

“Living on the Edge of the Abyss”

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Living, as all of us do, in the shadow of the Holocaust means living with a number of challenges and paradoxes. I want to use this time today to explore a few of those issues. For if this day is to mean anything to us—especially all of us born long after these events unfolded in Europe--it must be a time for exploring how our lives today look when viewed through this very dark lens. In doing so, I hope to share some of what I have learned in my own personal confrontation with these events, but also what I have tried to convey to my students in the Holocaust course I taught here several times. I do so, not as an expert in the Holocaust and not as a historian or social scientist with expertise in totalitarian regimes. I come at this subject both personally, as a Jew who cares deeply about the fate of this people, and academically, as a scholar of religion and an ethicist who has spent much of his life thinking about moral problems, about the human propensity to evil, and the possibility of repentance.

The first challenge I wish to explore is the dichotomy between good and evil. We often look at the Holocaust as an example—perhaps the

primary example in recent western history—of the stark contrast between evil perpetrators and innocent victims. And we do so with good reason. The Nazis violated every norm of human decency and ushered in an era of industrialized mass murder unlike any the world has known. The Jews, perennial victims of anti-semitism, were no longer hated for their religion, or their nationality, but simply for their being. They had to be utterly exterminated. Viewed in this way, the Holocaust is an epic story of good vs. evil.

And there is also some comfort in that framing, because we all know which side of the divide we put ourselves on. The problem is that the more one explores the experiences of perpetrators, victims, bystanders and rescuers, the muddier the boundaries of good and evil become. There are the Nazis—think Oskar Schindler-- who sometimes showed compassion and used his privileged position to save Jews. And there were Jews—think of the heads of the Jewish councils and the Jewish prisoners within the death camps who staffed the gas chambers and crematoria—who condemned others to death so that they could survive a little longer.

The line separating the “good guys” and the “bad guys” is not so easy to draw.

Moreover, as Christopher Browning has demonstrated in his powerful book, *Ordinary Men*, the people who performed these atrocities were, in fact, quite ordinary citizens, not the monsters we portray them as. The famous Milgrom experiments demonstrated that all of us are far more willing to obey authority, even when we are asked to inflict mortal pain on others, than we would like to admit. And when we begin to look deeply and honestly at these historical examples, we confront what is perhaps the most horrifying fact of all: Given the right circumstances, all of us have the capacity to do enormous evil, far beyond our imagination. How much easier it would be if we could locate “evil” as something “out there,” identified with “those others” who are utterly unlike us. But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, drawing such sharp distinctions between us (the good ones) and them (the evil ones), is precisely the sort of thinking that animated the Nazis’ entire racist theory. To confront the Holocaust is to face squarely the reality that good and evil are always found intertwined in human hearts.

The second challenge we face is that the institutions we depend on to protect us from discrimination and then wholesale destruction are in fact utterly inadequate to that task. Our entire civilization, our democratic way of life, is grounded in the conviction that the law, representative government, and civil society itself are the bulwark against chaos and lawlessness. Yet, when Hitler dismantled the institutions of the judiciary, established a police state, created slave labor and then death camps—no institution could stop him. Despite some individual exceptions, the judges complied, the scientists and physicians were co-opted to serve the cause of genocide, even the clergy were willing to endorse the Nuremberg laws (or, what amounts to the same thing, to remain silent). In a word, totalitarianism, once it takes root, can completely upend our democratic institutions and overturn our commitments to tolerance, equity, and justice. Just at the time when we needed them most, the foundations of civilized society crumbled.

Third, I want to highlight the challenge that I always used to frame the opening of my Holocaust course, namely, the question of whether these events are finally explicable. Is the Holocaust something that we can wrap

our minds around, or is it forever shrouded in mystery? Elie Wiesel, perhaps the most famous and influential survivor, once wrote: “I have always placed the Holocaust on a mystical level, beyond human understanding.” (A Jew Today, 46). For Wiesel, the effort to make sense of the Holocaust is, on its face, a form of trivialization. It is as if we could tame it, wrangle it within the bounds of human reason. Doing so, on his view, would minimize its utter terror, which lies precisely in the way it transcends anything that is *reason-able*. The Holocaust is a kind of eruption of the absurd, the monstrously insane, into our ordinary historical experience. It is an affront to sense-making, and hence, of course, not really a subject that can be approached academically at all.

By contrast, Yehuda Bauer, the eminent Israeli Holocaust historian, wrote: “What is totally unsatisfactory is an attempt to escape historical responsibility by arguing that this tragedy is something mysterious that cannot be explained. If this were true, then the criminals would become tragic victims of forces beyond human control. To say that the Holocaust is inexplicable, in the last resort, is to justify it.” (The Holocaust: Readings and Interpretations, 31) From Bauer’s perspective, to suggest that the

Holocaust is mysterious implies that it is somehow entirely alien to human life. But, of course, humans did these things. So how can they be beyond the scope of human understanding? Indeed, to place them there is to put them in some untouchable category, as a kind of sui generis event that has no relationship to other events of human history. It follows, then, that it has nothing to teach us about our lives today. And that, to Bauer's way of thinking, would be to trivialize the Holocaust in a very dangerous way and even, as he says, to exonerate the perpetrators as inhabiting some utterly inhuman, alien reality.

There is no obvious resolution to this contradiction. Either we domesticate the Holocaust, as it were, which seems to demote it from its status at the pinnacle of human evil, or we regard it as some kind of mystical and inaccessible event, which seems to make it irrelevant to the rest of human history. It is my experience of teaching this material that my students and I wavered back and forth between these poles. Sometimes working very hard to wrap our heads around these events, but then pulling back when we sensed we were putting the Holocaust under a microscope, as it were, and losing that sense of terrible awe that comes in

confronting the sheer enormity of it all. And sometimes, when the pain was just too great, we shifted and took refuge in some form of academic analysis. It is this dilemma that led me to decide that each class period would end with a brief reading that one student in the class chose from a Holocaust memoir that he or she was reading. It was the only way I could think to bring us back from our oh-so-comfortable academic discourse into a confrontation with the lived experience of those who suffered and died, often without anyone left to witness and honor their deaths.

Finally, I want to address two issues that were raised by the philosopher Emil Fackenheim. The first, which is directly relevant to those of us here who are Jews, concerns the idea of a 614th commandment, extending the idea that the Torah contains 613 commandments from God to the Jewish people. For Fackenheim, the Holocaust is an event that Jews (including entirely secular Jews) experience as demanding a response. As Fackenheim put it: You must survive as Jews, so as not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. To surrender one's Jewish identity now would be precisely to play into the Nazis' hands, to finish their work for them, albeit not in a gruesome way. But whether Jews are destroyed violently by their

enemies, or simply self-destruct through apathy and assimilation, the result is much the same: a world without Jews.

But Fackenheim also identified a dilemma that all of us face, Jews and non-Jews alike. As he wrote: “We are forbidden to turn present and future life into death, as the price of remembering death at Auschwitz. And we are forbidden to affirm present and future life, as the price of forgetting Auschwitz.” (The Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications, 294). That is the inescapable dilemma that we face. If we really take in the Holocaust, cultivate our connection to it, and remember it as it deserves to be remembered—this way can only lead to despair. The world then can only be seen as a cold and cruel place, and how can one bring children into such a world? In that case, the Holocaust swallows up all hope for the future. But the alternative—affirming life and hope and the future—can only happen if, to some degree, we forget the Holocaust. We must set it aside, put it away someplace where it won’t interfere with our moving on. And so we have to forget in order to keep living. Hence the dilemma: if we are really remember, we sacrifice the future to the past, we cannot move

on, we are paralyzed. If we don't remember, we sacrifice the past to the future, we live as if nothing has changed, we live a delusion.

This, too, is a challenge I personally faced each time I taught this course. As I immersed myself yet again in the personal narratives of horror, I felt haunted, as though I had visited some alien planet. Except all this happened on this planet, in our backyards, or in places much like them. One can't study this material without feeling like you have discovered a side of human nature that you wish you didn't know. It is so profoundly disturbing you have to wonder how life goes on from here. But you have no choice but to get up and go on. And every day during those terms—and as it happens I always taught the course in the spring term-- I felt as though I was living in an unreal reality. Leaving the nightmare world of our classroom conversation, I would emerge again into a world where students were chasing a frisbee around the Bald Spot, sunbathing, listening to music and laughing with friends—utterly unaware that the world is really freakish, absurd and horrifying. I never learned how to live comfortably with that contradiction. I'm actually not sure it's possible.

So these are at least some of the paradoxes and contradictions with which we live when we truly confront the Holocaust: that good and evil are never so neatly divisible as we would like; that the very social and political institutions that are supposed to protect us from rampant violence are likely to crumble in the face of rampant violence; that the Holocaust is both explicable and inexplicable at the same time; and that we must both remember the Holocaust in order to avoid repeating it and also forget the Holocaust in order to go on living. It is a daunting task to live with these paradoxes. They are huge and inescapable and vexing.

This is what I meant to suggest when I chose the title for today's talk—Living on the Edge of the Abyss. To confront the Holocaust—not only in annual commemorative events like this, but really confronting it in a deep and persistent way—is to realize just how close we are to the abyss. Our own human goodness is less secure than we imagine. Our social institutions will not protect us in our hour of need. Our attempt to understand these horrific events is itself fraught with dilemmas. And we are paralyzed, unable fully to move forward in a life-affirming way and equally clear that we must move forward in a life-affirming way. We must

bear these unbearable contradictions, knowing that even as life appears to move on, we are ever-so-close to the complete breakdown of law and order, a descent into hell on earth. Living on the edge of the abyss is living in a world where ultimate meaning and goodness are elusive. We grasp for something that will anchor us, but it evaporates in our hands and we are left suspended with no firm ground to stand on.

It was this sort of realization that led Yitz Greenberg, another of our most insightful thinkers about modern Jewish life, to include in his classic essay on the Holocaust these searing words: “No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.” (Ibid., 315) That is precisely where a confrontation with the Holocaust leads us, stated in the starkest possible terms. And, by that standard, there is precious little we can affirm. Not that life is ultimately good, or that things happen for a reason or that everything will work out for the best in the long-run. Certainly not that God is caring and people are good at heart and we have the power to keep our children safe. When we really take the Holocaust to heart all these facile affirmations have to be set aside. We have to live without illusions.

But we do not have to quit acting in the world. Indeed, Greenberg goes on to say that “There is one response to such overwhelming tragedy: the reaffirmation of meaningfulness, worth, and life—through acts of love and life-giving. The act of creating a life or enhancing its dignity is the counter-testimony to Auschwitz. To talk of love and of a God who cares in the presence of the burning children is obscene and incredible; to leap in and pull a child out of a pit, to clean its face and heal its body, is to make the most powerful statement—the only statement that counts.” (Ibid., 331) Greenberg’s point, I think, is profound. In the face of such immense desecration of human life only one response is possible—really required—and that is the equally powerful affirmation and sanctification of human life. The way forward intellectually and existentially may be murky and fraught with paradoxes, as we have seen. But the way forward morally could not be clearer. For every act of destruction, we must engage in acts of reconstruction; for every child thrown in a burning pit or every person tortured and senselessly murdered, we must save a life, restore someone’s human dignity, contribute to the repair of the world. For if the Holocaust

has taught us anything at all, it is just how much repair needs to be done. And as the ancient Jewish sage, Hillel, famously said, “if not now, when?”

I want to conclude this talk by reading the personal reflections that I shared with students in every one of those Holocaust courses, at the very end of the very last day of class. I have edited this little speech only slightly, to suit this context.

“I am struck again, as I always am at the conclusion of this particular course, that in one very fundamental way, this subject cannot really be taught. That is because, despite all the important things we learned and discussed, the most important thing about the Holocaust cannot really be reduced to an academic discussion. This subject is not really intellectual, but emotional and existential. As important as it is to read a discussion of bystanders and rescuers, to grapple with the enormous theological and moral questions raised by the Holocaust—all this pales in comparison to simply confronting its raw horror and allowing it to transform us. And this is not the sort of thing that we can do in a classroom, no matter how well I try to teach or how well you learn the assigned material.

The real purpose of this course, beyond thinking through the moral and religious issues that appear on the syllabus, is to confront the extraordinary inhumanity represented by the Nazis' behavior and the extraordinary degradation experienced by the victims. It is to confront the reality of "excremental assault," as Terrence Des Pres described it so horrifyingly. In doing this, the only proper reactions are emotional--shock, disgust, anger or fear. But a still deeper response comes when we begin to identify with these people, both the victims and the victimizers. Of course, we cannot experience directly what survivors of the death camps experienced, or what the camp guards and their collaborators felt. But we can recognize that the Holocaust is not about other people at another time. It is about us, all of us, in this time and in every time. It is about how a society goes mad, how good people get drawn into committing atrocities, how other good people can be completely dehumanized. In short, as David Blumenthal once wrote in a passage I read to you on the first day of class, "The real Holocaust is not a teaching device. It is not material to be 'learned from.' Nor is it the stuff of which story lines are made. The real Holocaust is a tearing of the veil which protects us from evil. It is a looking

into hell. . . It is a mirror of what humanity and God are at their worst. And well might we tremble before that image.” And, I’m afraid that no films or memoirs or talks by survivors can force us to fix our gaze on things so appalling, so horrifying, that they seem to belong to the world of nightmare rather than reality.

So, I don’t really know how to teach this subject without retreating into the academic world of ideas and categories and arguments. And yet all of these, valuable as they are, are beside the point. They are finally so many ways of averting our gaze from the mind-shattering horror of it all. If we have really confronted the Holocaust, we will forever be changed, because we will see beneath the veneer of our civility. We will know that, below the surface, we are capable of becoming monsters (and monsters who destroy life methodically, without feeling, and who return at the end of the day to normal life). If we have really confronted the Holocaust, we will look at law, medicine and religion with suspicion, because we have seen that all these can be co-opted in the service of mass murder. If we have really confronted the Holocaust, we will lose our faith in religious and political leaders to stand up against evil, because we have seen that most

of them did not. If we have really confronted the Holocaust, we will lose our faith in one another, because among the millions of people who watched these events unfold, both in Europe and in America, only a small minority were willing to risk their own necks (or their political fortunes) to do anything at all in response. Confronting the Holocaust is not the sort of thing one can write a good 5-page paper about; it is not measurable in letter grades. It is something that shakes us to the core.

At the end of the day, what to me is finally most essential is simply this: each of us bears the awful responsibility to choose between good and evil, between elevating humanity and degrading it. We cannot change the past, of course, but we can recognize in the choices that others made the enormity of the choices that face us. We can learn to scrutinize our own actions and those of our neighbors more carefully. We can send a clear message that we will not be counted among those who stand idly by as others are massacred. We can resolve to increase our moral sensitivity to all those who are marginalized and oppressed, knowing that the Holocaust is but one extreme example of what has already happened in far too many places, and could happen again. We can look to the example of the farmers

in Le Chambon and the fishermen in Denmark and try to emulate their courage. In short, we can maximize our potential for goodness and we can stand firm in our commitment never to negate one another's humanity-- not even a little bit, not even if the state requires it and our clergy people tell us that God permits it. That is what I think we can take away with us. And that is not something that I know how to teach or to grade. Ultimately, life will give you a chance to demonstrate what you have learned from your study of the Holocaust. I hope and trust that, on the only test that finally matters, you will not fail."