

Placing God: Holocaustal Reconstruction from a Feminist Point of View

Feminist theology is a movement that has followers both outside and inside well-established religious institutions. There is a great deal of variation in the theological thought of various religious beliefs, and these views are expressed through the actions of feminists inside religious institutions who hope to generate reforms within these organizations. Generally, they are pushing for greater ecclesiastical recognition of women's needs and contributions. Melissa Raphael is a Jewish feminist theologian that works as a professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Gloucestershire in the United Kingdom. With a focus on religion and gender, she has authored numerous articles and books in relationship to Jewish feminist theology. One of her most interesting academic literary pieces is "The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust" which aids in the reconciliation of the horrific events done to the Jewish people of Eastern Europe during the Holocaust.¹

The Holocaust was a genocide in which approximately six million Jews were massacred by the German Nazi regime under the reign of Adolf Hitler. In Hebrew, the word Shoah, describes "catastrophe" and is often used to denote the event of the Holocaust. In Israel, the Israeli Parliament called the Knesset has designated an official day for the commemoration of this event in the history of the Jewish people, called Yom ha-Shoah. As the largest event of anti-Semitism in Jewish history, the impact that the Holocaust has made on the Jewish people and their faith in God is vast. April 15th marks Yom ha-Shoah each year, and for many Jews, the meaning of their Jewish existence is held in this single event during post-Holocaust recovery. The term anti-Semitism was

coined in Germany as a scientifically oriented concept for *Judenhass*, which is German for "Jew Hatred", and served as a derogatory term giving justification for discrimination against the Jewish people at the time. Theologians have tried to develop theories that can contribute to the healing of the Jewish collective conscious in relationship to the Holocaust, something that still permeates the Jewish identity to this day. In her post-Holocaust theological literature, Raphael claims: "The traditional assumption of God's omnipotence, coupled with the evidence of his Holocaustal non-intervention, prompts a variety of post-holocaust responses."² Prior to reviewing Raphael's feminist interpretation of this horrific event, several other prominent Jewish theological interpretations will be researched to provide a context for post-Holocaust Jewish reconciliation.

From the generation of death camp survivors there arose a new school of theological speculation that became a guiding force in the development of contemporary Jewish religious thought. These theological interpretations were put forward to help the Jewish people cope and make sense of the horrors associated with the Holocaust. As a result, many theologians have concluded that common presuppositions about God have been distorted and are beyond restoration, due to the Holocaust. How could a figure who was supposed to protect his people as per the agreement in the covenant allow his people

¹ Carol P. Christ, "The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust by Melissa Raphael." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.2 (2005), 557.

² Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Taylor and Francis Library, 2003), 38.

such suffering? In light of their inability to reconcile the goodness of God, and the evil of the Holocaust, some have redefined their theories of God, causing a ripple in the interpretation of the Jewish religion.

Richard Rubenstein is a religious scholar and writer in the American Jewish community, who has approached the theological dilemma posed by the Holocaust and God's role radically. Rubenstein has concluded that it is impossible to sustain a belief in God in light of the Holocaust. The longstanding belief in the covenant between man and God was something that Rubenstein questioned in his theory. As the Torah explains, the established covenant enforces a special bond whereby God would bless the people of Israel above all others if they were to be obedient to his laws. How then, is God just if he allowed such suffering to fall unto the Jewish people? To Rubenstein, the God who comprises traditional Jewish understanding is dead. Throughout history, the Jewish people have maintained and reaffirmed the good character of God despite the evils perpetrated against them. The withstanding belief before Rubenstein's reaction was that God was good and would not allow the Jewish people to suffer without reason. Why then would he allow the horrors of the Holocaust to be inflicted upon his people? Rubenstein rejects the former construction that the Jewish people had made regarding their god: The benevolent and loving God. He finds no purpose in the Nazi regime and cannot reconcile the deaths of millions of Jews with a higher purpose that solidifies God's integrity. In his Jewish theological literature he writes:

How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in his historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in

Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will. The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job... No man knows when the full impact of Auschwitz will be felt, but no religious community can endure so hideous a wounding without undergoing vast inner disorders.³

Rubenstein's struggle to find meaning in the Holocaust is shared by many scholars, however there are flaws in his blatant denial from a religious perspective. He argues from a position that is devoid of a biblical framework, whereby the problem of evil in general cannot be resolved. In contrast to this blatant rejection of God are medians that are achieved by other theological scholars. It is argued among scholars that Richard Rubenstein's ultra radical theology initiated an explosion of Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust, including that of theologian Arthur Cohen. Cohen explains that:

...we [the Jewish people] must return again and again to break our head upon the tremendum of the abyss... We must create a new language in which to speak of this in order to destroy the old language which, in its decrepitude and decline, made facile and easy the demonic descent.⁴

Further, he suggests that the traditional theological categories cannot be applied to the Holocaust because there is no event in history like it; because of this, Cohen differs from alternative theologian Eliezer Berkovits in that Cohen, like Rubenstein, sees a need for the classical understanding of God as omnipotent and omniscient to be revised.

Eliezer Berkovits, a Rabbi and theologian in the tradition of Orthodox Judaism expressed a different opinion to Rubenstein in his systematic

work *Faith After the Holocaust*; where he says the Holocaust must be addressed through the lens of normative Jewish perspectives. He pushes the idea that despite its horrors the Holocaust serves as a chapter in the broader history of the Jewish people and integral to their covenantal relationship with God. The covenant between God and Jews is the basis for the idea of the Jews as the chosen people. He suggests that Jews honor and respect the Holocaust and its atrocities, but also he defends the traditional faith, and accepts God's injustice.

Rabbi and liberal Jewish theologian Ignaz Maybaum views the Holocaust as an expression of God's omnipotence. As the first major Shoah theologian, Maybaum was an Austrian Reform rabbi who served in Germany and England after the war. His book, *The Face of God after Auschwitz*, is influenced by the values of classical German Reform Judaism and European Enlightenment. Maybaum denies the Holocaust is a uniquely destructive event, citing the destruction of the first and second temples in Jewish history. Drawing from the influence of Jewish Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn, he argues that the Holocaust may be explained as the atonement of the victims for the rest of the Jewish world. Maybaum elaborates that it is the task of the Jews to be knowledge of God to the rest of the world, and that the violence of the Holocaust was necessary in teaching the Jews a lesson in a medium – drawing from the past – that they could understand: *churban* in Hebrew, or violence and destruction. Similar to the destruction of the first and second temples, Holocaustal *churban* would mark the end of an old era and the beginning of a new one for Jews, and should be interpreted as such.⁵

As a reaction to Richard Rubenstein's radical God-rejection theological framework, many

theologians have tried to justify the horrors of the Holocaust through a traditional patriarchal lens. Melissa Raphael's theology of the Holocaust rejects the patriarchal assumptions that past theologians make regarding God's supposed omnipotence, and constructs a feminist theology of the Holocaust. This is based upon "the presence of God",⁶ and argues that the very notion that God is omnipotent is a construction that is based upon the projection of patriarchal power rather than a justification of violence. Questioning the notions of divine power and interaction is not something new to be questioned by Jewish feminists.⁷ Aligning to this feminist religious skepticism, Raphael writes:

*God's silence in Auschwitz was the silence of an omnipotent God-king who was never there in the first place, but was one who reigned in the minds of those who required divine sanction for their own hierarchical rule.*⁸

This catalyzes a change in the theological debate from "where" God was in the Holocaust, to "who" God was in the Holocaust.

Aligning her views with traditional Jewish feminism, Raphael suggests that God as Shekhinah was present throughout the Holocaust and was suffering too with the Jewish people. Shekhinah is the feminine immanent face of God,

³ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 153.

⁴ Arthur A. Cohen "Thinking the Tremendous: Some Theological Implications of the Death Camps." *A Holocaust Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), 195.

⁵ Marvin A. Sweeney "The Impact of the Holocaust in America." *The Jewish Role in American Life* 6 (2008), 162.

⁶ Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, 51.

⁷ Christ, "The Female Face of God in Auschwitz", 578.

⁸ Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*, 52.

which means “dwelling”. Raphael describes Shekhinah as “a manifestation of God defined by her present-ness”.⁹ She suggests that God is defined as presence rather than action. Raphael approaches the Holocaust by reading and looking at the literature from Holocaust survivors. She gathered through her research that, “women’s experience in Auschwitz was marked by filth – inadequate sanitary facilities, dirty clothing, lice, pus, fleas.”¹⁰ Raphael writes: “The purificatory acts of some women in Auschwitz can be read as attempts to retain the mark of personhood, both human and divine.”¹¹ Further, “As Shekhinah, God’s presence in Auschwitz was that of a God whose power was such that she could consent to be defiled by virtue of her immanence and still be God.”¹² In Raphael’s eyes, during the Holocaust God was present through the actions and interactions between Jewish people, in particular, women. God was there in all who comforted one another, and took care of one another, and served to be a simple caring presence. This “theology of presence” is one that Raphael shares with other theologians such as Emmanuel Levinas, but is expanded upon so that it encapsulates the “Jewish women’s perspective”.¹³ She creates a Jewish woman’s experience and perspective in terms of the “alternative reality” of a “female subculture” that is based strictly upon circumstance. According to Raphael: “There in Auschwitz, the body of Israel was being consumed by fire and starvation and Mother was not yet one of God’s names.”¹⁴ She says this in justification to the apparent falsehood of other theological perspectives that do not sufficiently place God’s position in the Holocaust. Raphael pushes that although it did not seem like it at the time, God’s actions were in the nurturing of one victim to the next, in order to transform the horrible reality of the Holocaust, “It is as if within the story of Israel’s relationship with the male Father/King God, is another (untold) story: the story of the female bond of protective love

between the Mother-God and the daughters of Israel.”¹⁵

In order to solidify her theology, Raphael weaves the notion of Jewish *tikkun olam*, meaning “repair the world,” denoting a shared responsibility on the level of humanity to heal, repair and transform the world through action. This beautiful articulation boldly challenges previous assumptions of Holocaust theology by removing the historical blame from God’s physical inaction, and placing the responsibility into the hands of the people.¹⁶ It formulates the status that: no meaning and no redemption can be found when looking at the Holocaust as a whole event. She suggests, in summation, that the presence of female caring that reflects the presence of Mother-God during the Holocaust must too bring forth a new naming of the Jewish God. This renaming contributes to a redemption in God’s imprisonment as a patriarchal conception. The Holocaust demonstrates a God that is modeled over these patriarchal conceptions is not God, therefore this God was not revealed during the Holocaust, so God did not die in the first place. Raphael calls on Jews to carry the theological and symbolic project forward, reimagining the construction of God in terms of presence and power rather than domination.

The events and horrors of the Holocaust made such a profound impact on humanity itself that even today we see its ripples. The demonstration of pure and relentless evil caused many Jewish people to abandon the idea of God, or critically question his or her very existence. Taking into consideration theologians before her, Melissa Raphael offers a renewed and hopeful perspective of the gruesome situation that affected many Jewish people and their optimistic view of God. Through God’s Shekhinah we find hope, not only in the presence of God, but in all of humanity. Raphael

incorporates the Jewish custom of *tikkun olam*, in order to bring attention to the God that is apparent through the actions of kindness. Through her philosophy, she stresses that the collective Jewish conscious should not ignore what appalling events had been committed unto them, but not blame God's inaction. God was with the Jewish people throughout the heinous situation and through God's love was where an escape could be found. As an anecdote on collective responsibility, Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."¹⁷

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Christ, "The Female Face of God in Auschwitz", 578.

¹¹ Raphael, The Female Face of God in Auschwitz, 67.

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Ibid., 107.

¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹⁶ Jody E. Myers, "The Myth of Matriarchy in Recent Writings on Jewish Women's Spirituality." *Jewish Social Studies* 4.1 (1997), 14.

¹⁷ Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search For Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 86.

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