

Through God's Storm

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The Holocaust is a horror that should need no summary. As such a summation would only be to detail a list of inexhaustible realities which humanity has made abject. The impact of the Holocaust on thought could not be encapsulated by sheer representation of factual recitation as the weight of the event can be born differently based on the individual. However, from the fen left in its wake, familiar and similar questions do arise. For some, it asks the question of morality and responsibility in a “modern age”, and others of the culpability and responsibility of the perpetrators and onlookers. For many, the problem of the Holocaust remains bound in the realm of humanity, a grim reminder of its endo-cannibalistic nature, somewhat of a historical *momento mori*. However, for others the issue transcends humanity and rises upon black wings to strike at the very gates of heaven. It is an issue too great to be left un-reconciled by God. The following essay entails an argument between two important Jewish philosophers and their conflicting views concerning the matter of existence with God after the Holocaust.

Though the severity of the Holocaust is not reserved for any one group, be they religious or simply human, the Shoah presents itself as an issue for Judaism in a regrettably special and existential way, in fact, in many special and lamentable ways. Not only are Jews of the central victims of the Holocaust, but the centrality of their persecution create an enormous problem and question in regards to their relationship with God, in the very same way that the Holocaust redefines and places into new scopes Hobbles' statement *homo hominis lupus est*¹. Jews were aware that God hides his face, yet the Holocaust can be seen as a testament to just how far He is. Although the problems presented are as nebulous as they are numerous, of these issues we can somewhat narrow our focus in regards to the action, or rather, inaction of God in the world. How accountable is the permissibility of the world's events to Him, what are we to make of these actions and thus to finally ask can we follow Him, and what is His nature?

The issue will thus be explored by looking at two prominent Jewish philosophers: Abraham Heschel and Martin Buber. It is important to qualify them as philosophers and not merely theologians as the manner in which they address their theological problems with the Holocaust make it so that it is not strictly a religious issue, even if it deals with the Jewish God. As the issue can be taken in an abstract form and applied to the overall human condition. It is, how to continue belief in an idea when an event has occurred which seemingly denies that belief in its totality. This idea is not merely a thought; it is a promise, an ideology, a philosophy, a moral charge, a promise and a way of existence. What can one do, how can one hold onto a belief that is so strong it may indeed be seen as being ontological in the face of its adversity. However, more must first be said in regards to our two philosophers.

Martin Buber is an important thinker both in Jewish life, philosophy and the Jewish Hasidic movement. Living in Germany until 1939, Buber's most famous work is his book *I and Thou*. This details his idea of a relationship with people, the world and God expressed in the form of an I-Thou relationship. For Buber, it is only possible to truly know God in terms of an I-

Thou relationship. Thus the interactions one has with the external world is done by embracing that with which one is having a dialogue with by virtue of its own nature and not imposing presuppositions upon it.² In this way a dialogue is created as there is no barrier that the self imposes between it and that with which it interacts externally, and thus it becomes a shared dialogue. The idea of a monologue is created by an I-It relationship, where you see something only through the imposition of your ideas and conceptions upon it.³ What this culminates to is that everyday existence is a potential mode for dialogue. It is only the I-Thou dialogue through which one can have an experience of the divine. The Holocaust can clearly be seen as a problem here as it essentially negates this I-Thou experience. The veil in this instance is too deep to be penetrated, God's words too far away, and thus the I-Thou experience is almost unattainable, perhaps even undesirable.

Heschel is one of the few Jewish theologians who is widely read by both Jews and non-Jews. This is partly due to the nature of his religious writing as it can apply to more than the strictly religious, strongly empowered by use of an emotive language. Of his many books, his ultimate work is titled *A Passion for Truth*, and it is in this text where our problem shall be raised. Heschel introduces his book with a discussion on the two forces most important in his religious life, the Baal Shem Tov, and Rabbi of Heschel's youth Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Koztker. What is important about these two is that the former is the founder of the Hasidic movement, and it is with him that Heschel says he finds his soul at home.⁴ In contrast is the Kotzker, who leads Heschel to question and think critically, placing nearly insurmountable obstacles in Heschel's path. As Heschel says: "I was taught about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect the immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way."⁵ Heschel stands in the middle of a scale where one balance is lifted light in its teaching of song and promise, while the other lies heavy upon the floor, laden with silence and consternation. Thus, he says it is owed to these two figures that *A Passion for Truth* had to be written, and this is made clear in the seeming duality of hope and despair represented in Heschel's argument.

What the following will thus try and explain is Abraham Heschel's criticism of Martin Buber's concept of God and His theodicy after the Shoah. By first examining Heschel's own understanding of God, we can then with more hope succeed in fleshing out Buber's concepts by contrast and, prove that the criticism of the former (Heschel) in regards to the latter (Buber) is ultimately unjust.

The question of abandoning God at the cross-roads of the Holocaust here is irrelevant. The issue is how to understand the inaction of God concerning the Holocaust. In the last chapters of *A Passion for Truth*, Heschel discusses the absurdity and uncertainty there is in living with God, and in passing provides a seemingly condemning criticism of a statement once made by Buber. Or rather, Heschel takes an isolated quote of Buber's and chastises it. It is indeed a famous quote that deals with theodicy stating "Nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul for not murdering his enemy."⁶ This statement of Buber's statement arose from a dialogue he had with an older Orthodox Jew while they attempted to solve the problem of why

did God punish Saul for being charitable? This statement in Buber's work had nothing to do with the Holocaust as it was written before its inception. Yet Heschel criticizes it, unjustly, in reference or in light of the great event. What Heschel says is that Buber tries to confine God to a human model of understanding. That is to say that the latter is placing God on an even moral scale with humanity as Buber is judging Him by concepts from which one would judge a human. This is simplistic and should not be done as Heschel argues that it is not humanity's place to know the Truth of God, but only to strive for it. God should not be comprehensible. However, this is an unfair criticism of Buber as it is incompatible with the views expressed in a *Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth*. This argument however culminates to the different ways in which both these prominent Jewish philosophers deal with keeping faith in God in the face of the Holocaust.

Heschel's criticism of Buber comes in when the former explains the concept of God as the antecedent. To understand the implications of the criticism, the thesis of Heschel's section "Barrels Full of Holes" will have to be briefly outlined. Part of the idiomatic sum of Heschel's argument can be found twice in his text, stated as: "We (humans) are not the final arbiters of meaning. What looks absurd within the limit of time may be luminous within the scope of eternity."⁷ What Heschel means to say by this is that humanity cannot encapsulate God or His actions as we do not have the capacity to do so. Thus we cannot make the claim that the yawning infinity of stars, galaxies and the abyss between, is absurd as we are not fit to judge it.⁸ Heschel mentions the "infinite world of stars and galaxies" as an allusion to God and his justice. This is to say that we cannot comprehend something that is so vast as it transcends our understanding. The justice of God is then as incomprehensible as the vastness of the universe. As such, all that we can do, Heschel says, is strive for the Truth that is hidden. This truth necessitates God to be veiled. This is so because it is humanity's task is to search for Truth, and not for it to be given.⁹ Therefore, if God were to act in the world, thus giving humanity Truth, He would be taking away the freedom that our search for truth necessitates. Heschel states "is it not the essence of freedom to grope, to choose, to work out rather than be given Truth?"¹⁰ This point is well put in Eliezer Berkovits' article *The Historical Context of the Holocaust*, which states that "God cannot as a rule intervene wherever man's use of freedom displeases him. It is true if he did so the perpetration of evil would be rendered impossible, but so would the possibility for good disappear."¹¹ The possibility for good would take with it the freedom to chose, which is seen as humanity's ontological quality. For Heschel it is that quality which defines human existence and his relationship with God.¹² Reinforcing this point, he quotes Lessing who says that were God to give him the choice of choosing Truth and the search for Truth, Lessing (and Heschel) would choose searching for Truth as "pure Truth is for Thee (God) alone."¹³ How this addresses the problem of the Holocaust will be examined later. For now we shall look at Heschel's critique of Buber given that we understand the former's theory that man does not have the capacity to comprehend God, and nor should he.

For Buber to say that "Nothing can make me believe in a God who punishes Saul because he did not murder his enemy"¹⁴ goes directly against what Heschel is arguing if he is correct his assessment of Buber's statement. Heschel's disagreement with this statement lies in his

assumption that Buber sees God is on an equal moral scale with humanity by assuming to know what the will of God is and passing judgment on it. Like we cannot say that the infinite world of stars and galaxies is absurd, we cannot pass a judgment on God or His sanctions. What Buber is ultimately saying (in that statement) is that he could not worship a God who rewarded mercy with punishment, as this would be cruel and thus so is God's justice. Heschel is similarly making a claim on Buber's statement as he must see it as Buber making a tautology of God's justice, meaning that it, and He, must be fundamentally good. By turning away from a God that would be cruel, or by even assuming that because of this divine action one could claim God to be cruel is to make "a human model and then seek to accommodate God to it"¹⁵. Heschel here sees Buber as viewing God through a human lens by imposing human moral assessments on Him. Furthermore, humans are not even meant to pass the assessment itself as any answer humanity can furnish in regards to theodicy is an attempt to mould the vastness of the universe into a discernible form.¹⁶ Making such a judgment of God is making a definitive claim upon the Truth where such knowledge must be kept from us as validation of our present nature and purpose to strive for it. Heschel's argument here is best summed by the Kotzer who Heschel places in opposition to Buber statement, saying that a God who is easily understandable and comprehensible is not worthy of bearing the laurels of divinity.

Upon reading *The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth*, it is very clear that Buber makes no such tautologies for God's justice. Indeed, the closing lines of the dialogue resonate with what Elie Wiesel, Emmanuel Levinas and Heschel have to say of humanity's relationship with God with respect that it is a difficult road¹⁷. The Shoah has created an unprecedented state of silent dialogue between humanity and God where one cannot tell "the Job of the Gas chamber [to]: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever.'"¹⁸ Buber gives the example of the Jewish enslavement in Egypt, whereupon the Jews being released from bondage, can exclaim that God is a savior.¹⁹ However, the Holocaust has now created a state where God is too far away and the "estrangement [from Him] too cruel"²⁰ making it that it is no longer possible to speak and communicate with Him, let alone call Him savior. Nevertheless, this does not mean one can now abandon God and be overcome by the consequences of His hidden face. Rather, and this is where Buber and Heschel would agree, one must contend with God's absence instead of forsaking Him. Where Heschel's criticism of Buber applies is in Buber's closing words of the article "Though His coming appearance resemble no earlier one, we shall recognize again our cruel and merciful Lord"²¹. Why Heschel would have an issue with this is because Buber, in declaring God as merciful and cruel, is passing a judgment on His justice, reflecting the quote used in *A Passion for Truth*. Only in this way can we envision Heschel's criticism of Buber as being justified because beyond this statement, Buber is willing to "await His voice whether it comes out of the storm or out of a stillness that follows it."²² Therefore, is it fair for Heschel to criticize Buber as the latter is prepared to wait for God no matter the consequence? In this respect Buber is more stoic than Heschel as he does not end his essay by holding on to the hope that the absurdity of the universe may one day be explained, though such a revelation may come in the grave.²³ Rather, Buber will struggle for the redemption of the earth while God hides himself and despite whether or not the mercy of the Lord is steeped in cruelty or benevolence.

What Heschel has to say concerning God and the Holocaust is many-fold, yet it can be expressed in two broad arguments. Firstly, Heschel says that humanity has its own duty to help God so that “His justice and compassion can prevail.”²⁴ This statement is best explained by Levinas when he says that “the link between God and man is not an emotional communion... but a spiritual intellectual relationship which takes place through an education in the Torah”²⁵ as the Torah is not only education in God, but education in morality.²⁶ Thus we can understand Heschel when he asks that; in a world where God is defied, where the morality of the Laws of the Torah are defied, how can we question why does God permit evil to occur in the world when “the problem of anthropodicy and theodicy cannot be separated.”²⁷ Though Heschel is critiquing Buber, this statement is very reminiscent of Buber’s own ideas as it evokes the concept of a conversation between heaven and earth, which Buber says are.²⁸ Heschel’s idea that humankind must aid God so that the people’s justice can flourish fits into a dialectical model of the relationship between heaven and the earth, it should be an I-Thou relationship. Wiesel is painfully aware of the culpability of the world regarding the Holocaust as he emphasizes “that the victims suffered more, and more profoundly, from the indifference of the onlookers than from the brutality of the executioner.”²⁹ God is not only to blame, but men must also shoulder the responsibility. The question of why God should let evil persist is “bound up with the problem of how man should aid God”³⁰. Lawritson, writing about Buber, shows that both Buber and Wiesel are fundamentally choosing the same path, to remain with God through the hardship.³¹ Yet they are also wondering about the state of the relationship between God and humanity. However, they offer no concrete solutions to the questions of *why*. Their only answers are that they will stay by God no matter what the outcome.³² However, Heschel contradicts his own contention with Buber as he, by claiming that there is a symbiotic relationship between theodicy and anthropodicy, and that in the larger scope suffering is illuminated, is passing a judgment on the Truth³³. Heschel’s faith relies in that “the present chaos will not last forever.”³⁴

Secondly, part of Heschel’s thought concerning the Holocaust relates back to what we originally discussed, that man can but grope at the Truth. According to Heschel “God writes straight in crooked lines, and man cannot evaluate them as he lives on one level and can see from only one perspective.”³⁵ Thus since we can never fully comprehend God, he must be praised when humanity is both at its zenith and at its nadir. To abandon God in light of the Holocaust is no different than only praising God in times of joy as the Truth of the meaning of neither the darkness nor the light is discernible to humanity as humanity can only perceive it from its own limited scope. However, Heschel has the hope that this may be “luminous in the scope of eternity”³⁶ and this is given credence through the messianic promise. In this regard Heschel is agreeing with Levinas as the latter believes that the mature religious follower is able to question God and follow His commandments while being aware that an answer will never be received and yet walk with Him nonetheless.³⁷ The true test is to love God “in spite of God’s attempts to discourage such love.”³⁸ Thus Heschel concludes by saying that God needs those to stand by Him even through the darkest of kingdoms and have trust in God’s goodness, as our eyes or not fit to judge the descent of that night.³⁹

Each thinker articulates differently the common idea that the relationship with God after the Holocaust is a difficult road. For Wiesel, the pain begins once you accept God's action and prescience in human history.⁷⁴⁰ For Levinas, it is that the sky is empty, and all one can do is follow the Torah in spite of this seemingly abysmal state of humanity. For Heschel, although the road is difficult one must face the absurdity of the universe while believing in God as the difficulty humanity faces may only be horrible within its own scope. For Buber the road is difficult because although Jews have always spoken of God hiding his face, the Holocaust brings to light how far into the depths His face may lie. Heschel's criticism of Buber in "Barrels Full of Holes" is that Buber is fitting God into the narrow box of human conception. However, this criticism is not fair as upon examining Buber's statements in *The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth*, he articulates only that staying by God is difficult as to be able to do so, one must accept the paradox that God is merciful and cruel. Heschel in fact is the one who places ultimate judgment that the purpose of the road is that it be hard, however suffering will eventually be illuminated by God. Heschel stands by God in hope while Buber does so by duty.

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury was a 16th century English philosopher best known for his contributions to political philosophy. He borrowed the Latin phrase *homo hominis lupus est* from the Roman playwright Plautus, which is often translated as "man is a wolf unto (his fellow) man", in reference to the injustices and horrors humans are capable of.

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1977), 55.

³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴ Abraham Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrak, Straus and Giroux, 1974), xiv.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293

⁷ *Ibid.*, 295

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹¹ Eliezer Berkovits, *The Historical Context of the Holocaust: Faith After the Holocaust* (Minnesota: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 88-113.

¹² *Ibid.*, 297.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁷ Elie Wiesel is a Holocaust survivor and a political activist, famous for his novel *Night* in which he makes an account of his experiences in concentration camps during the Holocaust. Emmanuel Levinas was an important Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar of the late 20th century.

¹⁸ Michael Morgan, *A Holocaust Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²² *Ibid.*, 67.

²³ Heschel, *Op. Cit.*, , 302.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Loving the Torah more than God* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1990) 142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷ Heschel, *Op. Cit.*, 298.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁹ Morgan, *Op. Cit.*, 67.

³⁰ Heschel, *Op. Cit.*, 298.

³¹ Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber and the Human Sciences* (Albany: Sunny Press 1996), 205.

³² Morgan, *Op. Cit.*, 67.

³³ Heschel, *Op. Cit.*, 300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁷ Levinas, *Op. Cit.*, 145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁹ Heschel, *Op. Cit.*, 301.

⁴⁰ Friedman, *Op. Cit.*, 305.

