

Faith after the Holocaust



Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits

FAITH AFTER
THE HOLOCAUST

THE KLEINBART EDITION

Maggid Books

Faith after the Holocaust
Eliezer Berkovits

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

© 1973, 2019 The Estate of Eliezer Berkovits

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *Torah Education in Israel*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case
of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-497-1, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

Dedicated in loving memory of

DORA BACKENROTH KLEINBART A”H

דבורה בת ר' יצחק משה ע”ה

A Holocaust Survivor, scion of the Backenroth family, she never lost her faith in Hashem. That faith enabled her to move beyond the horrific nightmares from which she suffered as a result of those years of fire to live a life imbued with Torah and mitzvot

and

DAVID J. KLEINBART A”H

דוד יעקב בן משה ע”ה

Fortunate enough to arrive in the United States shortly before commencement of the years of fire, he brought with him a love of his people and their eternal yearning for the re-establishment of a renewed Jewish Commonwealth.

Both were privileged to see the establishment of the State of Israel, and together built a home faithful to the traditions of the Jewish people in which love for the Jewish nation and the State of Israel remained central and raised a son who remains loyal to those traditions.

In Loving Memory of
RABBI ELIEZER AND MRS. SALI BERKOVITS, Z”L

*We are eternally grateful for their many
years of guidance and friendship.
We are confident that the republication of
Faith after the Holocaust will inspire a
new generation as it inspired us.*

**HOWARD N. AND JACQUELINE GILBERT
STEPHEN J. AND ELIZABETH LANDES
JACK AND ANA BERGER**

Contents

Preface ix

Introduction: Approaching the Holocaust xi

Chapter 1: Man and the Holocaust 1

Chapter 2: The Vanishing West? 35

Chapter 3: God and the Holocaust 67

Chapter 4: The Historical Context of the Holocaust 87

Chapter 5: The Witness 117

Chapter 6: In Zion Again 147

Epilogue 163

*Afterword: The Content and Context
of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits's Faith
By Zev Eleff* 175

Index 191

Preface

The main thesis of this volume was worked out during the critical weeks that led up to the Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab nations, and was completed during those drama-filled six days; the last word of its heart was written practically when the last shot was fired in that war. It was written under almost unbearable tension, and against darkest fears and anxieties. The threat of another Holocaust was hanging over the Jewish people. This destruction would have been final for all Israel the world over, and not only for the Jewish people in the State of Israel. Our generation could not have survived another Holocaust, and certainly not this one. The State of Israel was a Jew's only comfort – although not really quite a healing one – after the extermination of six million of his people.

In spite of the fears and notwithstanding the tension, carried along by one's faith in the immortality of Judaism and the Jewish people, it was possible to write. That faith had to be affirmed anew with every word, for it was being tried and tested in the crucible of a fiery hour of Jewish and world destiny. Not once did I have to ask myself whether this faith in the eternity of Jewish survival was, perhaps, only a latter-day version of the "lying words," so radically rejected by the prophet Jeremiah: "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the

Faith after the Holocaust

Lord.” No, the State of Israel is not the Temple of the Lord. But God can do without His Temple; He cannot do without Israel, the people, nor can He, in this post-Holocaust phase of world history, do without Israel, the state. It was this faith that I was affirming with every word I wrote in those critical weeks before the war and during the six days of the war. To wait and to see what was going to happen and then to write, would have been a betrayal and a desecration.

Since those days, the main thesis, which was meant to be essentially a confrontation with the Holocaust of European Jewry, evolved into an examination of the Jewish experience in a world that had experienced the Holocaust and of a world history seen against the backdrop of the Holocaust.

“A Theology of Intolerance,” in chapter 1, was published several years ago in the magazine *Continuum*; the two sections of the second chapter, “Judaism in the Post-Christian Era” and “The Death of a God,” in a somewhat different form, were previously published in *Judaism*; and part of “The Nemesis of Power History” in chapter 5 also appeared previously in *Tradition*. They have been incorporated in this volume with the kind permission of these publications, to whom we hereby extend our thanks.

Eliezer Berkovits
22 Tammuz 5732
3 July 1972

Introduction

Approaching the Holocaust

There are two principle approaches to the Holocaust of European Jewry: the attitude of pious submission to it as a manifestation of the divine will, and the more frequently met attitude of questioning and doubt, a position that may ultimately lead to outright rebellion against the very idea of a beneficent providence. The rebellion may reach quite deep, in which case it may appear as the Jewish version of contemporary radical theology. Its final emphasis may lie in the phrases that God is dead, and life, absurd. In truth, however, the decisive question is rather: Who is the one who truly relates to this awesome issue? Is it not the person who actually experienced it himself, in his own body and soul, who actually entered the hell of the ghettos, the concentration camps, and the crematoria, with his wife and children, his family and friends, with innumerable fellow Jews from all over Europe, who lived, suffered, and endured, or who perished there? Or is it someone who read about it, heard about it, may have, perhaps, even experienced it in his identifying imagination? The response of these two cannot – dare not – be the same. Those who were there responded on the basis of their own experience, which was unique, incomparable, that stands in all human history in a class by itself. However much, and however deeply, those who were not there may identify with the sufferings of the victims, their

Faith after the Holocaust

experience remains forever merely a vicarious shadow of the actual event, as removed from the reality of the Holocaust as is the rather comfortable scholarship of the radical theologians of our day from the universe of the concentration camps and the crematoria. Their response, based on their vicarious experience, will be as shadowy and unreal as the experience itself. Needless to say, what applies to the rebellion of the radical theologian applies with equal validity to the pious submission and the acceptance of the Holocaust as an act of faith, by those who were not there either. Their response is no less unrelated to the actual event than is the response of the rebels and disbelievers. Neither of them succeeds in establishing genuine contact with the world of the *Shoa*.

Those of us who were not there must, before anything else, heed the responses of those who were, for theirs alone are the authentic ones. Many who were there lost their faith. I can understand them. A Hell fiercer than Dante's was their lot. I believe that God Himself understands and does not hold their loss of faith against them. Such is my faith in God. Can I, therefore, adopt their attitude for myself and rebel and reject? I was not there myself. I am not Job. I am only his brother. I cannot reject because there were others, too, in the thousands, in the tens of thousands, who were there and did not lose their faith; who accepted what happened to them in awesome submission to the will of God. I, who was not there, cannot reject, because to reject would be a desecration of the sacrifice of the myriads who accepted their lot in faith. How dare I reject, if they accepted! Neither can I accept. I who was not there, because I was not there, dare not accept, dare not submit, because my brothers in their tens of thousands, who did go through that hell, did rebel and did reject. How dare I, who was not there, accept their superhuman suffering and submit to it in faith!

I stand in awe before the memory of the *kedoshim* who walked into the gas chambers with the *Ani Maamin* – I believe! – on their lips. How dare I question, if they did not question! I believe, because they believed. And I stand in awe before the *kedoshim*, before the memory of the untold suffering of innocent human beings who walked to the gas chambers without faith, because what was imposed upon them was more than man can endure. They could not believe any longer; and now I do not know how to believe, so well do I understand their disbelief. In

Introduction: Approaching the Holocaust

fact, I find it easier to understand the loss of faith in the KZ [*Konzentrationslager*, Nazi concentration camp] than the faith preserved and affirmed. The faith affirmed was superhuman; the loss of faith – in the circumstances – human. Since I am only human, what is human is nearer to me than the superhuman. The faith is holy; but so, also, is the disbelief and the religious rebellion of the concentration camps holy. The disbelief was not intellectual but faith crushed, shattered, pulverized; and faith murdered a millionfold is holy disbelief. Those who were not there and, yet, readily accept the Holocaust as the will of God that must not be questioned, desecrate the holy disbelief of those whose faith was murdered. And those who were not there, and yet join with self-assurance the rank of the disbelievers, desecrate the holy faith of the believers.

One may, perhaps, go even further and say: The pious believer who was not there but meekly submits, not to his own destruction, but to that of six million of his brethren, insults with his faith the faith of the concentration camps. The *kedoshim*, who affirmed their faith in the God of Israel in the light of the doom that surrounded them may well say to such an eager believer: “What do you know about believing, about having faith? How dare you submit to suffering that is not yours. Calm yourselves and be silent.” But they, too, who were not there and yet declare from the housetops their disbelief in the God of Israel, insult the holy disbelief of the concentration camps. They who lost their faith there may well turn to our radical theologians, saying: “How dare you speak about loss of faith; what do you know about losing faith, you who have never known what we have known, who never experienced what we have experienced?” In the presence of the holy faith of the crematoria, the ready faith of those who were not there, is vulgarity. But the disbelief of the sophisticated intellectual in the midst of an affluent society – in the light of the holy disbelief of the crematoria – is obscenity.

We are not Job and we dare not speak and respond as if we were. We are only Job's brother. We must believe, because our brother Job believed; and we must question, because our brother Job so often could not believe any longer. This is not a comfortable situation, but it is our condition in this era after the Holocaust. In it alone do we stand at the threshold to an adequate response to the *Shoa* – if there be one. It is from this threshold alone that the break in and the breakthrough must

Faith after the Holocaust

come. It must come without the desecration of the holy faith or of the holy loss of faith of the Jewish people in the European hell. And if there be no breakthrough, the honest thing is to remain at the threshold. If there is no answer, it is better to live without it than to find peace either in the sham of an insensitive faith or in the humbug of a disbelief entertained by people who have eaten their fill at the tables of a satiated society.

Chapter 1

Man and the Holocaust

THE ACQUIESCENCE OF THE WEST

Since history is, first, man's responsibility, we should begin our examination by questioning and discussing man himself. Perhaps even more important than the question, Where was God? is, Where was Man? It is not our task to tell the story of mankind's behavior in view of the *hurban* (destruction) of European Jewry. Enough has been written about practically the whole of Europe gone mad with anti-Jewish barbarism. The Poles, the Lithuanians, the Ukrainians, the Slovaks, the Hungarians, the Romanians did not need much encouragement from the Germans. Many of them outdid the Germans in cruelty and inhumanity, if that was at all possible. Some of the French, the Dutch, the Czechs, were not far behind. Our main concern here is with the attitude of the free world, the Allies, the churches, and some of the neutral nations. Again, it is not our intention to tell the story. It has been told well by qualified authors. Books like *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, by Guenter Lewy, and *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, by Arthur D. Morse, describe and document with frightening impact not only the apathy of the world in the face of the catastrophe, but its actual genocide-encouraging silence or even active moral sympathy with the gruesome facts of the devilish

Faith after the Holocaust

extermination of a people. Our concern is with the moral aspect of that attitude and its consequences for the present human predicament. For this purpose we shall discuss some of the major features of the so-called “apathy” of the free world. In this connection I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness especially to the work of Morse, on whose excellent presentation of this dismal story I chiefly rely. However, the conclusions we reach are also supported by the work of Lewy, as well as by the Hebrew memoirs of Rabbi M. D. Weissmandel, *Min Hameitzar*, not to mention a great deal of other literature one has read in the course of the years.

1

One often hears and reads of the apathy of the major governments among the Allies towards the Nazi-German crime against the Jewish people. The truth, however, is that it was not only apathy but often actual sabotaging of possible plans of rescue. There were two farcical conferences on refugees of Evian and of Bermuda, which proved to the Germans that the world was not prepared to lend a helping hand to the Jews. On the contrary, they served as actual encouragement to Nazi Germany to go ahead with its plans of extermination. In the earlier days of the war, the State Department in particular even made every possible effort to suppress information about the German barbarities for fear that this might increase public pressure to do something positive to help the victims. Actually, there was little need to worry on that account. Morse reports the public-opinion poll taken by *Fortune* magazine in April 1939, after the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, on the question of whether, as a member of the Congress, one would vote “yes” or “no” on a bill to open the doors of the United States to refugees from Europe beyond the limits of the immigration quota system. The answers were devastating: 83 percent said no, 8.3 percent were undecided, and only 8.7 percent said yes. As the editors of *Fortune* summarized it: An American tradition was put to the test and it was repudiated by a majority of nearly ten to one. Not only was the quota system never relaxed during the entire period of mass slaughter, but every possible administrative hurdle was erected before the would-be immigrant, so that only a small percentage of the allotted quota was ever used.

Perhaps the most shameful forms of active acquiescence of the American and the British governments in the Hitlerite plan of extermination were the *St. Louis* and *Struma* episodes. The story of both refugee ships has been repeated often. There is little doubt that the refusal of the British government to allow the *Struma* passengers to proceed to Palestine, and that of the Americans to provide even a temporary sanctuary to the *St. Louis* refugees, of whom the great majority were holding U.S. immigration quota numbers entitling them to enter the U.S.A. within the near future, were actual death sentences. The passengers of the *Struma* duly perished; that the same fate did not immediately overtake those on the *St. Louis* was not the fault of the U.S.A. As their ship was approaching Germany on its return trip, Belgium, Holland, France, and Britain finally took pity on the doomed refugees and jointly found shelter for them in their respective territories. How many of them did perish ultimately when the Germans swept into Western Europe no one knows. Significant in the cases of the *Struma* and the *St. Louis* is the fact that both times mighty nations refused to help, not in the name of some universally valid principle, but in order to protect man-made rules and principles, like immigration quotas and the British policy on Palestine, reasons that had of course no moral authority in the face of such unprecedented humanitarian emergency. One should recall the reason why, for instance, an American secretary of state refused to grant asylum to people whose forced return to Germany meant certain death. Said he, with deep patriotic conviction: "I took an oath to protect the flag and obey the laws of my country and you are asking me to break those laws."¹ Is there much difference between such an argument and that of the Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg and after, who pleaded their oath to the Führer and their country? There may be a difference in degree, but none in kind.

It was not even possible to get an unequivocal official condemnation of the Nazi crimes against the Jews from the Allied governments. When, in 1940, news reached the outside world of the deportations, in most inhuman conditions, of tens of thousands of Jews from the Reich

1. Quoted by Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 30.

Faith after the Holocaust

to questionable destinations in Poland, one assistant secretary of state submitted a memorandum to his department in which he stated that even if only 20 percent of the reports were true, it raised a problem that “ought to enlist our humanitarian interest We cannot be party to any ultimate arrangement which sanctions that kind of cruelty on an organized scale.”² He was wrong. According to the answer he was given the mass murders were a domestic matter, completely within the jurisdiction of Germany; furthermore, since the publication of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, it had been known that “these poor people would be subjected to all kinds of improper treatment.”³ It appears it was the opinion of the State Department that one’s “humanitarian interest” was sufficiently engaged by referring to the victims as “poor people.” It showed where the American government’s sympathies lay. Nothing more was required since what was happening was not more serious than “improper treatment” of whose eventual approach the world had been given due notice.

During the entire period of the genocide perpetrated on the Jewish people there was not a single united official condemnation by the Allies of the crime. The Moscow Declaration of 1943 that warned the war criminals made mention of numerous crimes, but not a word was mentioned about the Jews, who had been singled out for hatred, humiliation, and destruction by the Germans. Was this not an actual signal given to Germany to continue with its plans against the Jews?

Every attempt to rescue larger numbers of Jews – and there were such possibilities – was stifled, especially by the British Foreign Office because, in the words of an American ambassador, the Foreign Office was “concerned with the difficulties of disposing of any considerable number of Jews should they be rescued.”⁴ In view of the record, Arthur D. Morse’s view is fully justified when he states: “The possibility of mass rescue threatened England’s Palestine policies; the vision of Jews streaming to Palestine seemed to upset Whitehall more than the vision of Jews walking to their death in the gas chambers.”⁵ One might add only that

2. Ibid., p. 291.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., pp. 85, 336.

5. Ibid., p. 335.

not only was Whitehall more upset by such a vision, but so were most other governments of the world more upset by the vision of Jews finding even temporary refuge on their shores than by the vision of the gas chambers and crematoria.

However, not only did most of the nations resist opening the gates of their lands to rescue efforts, they even refused to undertake any kind of action that might have interfered with the smooth running of the daily death transports to the concentration camps in Poland. There were military reasons for not bombing the railway lines leading to Auschwitz and to the other camps. But surely, they could have been sabotaged by the underground and the resistance movements. In fact, the Jews themselves could have done it, had they been given an opportunity. At a time when 700,000 Jews were still alive in Hungary, hundreds of Palestinian Jews were waiting ready to be parachuted into that country. Their presence might have made all the difference in retarding and, perhaps, even preventing the extermination of Hungarian Jewry. It was also in the military interest of the Allies. It was rejected for political reasons: it would have implied a recognition of Palestinian Jewry as a partner in the Allied struggle. The camp and the railway lines were not bombed for military reasons; Jews were not allowed to help themselves for political reasons. M. D. Weissmandel, in *Min Hameitzar*, tells how the Germans and their accomplices in Czechoslovakia and Hungary were wont to joke: The safest way to get vital military transports to the fronts was to put some Jews in them and write on cars in large letters: This is a Jew transport to an extermination camp. Thus it was sure not to be molested by the Allies. This is the most devastating moral condemnation of the attitude of the Allied powers to the Jewish catastrophe.

Most revealing of the mood of the times are the arguments used by the opponents of a proposed senatorial resolution to admit twenty thousand children from Germany. Some maintained that the country would be flooded with foreigners who would try to run it differently than desired by "the old stock"; some, that what was intended was not really a refugee bill, since most of those to be admitted would be Jews; some saw in it a response to foreign nationalistic or racial groups. Most original was the claim of those who feared that if the United States of America were to admit the number of children suggested, it would no

Faith after the Holocaust

longer be able to guarantee to its own children their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The prospective young immigrants, under fourteen years of age, were described as “thousands of motherless, embittered, persecuted children of undesirable foreigners,” potential leaders of revolt against the American form of government. They were also called potential Communists, of whom there were already too many of their kind trying to overthrow “our government.” One sees the arguments were very much like those of the Nazis themselves, who considered every Jew, men, women and children, as a Communist criminal. In essence there was no difference between the murderers of these children and those who refused to save them. Can one think of a more hypocritical reason for not saving children from persecution and death than the one put forward by the American Legion that “it was traditional American policy that home life should be preserved and that the American Legion therefore strongly oppose the breaking up of families, which would be done by the proposed legislation”?⁶ Obviously, in the minds of these people “the traditional American policy” was by far superior to the tradition of those cruel Jewish parents who were willing to part with their children rather than perish together with them in the bliss of family communion in the concentration camps (where, of course, in fact husbands and wives, parents and children were forcibly separated from each other). But this kind of Americanism was perhaps surpassed by that of Congressman Karl E. Mundt, who was against the relaxation of the immigration laws in order to save the Jewish victims of Nazi Germany because “it was not the American way to single out one group for special consideration.”⁷ No American idea was safe from being used in the noble effort to make sure that as many Jews as possible would remain behind the walls of the Nazi fortress. The children’s bill was defeated and the proud republic, whose vast territory had only recently been purloined from the Indians, was saved.

The Nazis had a comparatively easy time of it. There was great understanding evinced for their antisemitism the world over. After all, hatred and suspicion of the Jew were deeply rooted in the Christian

6. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

civilization of the West. The venom had been spread for many centuries. What the world did not realize was that one cannot revive old slumbering hatreds and prejudices and render them respectable without debauching the moral foundations of an entire civilization. To what extent demoralization had engulfed the West may be gauged by comparing the attitudes of successive American governments toward pogroms and Jewish persecutions in Russia, Romania, and Turkey in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the forbearance toward Nazi Germany. In 1902, for instance, notwithstanding their persecution the position of the Jews in Romania was idyllic compared with that of the Jews under the German yoke forty years later. Yet, an American government found it appropriate to protest to Romania against her treatment of the Jews for the reason “that it could not be a tacit party to such an international wrong.” The realization was still alive that to remain silent would make one a party to the wrong.

Forty years later, in the presence of far greater wrongs, the conscience of the world had become insensitive to such considerations, and the nations became not only tacit parties, but, through their attitude of active refusal to help, active accomplices in the greatest crime in history. By that time, a high official in the State Department complained about the publicity that had been given to the fate of the Jew by “Jewish interests.”⁸ By then the fate of the Jew in the world had become, in the most democratic country in the world, purely a matter of Jewish interest. Whereas a generation before the United States government spoke up on behalf of the victims of persecution “in the name of humanity,” now such matters, in the opinion of a high government official, had only “a remote humanitarian” interest for the general public and its representatives in Congress.⁹ The Hitlerite demoralization of the West had reached such a stage that normal humanitarian dictates of man’s conscience had lost their commanding quality. The degradation of the Western conscience is correctly reflected in the words of the Yiddish poet, Itzhak Katzenelson, whose life, with just a little less indifference, could easily have been saved: “Sure enough, the nations did not interfere, nor did they protest, nor shake their heads, nor did they warn the murderers, never a murmur.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 250.

Faith after the Holocaust

It was as if the leaders of the nations were afraid that the killings might stop.”¹⁰ He was not altogether right. In March 1944, there was a murmur from President Roosevelt and quite an audible one. Katzenelson never heard it. By the time the news might have reached the concentration camps he was dead, as were the overwhelming majority of his six million brothers and sisters. There were some high-minded individuals who fully understood what was at stake. One of them formulated the issue clearly in the case of the struggle for the admission of the children from Germany. It was, he said, “whether the American people have lost their ability to respond to such tragic situations as this one. If it turns out that we have lost that ability, it will mean that much of the soul has gone out of America.”¹¹ He was right not only as regards the question of the children, but concerning the more comprehensive issue of saving a helpless people condemned to extermination. Nor was the challenge addressed to America alone, but to all the free nations. The soul had gone out, not only of America, but out of the majority of the Western nations. A Jew, of course, familiar with the history of his nation within the domain of Western civilization, might well be wondering how much soul was ever present in that civilization.

2

The wonder about the quality of the soul of the West is never more justified than when one considers the official attitude of Christianity toward the Nazi crime against the Jewish people. There were some courageous spiritual leaders of Christianity that spoke up strongly against the persecution. There were quite a few, in the clergy in France and Holland who, at the risk of their own lives, did their utmost to help the persecuted. Needless to say, in relationship to the magnitude of the catastrophe all their magnificent efforts were only marginal. The situation demanded the arousal of Christianity by an official policy of the churches to protest, to condemn, and to save. But, in the words of Katzenelson, from the churches in their official capacity there was no interference, no head-shaking, never a murmur. There was no difference in this regard

10. *Ibid.*, p. 347.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 259.