

SOME JEWISH CONCEPTIONS OF HUMANITY IN THE WAKE OF THE SHOAH

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Yehudah Mirsky mirsky@brandeis.edu

RAPHAEL LEMKIN (1900-1959), POLISH JEW, ARCHITECT OF THE GENOCIDE CONVENTION

New conceptions require new terms. By ‘genocide’ we mean the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group. . . . Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accompanied by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups. . . (this) would include) disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.

Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Carnegie Endowment, 1944), p. 79

On the reaction to his ideas by the great Jewish historian Simon Dubnow (1860-1941)

“The basic value of your plan lies in the criminal character of the act. Obviously, if killing one man is a crime, killing of entire races and peoples must be an even greater one.”

Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin* (Yale U Press, 2013) [1958-59], p. 71

Essentially the idea of a nation signifies constructive cooperation and original contributions, based upon genuine contributions, genuine culture, and a well-developed national psychology. The destruction of a nation, therefore, results in the loss of its future contributions to the world. Moreover, such destruction offends our feelings of morality and justice in much the same way as does the criminal killing of a human being: the crime in the one case as in the other is murder, though on a vastly greater scale. (The idea of the nation should not, however, be confused with the idea of nationalism. To do so would be to make the same mistake as confusing the idea of individual liberty with that of egoism.)

Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Carnegie Endowment, 1944), p. 91

“When minds are destroyed the cohesive force of the group, which is essentially a mental quality, cannot be maintained. Was it not the Frenchman (Henri) Focillon who said that nations are families of minds.”

Raphael Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial*, p. 166

HANS JONAS (1903-1993), GERMAN-BORN JEWISH PHILOSOPHER

The disgrace of Auschwitz is not to be charged to some all-powerful providence or to some dialectically wise necessity, as if it were an antithesis demanding a synthesis or a step on the road to salvation. We human beings have inflicted this on the deity, we who have failed in the administering of his things. It

remains on our account, and it is we who must again wash away the disgrace from our disfigured faces, indeed, from the very countenance of God. Don't talk to me here about the cunning of reason.¹

Hans Jonas, quoted in Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions* (Brandeis U Press, 2007), p. 125.

(F)or the sake of our image of God and our whole relation to the divine...we cannot uphold the time-honored (medieval) doctrine of absolute, unlimited divine power....Quite the opposite. From the very concept of power, it follows that omnipotence is a self-contradictory, self-destructive, indeed senseless concept. The situation is similar to that of freedom in the human realm: far from beginning where necessity ends, freedom consists of and lives in pitting itself against necessity...(p)ower itself as such is a relational concept and requires relation....After Auschwitz we can assert with greater force than ever before that an omnipotent deity would have to be either not good, or...totally unintelligible. But if God is to be intelligible in some manner....then his goodness must be compatible with the existence of evil and this it is only if he is not all powerful.

Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice," in *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good After Auschwitz* (Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 138-140

"With the appearance of man, transcendence awakened to itself and henceforth accompanies his doings with the bated breath of suspense, hoping and beckoning, rejoicing and grieving, approving and frowning...can it not be that by the reflection of its own state as it wavers with the record of man, the transcendent casts light and shadow over the human landscape. Such is the tentative myth which I like to believe is 'true' – in the sense in which myth may happen to adumbrate a truth which of necessity is unknowable...yet which, by intimations to our direct experience, lays claim upon or powers of giving indirect account of it in revocable, anthropomorphic images...

"I am thinking of the gassed and burnt children of Auschwitz, of the defaced, dehumanized phantoms of the camps, and of all the other, numberless victims of the other manmade holocausts of our time. Among men, their sufferings will soon be forgotten, and their names even sooner...Are they, then, debarred from an immortality which even their tormentors and murderers obtain because they could act – abominably yet accountably, thus leaving their sinister mark on eternity's face? This I refuse to believe. And this I like to believe; that there was weeping in the heights at the waste and despoilment of humanity; that a groan answered the rising shout of ignoble suffering, and wrath – the terrible wrong done to the reality and possibility of each life thus wantonly victimized, each one a thwarted attempt of God. *The voice of thy brother's blood cries unto me from the ground.* Should we not believe that the immense chorus of such cries that has risen up in our lifetime now hangs over our world as a dark and accusing cloud?...For the secret sympathy that connects our being with the transcendent condition and makes the latter depend on our deeds, must somehow work both ways....thus in the dim light at the end of our wandering we may discern a twofold responsibility of man: one in terms of worldly causality, by which the effect of his deed extends for some greater or shorter length into a future where it eventually dissipates, and a simultaneous one in terms of its impact on the eternal realm, where I never dissipates....we can have immortality at heart when in our brief span we serve our threatened mortal affairs and help the suffering immortal God.

¹ Hegel's idea that history realizes its ultimate purposes in sly and unexpected ways, via the irrational side of human behavior.

Hans Jonas, "Immortality and the Modern Temper" (in *Mortality and Morality*, p. 127, 129)

Man is the only being known to us who can assume responsibility. The fact that he can assume it means that he is liable to it...Responsibility therefore is complementary to freedom, it is an acting subject's burden of freedom...(it) therefore exists with or without God...Yet besides being responsibility for something, it is also responsibility to something – to an ultimate authority to which an accounting must be given. This authority it will probably be said (if belief in divine authority is no longer present) is the human conscience. But...to whom or what are we responsible in our conscience?... (maybe we can learn it) from what we are responsible for...(which is) the consequences of my actions, to the degree that they affect a being. Thus the actual object of my responsibility is this being itself that I have affected. This however has an ethical sense only when this being is of some value: toward a being...when this being is a vulnerable one, as living beings with their intrinsic fragility always are and when it, with this vulnerability, enters of the field of my actions and is at the mercy of my power – either by accident, or...by my own choice. Then the universal call issuing from all transitory and valuable being is very concretely meant for me and becomes an imperative for me...responsibility is a function of our power and proportional to it...Expansion of the power also means expansion of its effects on the future...we can exercise our increased responsibility – which we have in any case, whether we want it or not – only if foreseeing the consequences of our actions increases proportionally...Today human power and its excesses...have taken on such enormous dimensions that even the daily exercise of our powers, which makes the routine of modern civilization possible and which we all depend on, becomes an ethical problem.

Hans Jonas, "Towards an Ontological Grounding of an Ethics for the Future" (in *Mortality and Morality*, pp. 101-103)

I could imagine revising my Zionism, but rejecting the brit – the covenant between God and Israel – see unthinkable to me, even if the concept of a divine partner in this covenant has remained completely nebulous to me. There is a mystery that binds all of us, beyond the time-bound, private personal positions that we adopt intellectually and in our conscious acts.

Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, as translated by Wiese, p. 151 (compare *Memoirs*, Winston, tr., p. 215)

God can work only through the human spirit. Through this spirit God can regain power, just as he can fail when human beings fail...That may be the only way we still have for broaching such things – suggesting, without claiming to know the truth, yet leaving room for the supernatural in the world. That there is indeed a supernatural element in human affairs – for this the human spirit seems to offer evidence.

Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, (Brandeis U. Press, 2008), p. 219 [tr. Krishna Winston]

RAV YEHUDAH AMITAL, SURVIVOR, FOUNDER OF YESHIVAT HAR ETZION (1924-2010)

The worship of God, in whatever form, cannot wipe out simple human feeling. The Rebbe of Kotzk would say about the verse *And you shall be holy people to Me* (Shemot 22:30) that God, as it were, is saying here 'Angels I have in sufficient quantity. I am looking for human beings who will be holy people.'" (*Jewish Values in a Changing World*, p. 193)

There is nothing in the world that can justify the death of hundreds of thousands of children, who were killed and burned. Nothing in the world can justify that! Not the State of Israel, not the coming of the

Messiah, not the Jewish people repenting. Nothing in the world can justify it! (*Commitment and Complexity*, p. 64)

There are commandments which a person must fulfill not because he was so commanded by God, but because that is his will and that reflects his inner consciousness... We must know that Halakhah is only an opening, a gateway through which the Holy One transmits a certain message to us, while a portion of the laws of human behavior are intended for a person to fulfill out of inner awareness... In the laws of character traits, no code such as the *Shulchan Arukh* is of any use. If the heart has not been mended, no codified law will help him... The purpose of the Torah is that a person should perform and fulfill the Torah as the patriarchs fulfilled it – out of inner awareness. (*A World Destroyed*, p. 122)

(The mitzvah) to cleave to the attributes of the Holy One (See Sotah 14a, Rambam, Sefer Ha-Motzvot, Aseh 8) is not meant to weaken the natural feelings of kindness that exist within a person's heart, but rather, on the contrary, to strengthen them, as Rav Kook says 'The love of fellow man must burst forth from the source of lovingkindness, not as a matter of law, for then the clearest part of its brightness would be lost, but as a mighty inner movement of the soul' (*Orot Ha-Kodesh*, vol 3, p. 318) But since it is clear that (when) 'the love distances itself from its divine source, its blossom withers' (ibid) it is especially important that goodness, kindness and mercy be based on the requirement to emulate the attributes of the Holy One, which are the traits of mercy. (*A World Destroyed*, p. 127)

Once I participated in a televised panel discussion with [the partisan and poet] Abba Kovner, concerning the significance of the Holocaust and the profound dilemmas of life thereafter for the survivors. I said there, inter alia, that these questions are much more terrible for a person who does not believe in God. I there is no choice but to believe in something, then what is left to believe in for a person without God? Can one believe in mankind, after what the German nation and their helpers form the family of nations did? I had a vision of German trains transporting the army to the front, that were stopped and vacated in order to transport Jews to Auschwitz... To believe in man after all that is impossible. (*A World Destroyed*, p. 128)

It is not [the Jewish people's] terrible suffering that is the source of its longing for redemption, but rather its striving to do good to mankind, for this is the essence of its soul. ("The Ethical Foundation of Rav Kook's Nationalist Views," "The Ethical Foundations of Rav Kook's Nationalist Views," trans. B. Caspar and R. Ziegler, *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755) p. 19)

I believe that we merited a Jewish state only because of God's desire to sanctify His name in the aftermath of the terrible desecration of His Name during the Holocaust. The establishment of the state and its victories in war against the Arab armies that rose up against it constitute a response of sanctification of God's name. Precisely for this reason, the obligation to sanctify God's name has special significance in our time for those of us who live in the State of Israel, the entire establishment of which stemmed from this principle. This is why, on various occasions over the years, I have felt obligated to protest against instances of the desecration of God's name. This was the only cause for which I felt a need to speak out publicly (*Jewish Values in a Changing World*, p. 155)

RAV IRVING (YITZ) GREENBERG (1933 -) AMERICAN RABBI, THEOLOGIAN, COMMUNAL LEADER

The right to human survival is unconditional; it needs no validation in terms of the Holocaust. Humans are called upon – in biblical language – to choose life. (12)

Faithfulness to the lessons of the Holocaust calls for challenging all absolute claims – even for good causes – and placing them in a framework of proper evaluation and consideration...The first and obvious lesson is that one cannot – dare not – underestimate the tremendous force of death and evil in this world... (22)

The second lesson of the Holocaust is that due to extraordinary human capacity and achievement, unprecedented concentrations of power have been created...If there is one thing modern culture stands for, it is the liberation of humanity... (t)he incredible destructiveness is matched in many areas by unprecedented flowerings of human culture and capability... (25)...To renounce power, as a policy alternative, decries the facts of human liberation...Ultimately, the Holocaust also shows that to renounce power in the era would be a victory for evil (26)...The proper policy alternative is the demythologization of power. The sheer scope of unmet human needs dictates the ongoing and expanding use of power; but the glorification of power and the deification of human power and human sovereignty must be reversed...One of the most important lessons of the Holocaust is the urgency of developing a new sense of humility and self-criticism on the part of Western culture and modern man. There must be a systematic policy of the delegitimation of absolute claims – be they for democracy or dictatorship, for socialism or capitalism, for preservation of status quo or revolution... (27)

Whoever claims the right to use absolute power is idolatrous and must be checked – by a group with matching passion and commitment. (29)

The Bible teaches that God, having been angered by uncontrolled human evil, unleashed unlimited destructive power and created a flood that wiped out humanity. Then the Divine itself came to recognize that unleashing such power was no longer tolerable or acceptable...because such power is dangerous to all of life...(and) a total violation of respect for life. Therefore, God initiated a covenant limiting God's power; even God cannot be entrusted with absolute power. (30) The Holocaust demonstrated that humans have the power once reserved for God alone...The other side of the Holocaust analogy is that humans now realize they have the powers of God, and that they should properly recognize those powers as a call by God to become partners in redemption. What is needed now is a worldwide covenantal commitment to retreat from the brink – step by step. There was a covenant in the Bible with Noah, another with Abraham, and further renewals of the Covenant. The repeated covenants teach that even the Divine could not retreat from the brink in a single motion – but only step by step. (31)

The reassertion of life must be built on proper faith in humanity, a faith that enables people to fight for peace without *naivete* or grasping at illusions. One has to hope that the generation in which Auschwitz functioned may yet create a triumph in which a covenant of life is renewed and applied and power is mastered for life.

All quotations from Irving Greenberg, “The Dialectics of Power: Reflections in the Light of the Holocaust” in Daniel Landes, ed. *Confronting Omnicide: Jewish Reflections on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Jason Aronson, 1991), pp. 12-35