Jewish Ministry in the Post Holocaust Era

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Mention the word culture to the common layperson and the perception often is that of the outward manifestations of behavior and artifacts. Early definitions of culture tended to focus on this perspective. Jewish culture, for example, might be captured in the composite of the terms Torah, holy days, ethics, Israel and so on. Others would say, however, that culture is substantially immutable. Hence our core beliefs are so deeply set that nothing will change who we are in terms of our identity. In this way of thinking, being Jewish is not merely the product of one's physical heritage, but also shaped by learning the practices, beliefs and history of the community.

Most people in any given culture would tend to fall into these two extremes of superficiality and immutability. But others have shown that there is another option, namely that cultural change is not only a possibility, but an ongoing reality. Culture, according to Geert Hofstede, is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."[1] To put it in contemporary vernacular, it is the operating system by which we function. Hofstede's reasoning, in concert with other cultural anthropologists and missiologists, corrects the errors of untethered superficiality and hardened immutability.

When collective experiences and environments change, cultures change as well, sometimes in subtle nuances, sometimes in dramatic shifts. The Jewish culture is no exception. While some might argue that the Jewish culture is resistant to change, and that some inner core beliefs such as community loyalty have stood the test of time, there are in fact major cultural shifts from one era to another, including some in recent history.

Every culture can point to a master story that forms the basis for its unique identity. These stories are told and retold down through the generations as a principal means for preserving cultural values and distinctiveness. For the United States in general the American Revolution serves as its master story, which centers around individual liberty. There is another master story unique to African Americans—slavery. For Mormons the visions of Joseph Smith and the journey of his followers to Utah serve as their master story. And so it goes for all people groups.

The history of the Jewish people is without equal in terms of longevity and complexity, and thus is shaped, not by one, but three master stories. The first is Mt. Sinai when Israel was called to exclusive devotion to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as His instructions as set forth in Torah. It was a life based on literal applications of Torah and centered around the Tabernacle and Temple. The second is the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and the subsequent compilation of the Talmud, when significant portions of Torah were reinterpreted to accommodate life without a place of sacrifice and a priesthood to carry them out.

The third Jewish master story is the Holocaust. The attempted annihilation of the Jews of Europe has not just left a legacy of lost lives, indeed lost communities. It has had an impact on the core beliefs or world view of those who survived and the generations to follow. But now, nearly 64 years after the liberation of the last Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen in 1945, as fewer and fewer survivors remain, we are on the verge of entering a new phase of the Post Holocaust era—a story without the actual victims, perpetrators and bystanders. In fact, one might argue that

[1] Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw Hill, 1991), 5.

until now we are still in the Holocaust era because of the presence of these persons, and that a true Post-Holocaust era is at hand. Thus the question arises to what extent will this master story continue to have a bearing on the Jewish world view. Moreover, we also need to ask how ministry to the Jewish people will be affected as we enter this era.

Living in California for most of my life, I can relate the way that people deal with the events of history to the way that earthquakes take place. There is an extended period of time when pressure builds in the earth's plates to the point of an incredible shock and movement and release of energy. Then come aftershocks, which have similar effects at lesser intensity and increasingly less frequent, but always causing you to wonder if another Big One is imminent. After that comes tranquility/silence in which you go about your daily lives with rarely a thought about another earthquake. Unless, of course, another one hits and then you start all over again.

This pattern is reflected in the Jewish master stories. The departure from Egypt in haste and the giving of *Torah* on Mt. Sinai some fifty days later was a shocking upheaval for the Jewish nation. Suddenly they were confronted with the call to be resolutely faithful to ordinances and practices that were significantly new to them. It was an entirely new way of life and thinking.

The remainder of the *Tanach* is a chronicle of aftershocks as subsequent generations experienced repeated cycles of renewed dedication to *Torah* followed by its neglect. Then came a time of silence—the 400 year intertestamental period in which Jewish life continued on without further revelation from God. We might surmise that the susceptibility of the Jewish community to the allure of Hellenism at the expense of *Torah* during this period, most acutely in the days of the Maccabees, was in part a function of the fading away in silence from the monumental encounter on Sinai.

And then another major shock was thrust upon them. With the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the priesthood, the Jewish people had essentially three choices: They could abandon their heritage completely and become absorbed into the dominant world of Hellenism. They could become followers of Yeshua (Jesus) and the belief system of what would later be called Christianity, and was a continuation of the redemptive principles of biblical Judaism. Or they could reinterpret their belief system so that religious and culture practices could continue, only without the literal application that came with the Temple and priesthood. Most Jews chose this latter option. The Talmudic period was a time of aftershocks as Jewish sages redefined biblical concepts so that Judaism might live on in some manner after the great shock of 70 A.D.

For nearly two millennia, the Jewish community carried on in this manner. Whether you lived in the *shtetl* (village) of eastern Europe, or integrated into European society by way of the practice of *haskalah*,[2] or found a new home in America, Jews could live meaningfully anywhere because of the redefined value system of Talmudic interpretation of biblical precepts.

But it was a silence utterly shattered by the great shock of the Holocaust. It is what Arthur A. Cohen has called a *tremendum,*[3] a happening so intense that there is no prior reference point. For Cohen and many others, the Holocaust demands a reconsideration of the reality of God and our response to this understanding. But for survivors, there has been no need for such exhortation. They simply reconsidered such things on their own. They frequently suffer from depression and survivor guilt—they cannot escape the inner pain of being unable to change history. For a large number of them, it was only after their physical suffering ended that the implications of their experiences were fully weighed. In the aftermath, some survivors were able to conclude that there

[2] Meaning Jewish enlightenment, beginning in the late 18th century.

[3] Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

was still a legitimacy in believing in the God of the Bible and in maintaining their traditional means of worship. But many others were unable to reconcile a belief in God with the circumstances of the Holocaust. The questions that they have asked are forthright and provocative. "Where was God? If He is so powerful and righteous, how could God allow such a thing to happen? Where was His justice? Where was His mercy?" Without satisfactory answers, many of them have reasoned, "God does not exist." Statistically, nearly half of the survivors who were religiously observant before the Holocaust no longer expressed belief in a personal God who is involved in the lives of people.[4]

This impact is illustrated by the following story, which was told to me in Jerusalem by a man who lived in Poland:

> I lived across the street from where they hanged Jews in the ghetto. At that time I was thirteen years old. Many of them would say the Shema Israel prayer when they were executed. Now when Jews go to the synagogue and we say Shema Israel, by custom we cover our eyes. But when I put my hands on my eyes, I can always see a man swinging on the rope and hear his voice shouting "Shema Israel." I just cannot say it anymore. So I started to ask questions. After the war, everything that I learned collapsed. Today I am a traditional Jew. I don't know the answers why the Holocaust happened, and it is something that bothers me very much.

Those who have gone to the extreme in response to the Holocaust by abandoning all religious practices and beliefs are joined by many more who simply carry on within the community with much bitterness. They may participate in the synagogue and holiday celebrations, but they do so with protest against God on their minds. The most renowned voice from this perspective is Nobel Prize laureate, Elie Wiesel. When considering God's justice in light of the presence of evil in our world, Wiesel writes:

> The suffering and death of innocent children inevitably places divine will in question and arouses men to wrath and revolt. But what if that were just what God intended: that men cry out to Him of their pain and disappointment? Might that be the path to a solution? I prefer to suggest that no solution exists. . . . I have never renounced my faith in God. I have risen against His justice, protested His silence and sometimes His absence, but my anger rises up within faith and not outside it.
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> I will never cease to rebel against those who committed Auschwitz, including God. The questions I once asked myself about God's silence remain open. If they have an answer, I do not know it. More than that, I refuse to know it. But I maintain that the death of six million human beings poses a question to which no answer will ever be forthcoming.[5]

This was similar to the conclusion made in the recent movie, "God on Trial" that was broadcast on PBS.[6] In this dramatization, Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz hold a mock trial in their barracks, and they reach the verdict that God is guilty of breaking His covenant with Israel because He pledged to preserve them as a nation.

A God who is guilty. Personal guilt and doubt. Abandonment of faith and practice. This is the rubble of the massive shock of the Holocaust. And then the aftershocks came.

The impact of the Holocaust is not limited to first generation survivors. Because many families of survivors have been regularly exposed to depression, anxiety, overprotection and distrust, they have adopted many of these traits as well. The world was presented as being dangerous and

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[4] Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 91-94.
[5] Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 84-85.
[6] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/godontrial/index.html

bent on the destruction of the Jewish people. As a matter of survival, children were often expected to join in their parents' distrust of all Gentiles and most authority figures.

Children also became a way for giving special meaning to the empty lives of the parents. They enabled survivors to replace lost goals and dreams while vindicating past suffering. "My life was over long ago; you are all I now have" are words that typify this perspective. Thus for the children, the expectations have been enormous. As a symbol of prosperity in a new world, they are counted on to succeed in all they attempt. Faced with such pressure, many children have grown up to be highly successful professionals.

The ripple effect of the Holocaust from generation to generation has also carried over spiritually. The issues of sheltering, isolation, and distrust have direct spiritual counterparts. Many Jewish children from survivor families have received little or no religious training. They have been kept in isolation from a spiritual dimension in their lives and consider God to be untrustworthy, if He exists at all. Thus many offspring consider themselves atheists or agnostics who choose to be angry and resentful at the God of Israel.

The aftershocks have worked their way through the extended Jewish community. After the the Holocaust, most Jewish people have become disciples of "civil Judaism."[7] In the world view of civil Judaism, God plays an insignificant role. He has no specific activity in the affairs of humanity. Instead of God, civil Judaism's center of devotion is the commitment to Jewish survival. Given the history of the persecution of the Jews, it is understandable that causes of social justice have become so important. By defending democracy and the rights of all groups who are vulnerable to discrimination, the Jewish community is able to work in a practical manner toward the prevention of another Holocaust. Likewise, the inclination toward humanism is also consistent with this emphasis on taking matters into one's own hands. If God failed in prior times, it will be up to the people to assure that their destruction doesn't happen again.

For a great many Jews today, the Holocaust has superseded Mt. Sinai/Torah and Temple Destruction/Talmud as the master story of the Jewish people. It is the Holocaust that most popularly expresses the nature of Jewish survival and provides a basis for meaning. While many Jewish families will still make a token acknowledgment of the Exodus account during annual commemorations of Passover, the Holocaust has become a theme for every day of the year. Books, motion pictures, the introduction of Holocaust curricula in public schools, and memorial services all serve to reinforce this master story dimension. *Yom Hashoah,* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), is the only observance throughout the year when secular, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews will gather together in a common observance. Occurring on the calendar right after Passover, *Yom Hashoah* contrasts God's deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt with the deliverance of themselves after the Holocaust.

For a vast number of Jews born in the wake of the Holocaust, their search for meaning is taking them outside traditional Judaism. In recent decades the number of Jews embracing Buddhism and other Eastern religions is substantial. In many parts of the world you can find Jews who attend the synagogue, keep kosher and observe Jewish holidays, yet also meditate, follow the teachings of Zen masters and attend Buddhist retreats. In the United States, for example, there are at present 35 Jewish communities (their preferred term for congregations) that are explicitly Buddhist in orientation.[8] A number of books on this movement have been written in recent years. It is important for us to recognize that the timing of this transformation is not arbitrary. One of the key

[7] Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), 77. See also Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[8] Information on this movement can be found at https://www.aleph.org.

components of Buddhism is the way it deals with suffering. Namely, suffering originates from our desires, but we can live in peaceful harmony by ceasing to strive in all things. In other words, Buddhism presents a means of coping with the suffering engendered by the Holocaust that traditional Judaism fails to offer. Granted, this culture shift is not exclusively the result of the people seeking meaning outside traditional Judaism because of the Holocaust. But neither can it be explained without recognizing this underlying factor. Thus any ministry to Jewish people who are devoted to Buddhist ways must take into account the importance of finding meaning in suffering.

Change has undeniably come upon the Jewish community in a significant way. The question now becomes, as the aftershocks wane, what more changes are in store in this time of supposed tranquility and silence?

The number of survivors continues to diminish year by year. Since the Jewish population of Germany plus the 22 countries occupied by the Nazis was nine million, and two-thirds of them perished in the Holocaust, around three million Jews could be considered as survivors after the war. Fifty years later that number had dropped to under one million worldwide.[9] Today that number is estimated to be slightly over 500,000. With three-quarters of them currently being 75 years and older, we are now entering a time with just a small percentage of people who were adults during the Holocaust.[10] And with an ever-increasing mortality rate, by 2025 the few remaining children of the *Shoah* will be above 90 years in age.

Capturing their stories has become an important priority. Tens of thousands of personal testimonies of survivors have been recorded on film and video. The most ambitious of these projects is the USC Shoah Foundation for Visual History and Education, originated by Steven Spielberg, which has a database of 52,000 recorded testimonies. Motion pictures continue to turn to the Holocaust for storylines. The acclaimed movies "Schindler's List" and "The Pianist" have been recently followed by "The Reader" and "Defiance" among others.

So the stories are certainly out there. But the question is not so much how often one makes a public or social acknowledgment of the historicity or the compelling saga of the Holocaust, but how it has affected the way that Jewish people perceive reality, their identity and the nature of God. As one Jewish writer asserts:

> It would be wrong to suggest that contemporary Jews are walking around thinking regularly about Auschwitz. Yet it is clear that the Holocaust has left its scar on the Jewish community. How could it not? Many of the issues that most concern the American Jewish community—continuity, assimilation, intermarriage, education, the survival of Israel—are particularly forceful because of the Holocaust. We are afraid of the destruction of our community. . . It seems too early to trust the world community that, by and large, stood aside while our people were massacred.[11]

As in the cases of virtually all historical events, the further we are in time from its occurrence, the more imprecise and impersonal it becomes. Our memories fade, the issues lose their urgency. We mythologize the events so that they turn into tales that we impersonally read and hear about, rather than gripping us with the stark reality that was life such as in Treblinka in 1943 or in an apartment in Tel Aviv in 1951 or 2009. The ignorant among us can even become more susceptible

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[9] Israeli Prime Minister's Office, "Number of Living Survivors," July 27, 1997.

[10] "Holocaust Survivors in Israel: Population Estimates and Utilization of Services for Nursing Care at Home," Myers JDC Brookdale Institute (June 22, 2008), 7.

[11] Rachel N. Baum, "The Post-Holocaust Jewish Heart," *After-Words: Post Holocaust Struggles with Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Justice,* David Patterson and John K. Roth, eds. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 229.

to the doubt that deniers can generate, especially when the eye-witnesses are no longer among us.

Pure faithfulness to Torah waned to a great extent after Sinai. The same was true for Talmud in recent generations. Might this fading also be true for the Holocaust? It will never be forgotten, just as the two prior master stories remain in the consciousness of the Jewish people. But in what form? That is what remains to be seen. A day is inevitably coming when no physical survivors will remain. But their master story experience will live on, not just on film and digital media, but in the very core world view of the Jewish community as a whole.

Because of these considerations, it is important for us to apply them in the context of ministry. I come today, not so much with completed answers, but with some questions for us to contemplate.

How aware are we to the underlying effects of the Holocaust impacting our ministry?

The reasons behind the beliefs and practices held by people are not always readily apparent. Ask the average person why the groom breaks a glass at a Jewish wedding and chances are the answer won't be very historically accurate.[12] The same is true in the case of the lingering effects of the Holocaust. The things we see and hear today may very well have underlying *Shoah* foundations that aren't readily apparent.

I once had an opportunity to spend some time talking to a Hungarian Jewish woman who managed to survive the genocide and ultimately made it to the U.S. She told me about her experiences in life and in the course of our conversation I asked her if she had ever been in a church. She replied yes but added that she did not like fire and brimstone style preachers. Alluding to the torment of hell, she said, "I just can't imagine a loving Father putting His children in ovens." I was able to express to her using Psalm 88 that the Bible also describes eternity for the unrighteous as being separated from God and His people. This led to a discussion on the concepts of holiness and atonement and, in the end, she affirmed her faith in Messiah. But it began by recognizing that her experience in the Holocaust had affected her perception of divine judgment. It called for finding a different starting point in witnessing with the hope that, in time, she would be able to deal with the heavy implications that were initially on her mind, much in the same way that Paul began his ministry with the Corinthians using "milk to drink, not solid food" (1 Cor. 3:2).

Are there ways that Jewish ministries can focus on the Holocaust?

This is an area where organizations would do well to share ideas. Some might find it beneficial to participate in local community *Yom Hashoah* commemorations. Others might want to sponsor their own programs. In a day when compassion and relationship are as important as biblical exposition, and Christianity is often accused as only being concerned about eternal matters, the Holocaust provides a context for demonstrating the priestly side of ministry.

How well-equipped are we to deal with distrust?

One of the most common characteristics of survivors has been their distrust of others. Stories of broken trust abound in this context. Acquaintances and co-workers, many of whom identified themselves as Christians, readily assisted the Nazis in sending Jews to the camps. Countless Jewish families were betrayed by Gentile neighbors who were motivated by duty—the government gave them "no choice but to comply." By greed—the homes and personal effects of

[12] The custom originated in the Middle Ages when people in many different cultures would attempt to ward off evil spirits coming from the north by making loud noises such as throwing glass against a wall.

Jews became tempting plunder. And by hatred—the arrests of Jews were frequently punctuated by taunts and celebrations from their neighbors. Broken trust also occurred within families, particularly those comprised of intermarriages.

I was able to get to know one woman whose story illustrates the intensity of betrayal that was produced by the Holocaust. She was born in Germany to a Jewish father and Gentile mother. As the Nazis were coming to power and the persecution began to intensify, the father decided to flee the country, leaving his family behind. Later, as people were threatened with death for harboring Jews, the mother turned her own daughter over to the Nazis. But she managed to survive the concentration camp and eventually immigrated to the United States. Today her life is marked by more than just a tattoo on her arm. She bears the emotional scars of abandonment by her father and betrayal by her mother. Consequently, she finds it difficult to develop close relationships and acutely distrusts others, especially non-Jews. Granted, this account is based on a highly dysfunctional family, but in times of crisis it is not uncommon for persons to behave selfishly. Her experience underscores the dramatic imprint that betrayal has had on survivors and explains, in part, why many Jews distrust other people today.

Building trust is an important aspect of ministry, and not just with survivors. But their stories remind us to pay attention to the extent that we are intentionally seeking to establish trust in our relationships.

How should we respond when others trivialize the Holocaust?

It is popular today, especially among those who oppose Israel, to accuse the country of inflicting a Holocaust on the Palestinian people. This claim is difficult to rebuff when the media so effectively depicts the plight of the people of Gaza. But in light of the massive difference in scale, in spite of the rhetorical efforts to equate the two situations, we might suggest that these opponents of Israel come up with their own term.

Are we prepared for another great shock?

If the Holocaust should stand alone without comparison to any circumstances of other people, does that also mean that Jews will never face another *tremendum* that is in fact equivalent to the first one? Depending on the way you interpret the Bible, Scripture would seem to indicate or allow otherwise (cf. Zech. 13:8,9). It would no doubt be a Holocaust without the camps and crematoria and the like, but another attempt to annihilate the Jewish people is always within the realm of possibility. The audacious Adversary of the Jews has not yet been confined to the bottomless pit. And as such, we need to be alert to his schemes. Voices can be heard in our world today that echo the call for a world that is *Judenrein*. Most people discounted Adolph Hitler as being a blowhard. The world was wrong then. We would be likewise wrong today to ignore calls to wipe Israel off the map.

Jewish ministries have an opportunity to be very different kinds of voices in our world. We can heed Isaiah's words to "comfort My people" (Isa. 40:1). We can take a stand in many ways. But if great tragedy should befall Israel, are we prepared now to carry out ministry in that context? It seems wise to think in advance about what we might be prepared to do. Assuming, that is, such an event occurs *before* we go to meet the Lord in the clouds.

Has the Holocaust spawned another Gospel?

It is worth noting that the Post-Holocaust era coincides with the onset of Post-Modernism. Indeed we might ask if there is a synergistic relationship. Today when truth is widely considered to be relative and left to the whim of the individual, the Holocaust has caused many theologians to

back away from biblical absolutes. Perhaps out of guilt for the widely deficient response of the Church during the *Shoah*, or perhaps out of ignorance of the very nature of salvation according to the Bible, Christian voices today can be heard denying the applicability of the Gospel for Jews. Consider these words, for example, from a Christian academician:

> "Our contribution to the abundance of covenant life may be to contend with our Jewish siblings not to convert them but in order to make this a creative, life-yielding tension revealing for each of us an even larger view of God's ways. But in the process, we may find ourselves called to move beyond the distinction between *saved* and *unsaved* as well. After Auschwitz, that may be good news we are yet to hear."[13]

Having compassion for the Jewish people in light of the Holocaust is commendable, even essential. But denying the applicability of the Good News for Jews is not. It requires a logic that says Jesus was born a Jew, lived a Jewish life, taught like a Jewish rabbi, preached about the Kingdom of Heaven (a Jewish concept), died just as the Jewish prophets foretold, thus fulfilling the biblically Jewish element of atonement, but then refused to apply it to Jewish people. Such reasoning renounces the line of continuity in the Bible from the Garden of Eden to the Cross in which God affirms a singular plan to bring about salvation and reconciliation with *all* humanity. As Peter unequivocally declared about Jesus:

> And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Moreover it is a plan that specifically mentions the Jewish people:

> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

Denying the resolute truth of these statements is the equivalent of climbing aboard a train supposedly going to a relocation camp that in reality turns out to be Auschwitz. It offers the Jewish people a sense of co-existence and temporary peace of mind but ultimately leads to spiritual disaster. It is this "other Gospel" of salvation that ignores extensive portions of Scripture and substitutes well-intended platitudes, but actually strikes at the very core of Christianity. Either Jesus died as an atonement for Gentiles and Jews alike or for none at all.

My challenge to you, on this day, is to stand against such a temptation to abandon your convictions in exchange for expediency. We need to stand as resistance fighters who realize that while others might get in line and go quietly, we will take a stand for the Good News. And we will do so with the proper weapons that God has given us (Eph. 6:13-18).

It might be said that we err when we forget the past. We also err when we assume the things of this world will always remain the same. Our ministries need to address the issues of the day forthrightly and wisely, while never forsaking our dedication to the Good News that remains the same for every generation. Paul's words to the Corinthians resound equally true today in the shadow of the Holocaust:

> Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love (1 Cor. 16:13,14).

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[13] Henry F. Knight, *Confessing Christ in a Post-Holocaust World: A Midrashic Experiment* (Westport Connecticutt and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 162-3.