

CONFRONTING THE HOLOCAUST AND ISRAEL

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By
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Thirty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the Holocaust remains a central Jewish experience. We recall it so that every generation will bear witness to that most terrible devastation of our people, and to remind ourselves that the Jewish future can never be secure unless we stand together as a strong, united, determined community.

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Dr. Greenberg's address to participants in the 1975 UJA Study Conference is an authoritative analysis of the meaning of the Holocaust and its continuing impact on the nature of Jewish life.

I

An experience of encounter with Israel inevitably brings with it an encounter with the Holocaust. This is partly because Israel is a land of survivors, and partly because one cannot begin to comprehend the creativity and the reality of Israel without the recognition of its profound subterranean relationship and roots in the Holocaust.

Yet there is another reason why one must encounter the Holocaust. To be a Jew, classically, since the very beginning, has been to live by the great events of Jewish history. It has meant a commitment not just to understand the event, but to live it in personal life. It was not just for ourselves but for the world. Thus from the Exodus, the Jewish people learned that the world was meant to be free. From the Exodus we learned to free the slave, to be concerned for the weak, the poor, the outsider — because we were outsiders in the Land of Egypt.

In that sense, I would say: in the life-time of our people in this generation, we have lived through two events of the magnitude of the Exodus and of the destruction of the Temple — those events which set Jewish life and gave the content to Jewish faith for thousands of years. These are overwhelming events, deeply contradictory to each other and yet deeply related — the Holocaust and the rebirth of the State. To be a Jew one must understand and live by both. If I am a Jew, these events happen to me, just as for four thousand years to be a Jew is to live through the Exodus of Egypt. A thousand years from now it will be clearer that these events not only have shaped our personal lives but have decided what is the content of the Jewish way and faith for the next millenia.

To encounter this event—if I had the power and the ability—we would first have to relive it together. Unfortunately, neither I nor anybody else has that power to re-create it in its totality. We would have to go through 1933 to 1939, when the Jews of Germany, very much like the Jews of America—a successful, highly westernized, integrated community participating fully in national political life, were first legally isolated, then removed from national life, then gradually stripped of their property and of their legal right to function with occasional violence and terror along the way.

And those were the good days. From 1939 to 1941, the second stage started. It was World War II—and in this period we have the stage of the ghettoization and the crowding. In Warsaw half a million Jews lived in an area of approximately a couple of square miles—thirty-seven percent of Warsaw's population in an area covering four percent of its land mass. It is estimated that there was an average of about fifteen people to a room in the Warsaw ghetto. Ghetto means a community cut off and being bricked in, no mail, no telephone. It means eight hundred calories a day at the official ration, when it takes something like three thousand calories in that climate to live a normal working life. It means that by 1942 the crowding and the cold (there being no coal for the winters) had reached the point where the Jews were dying at the rate of one and a half percent a month. And the birth rate had dropped so sharply that the deaths out-numbered births by forty to one. It would not be a difficult statistical act to figure out that at that rate all the Jews would have been dead in six to eight years—but that was too long for the Nazis.

On June 22, 1941, with the invasion of Russia, came the next stage of the final solution. The Ein-

satzgruppen were unleashed. These were specially trained groups, provided with special transport by the army so they arrived just behind the advance columns of the Wehrmacht before people could flee. They posted notices, rounded up the Jews, took them nearby and shot them down. Read the record of these groups—they are on file for day after day, throughout 1941 and early 1942. Einsatz Commando A and Strike Commando 3 reported its daily activities as follows: (Executions and shootings)

8/23/41	Panevezys	1312 Jewish men, 4602 Jewish women, 1609 Jewish children	7,523
8/25/41	Obelisi	112 Jewish men, 627 Jewish women, 421 Jewish children	1,160
8/26/41	Zarasai	767 Jewish men, 1113 Jewish women, 1 Lithuanian Communist, 687 Jewish children, 1 Russian Communist woman	2,569
8/26/41	Kaisiadorys	All Jews (men, women and children)	1,911
8/27/41	Prienai	All Jews (men, women and children)	1,078

One can get these figures for every day in that time. There is no comment, no observations. There are simply lists.

Afterwards, the Russian government took testimony which flash out the reality behind the numbers. For example, in Bobruisk, the Jews were lined

up at the lip of a ditch and the guns were set up to shoot high enough to kill the adults. As a result, many children were not killed because the bullets went over their heads; all were swept into the ditch which a bulldozer covered. The neighbors reported afterwards that for two days the ground settled and turned from the cries and writhing of those still alive and superficially buried under the ground.

(It is so profoundly important to confront the Holocaust because we do not know how to respond to any event unless we know where we came from. If today there is the horror and fear of a repetition of a Ma'alot, Kiryat Shemona, or Beit Shean, there must also be the appreciation of where we have come in thirty-odd years. We cannot absolutely prevent innocent deaths, but thanks to the existence of Israel, any group seeking to kill is at once cut off and stopped. It cannot go on day after day — and Jewish blood is no longer spilled with impunity. It is to mankind's eternal shame that would-be murderers of Jews are still organized and supported — but our sorrow must be mixed with a thanksgiving that a limit has been created.)

In time, the Einsatzgruppen were deemed too slow, too expensive, too problematical. Then came the transports and the gas chambers. When we speak of transports, we speak of people jammed into cattle cars so tightly they cannot sit down for the three days and two nights from Westerbork to Auschwitz—that is from Holland to Auschwitz. The lucky ones were the Jews who went to Treblinka because it is only six hours from Warsaw to Treblinka. Think of traveling three days and two nights and not being able to stand or sit, freezing where you are, with children thrown over the heads of adults in many cases; people having to defecate on the spot because they could not move. There are

even records of children that were trampled in the muck on the floor because their parents could not move to save them.

Then came that fundamental experience of every Jew in our life time—the gas chamber itself. According to the eye witness report of a guard, “the gas rises gradually to the ceiling, forcing the victims to claw and trample upon one another in their struggle to reach upward . . . Those on the top are the last to succumb . . . Corpses are piled one on top of another in an enormous heap. At the bottom of the pile are babies and children, women and old people”.

One of the questions one has to ask oneself all the time in Jewish life is: “What is it worth to ensure that that will not happen again?”

II

When we speak of confronting the Holocaust, the confrontation must be at the deepest level of our own being and understanding. For example, we have to admit to ourselves to what extent it has shattered many of our hopes and dreams as well as illusions. It has certainly shattered, it seems to me, the dominant drive that Jews had in the past 200 years (it is still perhaps the dominant drive of American Jewry). I speak of that drive to escape into a world of universalism, and into an insistence that since human rights are indivisible, people are not really Jews, or non-Jews, or what have you; we are really all citizens of one world. It followed that in some sense, the lines between humans are false or artificial. We had to apologize for the distinctiveness of our own concern and interest.

We now know that although the Jews were ready

and are still ready to join a world in which we are all the same and all equal, it turns out that in this world there are some more equal than others. When it comes to being eligible for the cattle cars to Treblinka, Jews are more eligible—and there are very few volunteers. It turns out that the recognition of our own distinctiveness and responsibility—our ability to stand alone—is not merely an act of graciousness or even an act of religious commitment; it becomes the reality of our fate, and the dignity of a human being who understands his own integrity.

In fact, the ideology that seeks to sweep the Jews into universal concerns, and insists in that sense we justify what we are—that ideology of liberalism, which I share and believe in and was raised on, can easily become the ideology of genocide and of justification of genocide.

Let me give a very specific example. When American Jews heard the reports of what was happening in Europe, they pleaded repeatedly with the United States government to speak out, to warn that those who were doing this would be held responsible. Their requests to bomb the concentration camps were turned down on the grounds that this was a war for democracy, for mankind. Therefore, one could not ask for special privileges for the Jews. One could not make a special effort; when the war was won for democracy, then the Jews would also be saved. But by the time the war was won for democracy, the Jews were gone.

In November of 1943, under the pressure of Jewish concern, the Allies did issue a statement on war crimes. They did warn the Nazis that they would be held responsible for the atrocities against civilians which they were carrying out. Only there was one catch: the Allies listed atrocities against Poles,

against French, against Dutch, etc. The critical question then became: shall we include Jews on that list? The argument and the conclusion was: no. Jews are not Jews; Jews are Hungarians, Poles, Germans and French, etc. Thus in that warning, the nations that were suffering were listed, but not Jews.

We have from the German side the understanding of that announcement: the Nazi leadership were frightened and concerned about it. However their reaction to the announcement was a very simple one. It was obvious to them that they were not just killing Frenchmen and Dutchmen and so on, but that in a very special way they were killing Jews. How could an announcement of this sort mention all the nations but not Jews? Yet their conclusion was obvious: they would be held responsible for the other acts. But here was a quiet signal that what was happening to the Jews was not so terribly important. That is the signal they got repeatedly throughout the years, from the beginning of the persecution to the genocide at the very end. Although the Allied Airforce said it could not bomb the tracks to Auschwitz because of all kinds of military difficulties—there was in fact a synthetic rubber factory near Auschwitz which was bombed repeatedly in 1944. But while 12,000 Jews a day were being stuffed into the gas chambers, the same airforce could not fly the few extra miles to bomb the gas chambers. That lesson was not lost on the Nazis either. I say this not simply to complain or be bitter—that is useless—but to understand where we stand today. We see today how the shards and dregs of that “universalist” ideology, the claimed opinion of mankind, are used at the United Nations to cover for creating new possibilities of genocide. And whenever we stand with Israel alone to that extent, it is our act of participation in that Holocaust reality. It is an act of accepting my

fate and welcoming the challenge of my fate, rather than a favor that I do for the Land of Israel.

I would go beyond that. The Holocaust is the classic expression of that reality of Jewish existence—that we are in fact singled out. In the ancient tradition we called it “chosen”, although Jews today have hang-ups about that term. To be singled out means quite simply that my fate as a Jew is my fate. Therefore, I cannot hide behind the fact that I am an American, or an Israeli, or German, or Russian. The recognition that this is my fate becomes the beginning of liberation. It becomes the beginning of responding authentically with integrity. It moves on to give dignity and content to that life, to express it in the sense of responsibility and understanding of what is happening. To be singled out is to become a member of Israel of the flesh. It means to understand suddenly that I, personally, am on the line and not just doing this voluntarily.

I will tell you who taught me this lesson. It was a Christian theologian, a very great man named Roy Eckardt, a person deeply shattered by the Holocaust also. He said that he was taught by Christian theologians that Christians are superior to Jews for one reason: the Jews are Israel of the flesh. Jews were born of the seed of Abraham, inherited the Bible and its promises and the Covenant—but Jews inherited it by birth. You do not have to be a committed or an observant Jew to be a Jew, whereas to be a Christian you have to believe. Christians have taken over the Jewish belief by faith—they are Israel of the spirit. It is not a question of birth, it is a question of commitment. Is not commitment superior to the accident of birth?

Then Eckardt said Hitler came along and taught him a very profound lesson.

When a totalitarian government was set up that sought to totally dominate human life, that sought to destroy the dignity of humans, then it felt that the existence of the people of Israel, the people of God, if you will, was a denial of its own claim to absolute power. It had to destroy that people. It occurred to Eckardt that Israel of the spirit was as much an enemy of the Nazis as Israel of the flesh, or even more so. If one was truly a believing Christian, if one truly practiced Christianity, one would also have to be a sworn enemy of the Reich and of Hitler and of Nazism. In fact, there were good Christians who went to Auschwitz and other places because of their beliefs and practices. But, said Eckhardt, it dawned upon him that there is another difference between Israel of the flesh and Israel of the spirit: Israel of the flesh *had* to stand up. Its own existence was a contradiction—to identify whether it wanted or not. A person could deny that he was a Jew, but he still stood for something that was too threatening to totalitarianism, and he had to be destroyed.

(There were Jews who violently denied that they were Jews; there was a church in the Warsaw ghetto up to the very end. The congregation of the church consisted of Jews who had been converted or who had apparently converted, who insisted to the very end that they were not Jews; they were good Catholics. They were still good Catholics when they jammed them into the cattle cars to go to Treblinka. When Lodz ghetto was transported there were German war veterans who went to their fate in their uniforms wearing their iron crosses. During the years they were in Lodz ghetto many would not mix with those East European Jews. They insisted that they were good Germans and they were suffering because of these no good Eastern European Jews, as a result of the Nazis who mistakenly lumped them

together. Some day they hoped the Nazis would realize the truth that they were good Germans and not cursed Jews.)

Eckardt learned that the Jew who is supposedly not committed, who does not understand what he stands for, speaks and testifies with his very life, whether he wills it or not. The people of Israel of the spirit had a choice. They could make believe that they were good Germans, or good Nazis and they could live happily ever after. They could even participate in the acts of the Nazis.

Today, all Jews confront that reality of Israel of the flesh—it means that I understand suddenly that I stand for something, and I am kidding myself if I think that I can hide behind some other characterization. This is the beginning of understanding how we have responded in 1967 and 1973 to each other, as Israelis and American Jews.

In 1967 Israelis suddenly confronted the reality of Holocaust, a reality which they had sought to put aside and say could only happen to other "galut" (diaspora) Jews. They suddenly realized that their fate was not divisible from other Jews, and vice versa. American Jews have begun to grasp the fact that we Jews are after all, Israel of the flesh and not Israel of the spirit. If the Israelis go, then we go—and there will be no clever divisions. We mean that literally since we would be fools to think that the second Holocaust would not be easier to consummate than the first; and after that, a third would be a lot easier than the second.

The reality of Israel of the flesh has very profound implications. It means I do not give or work as a volunteer because I am nice. In 1967 in my community, somebody gave five times what he had given before 1967. In 1973 he gave three times what he

gave in 1967. To do that he had to take out a mortgage on his home. When I asked him why he did that he replied that before this he gave because he felt strongly about it, he felt emotionally involved. This time he felt the same as if someone kidnapped his child and asked for ransom. In such a case one would take out a mortgage on his home. He wasn't giving *them* anymore—he wasn't even giving as a favor or as a good deed. He felt somehow that his life was at stake—and he would borrow to save his own life. That is Israel of the flesh.

Elie Wiesel once pointed out that in 1944 when the Holocaust was going on, when they were killing Jews in incredible ways, American Jews went on with bar mitzvahs, and annual dinners, and parties. It was probably because we were good Jews. The parties were to raise funds, I presume, for relief. The bar mitzvahs were part of the expression of Jewish loyalty. But they could go on because we could think we were Israel of the spirit, and not Israel of the flesh. We were helping them; it was not happening to us.

After the Yom Kippur war my wife and I talked about it a lot. We felt somehow that one had to be physically present in Israel to express that feeling of Israel of the flesh. Here the terrorists taught us something. When they started to attack the planes, or when they started to shoot or try to attack Jews abroad, it seemed to us that they were trying to give the same message. It was the same feeling that Russian Jews communicated when in that time of war they wanted to come to Israel even more than ever. They wanted to go from a country where they were persecuted but were safe, to a country where their very life was at stake. Indeed Israel's own life is at stake in part because of Russian government's re-

sentment of Russian Jews' behavior. Here is the extraordinary paradox of the reality of the Holocaust. Each one of our lives is so totally bound up in the other that in all cases, *my* life is at stake. This is what is involved in coming to Israel as opposed to the fact that one can stay in America and give too. It is somehow an ineffable sense that we have to be there personally. I begin to understand the biblical commandment that the Jew is supposed to go personally to the Temple and appear before God three times a year. Coming to Israel is the contemporary expression of a biblical *mitzvah*. The *mitzvah* is to be present personally to share to that extent the experience, the risk, and the suffering, and to communicate that sense of personal participation. That is Israel of the flesh. It will take a serious confrontation with this *mitzvah* to carry us through the next period.

Our own country is a key to life and death for Israel. In a way this is a morally wrong situation which should not be. In the Holocaust we were taught the hard way that nobody should have to depend for their existence on the goodwill of even the best people in the world. Even good people are only human. They may be too far away to understand the urgency or too preoccupied with their own concerns.

But if we bind up our lives with those of our brothers and sisters, if we communicate fully by our own commitment, if our urgency and teaching is in our very flesh, then the entire American people will share the vision and significance of Israel's life. In the words of Mordechai in the Bible: "Who knows, if it were not for this very moment that you were brought to this realm?" (Esther 4,14).

There is one other dimension of this confrontation with the Holocaust which must be understood in order to grasp Israel itself. The Holocaust is the most radical challenge to Jewish values and Jewish belief and faith that ever took place. In a sense it is a total contradiction of everything that Judaism stands for. If there is one belief that, more than any other, characterizes Jewish life, Jewish religion, and Jewish practice, it is the belief in the dignity of man. We speak of the human being in the image of God, of the absolute value of human life. To save one life is like saving the whole world. Think of the radical challenge to that statement in the presence of the Holocaust.

Thirty years ago in 1944, in the final stages of the war, the Nazis were determined to finish off the Jews. Hungarian Jewry was the last major Jewry on the agenda. So in the summer of 1944, every day tens of thousands of Jews were shipped to Auschwitz where they were gassed and put to death immediately. The pressure to put them to death was so powerful and so strong that German troop reinforcements were pushed to the side while the Jewish trains were let through. The Nazis were short of rolling stock, yet they took it away from their own ammunition transport needs to hand it over to get rid of Jews. At that point, mass killing became such a problem that they began to have a problem of running short of gas itself.

The Nazis, in the summer of 1944, in order to make the gas stretch far enough, cut the gas supply used in each chamber load in half. Medically speaking, Zyklon-B operates by cutting off the breathing centers, causing dizziness, nausea and asphyxiation. The victims typically have a kind of panic of gasp-

ing and choking before they die. When there is a high concentration of gas, people die quickly; when the concentration is lowered, people die rather more slowly. To cut the gas in half is to triple the time it takes to die—from three to seven minutes, to fifteen to twenty minutes.

In the mad orgy of death of that summer—an orgy which the allied nations perceived but did nothing to stop directly—even that was not the final statement of the cheapness of human, that is, Jewish life.

Hear the testimony of a Polish woman who was a guard in Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, taken from the Nuremberg trial record:

Witness: Women carrying children were (always) sent with them to the crematorium.

(If separated from their mothers some children started to cry and get hysterical—so it was decided to keep the children and mothers together, and even condemn able-bodied mothers to the gas chambers also. The killers could not take a chance at a kind of a panic or rioting that might slow up the production line.)

The children were then torn from their parents, just outside the crematorium and sent to the gas chamber separately.

(At that point it was too late to slow up the process, but crowding more people into the gas chambers was the most urgent consideration. Frequently, children were thrown over the heads of the adults in order to pack in more people.)

When the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers was at its height, orders were issued that children were to be thrown straight into the crema-

torium furnaces or into a pit near the crematorium, without being gassed first.

Smirnov (the Russian prosecutor): How am I to understand this, did they throw them into the fire alive or did they kill them first?

Witness: They threw them in alive. Their screams could be heard at the camp. It is difficult to say how many children were destroyed in this way.

Smirnov: Why did they do this?

Witness: It is very difficult to say. We don't know whether they wanted to economize on gas or if it was because there was not enough room in the gas chambers.

We have to understand that language, “to economize on gas”. What does economy involve? The Germans were a very efficient and reliable people; they kept good records of their gas production. Degesch, a respectable firm that produced the gas was owned by three major German chemical firms. It was a highly profitable business which paid 100 to 200% dividends every year in 1942, '43 and '44. The bills for Zyklon B in 1944 come out to 195 kilograms for 975 Marks, or 5 Marks per kilogram. Approximately 5.5 kilograms were used on every chamber load, for about 1500 people. That comes out to about 27.5 Marks per 1500 people. With the Mark, then at a quarter—allowing for inflation and such things—that comes out to \$6.75 per 1500 people or approximately 2/5 of a cent per person. In the summer of 1944 Jewish children were not worth 2/5 of a cent to put them out of their misery before one killed them.

What can one say religiously to such a reality? In what kind of language can one talk about God or

faith after such an event? I submit there is nothing that can be said. There is something that can be done. There is one fundamental religious act that Jewish religion speaks of after an event of such destruction—one act that one has the right to do ethically and religiously. That act may speak about God—the act of re-creating life. It is the act of taking human beings whom we say are in the image of God and restoring that image; it is to take away the blankness of the concentration camp victim, taking away the degradation of that life of which we read and saw, and to restore it to absolute dignity. That is the one testimony to religion and to God one can make. I would submit that that is indeed the fundamental understanding the Jewish people had after the Holocaust. The great religious act was the act of re-creating life. It was expressed a thousand different ways: the D.P. camps after the war had the second highest birth rate in the world.

To have a child after Auschwitz. I know a woman who was on the undertaking detail at Auschwitz for 2½ years. The undertaking detail had an advantage. They were collecting bodies, many of which died of disease so the guards hesitated to come near them. They were the only group which could circulate around the camp freely because people were dying all over.

When a woman became pregnant at Auschwitz she would be put to death immediately. If they could not abort her, they would try to hide her and cover for her. Imagine what that meant for nine months in a camp where there were constant roundups and selections and searches. Then, when a woman was ready to give birth, the undertaking brigade would put her in a wheelbarrow and cover her with dead bodies so no one should see her in order to take her out to the field where she would give birth. But, if

she came back with the child, she would be put to death anyway. This woman, my friend, risked her life everyday to make the birth possible. After the woman she helped keep alive and saved all this time gave birth, it was my friend's task to take the baby and drown or strangle it.

After the war my friend had two Jewish children. She is a "typical" Jewish mother—she worries too much and she is nervous. Her daughter wants to be a doctor, yet she fears that her daughter will find no boys who will marry her. (I keep telling her that liberation has struck and Jews are different now!) Yet, in the life of this "middle class", overconcerned mother who has frequent migraine headaches, is the secret of a daily heroism, of a triumph of faith and life over death whose grandeur overwhelms me. The heroism, the courage in her creation of life after that event is the reality of Israel we have to understand together.

It is a half a million survivors who were taken in. I remember talking to youth aliyah people who told me that they had problems with mice for ten years after the war. They had children in the village who had arrived in the camps at the end of the war. These children never believed that they would have food tomorrow, so they would sneak food out of the dining room to hide in their barracks. They would tell them: you're going to have food tomorrow; it's not going to happen again. The children could not believe that. Maybe tomorrow, what had happened before would happen again. Their family, well to do and well fed might suddenly disappear and they would be on to hunger and starvation. So then they forbade the children to take food out of the dining room. The kids—after all they survived in concentration camps—would find ways of smuggling out food from the dining room. They would bury it in

places no one knew. Being well fed, the children would forget the food and thus there was a mice problem for years after. Multiply this example by 500,000 survivors who came and you begin to grasp Israel.

The response to the Holocaust is to have taken in 800,000 Jews from Arab countries. It is to take in 30,000 or 40,000 or 50,000 Russian Jews a year. We have to understand what that process means, after the Holocaust; what it means to take an old person or a cripple and to be concerned for them. This is not just UJA, or just giving. This is the fundamental religious statement of our time and there is no other comparable religious statement—words are meaningless.

This is why I would say the whole notion of the secular Israeli is a false one. How many American Jews have complained about Israeli secularity? As long as they were in America, Jews expected all Israelis to be so religious. (Israelis should be like Paul Newman as Ari ben Canaan, but they should be religious—Paul Newman with tzitzis hanging out in the back!) When they come to Israel they're unprepared to see someone riding a car on Shabbat. To see through the eyes of the Holocaust is to understand the falsity of such a notion of religion—of who is religious. After the Holocaust, there is deeper sacredness to every divine commandment and a new challenge to embrace Jewish tradition but the category of "religious" is utterly inadequate.

In 1967 Jean Paul Sartre, the great atheist, supported Israel even though he was pro-Arab and a strong supporter of Algerian liberation—because after the Holocaust he understood that never again could there be another Holocaust. Pope Paul IV who is so religious he wears a yarmulka all the time,

said nothing. What, then, do we mean when we speak of religion?

We have to understand the fundamental reality of Israeli life in which a so-called secular Israeli gives his life—stakes his life that the people of God will survive, without such a people there can be no faith in God, no belief, no Torah. This is the fundamental religious act you and I are involved in. It is the act of personally being responsible for rehabilitating a life, creating it, and protecting a people's existence.

This is a fundamental theme in Israeli life which comes up a hundred times. When Israeli pilots are trained, they take them to Yad Vashem and say: if you fly well, this will not happen. When soldiers are trained how to treat the conquered population, they are reminded of the Holocaust: if you remember what it was like to have been on the receiving end, you will act differently when you have other people who are weak under you. That is the extraordinary dialectical confrontation with the Holocaust in Israel.

This is why the Israeli military cannot just be seen in military terms. There is a sense, after the Holocaust, in which the Phantom or the tank has to be removed from its military framework. First of all, it is necessary, for fear that we come to worship it. Secondly, because we understand that it too is part of the expression of life. Eldridge Cleaver taught me this lesson. Cleaver, before he became a "prophet" and before he turned against the Jews, once spoke about his experience of the Holocaust. When he grew up, he was taught—if you are a "good nigger", if you go along, everything will be alright. Then he came across the experience of the Holocaust. Something very obvious dawned upon him. Thanks to modern progress, if you go along, if you don't protect yourself, if you depend on the good will of others for

your own existence, there is no limit to what will be done to you. In the good old days they would persecute you; they would punish you and let you go. Suddenly he realized that thanks to progress, they can put every last one to death and it still won't help. So he decided there was only one solution—black power. In that fundamental sense he's correct: this is why Jewish power is so critical. This is Israel's reality: the reality of the creation of life and power used responsibly to protect that life. In turn, the Israelis' ability to be humane conquerors and be restrained in the use of power surely grows out of the vivid memory of the Holocaust and the not forgotten taste of being on the receiving end of unparalleled abuse of power.

IV

Finally, confrontation with the Holocaust means not just a new depth of understanding of Israel and of religious life in Israel, but the sense that I personally am living through it, together with my fellow Jews. I am convinced that a thousand years from now, Jews will re-enact the Holocaust; they will eat the rotten bread of Auschwitz, or the potato peelings of Bergen-Belsen and tell the story—as do we now eat the matzoh and the bitter herb of Passover, so that each one of us will know how to act accordingly. The fundamental act is that act of putting our own lives on the line, of giving as if our lives are on the line for that act of creation of life. Emil Fackenheim once said that the act of having a Jewish child after Auschwitz put the Jew above Abraham our Father, the great founder of the Jewish people, the great symbol of Jewish faith. In the Bible the great peak of Abraham's life was when he prepared to

take his only child and bind that child to the altar in faithfulness to his people, his covenant, his God.

I would submit that each one of us—by having a Jewish child, by coming to Israel, by participating—binds our lives. We bind not just our own children, but also our grandchildren, says Fackenheim, because the Nazis came for grandchildren too. The act of affirmation, with all the faults, limitations and real weaknesses of Israel is nothing less than a Messianic act.

The ultimate Jewish statement is the Messianic statement. We say this world will be redeemed; we say that human life will ultimately be worth everything. Anne Frank wrote in her diary that if she survived the war, she understood that she would have to make something of her life. The rabbis told us that the Messianic act is achieved when, in the face of total destruction, people choose to take on the grubbiness, the difficulties, the complexities of re-creating life at all costs.

The rabbis tell us that the Messiah's ancestry starts in the city of Sodom.

When Sodom was wiped out, we are told in the Bible that Lot survived with his two daughters. These two women were convinced that the whole world had been wiped out again, a Holocaust had taken place. Yet, they were absolutely determined to have a child. There was only one man left in the world and it was their father. So they got him drunk and they seduced him—drunken incest! Yet the rabbis say that here is the origin of the Messiah! From that intercourse came Moab, from Moab came Ruth, from Ruth came David and from David comes the Messiah.

What the rabbis are trying to tell us, I think, was that the Messianic life response to an overwhelming

outburst of death is as the State of Israel was to the Holocaust, as the Jewish people acted in creating the State of Israel. In such a response, one takes on all the grubbiness of life, all the complexities of life, all the failures of Israel, all the frictions of people of many different backgrounds and varieties. If you take that kind of ambiguity on yourself and still say: I will create life above all, then it is a Messianic act.

The rabbis said: if you want to create human life, if you have a dream that the world will someday be perfected, you have to have the capacity to love that grubbiness, to accept all the failures and all the fallacies and all the difficulties and the nitty-gritty, and love that too, and keep trying to perfect it. This commonality, this union of Jews that is determined to create life is the faith that is reborn, purged by the fires of Auschwitz, and determined never to forget them. A faith that is based on the total reality of that kingdom of night can never be broken by setbacks; it can never be destroyed by encounter with the realities of human beings with all their failures and complexities. Such a faith will yet bring redemption.

Someday the world will not just isolate Israel, but will thank it. In a generation of unparalleled brutality and degradation, it testifies that humankind can overcome death itself by the love and giving which re-creates life again and again.