

Memories without people

Trude Weiss-Rosmarin on 'theologising' the Holocaust

THE "revisionism" of Arthur Butz's "The Hoax of the Twentieth Century," which denies that there was a Holocaust with the murder of six million Jews, is less dangerous than the many books and essays on "Holocaust theology."

These works allege that "God was silent" during the Auschwitz years and that He was "hiding His face" and "closing His ears," so as not to see and hear the death agony and the cries of the martyred victims.

It is dangerous to say that "God was silent" while the gas chambers and crematoria worked overtime. If God was silent and did not respond to the prayers of those who turned to Him for help, why should the Pope have spoken out? And if God did not act to stop the genocide, why should Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill have done so?

Such questions as "Where was God during the Auschwitz years?" and "Why was He silent?" are appropriate in the context of a concept of God which assumes that He responds and acts as humans do.

True, the Hebrew Bible speaks of God as acting and responding as humans do. But the authentic teaching of the Sages of the Talmud is that "the Torah speaks in human language," that is, it ascribes to God human actions and responses because this is how the Eternal One can be made intelligible for us.

Although we speak of God as if He

Although we speak of God as if He were human — and our prayers address Him as father and king, affirming His mercy and goodness, and petitioning for His help — Maimonides' decree is that "nothing of humanness is to be associated with God" in Jewish belief.

Reliance upon God in situations where human action is required is courting disaster. "The earth was given to mankind," and we must take charge of life.

The Jewish belief in divine providence does not justify relying upon God "to act" for us. Judaism does not expect God to interfere in the affairs of men and the laws of nature.

This is why Jewish law legislates for life-sustaining and life-saving actions that desecrate the Sabbath and set aside the Law. "One does not rely upon a miracle to happen." God will not perform miracles so as to save us from evils we have caused and from evils we are capable of preventing.

Several years ago, during the dancing-with-the-Torah festivities on Simchat Torah, the Lubavitcher Rebbe suddenly felt faint and complained of chest pains. Immediately, eight heart specialists were summoned, the Rebbe's room was equipped with everything needed for intensive care (he did not want to go to a hospital), and an ambulance stood by to take him to the hospital if necessary.

necessary.

Of course, the Chasidim recited Psalms and prayed for the Rebbe's recovery, but neither the Rebbe nor his many thousands of followers the world over relied upon or expected God to act instead of the Rebbe's physicians.

While "Holocaust theologies" provide implicit apologies for those who did not act so as to stop the Nazis' death machines, those who "mystify" the Holocaust as the "Great Evil" which we cannot understand remove it from fact and history into the realm of the "ineffable." I share the apprehensions of Professor Yehuda Bauer, of the Hebrew University, about mystifying the Holocaust.

Bauer acknowledges that "the great philosophical questions can be posed [in connection with the Holocaust], but very few of them can be satisfactorily answered." This is why I oppose "theologising the Holocaust" as the tendency to blame "the absence of God in Auschwitz" instead of the presence of those who committed the mass murders and those who looked on.

The Holocaust years challenged civilised mankind to speak and act because God, as understood by mature Jewish thought, is not a "super-policeman."

Bringing the historical perspective to bear upon the Holocaust also

requires one, as Bauer sees it, to deflate the claims of "the witnesses" — those witnesses who mystify by proclaiming that the Holocaust is "ineffable" and that what was done in the Nazi murder camps cannot really be told.

Bauer warns that "were the Holocaust to remain the province of only those who were direct witnesses,

only those who were direct witnesses, it would not become the terrible warning for all the rest of us that it should be."

One cannot do justice to the Holocaust as an historical fact by telling tales and witnessing. Elie Wiesel, the most gifted and most moving teller of tales, concludes some of his lectures with this emotional mystification: "Let us tell tales . . . But there is one tale which will never be told. And soon we will not even know its name. Nor its secret."

"Such tales" mystify. The Holocaust, however, is a stark and sinister fact of history. The facts of history are obfuscated, Bauer writes, by "false over-emotionalism and mythological extravagancies."

Professor Jacob Neusner correctly noted that "anyone who could cite a few passages from Scripture and put on a good cry in public became a Jewish theologian; and the more tears, the more profound he was regarded when theologising the Holocaust."

Although "the Holocaust must not remain the province of those who were direct witnesses," the factual reports and memories of these witnesses are of supreme importance: diaries, archives, memoirs, and the testimonies at the Nuremberg, Auschwitz, Eichmann and other trials.

There are hundreds of thousands of historical documents in the archives of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, of Yivo in New York, and of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York and London, the principal depositories of Holocaust documentation. They will challenge many generations of scholars who work with the tools of the trained historian, *the only tools* for the study and understanding of the Holocaust.

