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# MENORAH REVIEW



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## For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

### Louis D. Brandeis and the Empowering of American Jewry Part 2 of 2 by Melvin I. Urofsky

When Louis D. Brandeis took over the Zionist leadership, he faced two major tasks—a weak organization and a fear that Zionism would somehow be subversive of their status as Americans. The two problems were not separate; Jews who questioned the legitimacy of the movement, for whatever reason, would not join; a weak movement, in turn, could hardly attract new members.

Meeting the organizational challenge was old hat to Brandeis; there was nothing particularly Jewish, or even Zionist, about this issue. As many Progressive reformers, Brandeis knew how to organize and he applied his considerable talents to the task. He studied the data, re-organized the central office, established a master card file for members, set quotas for local leaders to meet in terms of raising money and getting new members. As I have written elsewhere, Brandeis approached Zionism as he would any other reform, deciding on what solution would meet specific problems and then implementing his plans. He not only brought to bear the same outlook but adopted essentially the same tactics.

His motto, constantly repeated, was: "Men! Money! Discipline!" In August 1914, there were only 12,000 enrolled members in the Federation of American Zionists; by the 1919 convention, membership lists topped 177,000. From an annual budget of \$12, 150, Brandeis expanded Zionist activities into enterprises involving millions. Brandeis understood that for a citizen's group to have any influence with the government, it needed members who responded to the call for action. Politicians would be more receptive if they received not hundreds but thousands of letters advocating a particular program. In 1914, what little influence American Zionists possessed came from their new leader's personal contacts with the Wilson Administration. In 1919, with Brandeis on the Supreme Court and able to play only a

behind-the-scenes role, the Zionist Organization of America's leaders—Julian Mack, Stephen Wise and others—could approach and be received by Congress and executive branch agencies because they spoke for nearly 200,000 citizens. And the hitherto autocratic American Jewish Committee had to agree to share representation of Jewish interests at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference with the upstart Zionists.

Brandeis had a more difficult job in reconciling American and Zionists interests. Some of the older people in this room may remember the American Council for Judaism, which during World War II launched a desperate campaign against Zionism, believing the movement would undermine their status as American citizens and even trigger a pogrom that would send all Jews to Palestine. The Council never spoke for more than a few American Jews, most of whom abandoned it after 1948 when they realized the existence of the State of Israel had no effect on their American citizenship.

But the powerful German-Jewish community, and especially the American Jewish Committee, believed even more strongly that Zionism and Americanism were incompatible and while we can now see the fallacy of their reasoning, one can sympathize with their concerns.

The United States, with its melting pot mythology, emphasized allegiance, not to a foreign country or ideology but to the American dream of equality and opportunity. Of those who had accepted this creed, many had prospered and been allowed to live in peace; those who did not, like the Irish who persisted in their attachment to Rome, had been discriminated against. For Jews especially,

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after centuries of persecution, the United States indeed seemed to be the promised land. The leading spokesman for the various Jewish communities in New York, Boston, Chicago and elsewhere were successful as well as assimilated and wanted nothing to do with a movement that to them smacked of the ghettos they had escaped. "We have fought our way through to liberty, equality and fraternity," said Henry Morgenthau Sr. "No one shall rob us of these gains. . . . We Jews of America have found America to be our Zion. Therefore, I refuse to allow myself to be called a Zionist. I am an American."

Morgenthau's statement could be replicated dozens of times; it sums up not only the gratitude of Jews to this new homeland that allowed them to prosper and live freely but also the fear that if they acted too much as Jews, all might be lost. The lesson the uptowners tried to teach the new immigrants was that if they really wanted to become Americans, if they would prove themselves worthy of their new land, they needed to minimize their Jewishness and abandon the false hope of redemption in the Holy Land.

Zionist ideology derived from two sources. One, the Bible and Jewish tradi-

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tion, had God promising to redeem the Jews in their ancient homeland. The anti-Zionists, and especially the Reform movement of that day, interpreted this not as a literal promise but as a metaphor for the time when all nations would live at peace. In that day, wherever Jews lived would be Zion. But the other source of Zionism, European nationalism as transformed by Theodor Herzl, argued that so long as Jews did not have a home of their own they would be outsiders and persecuted; the answer to the Jewish question, Herzl maintained, was for Jews to move to their own homeland.

As long as Zionist ideology postulated that all Jews should go to Palestine, it ran counter to the prevailing hope of assimilation among Reform Jews, which included most of the German-Jewish community, and to the demands that immigrants to the United States become American and forego any other loyalty. Most important, the immigrants themselves had already made their *aliyah*; they had chosen not to go to the Zion of old but to the new Zion. They did not want to go to Palestine; they desperately wanted to become "Amerikaners." The success of Zionism in this country, therefore, would depend on finding some form that would not posit Zionism as opposed to Americanism, and a role so unique that only American Zionists could perform it.

What I call the "Brandeisian synthesis" met this challenge and, in doing so, not only transformed the American Zionist movement but also empowered the millions of immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe in a way they had never anticipated. Brandeis summed up his views when he said:

"My approach to Zionism was through Americanism. In time, practical experience and observation convinced me that Jews were by reason of their traditions and their character peculiarly fitted for the attainment of American ideals. Gradually, it became clear to me that to be good Americans, we must be better Jews and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists!"

What Brandeis did was equate Americanism with Judaism, then Judaism with Zionism, so that Americanism also equated with Zionism. "I began gradually to realize," he declared, "that these 20th century ideals of America, of democracy, of social justice, of longing for righteousness, were ancient Jewish ideals. . . that that which I was striving for as a thing essentially American, as the ideals for our country, were the Jewish ideals of thousands of years." Now I admit that there are many logical inconsistencies here, and one should also note that the Judaism Brandeis is talking about is secular, the ethical as opposed to the ritual. But logic is irrelevant here, since Brandeis, the man of logic and facts, struck an emotional cord in millions of American Jews.

They could be proud Jews and proud

Americans. They could be Zionists, not in opposition to Americanism but in support of it. Brandeis negated the need for *aliyah*; American Jews would not have to move to Palestine. Rather, they should stay in the United States, work hard at being good Americans and help those poor unfortunate Jews elsewhere who were persecuted and suffering to make their way to the Holy Land. American Jews should do their best to help the *chalutzim* in Palestine develop a democratic, egalitarian society, one in which the shared ideals of Judaism and the United States could triumph. "By battling for the Zionist cause," he declared, "the American ideal of democracy, of social justice and of liberty will be given wider expression."

\* \* \* \* \*

We have not the time to go into a full history of American Zionism in the Brandeis era, including his struggle with Chaim Weizmann in 1921, one in which Brandeis lost the battle but won the war, nor the return of the Brandeis group in the 1930s. Rather, let me suggest in conclusion that Louis Brandeis' legacy to American Jewry lay not in the creation of a potent Zionist movement but in what that meant for the millions of recent immigrants to this country.

Those of us who are third- or fourth-generation Americans cannot imagine what it must have been like for our grandparents to leave lands of oppression and misery, and undertake a journey that was hard, and often dangerous, to reach these shores. My own grandmother would talk very little about her trip to America, but she would never, for the rest of her days, set foot on a boat again.

Once here, they recognized that this was a land of freedom, but did freedom come at the price of their beliefs? Did they have to give up, if not Judaism entirely, then that mystic attachment they had to the land of their ancestors, to the religious dream of redemption? The German-American Jews said yes and considered it a price worth paying. In doing so, however, they also implicitly acknowledged their own fears that perhaps this country was not quite the paradise it claimed to be. One could be free here but one should not be too Jewish, one should not depart very far from the middle.

Louis Brandeis, on the other hand, believed in this country far more than the *yahudim*. He believed in a country where all citizens not only had the right but the obligation to speak freely, and this lesson he taught American Jews. If you would be truly free, then you must speak up for what you believe. If you speak up, then your fellow Americans will respect you for it. In a democracy, those who are silent are ignored; those who speak out for what they believe may have to fight other groups, but the give and take of such battles is what democracy is all about. Be brave, he told them, and fight for the right. By doing so you will become strong.

Recognizing that Jews could be equal

players in American politics, that they had a right to speak for their own interests, has been a lesson the American Jewish community still cherishes. There are still among us what Stephen Wise used to call the "sh-sh" Jews, who are always saying don't be too Jewish, don't make noise, be invisible. But American Jewish groups have stood up and battled for black civil rights before it became popular to do so. They have taken the lead in litigation to enforce separation of church and state, a position that the *yahudim* might have approved of in principle but would never have been willing to fight for publicly. And, of course, an empowered American Jewry has been Israel's most consistent supporter for more than 40 years. The success of the so-called Israel lobby rests on the belief, shared by most Jews and many non-Jews as well, that support for the democratic Jewish state in the Middle East is good for our own democracy at home.

It is this willingness to speak out, to feel that Jews as full American citizens need not hide their beliefs, that by standing up for what they believe, they not only fulfill their obligations as citizens but also as Jews.

*Melvin I. Urofsky is a professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University. The first part of this essay, the Annual Selma and Jacob Brown Lecture, appeared in the Fall 1993 issue of Menorah Review.*

## Christian Anti-Semitism, Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust Part 2 of 2

*Lessons and Legacies*  
edited by Peter Hayes  
Evanston, IL: Northwestern  
University Press

A Review Essay  
by Robert Michael

### *The Churches and Violence Against the Jews*

Between 1923 and 1931, nearly 150 desecrations of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues occurred, with little or no reaction from the churches. Although there was a modicum of resistance by churchmen and other Germans to the mass-murder of Jews, it is important to realize that the impact of Christian anti-Jewishness on attitudes and events was significantly greater than any religiously based opposition to events. Christianity contributed to the Holocaust by persistent expressions of anti-semitism even in the midst of slaughter by Christian leaders and by the continuing effect on the minds of Christians who, as a result, turned their backs on Jewish suffering. Indeed, the words and

behavior of the German Protestant and Catholic leaders on the Jews and other matters set the example for local clergy, whose attitudes in turn coincided with those of their congregations. They directly or indirectly approved of the Nazi regime's anti-semitism so long as it was not blatantly violent.

To claim that the church's tradition of protecting Jews was weakened by Nazism and, therefore, somehow these Christian institutions were exculpated from their participation in the Holocaust is to forget that the church's protection of Jews was profoundly ambivalent. As we have seen, the papacy and subordinate churchmen and women believed that Jews must be degraded. The reason Jews should not be killed is that their suffering example would then disappear. It is true that most Christians preferred the traditional solutions to the "Jewish problem," one less radical than that proposed and carried out by the National-Socialist (i.e., degradation of the Jews without their mass murder). Yet we have already examined several examples of Christian involvement in the mass murder of Jews long before the Holocaust and the ambivalent, ambiguous attitudes of the churches toward this kind of anti-Jewish violence.

Most Germans, during the 1930s, did not object to Hitler's "moderate" and "legal" early policies of discrimination, expropriation and expulsion of Jews as necessarily immoral and violations of Christian ethics, for these were long-established methods of exercising religious anti-semitism. Public violence committed against the Jews was usually too painful for most Christians to confront but, once most of the atrocities were moved out of Germany to Poland, which the Germans already considered the *anus mundi*, the murders could be ignored. Once taken away to disappear into the night and fog of the Third Reich, the Jews would be gone for good. This satisfied those who simply did not want to share their Christian world with Jews. This kind of attitude was observed by Friedrich Nietzsche more than 50 years earlier in 1886:

"I have not met a German yet who was well disposed toward the Jews; and however unconditionally all the cautious and politically-minded repudiate real anti-semitism, even this caution and policy are not directed against the species of this feeling itself but only against its dangerous immoderation. . ."

The Jews were denied basic rights and citizenship in Germany long before their physical extermination. As Ingo Müller has recently pointed out, in the 1930s the Jews experienced a "civil death" (i.e., they had no rights in any area of German law and society). The creation of concentration camps, the massive 1938 pogrom, the disappearance of Jews, and the persistent rumors and evidence of their mass murder were simply not considered significant issues for Ger-

man Christians. Many Christians were willing to stand up to the regime on other moral issues. There was more Christian protest in Bavaria, for example, against the April 1941 order that crucifixes be removed from German classrooms than against the fiendish treatment of the Jews. Another issue in which assertive Christian reactions stood out in sharp contrast to the silence concerning the Final Solution involved the Nazi Euthanasia Action. In 1941, the churches led a public crusade that at least temporarily ended the inhuman treatment of the insane.

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Hitler, until the end of his life, was aware of the churches' religious and political power, which could have been employed to moderate his behavior. In November 1944, he observed that "the wrath of the church constitutes in life no idle threat; in the face of real crisis, the church does not limit itself to threats of hellfire and purgatory in the hereafter but has tangible means of making life a misery for its victims on this earth as well."

It has been argued that the traditional limitations the Christian churches placed on anti-semitism were thrown off by the Nazis and the result was the Holocaust. But it was the churches themselves that refused to protect Jews. They did not have their virtue taken from them, they gave it willingly. Free of the strong stand that could have been taken by the churches against violence, the faithful were free to follow their "conscience." All the contempt that had been taught about Jews over the centuries by the churches now had their greatest impact. This was not unprecedented. During the medieval period, as we have seen, the traditional protections for Jews had often broken down, especially during times of crisis. It was then that the centuries of religious hostility toward the Jews made possible the mass murder of Jews perpetuated by Christians unrestrained by traditional limits.

On November 9-10, 1938, before the extermination period of the Holocaust, during the massive peace-time pogrom of *Reichs Kristallnacht*, almost every significant Christian voice remained silent. During the worst violence against Jews in Germany and Austria since the Middle Ages, only a few Christian voices publicly spoke out for the Jews.

### *Hitler's Christian Anti-Semitism*

Hitler had read books emphasizing forms of Christian anti-semitism in Luther, Goethe, Father Rohling and Heinrich Treitschke. Privately, he expressed his admiration for the anti-Jewish ideas of "all genuine Christians of outstanding calibre." He specifically mentioned John Chrysostom, as well as the 11th-century Pope Gregory VII, the 13th-century scholastic Thomas Aquinas and the 16th-century Martin Luther. As we have seen above, Chrysostom was the most radical theological anti-semitic among the Church Fathers, who ended by suggesting that Jews should be slain. Gregory VII had opposed any Jewish authority over Christians on the grounds that to do so would "oppress the Church of God and exalt the Synagogue of Satan. . . . To please the enemies of Christ is to condemn Christ himself." Thomas Aquinas had strongly advocated a servile, subordinate and inferior status for Jews. Hitler called Luther "one of the greatest Germans," "the mighty opponent of the Jews," "a great man, a giant," who had found himself, as Hitler said, in his anti-Jewish writings.

"He saw the Jew as we are only now beginning to see him today. But unfortunately too late, and not where he did the most harm—within Christianity itself. Ah, if he had seen the Jew at work there, seen him in his youth! Then he would not have attacked Catholicism but the Jew behind it. Instead of totally rejecting the church, he would have thrown his whole passionate weight against the real culprits."

It is obvious that Hitler's "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem" paralleled Luther's program for the Jews in almost every respect, from the destruction of Jewish culture, economy, and social-political standing, to expulsion and/or mass murder. Yet we do not know whether it was Luther's works that gave Hitler his specific solution of the "Jewish question" or not. In 1932, Hitler speaking informally in his Munich flat, observed that "Luther, if he could be with us, would give us [National-Socialists] his blessing."

Hitler's rhetoric from the 1920s on, both publicly and privately, indicates he had learned much in his fight against Judaism from Christianity. In February 1933, he told a Stuttgart audience that "Christians . . . now stand at the head of Germany. I do not merely talk of Christianity, no, I also profess that I will never ally myself with the parties which destroy Christianity. . . . We wish to fill our culture once more with the spirit of Christianity—and not only in theory. No, we want to burn out the symptoms of decomposition in . . . our whole culture. . . ."

This is not to deny that Hitler grew to hate Christianity itself. Privately, he called Christianity "an invention of sick brains; one could imagine nothing more senseless, not any more indecent way of turning the

idea of the Godhead into a mockery. A Negro with his tabus is crushingly superior to the human being who seriously believes in Transubstantiation." Hitler planned to destroy Christian institutions after the war. "The evil that is gnawing our vitals is our priests, of both creeds. . . . The time will come when I'll settle my accounts with them. [We will] exterminate the lie." But, at other times, he attributed this radical solution to his youth and argued that the churches should withdraw away of their own accord. "The best thing is to let Christianity die a natural death, . . . the rotten branch falls off itself." He even spoke of continuing state support (a grant of 50 million marks) for the Catholic Church after the war, at the same time making the recruiting of priests difficult. Theodor Groppe, one of Hitler's generals and a Catholic, warned Pius XII that Hitler had stated: "I will crush Christianity under my heel as I would a toad."

Nevertheless, Hitler had learned much from Christian anti-semitism. He declared in a speech in 1922 that "I would be no Christian . . . if I did not, as did our Lord 2,000 years ago, turn against those by whom today this poor people [Christian Germany] is plundered and exploited." In another speech on February 24, 1939, Hitler rhetorically combined Judaism and Christianity in the same paragraph, explaining how the Jewish problem had been solved in Germany—by expropriating the Jews and redistributing their wealth in a more socially conscious nation. In this sense, the Nazis were authentically Christian:

"Today the Jewish question is no longer a German problem, but a European one. National-Socialist Germany has created a new economic doctrine which views capital as the servant of the economy and the economy as the servant of the people. We are the first nation to make the ingenuity and industry of our people the basis of prosperity. If the positive element of Christianity is love of one's neighbor, that is, caring for the sick, clothing the poor, feeding the hungry and quenching the thirst of the parched, then we are true Christians!"

In a private conversation published in 1924 with Dietrich Eckart, Hitler's closest friend up to the Munich *Putsch*, Hitler admitted his belief in ritual murder. He mentioned he was unshakably convinced that "the Jews had continued to perform ritual murders" up to recently. In 1935, the government of the Reich permitted the republication of Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, which, as we have seen, contained references to Jewish ritual murder and the Christian's obligation, in turn, to murder the Jews.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Streicher's *Der Sturmer*, Hitler's favorite reading, abounded with references to ritual murder and other

religious myths against Jews, in particular their association with the devil. Catholic myths about Jewish ritual murder were considered "historical documents. Works of art portraying these fables in individual Catholic churches prove that what was written about really happened, indeed that the Catholic Church recognizes the reality of ritual murder." *Der Sturmer* repeated all the medieval allegations of Jewish ritual murder.

**Hitler's rhetoric from the 1920s on, both publicly and privately, indicates he had learned much in his fight against Judaism from Christianity.**

In 1926, the magazine had published a story and cartoon on Jewish ritual murder. The cartoon portrayed three Jewish men drinking blood from a slaughtered blond Polish (Catholic and Aryan, assumably) woman. Many areas of Germany and Austria had local saints revered as martyrs of the Jews. The famous ritual-murder issue of 1934 contained many articles on the subject and a front-page drawing of repulsive Jews catching the blood from the severed veins of blond women and children hanging upside down. This was the Christmas message of December 25, 1941: "To put an end to the proliferation of the curse of God in this Jewish blood, there is only one way: the extermination of this people, whose father is the devil." Besides, assumably with Hitler's knowledge, in May 1943 Himmler ordered Kaltenbrunner to discover cases of Jewish ritual murder "wherever Jews have not yet been evacuated," notably in England, Rumania, Hungary and Bulgaria, and publicize them. Moreover, after an international uproar, Hitler banned a special ritual-murder edition published in 1934 on the grounds that Streicher's comparison of Christian Communion with Jewish ritual murder was an insult to Christianity!

Reflecting the anti-Jewish theological premises he had absorbed in his youth, his speech to political leaders of the Nazi party at Nuremberg in 1936 was replete with "an astonishing montage of Biblical texts," especially from the Gospels of Matthew and John. As late as 1938, in a conversation with Hans Frank, his Minister of Justice, Hitler noted that "in the gospel, when Pilate refuses to crucify Jesus, the Jews call out to him: 'His blood be upon us and upon our children's children.' Perhaps I shall have to put this curse into effect." How many Christian believers, from the Church Fathers on, were able, in principle, to deny these statements as representing their own beliefs?

**Hitler and Racist Anti-Semitism**

At the same time that he employed Christian anti-Jewish ideas, Hitler often

spoke in racial and secular terms about Jews. In a letter of 1919, he wrote that "the Jews are unquestionably a race, not a religious community." In 1942, his table-talk included the observation that the way to free Germany of disease was to "dispose of the Jew . . . the racial germ that corrupts the mixture of the blood." In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote that "race . . . does not lie in the language, but exclusively in the blood . . . ; [the Jew] poisons the blood of others, but preserves his own; the lost purity of the blood alone destroys inner happiness forever, plunges man into the abyss for all time, and the consequences can never more be eliminated from body and spirit."

But at bottom, like traditional Christian anti-semitism, Hitler hated spiritual, not biological Jewishness. In the midst of the "racial" condemnation of the Jews, his language keeps turning to traditional anti-semitic ideas. Several Christian theologians we have already discussed had paralleled Hitler's statement that the Jew "stops at nothing, and in his villainess he becomes . . . the personification of the devil;] the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew." The only way for him to rid the world of the Jewish spirit was to carry out Fichte's suggestion and to "cut all their Jewish heads off." It was the "Jewish mind," (i.e., the Jewish religious and cultural values inculcated into Jewish thought and behavior) that both Christian anti-semites and Nazis objected to. It was not the decide that made the Jews evil; the Jews' evil caused them to commit decide and a myriad of other crimes. Both the church and the National-Socialists saw Judaism as the "root of all evil." Judaism was a metaphor for wickedness, and Jews were actually maleficent. Indeed, whereas Hitler late in the war confessed that he thought biological racism nonsense, the ideas of biological racism were much more sincerely held in Catholic Spain.

Whatever his ideological pretenses in regard to race for public consumption, Hitler did not determine state policy based on racism. Far from being the prophet of race, Hitler did not see the Jew essentially as flesh and blood at all. Both hating the church and, at the same time, imitating it, Hitler's idea was that the Jews were an alien and spiritually un-German anti-people, devils who must be eliminated. This had been the church's essential position for two millennia. Hitler cut short the church's more complicated belief that a remnant of Jews would be left to convert at the end of time and the church's inconsistent belief that Jews should disappear through conversion to Christianity.

Both before and at the end of World War II, Hitler clarified his conception of race as it applied to the Jewish issue. He implied that beneath the surface of biological racism, there was a more essential "spiritual racism." As we have seen, this idea about the corrupting nature of a Jewish spirit

that was embodied in individual Jews was as old as Christianity. From start to finish, Hitler seems to take this same position. Dietrich Eckart reported that in the early 1920s Hitler told him about the corrupting nature of "the Jewish spirit" that was embodied by all Jews. To Hermann Rauschning in 1939, Hitler had noted that "I know perfectly well . . . that in the scientific sense there is no such thing as [a biological] race." Another document reported Hitler's final conversations with his last intimate, Martin Bormann. A few months before his death, Hitler differentiated between a race of the mind and one of the body. Hitler told Bormann that

"we use the term Jewish race as a matter of convenience, for in reality and from the genetic point of view there is no such thing as the Jewish race. There does, however, exist a community . . . It is [a] homogeneous group [to] which all Jews throughout the world deliberately adhere . . . and it is this group of human beings to which we give the title Jewish race."

Although Hitler continued to deny that the Jews were, strictly speaking, "a religious entity," since Jewish atheists existed, Hitler went on to describe the Jews as "an abstract race of the mind [that] has its origins, admittedly, in the Hebrew religion. . . . A race of the mind is something more solid, more durable than just a [biological] race, pure and simple." Indeed, Hitler opposed the churches because they were not only political rivals but, also, in Klaus Scholder's words, "the last bastion of the Jewish spirit."

#### *The Final Solution, A Modern Crusade*

The anti-Jewish defamations established by Christian theologians were precisely those used by the National-Socialists. These ideas were so thoroughly part of the Christian mind it was natural they would be used. It is often argued that the Holocaust resulted not from Christian anti-semitism or by Nazi influence. Yet Christians had already killed millions of Jews before the Holocaust during a period when these so-called limitations were already in place, even during the Middle Ages. Hitler, the Nazis and the Third Reich supplied the organization with daring seldom seen before, but what made the difference between the Nazi Final Solution of the Jewish Question and earlier attempts was that by the fourth decade of the 20th century, mass murder technologies, not previously available, were employed. In rereading the Hebrew and Christian Crusade chronicles, I am convinced that had the Crusaders possessed a technology of death like the Nazis, they would have achieved a Final Solution a thousand years ago.

"Products of a culture deeply impregnated with Christian symbols," both the Nazis and their collaborators, and the medieval murderers, sought to destroy Jewishness. The Nazis intended to murder all Jews, even

those loyal to Germany and converted to Christianity. Medieval Christians spared those who allowed themselves to be baptized but many medieval Christians were skeptical about the efficacy of baptism in regard to the Jews and, often, the murderers themselves did not offer a choice. In late medieval Spain, for instance, Christians would not relent in their assault on Judaism even after Jews had converted to Catholicism. The "New Christians" were hounded by Church and State, by Inquisition and popular pressure, even after their baptism.

The anti-Jewish climate of opinion, the devastatingly hostile *idees forces*, the negative ideological and emotional groundwork, the administrative procedures, the calls for murder, and the tacit acceptance of mass murder by the greatest authorities of the time—the social and political elites, the governments, and the Church—were all in place. The Nazis enlisted a large percentage of Germans and many other Europeans to collaborate in their endeavor. We can include here the oftentimes tacit acceptance of the Final Solution by most European Christians, including the papacy. Many medieval Jew-murderers and other Christians who called for the murder of Jews wanted to berid of the Jew, down to the last child. The medieval and the modern papacy both based their Jewish policy on Augustine's ambivalent precept of degradation and protection. As a result, the popes often neglected their protective role and, like most Christians of the time, having already accepted the necessity of the degradation of Jews, sanctioned the murder of Jews.

Like his fierce predecessors, Hitler transformed preexisting anti-Jewish Christian ideology into action; he made manifest behaviors implicit in Christian theological anti-semitism. "The process is that of bringing to the surface what has been present before as an internal and broad condition." He created a system in which the Jews' souls were crushed; their religion lost; their morality murdered; and their bodies, like their dreams, transformed into smoke and ashes. He catalyzed the brooding anti-Jewish antipathy of the great mass of the Christian populace into terrifying actuality. In the 1930s, when Hitler ordered degradation and expulsion, the nations of the world refused to accept these Jewish pariahs and aliens.

*Robert Michael is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. The first part of this essay appeared in the Fall 1993 issue of Menorah Review.*

*"If man uses the Torah properly,  
it is a medicine of life;  
if improperly,  
it can be a deadly poison."*

—Talmud

## The "Why" of Creation

*What Is the Purpose of Creation?*  
by Michael J. Alter  
Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc.

A Review Essay  
by Earle J. Coleman

Some philosophers regard the following as the most profound of all questions: Why is there what there is rather than something else or nothing at all? In the end, there is no non-religious answer. For if one posits, say, evolution, "Things just evolved to be the way they are," someone else can ask, "but why is there evolution? Why not devolution, or nothing at all?" As the child's "why" questions lead to an infinite regress unless we postulate the existence of God, philosophical and scientific answers are penultimate, driving the religiously disposed to adopt faith in God. Of course, atheists, such as Bertrand Russell, readily concede there is no answer to the question. But this hardly placates those who find an authenticity in the question and balk at the asymmetry of a good question for which there is no correspondingly good answer. Still, the atheist thinks that to ask why God created is to commit the fallacy of the complex question; i.e., to ask a question that presupposes a prior question has already been answered affirmatively: Does God exist?

After one asks *why* there is everything that there is, the next most basic questions are *how* and *why* did God create? The representative Jewish replies, which have been very helpfully culled by Alter from centuries of tradition, contain insights, ironies, puzzles and paradoxes. First, consider the *how* of creation; in the *Sefer Hayashar*, a classic of the Middle Ages, we find: All the wise men of the world believe . . . that the Creator is first, and that which was fashioned is created *ex nihilo*. . . ." To the Greeks, the creation of something from nothing would have been as absurd as a square circle. Thus, some Jews reinterpret creation from nothing as creation out of God because God is *no thing* (i.e., no mere thing but the ground of all things). Under this model, the universe is an outpouring from God just as sparks proceed from a fire. Ironically enough, according to the Lurianic Kabbalah, creation occurs only when God withdraws himself. The reasoning is that if God were a part of creation, creatures would be overwhelmed by his majesty and absorbed into his being.

Thinking about creating also leads to a paradox of omnipotence. Before creation, God was, of course, King of heaven, but afterward God was King of both heaven and earth. Does this mean that divine omnipotence increased accordingly? If so, how can a being that is all powerful become more so?



Consider *The Book of the Righteous* "... with the Creator, nothing was lacking in His power before the world was created, but in the creation of the world His perfection increased." But if to be perfect is to be beyond improvement, one may wonder how a perfect being can become greater. One also may wonder about the point of creation. Why would God create? It seems that whenever we act, it is because we lack something. We eat because we are hungry and wish to fill a cavity; we visit a friend because we have social needs; we create art to fill a psychological hole. But why would a perfect God, one who is complete, self-contained and autonomous, act at all? Such a being would have no need to create. One thinks of Aristotle's unmoved mover who, being fully actual, thinks but does not engage in any activities whatever. Thus, Spinoza concluded that the doctrine of creation undermines God's perfection: "... if God acts for any object, he necessarily desires something which he lacks."

In scripture, creation is sometimes explained as an act of boundless love or altruism: "The world is built of love" (Psalm 89:3). One Kabbalistic writer, Yehuda Ashlag, states the "ultimate intention and purpose of the creation of the universe" was to bring pleasure to those whom God had created. In short, God did not need to create for his own self-satisfaction. Denying that God created the world because he needed it, Joseph ben Jacob ibn Zaddick argues: "If He was always in need of it, it is impossible that the world should not exist with Him from eternity, but this leads to a belief in the eternity of the world and that it is not created." Concluding that God is self-sufficient, Zaddick interprets creation as an act of loving kindness. God's generosity entailed that he would share his experience. This raises the question: If creation flows from God's loving and eternal nature, why did God not create sooner? Also, is it not the case that God needs humans, for how could even He be just or merciful if there were not creatures toward whom He could be just or merciful? Indeed, one might wonder if God's love does not entail that he needed something after all, a universe upon which to bestow His love. Finally, since a perfect being would bring about the maximum goodness possible, was God determined, rather than free, to bring about the best of all possible worlds?

One 19th-century thinker, Moritz Lazarus, theorizes that humans exist to supplement the physical creation, which is devoid of ethical values, with a valuational dimension. The creation of human beings was a creation of axiological creatures, beings who introduced moral value into the universe. God, by Himself, is not a moral being, for a moral agent has rights and duties, because no one can grant rights to God or impose duties on Him. Nor does God plus

the physical cosmos alone constitute a moral situation, for there is no moral struggle. Thus, if there were to be more than the transmoral God and the amoral material universe, if moral values were to exist, humans had to be created. As Moses Mendelssohn urges, God created us so that we might develop our capacities; humans are necessary for the completion of the world.

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Joshua Adler observes that in the course of analyzing nature, one reaches a point at which one can only say that nature just is what it is. Only a turn to what is above nature can transcend its meaninglessness. In fact, Abraham ibn Daud reasoned that because there is no species above man, we can infer that he is the purpose of created existence. Maimonides, among others, maintained that the purpose of creation could only be human perfection. Joseph ben Jacob asserts that man, unlike beasts, was created to know, and the ultimate purpose of knowledge is to know God's existence. Again, for Moses ben Nahman, unless humans pursue knowledge of God, the universe is bereft of purpose. According to Solomon ben Judah ibn Gabirol, God created man because knowledge of the divine is the object of human existence and humans come to know something of the Creator through his creation.

Of course, scripture also teaches that the creation exists to honor or praise God. For example, in Isaiah (43:7): "Every thing that is called by my name, and that I have created for my Glory . . ." Isaac Leeser observes that when a man is glorified, he may begin to place himself above all others and may eventually harm them. Leeser further states the glorification of God can never interfere with human well being since he does not injure humans but sustains them. Still, one may wonder why a perfect (i.e., self-contained) God wishes to be honored. Given that God is fully actualized, the purpose of divine glorification could only be for the development of humans.

Lazarus emphasizes that "... the highest form and ultimate purpose of human life is likeness to God . . . in whose image man was created, and whose copy and image it is man's task to strive to become." God is the paradigm of action and we are "to walk in the

ways of God, to be righteous and just" (Genesis 18:19). But American philosopher Robert Nozick asks why fitting into God's scheme lends meaning to *human existence*. How can surrendering to divine providence or living in accord with God's way give meaning to human existence? One reply is that since we are made in the image of God, to satisfy God's will is to satisfy our own nature.

Classical and contemporary Jewish writers have sometimes insisted that humans simply cannot know the divine purpose behind creation. As scripture asks: "Does one exist who can search out God?" (Job 11:7). Mattis Kantor answers negatively, "In order to truly understand why God desired to create our existence . . . is to be God. We are subjects and only God can have an objective understanding of His desire." According to the philosopher Joshua Adler, any explanation of creation requires what humans cannot have (i.e., a grasp of non-creation or what preceded existence). In short, to know the purpose of creation requires knowing the contents of God's consciousness, God's internal reasons or motivations. Because these seem inaccessible, some writers speak of knowing God's intentions indirectly (i.e., through deduction rather than a direct intuition). If one replies that God has made His wishes known in scripture, the question becomes: Which sacred text from the world's religions should be authoritative? Samuel Belkin suggests that Jewish sages addressed a *whatfor*, not an *original why*. The former refers to man's purpose (e.g., to serve God); the latter refers to God's unknowable basis for creation itself. On the related question of why God exists, Maimonides argued that we cannot ask about the purpose of God's existence since we can ask the purpose of a thing only if it is produced by an agent.

According to scripture, God created everything with some end in view: "The Lord hath made everything for a purpose, even the wicked for an evil day" (Proverbs 16:4). But no less an intellect than Spinoza categorically denies there is any purpose in the universe. According to him, people will defend the existence of a final cause (i.e., purpose, at all costs); thus, storms, diseases and earthquakes are attributed to the gods being furious with men. But if people are confronted with the reality that good and evil fortunes befall the pious and the impious alike, they do not reject their great Designer—the idea that God directs everything toward a specific goal; instead, they assert that God's ways are beyond human understanding. To which Spinoza replies, "the will of God" is nothing more than "the sanctuary of ignorance." Following Spinoza, Aryeh Kaplan declares, "In a world without purpose, there can be neither good nor evil, since both of these concepts imply purpose." Indeed, Freud asserts that the question itself should be dismissed, "... for it seems to derive from human presumptuousness . . .

nobody talks about the purpose of the life of animals unless, perhaps, it may be supposed to lie in being of service to man." Freud refutes this last supposition by observing that innumerable species of animals became extinct before man came into existence. Alter's excerpt from Albert Einstein, while not explicitly religious, does affirm that life has purpose. Einstein finds the significance of life in three areas: the ethical (the establishing of "a community of free and happy human beings who by constant inward endeavor strive to liberate themselves from the inheritance of anti-social and destructive instincts"), the cognitive ("the fruits of intellectual effort") and the aesthetic ("the creative activity of the artist").

Significance in a future life is thematic for Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, a kabbalist and poet, who teaches that humans were created solely to rejoice in God and to derive pleasure from his presence, but Luzzatto adds that this human joy may be fully realized only in the World to Come. In other words, the meaning of life will be grasped only after death. The present world simply provides a means to the ultimate end of union with the Divine in the World to Come. He asks why else would we have a soul that is incapable of being satisfied by all the pleasures of the world? Nachman of Bratslav also emphasizes the afterlife: "One must realize that the goal of creation is the delight that will exist in the world to come." He thinks that, given the human suffering of this world, there would be not point in humans being born if they could not eventually participate in a better world. Concerning the "the World to

Come," he says, "It is precisely through this that they attain the purpose [of creation]." After all, in the present world, the good often suffer and the evil often flourish. If such a life is to be meaningful (i.e., not absurdly inequitable), there must be another chapter in the human narrative, an afterlife in which virtue does not go unrewarded.

Some individuals realize the point of life quite late but still in the present life. Shortly before dying, Rabbi Israel Eliezer Baal Shem Tov declared, "Now I know the purpose for which I was created." Eliezer Berkovits asks, "If the universe were meaningless, a chance event, how could man know about meaning?" He says of man, "Only in the expectation of meaning can he reach the judgment that existence is meaningless." Are not meaningful and meaningless correlatives, neither being intelligible without the other? In defense of the thesis that life does have meaning, one may argue that our search for meaning is what introduces meaning to the world in which we eventually find meaning. Without an individual's personal search for meaning, life would strike one as meaningless. Clearly, the will for meaning can eclipse the will for power, sex, material goods and even life itself. If nothing in nature is in vain, the pursuit of meaning may uncover the meaningful. Humans give meaning to their lives by pondering the right questions: Where do we come from? What are we? And where are we going? Paraphrasing Descartes, "I think therefore I am meaningful." In fact, Martin Buber thought that once a person experienced a religious revelation, nothing

could be meaningless again. Still, the mystically inclined Buber left room for mystery through his assertion that one's spiritual encounter would demonstrate that life is meaningful but not what the meaning is.

Alter's selections, whether emphasizing knowing, loving or serving God, make it evident that for the Jew, the meaning of life is to be found through participation in it rather than in scientific descriptions, logical analysis or propositions of any kind. One sometimes has moments in which he/she is buoyant; life is full, rich and brimming over. As boundaries fall away and prospects multiply, he/she can contain neither life nor his/her own ebullience. This is just to say that the deepest meaning of life lies in the experimental rather than the conceptual. As Eliezer Berkovits has remarked, "No one can really tell anyone else what the meaning of his life should be. It is of the very essence of human existence to search for this personal meaning to one's personal existence, to formulate it, to discover it. It is of the very essence of life's adventure and man's creativity." There can be no general formula for the meaning of life because each person is as individual as a painting. In addition, the meaning of life, as with a piece of art, is something the individual creates rather than merely discovers. G. K. Chesterton said of Francis of Assisi that his life was itself a work of art. Of course, to be art is also to be meaningful. We do not call something art if it is devoid of all meaning.

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## BOOK BRIEFINGS

*Editor's Note: Inclusion of a book in "Briefings" does not preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.*

**The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism. Volume I: God.** By Jacob Neusner. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc. In this first volume of a trilogy, Neusner presents the first systematic account of the self-revelation of God in the writing of the Oral Torah (Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash). According to the author, we know God in four aspects: (1) principle or premise—the one who created the world and gave the Torah; (2) presence—supernatural being resident in the Temple and present where two or more persons are engaged in Torah; (3) person—the one to whom prayer is addressed; and (4) personality—a God we can know and make our model. Subsequent volumes in this trilogy will focus on Torah and Israel.

**Children of the Flames: Dr. Josef Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz.** By Lucette Matalon Lagnado and Sheila Cohn Dekel. William Morrow and Company, Inc. Three thousand twins are believed to have passed through Mengele's laboratory in Auschwitz between 1943 and 1944. Only 100 are known to have survived. Few have ever borne witness to their suffering; indeed, theirs is the untold story of the Holocaust. The authors searingly recount for the first time the graphic, psychic horror of the twins' lives in Auschwitz under the notorious "angel of death," and their struggle to rebuild a life after liberation. They have added a critical piece to our understanding of the Holocaust.

**Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem.** By Robert Alter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. In four chapters, Alter explains the prism-like radiance created by the association of three modern masters: Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem. The volume pinpoints the intersections of these divergent witnesses to the modern condition of doubt, the no-man's land between traditional religion and modern secular culture. The author uncovers a moment when the future of modernism is revealed in its preoccupation with the past. His focus on the epiphanic force of memory on these three great modernists shows with sometimes startling, sometimes prophetic clarity that a complete break with tradition is not essential to modernism.

**The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times.** By Norman A. Stillman. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. This book sheds new light on the relationship between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. Also, it documents a historic migration of Jews from their homelands, a migration reminiscent of so many exoduses of the Jewish people, from the flight from Egypt to the Spanish expulsion in 1492 and the emigration from Russia near the end of the 19th century. Barely a generation ago, 800,000 Jews lived in the Arab world; today there are less than 16,000.

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Stillman begins with an interpretive vision of the events of history; he then provides a wide-ranging collection of sources, giving the reader a rare opportunity to see the raw material on which the history is based, to hear the voices of the actual participants in the events and to form his or her own opinion based on these sources, many of which make gripping reading.

**Joshua's Altar: The Dig at Mount Ebal.** By Milt Machlin. William Morrow and Company, Inc. The author describes the astonishing archaeological discovery of Joshua's altar (Joshua 8.30: "Then Joshua built an altar unto the Lord God of Israel at Mount Ebal.") It is the first physical evidence that corroborates a biblical reference. Machlin places the altar into a variety of perspectives. He discusses how it shed new light on the ethnic and religious origins of the early inhabitants of Israel, then called Canaan. He reveals how Zertal's findings can be interpreted in the ongoing debate about the factual nature of the Bible, and he details how the new evidence of Israel's deep historic roots on the West Bank contributes to the area's current political conflict. This book is not only a description of an important archaeological discovery but also an examination of larger questions of history, religion and faith.

**Beyond Innocence & Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power.** By Marc H. Ellis. Harper & Row, Publishers. With the lightning victory of Israel in the June 1967 War, a new understanding of the meaning and destiny of the Jewish people crystallized and quickly came to define Judaism for Jews around the world. This self-understanding made the Holocaust central to what it meant to be a Jew as well as a member of the people of Israel and articulated the belief in Jewish innocence and the necessity of Jewish empowerment for survival. In this volume, the author exposes the current impropriety of this world view as enshrined in

Holocaust literature and theology, now that Israel has not only attained nationhood but wields state power against the Palestinians. Ellis challenges militant Zionism with a radical moral vision of the Jewish people acting in solidarity with justice-seeking Palestinians.

**Jews of the American West.** Edited by Moses Rischin and John Livingston. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. In a series of nine original essays, the editors and other leading American historians bring dramatically new perspectives to bear on our understanding of the West, its Jews and other Americans, both old and new. Whether comparing the history of the Jews of the West with the Jewish experience in the older regions of the country or bringing attention to the uniquely local aspects of the western experience, the contributions of this landmark volume perceive the West as an increasingly important and vital presence in the nation's history. Essays on the role of intermarriage, the shared encounter of immigrants and migrants, and the response to the founding of the State of Israel by western pioneer families, tell us much about the interaction of the West with our American world nation.

**A Time To Be Born and a Time To Die: The Ethics of Choice.** Edited by Barry S. Kogan. Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter. This volume brings together original essays by many of the most prominent figures in the field of biomedical ethics and presents them in a dialogue that significantly updates their earlier work. Focusing on the moral dilemmas that recent medical advances have created at both ends of the life course, the contributors discuss in depth such issues as patient autonomy, hospital policies of risk management, new developments in the abortion debate, genetic counseling and prenatal care, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, testing and treatment policies for HIV infection, and fairness in allocating health care and donated organs.



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