

Na`aseh ve Nishma` : Thoughts on Chosen People and Godwrestling

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Though I acknowledge the assets related to digital media, I prefer the traditional method in teaching Jewish Studies at Los Angeles Valley College, a two-year public community college in the San Fernando Valley.¹ In my Jewish Studies classes related to TaNaKh and Rabbinics, I use an historical-critical method that grapples with the biblical axis of God-Torah-Israel centered in two-millennia-old Jewish texts and related literature in the context of the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman era and evolved to the modern era. I limit the straight lecture approach preferring student encounter not encroachment ambience. I impact a teaching moment with a *maggid* teaching lesson. How (*na`aseh*) and Why (*nishma`*) interweaves personality, pedagogy, and personal relevancy. At the annual conference of the 2016 Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, NAPH session, I responded to the charge that "Moses did not have a Ph.D.," and that the Torah cannot be viewed as "factual," with my usual midrashic-linguistic approach: "The terminology I use is 'actuality.' Even though the 'actual' may not be that 'factual,' it is *meaningful* because it is actual for the participant who engages in it." Rather than utilizing what I call "highfalutin language," I encourage the classroom instructors to address the people, right where they're at. I don a Jewish *tallit* and showcase the actual pipe of Hitler's personal prisoner, the Rev.

¹ See Zev Garber, "Teaching Jewish Studies, Hebrew Scriptures, and the Historical Jesus in the Context of Jewish Studies at a Two-Year Public College: Rationale, Objectives, Evaluation," in Z. Garber, ed., *Teaching the Historical Jesus: Issues and Exegesis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015) 13-25.

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Dr. Martin Niemoeller, as I proceed to engage the audience on post-Shoah Jewish and Christian responses, theology and theodicy speaking.²

Thoughts on American Jews and Mosaic Faith

From the earliest biblical record to the eve of Emancipation, Jews took seriously the belief that Israel is the firstborn of God (Exod 4:22), a unique people, chosen from all the nations as God's treasured people (Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18, 19; 28:9, etc.), and singled out for the mission of bringing all life closer to the kingship of God on earth. The mission of Israel was cemented in a mutual covenant of love between God and Israel (Deut 6:5; 7:12 13; 10:15, etc.). This belief helped compensate Jews for their hurts and humiliations of life in exile.

Traditionally defined within and outside of the group as "a people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations" (Num 23:9) Jews sustained this role, for they believed that they were part of "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6), divinely commissioned to advance the day that the "Lord shall be king over all the earth; on that day shall the Lord be one and His name be one" (Zech 14:9). Fulfilling the Torah mandate, "the Lord shall reign for ever and ever" (Exod 15:18).

Enlightenment and Emancipation brought a radical departure from traditional thought patterns and aspirations. Emancipation destroyed the authority of the Jewish community and Enlightenment offered an ideological justification of surrendering the authority of Jewish tradition. The organic relationship of God-Torah-Israel (religion, culture, peoplehood-statehood), was now

² Remarks presented by me at the SBL/NAPH session in San Antonio, Texas, November 21, 2016.

challenged by reason and equalitarianism. Count Clermont Tonnerre's declaration to the French National Assembly in 1791: "To the Jew as individual – everything; to the Jew as a nation – nothing," and the position adopted by the French Great Sanhedrin in February 1807, though bestowing equal civic rights upon Jews, began the process of redefining Jewish doctrine and values.

Unlike the national-religious identifying Jews in the Arab world and in Eastern Europe, Jews of the West now saw themselves as nationals of their countries of citizenship and worshippers in the "Mosaic faith." However, what Jews as individuals may have gained by Emancipation, Jews as a group lost. By leaving the ghetto and attaining the status of citizens, the Western Jews loosened the bounds of Jewish group identity which in many cases led to total assimilation.

All modern varieties of Judaism react to a greater or lesser degree to emancipation. The influence is greater in America where, unlike in Western Europe, little pre-Emancipation Jewish bias had to be overcome. The triumph of American constitutionalism welcomed Jews as full participants into a society of secularism and freedom of religious interpretation. Consequently, the more than three centuries of American Jewish experience have produced multiple interpretations of what it means to be a contemporary Jew. However, studies on the subject conclude that there is a crisis in American Jewish identity. Hence in post-World War II era, significant numbers of Jewish scholars are haunted by memory of the Shoah, ecstatic by the emergence of the State of Israel, and concerned with the paradoxical condition of the Jewish minority in America. The universal transcendence of America's "melting pot" credo has eroded, but not completely, the national and religious Jewish particularism of the doctrine of "The Chosen People."

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Godwrestling in the Night

Theology. Theodicy. Jew and Christian together confront the ashes of the night. Scriptural *din torah* infuses their dialogical Godwrestling on sacred texts, which embraces doctrinal, ethical, religious, and social concerns. I submit that the message of Auschwitz for the Jew and Christian is not survival alone. There is something more important than physical survival, and that is preventing moral bankruptcy. When Auschwitz (survival at any price) contends with Sinai and Calvary (moral standards), Sinai and Calvary must prevail. Nazi Germany is an example of what can happen when Auschwitz prevails. On European anti-Semitism, Sigmund Freud argued that the practitioners were “badly christened,” and were forced into Christianity by bloody compulsion. Their true essence, barbaric polytheists, subliminally rejected the triumphant Church militant. So “(T)he hatred for Judaism is at bottom hatred for Christianity, and it is not surprising that in the German National Socialist revolution this close connection of the two monotheistic religions finds clear expression in the hostile treatment of both.”³

Holy Scriptures teaches that God’s proclivity is with the destiny of Israel. Moses professes that the Children of Israel are eternal and Paul confesses that the foundation of *Heilsgeschichte* is founded in their being⁴ and both acknowledge that their fate testifies to the transcending power of God in history. In Exodus 32, Moses defends Israel who is referenced as a stiffnecked people but in whom God’s moral self in history is rooted. Moses argues that however just God’s position is (e.g., the Golden Calf apostasy), His decision to destroy them would be *the sine qua non* factor for

³ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), p. 117.

⁴ Romans 9:1-6 and Romans 11.

the Egyptians (that is to say, the nations of the world) not to expect any notion of heavenly justice. The Torah declares, *tsedek, tzedek tirdof* (“justice, justice shall you pursue”)⁵ and Moses requests that God must be perceived as doing no less. Also at stake is God’s covenantal promise to the Patriarchs that He will enable their “offspring (to be) as numerous as the stars of heaven” (verse 13). And the Lord relented and “renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people” (verse 14).

So what to make of Auschwitz? In the fire of the crematoria, God’s Child (Exod 4:23) was cremated. Was this ultimate crime for the sake of the covenant and for the glory of His Name? In Egyptian bondage of yore, God heard the cry of the people, and God remembered His covenant with the Patriarchs, and He redeemed. The thousands and thousands of Jews from the *shtetlakh* (Jewish villages) of Eastern Europe refused to abandon the yoke of the covenant. Their oath of survival, mixed with dirges of pain, hoped that God would stop the indescribable *churban*. But Heaven shed no tears. The position that the Shoah twins Jewish history and the Jewish conception of God is decisive and stark. Are we to conclude that in the “Flicker of the Jews’ last hour, Soon Jewish God, Your eclipse?”⁶

The question underscores the perpetual dilemma in covenant theology. Were the *Endlösung* be fully enacted there would be no covenant, since on the altar of Auschwitz, the commitment to the Torah directive, “Choose life”⁷ would go up in flames. Were the Jews treated

⁵ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁶ Jacob Glatstein. On Jacob Glatstein, the man and his poetry (Yiddish), see my entries in the *Reference Guide to Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Gale Group, St. James Press, 2002), pages 110-111, and 466-467.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19.

as ordinary victims of Nazi incarceration, this would forsake the ultimate concern of covenantal belief. In Auschwitz, God is challenging Israel's commitment to the covenant. In actuality, the Jew is also challenging God's commitment to the covenant. In the context of covenant theology as played out in the death camps, mutual challenges are expected. Indeed, these challenges do not diminish the paradox of Auschwitz but serve to make the issue more significant and more troubling, and therefore also more of hope. In the heat of the Nazi inferno, the unconditional commitment of both partners is tested and endures.

And what to say to the post-Shoah Jew and Christian? To honor the memory of the brutally murdered, we must never forget nor forgive. True, "in (y)our mouth" we cannot still the anguish cry of bodiless millions, but we can restore flesh to bones, personality to numbers, and novelty to novum – a doable memorial to those who suffered in the consuming fire and we believe were sustained by the supernal light which does not consume nor diminish.⁸

⁸ Thoughts extracted from Zev Garber, "One in Christ" The View from Torah and Shoah," in *One in Christ Jesus: Essays on Early Christianity and "All that Jazz," in Honor of S. Scott Bartchy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014) 109-11.

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