

## THE SILENCE OF GOD

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“As a Jew,” Elie Wiesel has written, “you will sooner or later be confronted with the enigma of God’s action in history.”<sup>1</sup> Religion was not a sufficient condition for the Holocaust, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews, but it was a necessary one. What happened at Auschwitz is inconceivable without beliefs about God held first by Jews and then by Christians. For many who live after Auschwitz, however, it is God not genocide that has been rendered inconceivable. At the very least, the Holocaust makes Jewish and Christian religious affirmations alike more difficult and problematic than they were before. In an earlier day instances of natural destruction occupied much of the attention of philosophers and theologians. Considering, for example, the great earthquake that devastated Lisbon in the mid-eighteenth century, they argued whether such events could be reconciled with the claim that we live in the best of all possible worlds or whether God could be regarded as both omnipotent and totally good. The Lisbon earthquake caused fires and floods. It killed thousands of people. It was also beyond human control. In centuries past, philosophers were well aware that catastrophes are also produced by human action, but their analyses often pivoted around natural disasters—“acts of God” as they were called—that human might could not prevent.

Nature’s fury still demonstrates how fragile our lives can be. But today two factors stand out in bold relief. First, human beings do have considerable ability to control some of nature’s destructive might. Death still claims everybody, but it need not come so quickly or painfully as in earlier times. If those results leave one to wonder why natural devastation has been so prevalent, they also testify that suffering can be reduced, that human life is not completely in the grip of necessities and inevitabilities which cannot be broken, and that affirmations about life’s goodness can be underwritten by successes that make human existence more secure.

The second point, unfortunately, is less a cause for celebration. For if headway has been made against natural destruction that threatens human life, the problem of human self-destructiveness seems greater than ever. Ours is an age of redundant populations, refugees, concentration camps, and mass murder. It is capped by the ultimate dehumanizing threat: nuclear war. Violent deaths, caused by human catastrophes not by natural disasters, number well in the hundreds of millions



in the twentieth century alone. The scale of man-made death, therefore, looms up as a fundamental fact to show conclusively that ours is not the best of all possible worlds.

The Holocaust is paradigmatic. It was not the result of sporadic, random violence carried out by hooligans. Driven by a zealous antisemitism, which seemed anything but irrational to the men who used it as a springboard to power, the Holocaust was a state-sponsored program of population elimination, a destruction process that could successfully target the Jews only because it received cooperation from every sector of German society. Why was this permitted to happen? That question indicts men and women, but since they did not begin history themselves, the Holocaust makes the issue a religious one as well. What or who started history is a question without an answer, at least it is if by “answer” one means a human conclusion that is impregnable to doubt and completely certain. It is not, however, a question without answers, at least it is not if by “answers” one means convictions that people form, all of them fallible and possibly even false, to fathom their individual and collective experience. Weighing evidence differently, some of these beliefs are less affirmations in their own right and more rejections of claims held by others—as in atheism, for example—or manifestations of a refusal to affirm or reject—as in agnosticism—because too much knowledge is lacking. Over time many of a person’s responses to religious questions and to questions about God in particular will change both in substance and in certitude. Others will stay remarkably the same in spite of traumatic events that create great dissonance between what was believed before and what could possibly be accepted after.

Surely the Holocaust qualifies as a watershed event. A typical reaction is to feel that Auschwitz seriously impugns the credibility of many, if not all, claims about God that Jews or Christians have usually made. Indeed the Holocaust appears to call the very existence of God into a serious doubt, if it does not make God’s non-existence perfectly clear. Some would argue that it did not require the Holocaust to do these things. Previous human history contained far more than enough senseless injustice to demonstrate the delusions of trust in God. Such appraisals, however, do not give the Holocaust its due. Both in its own right and in the impact it bestows with its massive addition to history’s accumulated waste, the Holocaust can shatter belief that had been able to endure more or less intact everything else that went before. Theologians and philosophers who wish to defend Jewish or Christian views about God have always had a formidable task to show that God is not buried beneath history’s debris. Few who encounter the Holocaust with seriousness would deny that any other reality makes their interpretive efforts more problematic than does Auschwitz.

As philosophers and theologians develop their points of view, they usually claim to ground their claims and arguments by appeals to actual human experi-

ence. Unavoidably these appeals go beyond direct knowledge of individual cases or the statistically documented studies of human behavior and belief carried out by social scientists. Philosophers and theologians draw on such material, and on historical studies as well, but their efforts often require them to raise and reflect on questions that exceed immediate experience. The facts, it is often said, speak for themselves. They do not always speak clearly, however, nor are they self-interpreting. Philosophy and theology are disciplines that seek to interpret experience so that its most basic features—structural and normative—are clarified.

“Unique” and “unprecedented” are two of the descriptive terms most applied to the Holocaust. Jews in particular are likely to insist on using them, along with an emphasis on the particularistic nature of Nazi genocide, which specifically targeted Jews for total extermination root and branch simply because the Jews were Jews. Such emphases have validity and not least because they help to demonstrate that the Holocaust was a boundary-crossing event, one of those moments in history which changes everything before and after even if the substance and direction of the change take time to dawn in consciousness. As philosophers and theologians probe the religious impact of the Holocaust, they can help to bring that dawning to fullness. They can also explore and indicate how it might be shaped, since the course of that dawning, like all human experience, remains subject to variation.

The first to probe the religious impact of the Holocaust, however, were not philosophers and theologians who thought about the Nazi onslaught after it had ceased. Men and women who lived and died and in some cases survived the hiding places, the ghettos, and the camps already carried on that activity as their circumstances, energy, and inclination permitted. Their observations and feelings, expressed in diaries and eyewitness accounts, provide some of the most important experiential data for philosophers and theologians to encounter. For even if that data’s religious testimony is not all that can or must be said on such matters, such testimony has an irreplaceable significance because it represents those who had to cope with genocide first-hand. To make pronouncements or even suggestions about what can or cannot, must or must not, be credible religiously after Auschwitz without knowing what the survivors think about their own experiences would be to develop one’s philosophy or theology in a considerable vacuum.

Until recently knowledge about the faith and doubt of Holocaust survivors had to rest largely on inferences drawn from oral and written testimony that remained scattered and unsystematically analyzed. There is still much work that should be done to gather this testimony, but thanks to the cooperation of many hundreds of survivors, a major social scientific study in this field is now available. During the 1970’s, Reeve Robert Brenner polled a thousand Israeli survivors to

ascertain the religious change, rejection, reaffirmation, doubt, and despair that the Holocaust might have brought them. Selecting the subjects at random from survivor rosters, especially from those carefully maintained at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, he received more than seven hundred responses to a lengthy questionnaire. Of those who responded, one hundred were interviewed personally, the remainder by mail. The data gathered is rich, the testimony moving. Much of it speaks about the silence of God, which is one way to designate what may be the most crucial religious problem posed by the Holocaust. How survivors have coped with that silence is instructive for the interpretive work that falls to philosophers and theologians today. No less so are some of Brenner's conclusions.

When Brenner speaks of "Holocaust survivors," he means Jews who successfully endured "various types of Nazi concentration camps, including detention or internment camps, transit and exchange camps, and annihilation or death camps where crematoria were installed."<sup>2</sup> Within his random and representative sample, one of the most fundamental findings is that 53 percent "consciously and specifically asserted that the Holocaust affected or, to a certain extent, modified their faith in God" (p. 103). The other 47 percent "averred that the Holocaust had no influence on their beliefs about God." (p. 95). Considering the cataclysmic qualities of the Holocaust, plus the fact that 69 percent of the surveyed survivors held that they had believed in God prior to the Holocaust, a figure that would have been another 10 percent higher for Eastern European Jews, the size of the 47 percent category may seem surprising. Brenner has no doubts that the survivors explored their religious histories profoundly and honestly in answering the wide-ranging and disturbing questions that he raised about religious behavior and belief before, during, and immediately after the Holocaust, and in the present as well. Nor does he regard the significant numbers of people—approximately one in four—who remained unwavering in their belief in the existence of God, personal or impersonal, as sufficient to modify his judgment that for those caught in the Holocaust "a radical transformation of faith took place" (p. 94). The most salient feature of this transformation is that of the 55 percent who before the Holocaust believed in "a personal God" who is involved in man's daily life, more than one in four rejected that belief either during or immediately after the war. Nor have they reclaimed it since (p. 94). At the heart of this rejection stands a fundamental premise, namely, that if there were a personal God who was involved in humanity's daily life, that God would surely not cause or even permit an Auschwitz to exist.

Stubbornly powerful though it is, that assumption has not governed all theological reflection either during or after the Holocaust. In fact, Brenner's research found a vast array of religious responses among the survivors who responded. They included Orthodox Jews who say the Holocaust was God's punishment for

Jewish refusal to honor their historic covenant with a God who made them a chosen people. Others affirmed God but as One who is impersonal, uninvolved in human history generally or in the Holocaust specifically. And if nearly three out of four of the 53 percent who found their faith affected or modified by the Holocaust underwent "either a complete loss or an attenuation of religious faith," the remainder reported that the Holocaust made them more religious (pp. 103-104). Overall about five percent of all Brenner's sample was transformed from atheists into believers. If that figure seems insignificant, Brenner puts it in a different light by noting that "nearly one of every four religiously transformed survivors began to believe in God because of the Holocaust" (p. 119). That is, of those who moved from the basic position of affirming or denying the existence of God, the shifting was not exclusively, though largely, in one direction. Twenty-five percent of that group found themselves moved to affirm the existence of God when they had not done so before, and the impetus for that movement was the Holocaust itself. In all, Brenner observes, the total loss of faith in the existence of God among his sample of Holocaust survivors came to 11 percent.

Faith in God after Auschwitz is not easy for Holocaust survivors. For the questions that are felt about God's silence do not reach far until they ask: How can one believe in God at all after Auschwitz? Brenner found, however, that the believers' perplexity and discontent with their own beliefs had parallels in the experiences of those who professed atheism. Granted, those who sustained or arrived at atheism during the Holocaust were spared the frequently agonizing questions that Brenner's survey posed for those who affirmed God's reality. In some cases this atheism was strident, maintaining not merely that the existence of God, especially of the omnipotent God of Israel, is incredible but also that no theologian could possibly be qualified to controvert, let alone refute, that conclusion unless he or she had been through the "selection" itself. But Brenner found the atheism of others less self-assured. For some survivors, Brenner is convinced, profession of atheism was less a simple theological posture and more an emotional reaction, an expression of deep hurt and anger against God for leaving Jews so radically abandoned. Others found their atheism producing a sense of guilt. This was not guilt over having survived, Brenner's findings turned up very little of that syndrome, but rather a sense that one's atheism betrays too many of those who perished and even entails disloyalty to the Jewish tradition itself. At least for Jewish survivors, atheism after Auschwitz, however natural a response it may be, is rarely easy or comfortable.

If it is ironic that "those Holocaust survivors who became non-believers appear to feel the urgent need to explain and justify their non-belief to a far greater extent than believers seem to feel the need to justify *their* belief" (p. 112), still the believers are left to contend with demanding questions about the kind of God they affirm. Again, the variety of outlook is the most striking feature in Brenner's

sample. Far from irresistably driving survivors away from belief in God, the Holocaust draws out many different views, thus suggesting that post-Holocaust religious options are not simply reducible to affirmation of one God or of none at all. It remains possible, of course, to label all affirmations of God incredible, and the Holocaust led significant numbers to do so. Along with the sheer diversity of affirmative views held by others, they underscore that no single idea about God will ever be acceptable to all. That same pluralism, however, means that the spectrum of what one may find religiously credible after Auschwitz remains open wide. One survivor's religious convictions do not necessarily speak for anyone else. Nor do those of philosophers or theologians who declaim for or against God in the Holocaust's aftermath. What such reflection can do is to help people confront the options so they can consider what honestly makes the most good sense. Survivors do this by showing how they personally have coped with massive destruction. Philosophers and theologians can share in that quest by developing various options in greater detail; by testing the alternatives critically as to their assumptions and implications; and by bringing imagination to bear to reinterpret religious traditions and to break new ground that reveals the significance of the Holocaust and the resources we need to reduce the waste that human power can spew out.

Survivors do not provide ultimate, final answers to complex questions raised by the Holocaust. No one can. The survivors' religious disagreement is substantial, but it is also worth noting that those who affirmed God's reality tended toward a consensus about views they *rejected*. None, for instance, regarded the Holocaust as evil that might really be good in disguise if viewed from a proper perspective. Nor did it seem to them that the Holocaust was a device used by God to refine or to purify moral character through suffering. Also unrepresented was the suggestion that there is an ultimate source of evil, a devil, who coexists with God: God may be the source of evil as well as of good, but God has no peers. At no time, moreover, did the survivors believe that Jews would finally disappear from the earth, and they welcomed the State of Israel as vindication of that trust. But likewise, when questioned whether Israel was worth the Holocaust, their collective response was, "if not a resounding and thunderous no, then certainly an emphatic no, a declination with little hesitation or uncertainty" (p. 246). Indeed if the State of Israel was insufficient to justify the Holocaust, not one "among these 708 twentieth-century Jewish victims...thought the world-to-come—whether as afterlife, heaven, messianic future, resurrection, or whatever a survivor may conceive—was sufficient alone to make sense out of the Holocaust" either (p. 206).

Although it does not follow that the survivors were equally unanimous in rejecting all affirmations of a world-to-come, they were nearly so in denying the theory that those who perished in the Holocaust were being punished by God

for their own sinfulness. More than 70 percent of those who responded to that issue set aside any interpretation that linked the Holocaust to God's wrath or judgment in response to human sin. The Holocaust, they stressed, was humanity's doing, not God's. In emphasizing that point, however, the survivors recognized that the issue of God's relation to the Holocaust is not set aside. Their response to the following question, which merits quotation in full from Brenner's study, made that fact plain.

With regard to the destruction of the Six Million which one of these responses is the most acceptable to you?

- a. It is inappropriate to blame God for the acts of man (man may decide to kill or not to kill).
- b. It is not for us to judge the ways of God.
- c. God was unable to prevent the destruction.
- d. The Holocaust was the will of God (it was part of His divine plan).
- e. Nothing can excuse God for not having saved them. (p. 215.)

Of the 26 percent in Brenner's survey who chose not to answer this question, virtually all were non-believers. Among the remainder, the response most frequently chosen first (34 percent) was (b): it is inappropriate to judge God's ways. This option was followed closely (27 percent) by an emphasis on (a): refusal to blame God for what are human actions. One out of four put (e), the opposite of (a), in first place: God had no excuse for not saving the victims. Overall only 9 percent of the survivors stressed (d): the Holocaust was God's will. Fewer still gave priority to (c): God was unable to prevent the Holocaust.

The configuration of first-choice emphases suggests that Holocaust survivors who believe in God take seriously the reality of human freedom and responsibility. Nonetheless, far from removing puzzles about God, that emphasis on freedom stands by another, namely, that it is not for us to judge the ways of God. But the latter response implies ambivalence as much as piety. In spite of humanity's freedom, or even because of it, the ways of God remain puzzling in light of the Holocaust, an intimation that is reinforced by the fact that hardly any of the survivors would be prepared to place the primary emphasis theologically on the view that God was unable to prevent the destruction.

The opinions of Holocaust survivors are not necessarily normative theologically, but neither are they without significance when compared to some of the theological interpretations of the Holocaust that both Christians and Jews have offered recently. For in one way or another, those interpretations emphasize the very point that the survivors find immensely difficult to accept, namely, that God was somehow unable to prevent the destruction. On the Christian side, a noteworthy example is provided by Paul M. van Buren's *Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality*, the first of a projected four-volume

work. Engaged in a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of Christian thought in light of the Holocaust, the vigor of Jewish religious life throughout the centuries, and the re-emergence of the State of Israel, van Buren does much to overcome Christian triumphalism and the notion that Christianity has superseded or negated Jewish faith. Unfortunately, his suggestions about God's relation to Auschwitz are far less credible than his estimates about how to reconceive the relations between Christians and Jews so that anti-Jewish sentiment in Christianity is laid to rest forever.

Van Buren's theology stresses that Christians worship the God of the Jews, the same God presumably who is the God of the survivors polled in Brenner's survey. Underscoring the difficulties of speaking about God at all after Auschwitz, van Buren tries to formulate a meaningful Christian response to the Holocaust. Like the survivors, van Buren stresses that God has created us free and responsible. To bestow us with those qualities, van Buren believes, is a loving thing for God to do. It also entails that God has "to sit still and to suffer in agony as His children move so slowly to exercise in a personal and loving way the freedom which He has willed for them to have and exercise."<sup>3</sup> Confronted by the question, "Where was God at Auschwitz?", van Buren's understanding is that God was in the midst of that destruction, suffering "in solidarity with His people." The objectives of this suffering God, surmises van Buren, might have included "trying to awaken His creatures to their irresponsibility. Perhaps He was trying, by simply suffering with His people, to awaken His church to a new understanding of love and respect for them." Obviously uneasy about those answers, as well he might be, van Buren adds: "The cost seems out of all proportion to the possible gain, so silence may be the wiser choice" (p. 117). If so, van Buren eschews it and goes on to elaborate his views about God's suffering.

Those views amount to an apologetic defense of God predicated on the assumption that God's creation of human freedom binds God from decisive intervention in human affairs. God could not intervene to stop the Holocaust, asserts van Buren, "without ceasing to be the God of love and freedom who has...conferred responsibility and free creative power on His creatures" (p. 119). Here van Buren begs the question twice over. Responsibility and free creative power are not incompatible with interventions by God unless God or van Buren defines them that way. Moreover, if van Buren or God does define them that way, then one might wonder how that decision is supposed to embody love, seeing that its outworkings in history led to unremitting slaughter in the Holocaust. Van Buren pleads that, if we are to think of God as a parental figure (the imagery is common to both Judaism and Christianity) "then this must surely be an agonizing period in God's life" (p. 153). Well it might be, though less because of van Buren's emphasis that God is bound by the existence of human freedom and more by second thoughts about what God did in creating a world of freedom in which

irresponsible destructiveness destroys more than love appears to save.

About one matter van Buren is perfectly credible: "God is not a God who does it all for His creatures" (p. 151). He may even be correct that if more Christians had acknowledged that fact earlier, millions murdered by Hitler might have been rescued. But if we are to go on to suggest, as van Buren does, that the Holocaust becomes divine revelation, informing us "that God requires that we take unqualified responsibility before Him for His history with us" (p. 181), then at the very least common decency would seem to enjoin us to ask God, or at least van Buren, whether there were not a more effective, less wasteful, way for God to get that message across. Van Buren reads the emergence of the State of Israel in a similar light. That development did occur because of human initiative, but to speak of such effort as containing revelation from God concerning human responsibility should raise still more questions about what God is doing. For however wonderful the State of Israel may be, the Holocaust survivors speak convincingly when they emphasize that in no way is it worth the price of the Holocaust, which has played such an unmistakable role in establishing and in sustaining the State of Israel.

Van Buren's Christian theology tries to retain a God whose goodness is as great as God's suffering and whose love is as vast as God's freedom. As far as history is concerned, however, his account gives God very little freedom. God's power recedes as humanity's emerges. A love that consists of suffering innocence remains. Van Buren believes that Christians take "the crucifixion to be God's greatest act," the very essence of suffering love (p. 115). But van Buren's perspective overlooks the fact that the crucifixion would have been just another Roman execution had it not been succeeded by what certain Jews took to be a substantial intervention in human affairs, namely, the resurrection of Jesus from death itself. At the very core of Christianity, and it poses a serious inconvenience for van Buren's Holocaust theology, is the assertion that God's divine power far exceeds anything that human beings can do. God is not bound by human freedom unless he wants to be. And if God wants to be, so that his presence at Auschwitz is that of suffering with the victims and not interceding on their behalf, then that is a problem for us all—God, Christians, Jews, and everybody else.

A credible Christian theology in a post-Holocaust world neither can nor will want to take God off the hook quite so easily as van Buren does, unless it is true that Christians are simply unwilling to confront the awesome and dreadful possibility that their God of love is at times needlessly and even wantonly involved with evil that did not have to be. "If we are to speak of ourselves as being responsible for history," writes van Buren, "then we shall have to find a way to speak of God that corresponds." (p. 99). True, people are responsible for history, but humanity's responsibility cannot be the whole story. It is irres-

possible, not to say un-Christian, to assign responsibility inequitably. If God exists, God must bear a fair share. God's responsibility would be located in the fact that God is the One who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being. Granted, since we are thrown into history at our birth, we appear in social settings made by human hands. But ultimately those hands cannot account for themselves. To the extent that they are born with the potential and the power to be dirty, credit for that fact belongs elsewhere. 'Elsewhere' is God's address. Stendahl need not have been correct when he remarked that God's only excuse is that he does not exist. Still, to use human freedom and responsibility as a defense for God, we now ought to be mature enough to see, does not ring true. His establishment of that very freedom and responsibility, at least given the precise forms it has taken in history, rightly puts God on trial.

Van Buren remains exceedingly hopeful about human existence after the Holocaust. For having stressed God's limited intervening role in history, he underscores that history shall be redeemed. To transform history into something very different from the slaughter-bench Hegel aptly envisioned it to be, some radical changes are going to be required. The issue is: Who will carry them out? By van Buren's reckoning, the burden of freedom places overwhelming responsibility on human shoulders, unless he reverses himself and suddenly falls back on a more dramatic divine intervention within history than his discerning of the ways of God provides a basis for expecting. For where is the evidence to suggest that, in a post-Holocaust world, human beings have made or are likely to make substantial progress in redeeming history? Who, in short, is going to do the redeeming? Van Buren holds little stock in secular humanity; its ways did too much to pave the way to Auschwitz. Christians, he notes, are declining in absolute numbers in the world. Perhaps, then, the task falls to the Jews. If it does, it is not likely that their human power alone will succeed in turning the world's swords into plowshares and its spears into pruning hooks. If lions and lambs are to lie down together in peace on this earth, nothing less than a massive intervention in history by God appears to be necessary. But given God's continued policy of non-intervention, the historical order will remain less than redeemed. God's promises for such renewal appear to be for "the life to come," if there is one. Meanwhile, Jews and Christians alike are left waiting to see what God's promises are made of, even as they try themselves to make the world less destructive.

The redemption of history is a theme with which post-Holocaust Jewish theologians must wrestle, too, for as Arthur A. Cohen argues in *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*, "redemption is Jewish."<sup>4</sup> That claim requires one to ask: What does redemption mean? Though Cohen underscores not only the Jewish roots of this idea but also that his understanding of redemption

pertains to “the Jewish people, the House of Israel” (p. 108), his references to redemption are riddled with vagueness. Using the term much more than he defines it, Cohen implies that redemption entails more than continuing Jewish existence. That element, he sometimes refers to the “eternal” existence of the Jews, is absolutely fundamental, but Cohen goes on to employ the term in additional ways. For example, “there is,” he says, “no portion of the human earth that does not need redemption in order that growth be renewed” (p. 109). He also speaks of “the promise of redemption” and later of “the last minute of redemption” (pp. 84, 110). He comes closest to clarifying the meaning of such language when he alludes to “the binding up and healing, not of persons, but of peoples,” but little elaboration follows concerning how those ideas should be construed (p. 108). Apparently this binding up and healing are to be actions within history, but the extent to which they can achieve fulfillment there remains obscure. That outcome is not owing entirely to Cohen’s verbal imprecision. It depends more decisively on the Holocaust itself.

Cohen has his own name for the Holocaust. He calls it the *tremendum*. This word, he hopes, will convey a sense of immensity, “a horror that exceeds the category of horror” (p. 31), an event within history but whose “reality exceeds its causalities” (p. 6). The Holocaust, Cohen asserts, “ended forever one argument of history—whether the Jews are a chosen people. They are chosen, unmistakably, extremely, utterly” (p. 11). As Jews were brought to the borders of extinction, a moral and religious abyss scarred existence ultimately. The abyss engulfs redemption. For if the Holocaust and its aftermath reveal advances in technical competence, they unmask the pretension in assertions that “the world grows better or that mankind improves” (p. 47). Yet, insists Cohen, the ultimacy of the Holocaust is not to be confused with finality. Ultimate in its “consummate destructiveness” (p. 48), the Holocaust is not necessarily final, the latter term referring to whether consummate destructiveness is the destiny of human existence and of Jewish life in particular. The ultimacy of the Holocaust, thinks Cohen, is sufficient to require “a redefinition of the reality of God and his relations to the world and man” (p. 84). That redefinition, he recognizes more profoundly than van Buren, must reckon with the fact that God “creates a universe in which such destructiveness occurs” (p. 82). But then Cohen, too, evades the implication that is apparently too scandalous to escape silence, namely, that God is needlessly involved in destruction that is indeed ultimate if not final.

Instead Cohen offers a romanticized God, plus some recommendations for calming spirits troubled by their encounters with divinity during and after Auschwitz. “Creation,” holds Cohen, “is necessity within God,” whose “being is full and plenteous” (p. 90). God is a never-diminished source of “new forms, new beginnings” (p. 91). Human rationality and freedom are God’s creation, but if God is the source of all historical possibilities, men and women are the

ones who enact them. And this enactment is really ours, which is to say that no divine intervention is to be expected. Seriously to wish otherwise, Cohen contends, would be to assume “that the created world is never independent of God” or to deny human life “its essential freedom” (p. 96). But surely this false dichotomy does not exhaust the possibilities, especially if we are dealing with a God whose range of possibilities, no less than God’s being itself, is full and plenteous. In what sense is a freedom that creates Cohen’s *tremendum* to be construed as “essential?” To hold that it is simply begs the question. As for “independent,” that term’s meanings are neither single nor fixed—least of all, one would assume, for God. To rule out God’s intervention in history is to stipulate a meaning for independence and a status for the world that may or may not be the case.

Even more intriguing, as Cohen pens his paean to God’s on-going and ever-new creative action, the connections between those aspects and the hideously bloody history that results recede from view. Granted, Cohen says that “the *tremendum* remains *tremendum*, neither diminished nor explained,” but then he urges his readers to see that God’s “plentitude and unfolding are the hope of our futurity.” If we can do so, he urges, “we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honor, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand” (pp. 95-97). The problem that remains, however, is what the plentitude and unfolding of God still have in store. Underscoring that “the historical is the domain of human freedom” (p. 98), what is in store within history will fall largely to human determination. Here Cohen falls prey to the same probability that ruins van Buren’s hopes for redemption within history, namely, that there is precious little evidence to convince perceptive judgment that humanity’s wasting of life will decline, not to say disappear. That situation, in turn, ultimately traces back to God as the source of our possibilities. The ways in which Cohen’s God is involved in history do not make clear that God deserves only love and honor. Nor does it follow, if we are to speak in those terms, that we love and honor such a God well if all elements of fear and of holding God to account are removed. Thanks to God, as well as to ourselves, the chances here and now of binding up and really healing the wounds inflicted by history appear to be slim—short of a massive intervention on God’s part, which seems not to be in the cards either.

Cohen argues that the Holocaust is not final. Yes, life—including Jewish life—does go on, but the issue is whether anything can happen in this world or in the world to come that will lead us to set aside a judgment that may well be final because it is ultimately true: Human life has emerged within boundaries set by God that make needless waste and wanton destruction all too real. Perhaps in “the last minute of redemption,” to use Cohen’s phrase, God will erase every memory of the Holocaust and win the ovation of love and honor that Cohen

wants for him. Short of such action the ultimacy of the Holocaust remains to impinge on finality. One element of that finality is that God's world needlessly contained a Holocaust that God, if not humanity, could have avoided.

If so, honor and love for God are not necessarily eliminated, though they are rendered difficult and the difficulties are sufficient to move people away from belief in a personal God or in any God at all, as the testimony of survivors indicates. Credible post-Holocaust honor and love for God, if they occur at all, will need to include being for God by being against God, too. This response confesses that God's power is decisive if destruction and death are not to be final. But the same affirmation recognizes that power sufficient to deny finality to destruction and death can be bound by no necessity that makes it powerless to stop a Holocaust.

Arthur Cohen is correct: The Holocaust makes "the sovereignty of evil" seem "more real and immediate and familiar than God" (p. 34). He is correct again when he asserts: "The question...is not how can God abide evil in the world, but how can God be affirmed meaningfully in a world where evil enjoys such dominion" (p. 34). Neither van Buren's suffering God nor Cohen's God of plenteous unfolding fully meets that test. To protect their fundamental goodness, the Gods of these theologians are hamstrung necessarily by human freedom; and yet, even though it cannot be utilized now, they retain power sufficient to assure that redemption will finally arrive. No Holocaust survivor is likely to be swayed by such theological subtleties, which are essentially apologetic attempts to calm dissonance that is never likely to go away after Auschwitz because the feelings in which it roots are deeper-seated, more stubborn, and perhaps more honest than any of our theological theories. That dissonance can be summed up in a few words: If a caring God exists, why didn't that God stop the Holocaust when human beings failed so miserably to do so? To say that God could not stop it is an answer that arouses suspicion at least as much as it lays gut-level questions to rest. For those who cannot lay those questions and suspicions to rest, one alternative will be to deny God or at least to deny that God cares. Another moves in a different direction. It admits that our highest hopes are dashed: Things are not going to work out for the best. Still, they might work out better instead of worse, and since we know that life can be very good—else why the dismay and anger when things turn out otherwise?—then the Holocaust can lead us to stand against despair by affirming that God can stop evil whenever and wherever God chooses to do so. But in doing so men and women also choose the hardest path: For the choice is not only for God when there may be none, or at least none that cares, but also for a God whose goodness is less than perfect because God's involvement with evil is at times more than we can bear. To hope in this God is also to protest against God and vice versa. The significance of this position, it should be emphasized, is *not* to blame God as a way of covering up our human

responsibilities, but rather to intensify honesty with God and with ourselves as a means to deepen compassion for the world. Such positions are taken at the risk of being defeated, but they may also be vindicated. In either case they at least have the decency not to apologize for God at humanity's expense, not to place God's portion of responsibility on human shoulders when the portion that is rightfully ours, limited though it is, still is more than we typically handle as well as we might.

By Reeve Robert Brenner's reckoning, it should be remembered, "nearly three of every four survivors were of the conviction that the Six Million were destroyed only as a consequence of man's inhumanity to man and with no connection whatever to God."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, in one way or another the Holocaust has diminished our sense of God's presence in history. Yet the fact remains that human existence does not account for itself. That fact is enough to keep at least the question of God in our midst. Insofar as the question of God remains alive in the survivor community polled by Brenner, it bears remembering that only five percent "were of the conviction that 'God could not have prevented the Holocaust.' ...For most other survivors, 'a God who is not all-powerful is no God at all'" (p. 231). The views of these survivors are neither normative nor binding on anyone. They may even need to be rejected. At the very least, however, they drive home convincingly that religious questions about the Holocaust have everything to do with power. As Jewish and Christian theologians continue to wrestle with the silence of God, the survivors' testimony is a reminder that the power equation between God and humanity should remain at issue in a world where the Holocaust has happened. Van Buren and Cohen contribute to that understanding, too. By focusing reasons for agreement or disagreement with them, each of us can better discern our way in interpreting what the Holocaust can and cannot, must and must not, mean.

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## NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, trans. Lily Edelman and the author (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 215.
2. Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), p. 21. Additional references are in parentheses within the text.
3. Paul M. van Buren, *Discerning the Way: A Theology of the Jewish Christian Reality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 116. Additional references are in parentheses within the text.
4. Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), p. 108. Additional references are in parentheses within the text.
5. Brenner, p. 230.