* Jewish thought? Thinkers, from Spinoza to Mordecai M. Kaplan, who carry the arc of the definitional narrative regarding *modern* Jewish thought from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries—offer different angles and perspectives from which to address *that* question. The most recent of them, who lived through the era of the Holocaust—most specifically, Buber, Heschel, Soloveichik, and Kaplan—while offering diverse explorations of Jewish thought, make little or no reference to that most significant of traumatic experiences endured by the Jewish people in its history.⁴

⁴ These are among the thinkers whose work I discuss in *The Question of Modern Jewish Thought: From Spinoza and Marx to Soloveichik and Kaplan*.

It is indeed a truism of the focus on the Holocaust that very little was written about it, particularly by Jewish *theologians*, until after the dual world-shaking events of the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Six-Day War between Israel and her neighbors of June, 1967. Whereas the occasional Christian theologian tended from the outset to ask the theodicy question⁵—wondering how such radical evil as that engendered by the Nazis could have transpired in a world created by a God at once all-powerful and all-good, and interested and engaged in human affairs—the occasional Jewish thinker tended initially to write in historical terms, asking whether the Holocaust was or was not simply a logical outcome of fifteen hundred years of Jew-hatred on the part of the Christian community.

The Holocaust, in fact—even if it would take one or even two decades after it for the subject to find its proper place within the confines of “Jewish thought”—will mark an important dividing line within not only the world at large, expanding exponentially the depths to which the depraved side of human potential finds itself capable of acceding, but most particularly where the Jewish experience is concerned. Even against the horrifying backdrop of the African-American experience—that runs on a fairly precise chronological parallel track with the account of *modern* Jewish thought, (the first slave ship arrives on these shores in 1619, thirteen years before Spinoza was born), as well as parallels to the experience of indigenous peoples in the Americas, whether we parse the beginning of “modernity” with the arrival of Columbus into the Caribbean in 1492-3 or with the founding of the first English colony in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607—the

⁵ “Theodicy,” from the Greek words *theos* = “God” and *dike* = “justice,” means “the justice of God.” It pertains to the question of why, in a world made by the sort of all-powerful, all-good and also interested and interventionist God in whom Christians and Jews traditionally believe, the innocent suffer and the guilty seem to get away with their crimes. Succinctly, in Holocaust terms: how do a million children end up in ovens?

Holocaust offers something unique. The entire apparatus of a modern industrial state was devoted in a systematic manner to the extermination of an entire group—the Jews—in a process no less than breathtaking in its thoroughness.

More importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the range of secondary individuals and groups who actively or passively cooperated with the primary group of perpetrators and helped facilitate that thoroughness was/is more than disturbing. For what these features of the Holocaust demonstrated to Jews and those interested in Jews is that the long arc of modernity—that had, between 1782 and 1933, presumed to struggle with and perhaps ultimately to lead to the acceptance of Jews within the mainstream of a Western civilization that was constantly wrestling with its own religious and so-called ethnic identity—had arrived at a definitive dead end. The cancer of Jew-hatred not only could not be cured but it metastasized.

With this condition, the matter of “modern Jewish thought” would also arrive at a dead-end. Post-Holocaust thought would require a different sort of label. And so—as with other disciplines, such as visual art, for other reasons and perhaps following slightly different timelines—the post-Holocaust era requires a different summary statement of what it is: postmodern. The discussion of Jewish thought in the post-Holocaust era therefore might be called “postmodern Jewish thought” rather than “modern Jewish thought.” Hence this book and its subtitle.

Aside from theological work directed toward the Holocaust—including work by the likes of Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Ignaz Maybaum, Arthur Cohen, and others—by the 1960s writers of poetry and prose fiction emerged, enthralled to the need to wrestle with the post-Holocaust theodicy question, angling their approach differently from their academic colleagues. These include Elie

Wiesel—most obviously and famously—and also Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Saul Bellow, and Primo Levi (among others). Wiesel (from Rumania/Hungary) and Levi (from Italy) offer their diverse prose narratives—in the form of memoirs, novels, short stories, and expository accounts—as survivors impelled by a passionate sense of obligation not to allow the memory of those who perished and the circumstances that led to their deaths to be forgotten. Sachs was able to leave Germany for Sweden before she was swept up into one of the myriad shipments of Jews to the Camps, thanks to the intervention of a Swedish Nobel Prize laureate with whom she had been in long correspondence—since age 14. Her poetry has been referred to both as that of the last German Jewish poet and as the first German poetry to address the Holocaust.

Born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Bukovina (now Romania), Paul Celan survived in a Romanian forced labor camp; his parents were deported and murdered. His German-language poetry offers a unique and path-breaking shape to it. The American Bellow was already well-known as a novelist—his subjects were emphatically American, with no reflection of or on the Holocaust—until he wrote *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in 1970. Sammler is an elderly American Holocaust survivor for whom that trauma offers a key aspect of his ongoing ruminations, both directly and—through the lens of his contemporary experiences—indirectly on the state of the world and how one (or how he, an elderly Jew) might survive in it, less in the physical than in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual sense.

Of course, discussing the subject of the Holocaust raises an obvious question: is it an inherently Jewish subject and is any thought devoted to it as a subject necessarily “Jewish thought”? What of—for instance—the four Protestant theologians whose address of post-Holocaust theodicy is discussed by Richard Rubenstein in his book,

After Auschwitz? How might their proposed solution to the theodicy problem be considered a part of or apart from “modern Jewish thought”? What of the intense poetry of Ursula Duba, focused on the Holocaust to the point almost of obsession—who was born in Holocaust Germany and grew up in a post-Holocaust Germany in which she knew nothing about that trauma until she was a teenager—and whose entire life as a writer and educator has been devoted to assuring that Holocaust awareness expand rather than ebb?

One might add, moreover, that a number of the authors noted above—in particular, Rubenstein, Fackenheim, and Cohen—connect the Holocaust, as the darkest hour in Jewish experience, with the founding of the State of Israel as the bright, even messianic light (Rubenstein and Fackenheim); or as a catastrophic aftermath (Cohen). So, too, for Sammler, the other obsessive focus of his internal narrative is Israel. This raises at least two questions: Is Israeli thought necessarily and inherently “modern Jewish thought”? What of non-Jewish Israeli thinkers and their writing? What of Jewish Israeli writers whose subject matter veers away from obviously Jewish (or Israeli) subjects? The narrative briefly considers a handful of Israeli writers—while also noting the new definitional complication that emerged after 1993 with regard to Israeli, Palestinian, and Israeli-Palestinian identity in the geographic strip bounded by the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

One might twist such questions one further turn: if in considering the work of the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges—specifically stories that make use of the kabbalah as a significant part of their basis (I have two in mind, in particular)—how more or less might they be part of “modern Jewish thought,” considering Borges’ religious identity? As much as Argentinian anti-Semites excoriated him as a Jew, and as much as he was extremely philo-Semitic, try as he might he could find

no distinctly Jewish forbears searching at least a handful of generations backward. Yet so much of his writing makes emphatic use of “Jewish” material. And by contrast, how might we understand the novel by the Brazilian Jewish writer, Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden*, whose protagonist partakes simultaneously of human and equine realities, as an extended allegory of the Jewish experience of the Jew in the modern world as a border-creature—a *grenz-Kreatur*?

Hannah Arendt brings us more than a century back toward Karl Marx—and his handling of the “Jewish question” in 1843-4.⁶ She is a child of the direction of thought known as “Marxist” and also escaped Nazi Germany to Princeton, New Jersey; New York City; and more than half a dozen academically-based locations in-between. She is best known on a popular level for her problematic coverage of the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem—what began as a series of long articles for *The New Yorker* ended up as a book—that raised, for some, the question of her positive or negative Jewish identity. We mainly examine (briefly) that work and then also her essay “What is Freedom?” from her 1961 book, *Between Past and Future*, however, to the contents of which we apply the question of whether and how her thought might fall under the “modern Jewish thought” umbrella in a less obvious manner than for a work such as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

If it is a truism of Jewish experience that, when one imagines that one has located the first Jew to inhabit some place, there turns out to have been a Jew who had actually been there earlier; and that once the last Jew has left some venue it turns out there is still one more still living there—then it is certainly appropriate for a volume seeking to define postmodern Jewish thought that it have multiple concluding directions.

⁶ See chapter five in Soltes: *From Spinoza and Marx to Soloveitchik and Kaplan*.

For what of the contemporary world of the last more than fifty years, at least, to which the label, “postmodern,” has been typically most emphatically applied? Our narrative turns to two figures in considering a series of epilogues and conclusions to the discussion. The essay by the French Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, is one such figure, whose 1975 essay, “God and Philosophy” considers the relationship between philosophy and theology and the problem of language in both fields—but particularly for the second, in which, in dealing with God, we are dealing with a reality that transcends our language capabilities, making all kinds of questions, including that of theodicy, impossible to answer.

Our concluding turn will be toward a late work by the eminent contemporary Jewish thinker and rabbi, Eugene B. Borowitz, who passed away in 2016. His 1991 book, *Renewing the Covenant*, is not only in and of itself a work that might be analyzed with regard to how its *prescriptions* place it comfortably within our rubric, but also spends much of its length *defining* the array of key issues that comprise contemporary Jewish thought, as well as referencing many of its key thinkers—and thus its analysis as well as its descriptions and prescriptions have a place within our discussion.

In the end we might note two issues. One is the obvious: that the rubric, “postmodern Jewish thought,” like its older sibling, “modern Jewish thought,” requires a certain amount of flexibility, in part determined by place and—even within the relatively circumscribed parameters of “postmodernism”—time, as well, perhaps, as specific sort of medium. The other is that to include the product of some thinker’s thinking within our rubric by no means excludes its inclusion within other rubrics, as well. Every individual who creates, in whatever medium—writing prose or poetry, essays or novels or memoirs; shaping paintings or sculptures or musical compositions or

choreography—is a function of and influenced by a range of aspects of who he or she *is* as an individual and as part of a group. Gender. Race. Ethnicity. Nationality. Religion. Being an only child versus one of many. The child of two parents—of two genders or the same gender—of one parent, or orphaned entirely. And so on.

The list of possibilities for input into one's creative output is long, and in many cases, a given individual would be included within several categories on that list. Hannah Arendt's thought, for example, may be a function of her being German as well as Jewish and also of being a woman instead of a man—and affected by her intense relationship with a particular man, Martin Heidegger, who was eventually recognized for having been a strong Nazi sympathizer within the Germany from the academic world of which she came to be excluded before she was forced to flee the country altogether. So if we are asking whether what ends up on the page would have been different had she not been Jewish, we might also ask how it would have been different had she been, say, French—or American—or had she been male.

One might suggest—I shall—as a framework within which to embed the thinkers whom I believe may be included in the “postmodern Jewish Thought” rubric, the notion that *if it can be reasonably suggested that the text(s) that we are reading would have been other than what we have before us were the mind that wrote them not Jewish, then we may label that product part of Jewish thought*. Perhaps I might add: *texts that address an emphatically Jewish subject by a non-Jewish thinker might also be included in the rubric, depending on the circumstances*. That does not prevent the thinking in question, to repeat, from being included in any number of other categories, as well, however. Nor does it necessarily suggest that the text(s) in question *further, per se, or contribute* to the continuous shaping of what we might call “mainstream Jewish thought.”

That said, there is a slightly differently-angled definitional parameter that we might add to distinguish different sorts of “Jewish thought.” Does the writing seek in some way to address the question of what it means to be and how to be a Jew in the world—in this case, in the modern Christian/post-Christian (mainly Western) world? That is certainly not Wiesel’s or Bellow’s overt intention, but it more than lurks beneath the surface, and it is overtly the intention of Rubenstein and Fackenheim—to say nothing of Borowitz. Concerning Sciar, we might have a question about this *intention*, but we don’t need to look too far beneath the surface to seek an answer.

Indeed—to repeat—it turns out that we may need to turn this rubric still another twist if we wish to consider certain work by Ursula Duba or Jorge Luis Borges. Narrowly speaking, they shouldn’t be here, but my intention is not to be narrow, so the question (to repeat) will be: what is it about writers like them that would allow them to be included in the definitional conversation? But then again, the two most important pillars for a Western Jewish thinker, I would assert, are the rabbinic (of course) and Socratic engagements with the reality around and beyond us with questions. Both of these pillars keep asking questions without necessarily expecting to find definitive answers. So, there is no reason not to charge in to the question-dominated subject, and to see where it leads us.

Chapter One

The Holocaust in Prose and Poetry: From Elie Wiesel to Nelly Sachs and Primo Levi¹

Jewish tradition refers to the very Name of God as ineffable—unspeakable—because a name is understood across most of human history and geography to encompass the essence of its bearer, and to know or speak God’s name would be somehow to encompass God’s Being. And that is impossible, at least for anyone other than the High Priest—descendant of Aaron, Moses’ brother—whose domain was the Temple precincts. And the Temple was destroyed nearly two millennia ago. If even God’s essence-bearing Name is therefore ineffable, then God Itself must be ineffable: indescribable, since we cannot know what God truly *is*.

Even aspects of our own earthbound reality can defy description. Not only the beauty of a sunset or the profound sweetness of parental love, but fully human-contrived beauty: the sublime music of Mozart or Debussy and the exquisite accomplishment of Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. We can describe such things in word after word, and yet fall short of fully capturing them. Even more so, on the other hand, the horrors that Stalin foisted on millions of people, the inestimable ugliness that Hitler extended from one end of Europe to the other, the complex shaping of programs of massive, intensive and systematic

¹ Some of this particular chapter is heisted from my book, *The Ashen Rainbow: Essays on the Arts and the Holocaust*, chapter one. I saw no reason to recreate my own wheel entirely. The discussions of Duba, Celan and Bellow, in chapter two, are new, as is the discussion in chapter three, of Rubenstein, et al.

destruction—and the apparent joy in devising ever crueler ways of disposing of others—defy all the words that we might pile up in an attempt to encompass such human-contrived events.

And yet—in a more complex paradox—we feel compelled to do so. From the memoir to the novel to the poem to the structural analysis—from Elie Wiesel to Nelly Sachs to Primo Levi—words expressing, engaging, recording, describing, seeking to understand, to somehow encompass the Holocaust, have poured out of an endless array of writers and speakers, particularly in the last nearly sixty years. For various reasons it took nearly twenty years after the catastrophe for words to begin to flow, for the most part, but they swiftly became a torrent by the late 1960s. Wiesel and Levi are among the most significant of writers on this subject, and Nelly Sachs did no less than share the Nobel Prize for literature for her poetry that suffers through it.² What connects these three writers most obviously is that they all lived through the Holocaust, albeit under somewhat different circumstances. So, too, Paul Celan's radical new style of poetry would seem not to be disconnectable from the Holocaust subject matter that centers so much of his work.

We might add, in a discussion not presuming to be complete, not only another Nobel Prize winning—prose—writer, Saul Bellow, and who writes, as we shall see, from a different post-Holocaust angle, specifically by way of his novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, but also another post-Holocaust poet, a non-Jewish German, Ursula Duba. Duba was born in Koln, Germany, in 1938, and thus spent the first seven years of her life in the middle of that war and its aligned modes of slaughter, but never heard—was never told—about the Holocaust by her parents

² She shared the 1966 Nobel Prize for Literature with the Israeli novelist and short-story writer, S.Y. Agnon.

or teachers; she became aware of it, by chance, when as a teenager she went on a date with a Jewish boy who brought up the subject.

These writers' respective approaches are as different as the details of their respective experiences must have been, and yet in particularly important ways they interweave like the strands of a single rope. Because of the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an event, it can also redirect the question of where writing that reflects one way or the other fits into the category "postmodern Jewish thought." since in the case of someone like Duba, none of what her poetry is about aligns with the criteria for inclusion that one might assume would guide this volume—yet the subject matter is so obviously and, in a sense, uniquely congruent with Jewish thought that somehow a new category needs to be opened up, analogous to how the Holocaust itself offers a new category of both Jewish and larger human experience.

Perhaps this also suggests another aspect to the distinction between modern and postmodern Jewish thought. In appraising the nineteenth-century modern work by Heinrich Heine or Karl Marx or Rahel Varnhagen, for instance, we are considering work by non-Jewish writers who were born Jewish and continued to be affected in growing up by having been born Jewish. In turning to Duba we are facing a phenomenon inconceivable in nineteenth-century Germany: not only the datum of a Christian German poet writing poetry that is specifically Jewishly relevant, but, given the unique phenomenon of the Holocaust and the unique role of Germany as a shaper of that phenomenon, an entirely different angle from which to raise the question of a "Jewish Quotient." It is a postmodern angle.

What I mean by the last clause of two paragraphs back—in referring to the Holocaust as offering "a new category of both Jewish and larger human experience"—is this: there have been genocidal actions against Jews many times before in history, from the Rhineland massacres and

expulsions during the Second Crusade in the mid-twelfth century to the slaughter of Jews under Khmelnytsky's guidance in Ukraine in the mid-seventeenth century to the array of pogroms that marked the Jewish experience in Tsarist Russia between 1882 and World War I. So, too, there have been genocides both before and, alas, after the time of the Holocaust—from the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in the middle of World War I, to Stalin's murder of tens of millions of diverse Soviet citizens for political and other reasons, to the massacre of Cambodians by the Pol Pot regime in 1975-9, to the massive slaughter of the Tutsi by the Hutu in Rwanda in 1994. And during the Holocaust itself, there were other groups marked out for destruction by the Nazis during the Holocaust—most notably the Roma, as well as Communists and people with physical or mental disabilities, early on. There has never been, however, a context in which every branch of a government's infrastructure was so obsessively devoted in such an extraordinarily systematic manner to the destruction of one particular group as was the case of Nazi Germany's campaign to exterminate every Jew and Judaism itself.

So in recognizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a moment in Jewish and larger human history, one may need to adjust the parameters of how what we might term "Holocaust literature" could be embraced by the rubric "postmodern Jewish thought." Moreover, one must add to whatever one might say about the work of poets, memoirists, novelists and essayists—most of whom experienced the Catastrophe in a very personal and intense manner—and the place of that work within "postmodern Jewish thought" a consideration of the post-Holocaust writers who began eventually to raise the God-question—the *theodicy* question—in their reflections on the Holocaust. This group will include both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, but for our purposes the focus will necessarily be primarily on the Jewish scholars—specifically, Richard Rubenstein, Elchonon Wasserman,

Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, Ignaz Maybaum, Emil Fackenheim, Arthur C. Cohen, and Eliezer Berkovits.

As noted in the introduction, the theodicy question (from the Greek words *theos* = God and *dike* = justice, to repeat) to which they all seek an answer can be reduced—to be concise—to the question of how a million children ended up in ovens. How, in a world made by an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, all-merciful God who is also a God who is interested and involved in human affairs, does such a heinous transgression of justice transpire? How can the innocent be allowed to suffer so thoroughly and those who are so patently and blatantly evil not suffer at all? The theological implications of this series of linked questions carry, of course, beyond the Jews and beyond the Holocaust, but it is the implications specifically of the Holocaust and its systematic process directed against the Jews that have provoked the question more stridently than ever before, in part because of the Jewishness of the victims and the Christianity of most of the perpetrators, however secular the shape of the lives that so many of both groups tended to live.

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An obvious starting point for this discussion is Elie Wiesel's memoir, *Night*, which records the trauma of his having been through several camps in the last year and a half of the War, of having watched (in retrospect) his community and its leadership—notably his father—dupe themselves into imagining first that the stories of genocide were false and then that such stories could in any case never apply to them. It follows the demonically sleep-inducing civility of the Nazis arriving into Sighet and the more simply demonic barbarity of the Nazis receiving Jews arriving into Auschwitz-Birkenau; the last glance of his mother and little sister, who would be gassed shortly after arriving, and the struggle, together with a massively demoralized father, to

survive; and ultimately, the numbed moment immediately after his father's death, so shortly before the liberation and the emptiness of that word—*liberation*—in the contexts of memory and guilt.

Many issues are engaged by the memoir. The ability of people to believe what they want to believe. The cruel genius of the Nazis at recognizing and exploiting that facet of the human psyche, feeding detail by detail into the illusion that their intentions are not venomous, or, when the illusion becomes blindingly impossible to believe, substituting a secondary illusion: that one's choices with regard to how to survive—and that if one makes the right choice, one *will* surely survive—are both real and clear. The enormous weight that those who *manage* to survive carry with them out of the camps into freedom. Above all, the unanswerable, tormenting question both during and after the disaster: how can such a catastrophe be taking (have taken) place? How can humans do such extraordinary things to other human beings? Where is (was) God in all of this? What kind of a God would allow such things to happen—not just to adults but to children? Thousands and millions of children. *Is* there a God? These are, to repeat, questions that, despite their specific Jewish context in this narrative, have much broader, universal human implications—both sides of the question: the “what/where is God?” side and the “what are humans?” side. Put otherwise—as I shall repeat again at least once—the theological question interweaves the anthropological and sociological question.

Arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the young Wiesel hears “a few sturdy young fellows [with] knives on them, [who] tried to incite others to throw themselves on the armed guards. . . . But the older ones begged their children not to do anything foolish: ‘You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head. That’s

the teaching of our sages. . . .”³ That briefly reported dialogue is the beginning of the author’s wrestling match with the issue of *choices* (later, on the same page: “We did not yet know which was the better side, right or left; which road led to prison and which to the crematory. . .”), of acquiescence/non-acquiescence—and above all of faith. It is a world that is a twisted mirror of the God that is the object of faith. God is a paradox—simultaneously so distant and so near to believers. In turn, God, as Moses reminds the Israelites, created humans with the paradoxical blessing/curse of choice: “See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil. . . therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed” (Deut. 30:15-19). Arriving at Auschwitz, the descendants of the Israelites are reminded by an SS officer who was “look[ing] us over as if we were a pack of leprous dogs hanging onto our lives” that “. . .you have got to work. If not, you will go straight to the furnace. To the crematory. Work or the crematory—the choice is in your hands [emphasis added].”⁴

The notion of choice is mocked by this harangue, since the diet of the inmates has been calculated to make it all but impossible to work and survive beyond a maximum of eight months.⁵ The choice is really between immediate death and a certain number of months of intense suffering before death. It is a world so twisted that benevolent actions

³ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans from French by Stella Rodway, 40-41. It should be noted that Wiesel’s original manuscript—produced at the suggestion of a friend, essentially as a form of therapy; to help in some small way to exorcise his demons but also as a form of memorial for those beloved family members and others who perished anonymously—was written in Yiddish, and was over 900 pages long. The publisher who originally considered it suggested that he shrink it down considerably and write it in a language more widely read—this datum has its own small irony: so many millions of Yiddish-speakers and potential Yiddish-readers were now gone—so he re-wrote it in French, reducing it in length significantly. It was subsequently translated into English (and other languages).

⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

⁵ See Richard Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History*, 25-6.

can yield a malevolent result even as a wrong action, committed for the right reason, still yields a negative result. Eight days into his Auschwitz experience Wiesel's father is approached by a relative, Stein, hoping for word about his wife Reizel. Wiesel answers in his father's stead, lying: "Yes, my mother's had news from your family. Reizel is very well. The children too. . . ."⁶

In order to give Stein the hope that will enable him to live another day the formerly scrupulously honest young talmudist lies—or rather, becomes part of the long lie that began before the Nazis arrived in Sighet and continues every step of the way to the gas chamber. It is not only a lie because there had been no word from Reizel since 1940, nearly four years earlier, but because although Stein may survive another day, at the very least he will sooner or later find out the truth (that Reizel and the children are dead) and that will kill him. (And there is irony in the fact that Wiesel has not seen or heard news of his *own* mother since the day they arrived in Auschwitz, much less having heard *from* her with news of anyone else.)

Should Wiesel not have committed the small sin of lying in the first place? Or was the extra time he bought for Stein worth the lie? Or was it a worthless investment, since eventually Stein did learn the truth and died from it? No easy answers exist to such questions. And is it mere coincidence, remembered precisely by Wiesel or merely the author's artistry that records this event on the *eighth* day after arrival into Auschwitz? If that arrival is, in the negative sense, birth into a new life, (a life in death) then on the eighth day a reborn Wiesel joins the Covenant of Lies that, imposed by the community of Nazism, mocks the community of Israel and its sense of Covenant.

⁶ Wiesel, *Night*, 52.