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The Holocaust as a Source for Jewish-Christian Bonding

Gershon Greenberg

American University

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Jan Karski

Jan Karski, the Polish courier who, in the fall of 1942 delivered the first eye-witness report to the West (directly to FDR) about the Warsaw ghetto and the Belzec concentration camp, made an unforgettable confession during a conference I organized in Washington in March 1980 on the Holocaust's impact on Judaism in America. With fellow panelists Emil Fackenheim (the religious philosopher), John Pehle (of the War Refugee Board) and American Jewish historians Abraham Karp and Henry Feingold at his side, he rose and declared: "The war made me a Jew. I am Jewish, I want to be Jewish. I am a Christian, but I am a Jew." He explained this further a year and a half later at the International Liberator's Conference in the same city:

I became a Jew. Like the family of my wife. All of them perished in the ghettos, concentration camps, gas chambers. And all the murdered Jews became my family. But I am a Christian Jew. I am a practicing Catholic. And although not a heretic, still my faith tells me: There [in Warsaw and Belzec], the second original sin had been committed by humanity. Through commission or omission, or self-imposed ignorance or insensitivity, or self-interest or hypocrisy, or heartless rationalism. This sin will haunt humanity to the end of time. It does haunt me. And I want it to be so.¹

¹ See Gershon Greenberg, "Shover Shetikah: Hartsa'ato Shel Jan Karski Be-23 Merts 1980," in *Jan Karski: Ha'ish U'shelihuto*, ed. Ester Webman and Lawrence Webman (Tel Aviv 2006): 42-57.

In the cauldron of the Holocaust, Judaism and Christianity became rooted as one in this deeply religious individual. I have Karski in mind, when I suggest that a common root was struck

during the Holocaust for all Jews and Christians, with regard to their respective conceptions of sacred death.²

The Intimate Bond: Dubois, Sherman, Thoma

In 1974, Marcel Dubois spoke of a shared reality-of-suffering by Jews and Christians. It existed, without the loss of respective particular identity—of Christianity, where the mystery of Christ's crucifixion transfigured suffering and death into a crucible of resurrection; of Israel, where suffering was to redeem the world (see Is 53:3-4). Dubois wrote:

The transcendent intelligibility of the Holocaust can be granted only by light from above, and for us Christians, that light passes through the mystery of Golgotha.../What the Christian can truly say is that to the eye of faith, Jesus fulfills Israel in her destiny of Suffering Servant; and that Israel, in her experience of solitude and anguish, announces and represents even without knowing it the mystery of the Passion and of the Cross.../The Calvary of the Jewish

² I am indebted to John Pawlikowski for directing me to Christian thinkers who addressed the matter of Jewish-Christian unity, in the Holocaust context, during our seminar at King's College in April 2000. See John Pawlikowski, "Christology After the Holocaust," *Encounter* 59 nr. 3 (Summer 1998): 345-368; and *idem*, "The Historicizing of the Eschatological: The Spiritualizing of the Eschatological: Some Reflections," in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan Davies (New York: 1979): 151-166. Also Gershon Greenberg, "Crucifixion and the Holocaust: The Views of Pius XII and the Jews," in *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust*, eds. Carol Rittner and John Roth (New York: 2002): 137-153.

people, whose summit is the Holocaust, can help us understand a little better the mystery of the cross.³

That same year, Franklin Sherman wrote that it was a tragedy that the cross of Christ, symbolizing the agonizing God, had become “a symbol of division between Jews and Christians, for the reality to which it points is a Jewish reality as well, the reality of suffering and martyrdom.” It should be kept in mind, Sherman pointed out, that the cross was the instrument upon which Jews were put to death long before Jesus. Josephus recorded that Cyrus threatened crucifixion for any Jews who disobeyed his edict for the return of Jews from Babylon. Antiochus crucified Jews who would not abandon their religion. After the Romans besieged Jerusalem, Titus crucified so many Jews, that according to Josephus; “There was not enough room for the crosses, nor enough crosses for the condemned.” The cross was, first of all, a “Jewish reality,” one that should make Christians the first to identify with the sufferings of any Jews.” It was “a matter of deepest shame on the part of Christianity” that it made the cross into a symbol of inquisition and not one of identification. Auschwitz, Sherman concluded, should become a source for new Christian-Jewish unity—and certainly not a ground for Christian triumphalism:

A god who suffers is the opposite of a god of triumphalism. We can speak of a god after Auschwitz, only as the one who calls us to a new unity as beloved brothers—not only between Jews and Christians, but especially between Jews and Christians.⁴

In 1977 Clemens Thoma wrote that a believing Christian should not find it very difficult to interpret the “sacrifice of the

³ Marcel Dubois, “Christian Reflections on the Holocaust,” *SIDIC* vii, 2 (1974): 4-15.

⁴ Franklin Sherman, “Speaking of God After Auschwitz,” *Worldview* 17 (Sept. 1974): 26-30.

Jews” during the Holocaust. Their sacrifice should turn the Christian’s thoughts “toward Christ, to whom these Jewish masses became alike, in sorrow and death.” For Thoma, Auschwitz was “the most monumental sign of our time for the intimate bond and unity between Jewish martyrs—who stand for all Jews—and the crucified Christ.”⁵

What were the ingredients of this intimate bonding, associated by Dubois with Calvary, the Passion, and crucifixion? What unified Judaism and Christianity, such that neither lost its particular identity—for one, the national suffering which redeemed the world, for the other, that of the mystery of Christ’s crucifixion which transfigured suffering and death into a crucible of resurrection? The ingredients include *Akedah*, physical suffering, love and crucifixion. I will examine them as conceptualized by Judaism through the Holocaust, in light of its historical precedents, and illustrate the bond by comparing them with conceptions articulated during Christianity’s formative period of the early church.

Ingredients of Jewish-Christian Unity

1. *Akedah* (Binding of Isaac)

Over the course of time, Jewish thinkers carried the binding of Isaac into actual sacrifice, drawing from the rabbinic tradition,⁶ and they established it as an archetype for the sacred death of Jewish martyrs.⁷ Different aspects were

⁵ Clemens Thoma, *A Christian Theology of Judaism* (New York 1977): 155.

⁶ 4 *Macc* 17:24, *Mekhilta De’rabi Shimon bar Yohai*, *Massekhta De’sanya* 2:2, *PT Taan* 65^b, *GenR*, *Parashah* 39, *Siman* 11, and *Parashah* 94, *Siman* 5; and *LevR*, *Parashah* 36, *Siman* 5.

⁷ On the history of interpreting the *Akedah* see Tsevi Levi, *Ha’akedah veka-tokhehah: Mitoš, Teimah Vetopos Be’sifrut* (Jerusalem: 1991). Avraham Sagi, “Ha’akedah Umashmeutah Be’tarbut Ha’yisraelit U’bemasoret Ha’yehudit,” *Mehkeret Hag* 7 (1996): 66-85. Examples of the view that Isaac was (virtually or actually) killed include 4 *Mac* 17:24, *Mekhilta Derabi Shimon*

emphasized. During the Crusades, Eleazar of Worms held that Isaac died and then returned to life. How so? His soul fled in fright when the knife reached his throat. When Abraham was commanded, "Lay not thy hand upon the lad" (Gn 21:12), the soul returned to the body and Isaac rose up from the altar.⁸ According to the medieval Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas, once the *Akedah* took place, readiness to offer one's life in sanctification of God's name served as proof that one belonged to the seed of Abraham and Isaac.⁹ Many centuries later the Mittlerer Rebbe of Lubavitch, Dov Ber Schneersohn (1773-1817), explained that when Isaac's hands were bound for sacrifice and he was placed upon the wood pile, he was so terrified of his imminent death that, except for a tiny spark, all life left him. The spark remained to revive him once he would be taken down from the altar. Schneersohn wrote:

When the sword reached his neck, the soul of Isaac left him. When the voice came forth, 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything to him' [Gn 22:12], Isaac's soul returned to his body. Abraham released him [from his bonds] and Isaac stood up. Abraham knew that the dead would be revived in this way, and he said, 'Blessed art thou...who revives the dead' [*Yalkut Shimoni, Parashah Va'yera, Perek 22, Remez 101*].¹⁰

bar Yohai Massekhet De'sanya 2:2; Palestinian Talmud Ta'anit 65^a; Bereishit Rabbah Parashah 39, Siman 11 and Parashah 94, Siman 5; and Va'yikra Rabbah, Parashah 36, Siman 5. On Abraham's confidence that Isaac would survive see also Sefer Yosifon, Vol I, ed. David Flusser (Jerusalem: 1978-1980): 424.

⁸ Citing *Pirkei Derabi Eliezer*, ch. 31. Eliezer MiWorms, "Parashat Va'yera," in *Perush Ha'rokeah al Ha'torah* (Benei Berak: 1978): 174-175.

⁹ Marc Saperstein, "A Sermon on the Akedah..." in A. Mirsky, A. Grossman and Y. Kaplan, eds., *Exile and Diaspora* (Jerusalem 1996): 103-124.

¹⁰ Dov Ber Schneersohn, "Sha'ar Hatefilah," in *Sha'arei Ha'teshuvah* (Jerusalem: 1971 rpt.): Part 1, 69-93. Tali Lowenthal, "Self-Sacrifice," pp. 468-478.

Wartime Jewish thinkers expanded the individual experience into a collective one, identifying the mass death as the *Akedah* carried through into actual immolation, sometimes adding a vicarious dimension—rooted in 4 Mc, where Hannah and her seven sons begged God to let their punishment serve as an exchange for the nation's sins, and their blood as a purification for the people (4 Mc 6:27-29); and in the *Mekhilta*, where the patriarchs and the prophets offered their lives on Israel's behalf (citing Moses in Ex 32:32; Nm 1:15; and David in 2 Sm 24:17).¹¹

In the Warsaw ghetto in October 1940, the Piaseczner Rebbe Kalonymous Kalman Shapira preached that

The *Akedah* was not only a test of Isaac, but also the commencement of a form of worship that requires total self-sacrifice for God and for the Jewish people...The *Akedah* was just the beginning, the expression of intent and desire, while the murder of a Jew is the conclusion of the act. Thus, the *Akedah* and all murders of Jews since are components of one event.¹²

Sometime later during the war, Chief Rabbi of Petah Tikvah Reuven Katz stated that the Jews who were killed in the catastrophe constituted a complete burnt offering (*Olah*; see Lv 1:3ff), where the innocent blood of the sacrificial victims (*Korbanot*) atoned for the collective sins of Israel. The ashes of atonement desired by God (*Kaparah retsuyah*) would reconcile Israel with God. Death served as atonement:

¹¹ *Mekhilta, Massekhet De'pisha ad Exodus 12:1*. On Hannah and her sons see also *Sefer Yosifon*, Vol. 1, ed. David Flusser (Jerusalem: 1978-1980): 70-76.

¹² Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, transl. J. H. Worch (Northvale, NJ: 2000): 140.

'And the blood shall be forgiven them' [Dt 21:8]. This does not mean that the atonement is separate from the blood, or is for the sake of the blood. Rather that the blood is the actual atonement of Israel. And the blood of our sanctified ones will bring freedom and polity (*Medinah*) to Israel. [The atonement of blood] is a desirable form of worship, one which resolves the nation's trespasses.¹³

In 1946 the legal scholar and poet Simhah Elberg, who had escaped Warsaw via Vladivostok for Shanghai in fall 1939, identified *Akedah* as the essential reality of the Holocaust. Following the rabbinical tradition that the *Akedah* precluded immolation, he conceived of *Akedah*-death as a metaphysical entity. It was central to Jewish existence, and it joined the people of Israel as they moved from Mt. Moriah and ultimately to Poland and the death camps. The sharp differences between Mt. Moriah and Treblinka notwithstanding, they shared the *Akedah* essence.¹⁴

Katz's application of *Korbanot* and *Olah* to the Holocaust reappeared a number of years after the tragedy. Yehoshua Mosheh Aharonson, who survived labor and concentration camps, and the death march from Auschwitz to Theresienstadt, and after liberation served as the Chief Rabbi of Jews in Austrian D.P. camps, identified the victims as *Korbanot Olah*, where the bodies were transformed into white smoke and served to mend (*Tikkun*) the entire world.¹⁵

¹³ Reuven Katz, *Duda'ei Reuven*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem 1953/54): 63-72; vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1953/54): 72-78.

¹⁴ Simhah Elberg, *Akedas Treblinka* (Shanghai: 1946).

¹⁵ Yehoshua Mosheh Aharonson, "Azkarah Li'kedoshei Ha'shoah Be'kenes Yotsa'ei Gostinin," [n.d.], in *Alei Merorot* (1996): 258, citing Ya'akov Aryeh Guterman, *Bikurei Avi"v* (1947), citing *Beit Yosef* (Yosef Karo). See Aharonson, in *Pinkas Gostinin: Yizker Bukh* (New York 1960).

Early church thinkers applied the *Akedah*, including the vicarious dimension, to Christ on the cross. In the second century, Melito of Sardis declared that if one wished to see the mystery of the Lord, one should look at Isaac. Christ was bound in (or as one with) Isaac, for both were led by the father, with Isaac carrying firewood and Jesus carrying the cross. However, while Isaac was ransomed by the lamb (or ram) in the thicket, Jesus was himself caught in a tree—and slain to save humanity. In this way, Christ brought Isaac to perfection, making Him superior to Isaac.¹⁶ Origen held that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, because he knew that Isaac would be revived. God promised Abraham progeny, God was not a liar, which could only mean that Isaac would be resurrected. Abraham knew as well, that Isaac's death and resurrection prefigured that of Jesus, who would advance ahead of Isaac by actualizing the sacrifice for which he, Jesus, was bound.¹⁷ Facing martyrdom in 107, Ignatius sought to identify his death with Jesus' sacrificial death. As with Jesus, whose flesh suffered on behalf of mankind's sin, the animals about to devour Ignatius were instruments of a sacrificial atonement for the community. He would be the scapegoat, a sacrificial offering for his fellow.¹⁸

2. Physical Suffering

A recurring theme concerning sacred death within the Jewish tradition was that suffering liberated the soul from the body, enabling the soul to enter God's presence. The rabbinic sage Rabbi Akiva said suffering was the dearest of

¹⁶ Stuart G. Hall, trans., *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford 1979).

¹⁷ Origen, "Homily 8," in J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus...Series Graeca Prior Origenis Opera Omnia* 12 (Paris 1862): 203-210.

¹⁸ Ignatius, "Letter to Polycarp" 2:3; "Letter to Smyrneans" 7:1; and "Letter to the Ephesians" 8:1, in Bart Ehrman, transl., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: 2003): 1: 367-401, 295-309, 219-241.

experiences, because it purified the soul by removing it from materiality and enabling it to enter the world to come.¹⁹ The *Zohar* contains the passage:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, wishes to illuminate the soul of man, He crushes the body so that the soul will govern. Because as long as the soul is within the body, they remain equal and the soul cannot rule. But once the body is crushed, the soul assumes power.²⁰

The sixteenth century kabbalist Meir Ibn Gabbai held that when sacred death occurred, the body which came between the soul and God, was removed. Thus, when Rabbi Akiva was martyred and he declared God's oneness with his final word (*Ehad*, one) the physical partition dividing him from God disappeared.²¹ Similarly, his contemporary the Maharal of Prague believed that God brought suffering to the pious, because it ended the soul's adherence to materiality and thereby enabled the individual to reach lofty heights.²²

A bi-product of the separation between soul and body was the ability to overcome physical pain. In the thirteenth century, Meir of Rotenberg observed that when there was martyrdom (*Mesirut nefesh al kiddush Hashem*)—which made one holy—there was no crying out. Whatever form the murder took, the physical pain was overcome.²³ In the fifteenth century, the Spanish kabbalist Avraham Eliezer Halevi held, that even

as the martyr's body was hacked to pieces, there was no pain because God instilled new life into the soul with a love which overcame pain. The love was so intense, as to remove the impact of physical death. The loving soul became as a flaming torch, and no matter the manner of death (burial alive, burning in a furnace) the soul remained unaffected (See *Cant.* 8:6).²⁴ In the nineteenth century, Yehudah Aryeh Layb, *Admo"r* of Gur, held that when the material partition which separated the martyr from God was removed, and the inner point of holiness (Nekudah penimit) was revealed, the pain borne by the material was removed as well.²⁵ His contemporary, the Mittlerer Rebbe of Lubavitch Dov Ber Schneersohn, wrote that as Rabbi Akiva prolonged the word *Ehad*, it enclosed his soul, shutting out all materiality, and he did not feel the burning iron combs.²⁶

These motifs reappeared during the Holocaust. Regarding the liberation of the soul from the body: Eliyahu Meir Bloch, one of the Heads of the Telsiai yeshiva, who found refuge in Cleveland, wrote in 1940 that God's *Hesed* (covenantal love, one of the kabbalistic *Sefirot*), opened a narrow path in the body, through which the soul could ascend to God). When *Gevurah* (power, another of the kabbalistic *Sefirot*) was added, there was suffering. Suffering meant that the body shattered into little pieces (*Kelipot*, kabbalistic shards) for the spark of the soul to be liberated.²⁷ Ya'akov Moshe Harlap, Avraham Yitshak Kook's successor as Head of Merkaz Harav in Jerusalem, believed that each death of the Holocaust

¹⁹ Source uncertain. Cited in Mosheh ben Gershon, "Siman 155," in *Mishpat Tsedek: Leva'er Inyan Kabbalat Yesurim Be'ahavah* (rpt. Benei Berak: 1986/87). See also *Sanhedrin* 101^a.

²⁰ *Zohar, Helek* 1, *Toledot*, p. 140^b (*Sulam* edition of the *Zohar*, para. 90).

²¹ Meir Ibn Gabbai, *Perek* 36, *Helek Sitrei Hatorah*, col. 2, in *Avodat Ha'kodesh* (Cracow: 1576/77).

²² Maharal of Prague, *Netivot Olam* 2, p. 174—*Netiv Ha'yesurim, Perek* 1, cited in Mosheh ben Gershon, "Siman 153," in *Sefer Mishpat Tsedek*.

²³ Meir of Rothenberg, "Para. 517," in *Shu"t Maharam* (Prague: 1608).

²⁴ *Megillat Amraphel*, in "Perakim Betoledot Sifrut Hakabalah," *Kiryat Sefer* 7 (1930/31): 152-153.

²⁵ Yehudah Aryeh Layb MiGur, "Para. 638 and Para. 652," in *Sefat Emet* (Brooklyn 1989/90 rpt.).

²⁶ Dov Ber Schneersohn, "Sha'ar Ha'tefilah," in *Sha'arei Hateshuvah* (Jerusalem: 1971 rpt.): part 1, pp. 69-93, 111. Loewenthal, "Self-Sacrifice of the Tsadik..." in A. Rappaport-Alpert and S. J. Zipperstein, eds., *Jewish History* (London: 1988): 454-494.

²⁷ Eliyahu Meir Bloch, "Yesurim Shel Ahavah," in *Shiurei Da'at* (Jerusalem: 1971/72): 1: 121-127.

was an *Akedah*. The shattered body descended into the oblivion of hopelessly dark history, as the spark of the soul ascended and blended into the light of the messiah son of Joseph.²⁸

As to overcoming physical pain: In Ra'anana, Palestine, Rabbi Efrayim Sokolover explained that when there was suffering unto death, the adherence (*Devekut*) of the Jew to Torah and *Mitsvot* could become intense to the point of transforming flesh and blood into spiritual, heavenly material—leaving the physical body with its pain behind. Sokolover said he knew of instances in Europe where Jews danced and sang as they went to their death.²⁹ One of the Heads of the Slobodka yeshiva, Mordekhai Shulman, having escaped to America, cited the midrash where Abraham was cast into the furnace by Nimrod, and become transformed into a spiritual being—so intensely spiritual that physical pain subsided. Up through the Holocaust, Shulman wrote, Jews were able to submit their souls in sanctification of God's name, because their spirituality was so intense that it could overcome physical torment.³⁰ In Shanghai, Simhah Elberg held that the soul could reach such spiritual heights, that pain disappeared. For example, the mother taken into the gas chamber in Treblinka did not suffer the torture of *Gehinnom*, because she now resided in a heavenly atmosphere.³¹

The separation of the soul from the body for the soul to enter God's presence, was articulated during the period of the early church by Ignatius. Ignatius yearned for his soul to leave his body. He wanted his love for anything worldly to be "crucified," because this would enable him to escape the prison

of materiality and enter a realm of spirit to become a true disciple of Christ. By severing all love for earthly, material existence, he could receive Christ's spiritual love—which was present in His blood.³² Origen also spoke of the soul's leaving everything earthly and material.³³ As to overcoming physical pain: Members of the Church of Smyrna recorded how Polycarp concentrated on the world to come with such intensity, that "the fire of the inhuman torturers was cold to him...He was filled with joy as he taunted his torturers to do with him as they wanted. For he had journeyed away from the flesh, to speak with the Lord."³⁴

3. Love

Another ingredient shared by Jews and Christians was the love in which the suffering of sacred dying was immersed. The suffering involved God's love for the martyr, the martyr's love for God, and even the martyr's love for the suffering itself. The *Tannaim* held that God brought about suffering, in order to purge sin and save the sinner from the fires of hell. The sufferings should therefore be objects of love. The *Tanna* Hananiah ben Teradyon, for example, recognized that his torments and imminent martyrdom were somehow related to his sinning, and brought by God as expressions of His judgment. The *Tanna* accepted them in silence, out of his love for God.³⁵ In the *Zohar*, a comparison is drawn between the human soul and a candle. When a candle did not properly shed

²⁸ Gershon Greenberg, "The Holocaust Apocalypse of Ya'akov Mosheh Harlap," *Jewish Studies* 41, 5-14.

²⁹ Sokolover, *Penei Efrayim* (Tel Aviv 1965/66).

³⁰ Grossman, *Kovets Zikaron Keneset Yisrael* (Benei Berak: 1982/83): 639-641.

³¹ Elberg, *Akedas Treblinka* (Shanghai: 1946).

³² Ignatius, "Letter to the Romans" 2:2, 4:2, 7:2, 7:23. In *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. Bart Ehrman (Cambridge, Mass: 2003): 257-283.

³³ Origen, "Exhortation to Martyrdom," in *Origen*, trans. R. Greer (New York: 1971): 41-79.

³⁴ "Martyrdom of St. Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna," 2:2-3; 11:2; 12:3; 14:2. In *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, 367-411.

³⁵ Adolf Büchler, "The Service of God for the Love or the Fear of Him, and the Right Attitude of the Jew to Suffering," in *Studies in Sin and Atonement* (New York 1967): 119-24.

light, the wick had to be moved about. Likewise, when the soul did not shed light as it should and there was only darkness, it had to be upset. It followed, that sufferings should be accepted with love.³⁶ According to another sixteenth century kabbalist, Avraham Galante, sufferings-of-love (*Yesurim shel ahavah*) contained the secret, that suffering brought about love between, and unity with, God.³⁷ The suffering-love relationship was also articulated in medieval philosophy. In his *Hovot Halevavot*, Bahyah Ibn Pakudah (eleventh century) wrote:

In the manner of Job, 'Though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him' [*Job* 13:15], there was a pious man who used to get up at night and say, 'My God, You have made me hungry and naked and You have put me in the darkness of night. But I swear by Your power, that were You to burn me with fire, it would only add to my love for You and my attachment to You.'³⁸

The relationship was articulated again during the Holocaust. During December 1938 in Kovno-Slobodka, another Head of the Slobodka yeshiva, Avraham Grodzensky, citing Bahyah Ibn Pakudah's principle of the harmony of the world as created by God, observed that *Devekut* (adherence to God) enabled perception of an inner, absolute unity between suffering and love. Grodzensky burned to death when the ghetto hospital was set aflame, and when Yitshak Ayzik Sher, another Head of the Slobodka yeshivah, memorialized him, he associated the death with that of Rabbi Akiva. Both intensified

their love for God, as they suffered until God took their souls.³⁹ Efrayim Sokolover took the relationship a step further. Insofar as chastisements came to Israel for Israel's benefit, according to the rabbis;⁴⁰ and did so solely out of God's love, it followed that the greater the love the greater the suffering. Sokolover offered two analogies. The tailor cut beautiful lengths of cloth into pieces, not to destroy the cloth but to make a suit. So God let the body of Israel be cut limb from limb during the Holocaust, to the point that the pieces disappeared, for the sake of redemption. A certain surgeon, Sokolover offered, had to amputate the legs of a child in order to save him. But the disease spread, and more and more body parts had to be amputated—until all that really remained was the soul. The surgeon was the boy's father. Similarly, God let Israel suffer to such extremes as He did, and did not spare the people, because the soul was bound to Him in *Devekut* and He could never let Israel die.⁴¹

This ingredient of sacred death can be found in the early church as well. Believing that the torment would bring him to Christ, Ignatius begged to become bread for the wild beasts which were set upon him:

Fire and cross and packs of wild beasts, cuttings and being torn apart, the scattering of bones, the mangling of limbs, the grinding of the whole body, the evil torments of the devil—let them come upon me, only that I may attain to Jesus Christ [and drink the blood of Christ which is imperishable love].⁴²

³⁶ *Zohar*, *Helek* 3, *Ba'midbar*: *Pinhas*, p. 219^a (*Sulam* edition of the *Zohar*, para. 115).

³⁷ Avraham Galante *ad Lamentations* 3:25, in Avraham Galante, *Kol Bokhim*, cited by Isaiah Horowitz, "Siman 39," in *Asarah Ma'amarot: Ma'amar Shelishi Urevi'i*, in *Shenei Luhot Haberit* (Jerusalem: 1993).

³⁸ Bahyah Ibn Pakudah, *The Book of Directions to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor (London: 1973): 428.

³⁹ *Berakhot* 60^a. Sher, "Eleh Ezkerah," in *Leket Sihot Musar*, vol. 2 (Benei Berak 1989/90): 538-548. Grodzensky, *Torat Avraham* (New York: 1962/63).

⁴⁰ *Tanna Debe Eliyahu Zuta*, ch. 1.

⁴¹ Efrayim Sokolover, *Penei Efrayim* (Tel Aviv: 1965/66).

⁴² Ignatius, "Letter to the Romans" 4:1-2; 5:2-3; 7:23. In *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, 257-283.

Members of the church of Smyrna, identifying Polycarp's martyrdom with the crucifixion, recorded that his astonishing love for Christ enabled him to endure, even as the "skin was ripped to shreds by whips, revealing the very anatomy of the flesh."⁴³

4. Crucifixion

Marcel Dubois wrote that the Holocaust, the "summit" of the Calvary of the Jewish people, helps Christians better understand the mystery of the cross. Namely, that while Jesus fulfilled Israel in her destiny of Suffering Servant, Israel's suffering announced and represented the mystery of the Passion and the cross—even without knowing it. Some Jews invoked the image of the cross, to represent their own Jewish suffering.

The cross as a Christian symbol, let alone conversion to it, was absolutely objectionable to the masses of Jewry. In Cluj, Romania, for example, a certain *Hasid*, knowing with a certainty that he would soon be taken to the ovens, faced the choice of leaving his three daughters with a Christian neighbor—until "the fury passed" (See Is 28:15). He turned to the *Admo"r* of Klausenberg (Cluj), Yehudah Yekutiel Halberstam. Halberstam recalled:

In vain I tried to convince him to leave his daughters with the Christian. It was not certain they would convert even if he would not be fortunate enough to return. Especially so since his daughters were already grown. But he replied, 'Rabbi, I have always listened to whatever you told me. But not here. I would not die with a whole heart, knowing

that possibly, God forbid, my daughters would convert.' And he resolved to take his daughters with him.⁴⁴

In the Warsaw ghetto during September 1940, it is told, a father had the opportunity to leave his daughter in safety in a monastery. The man recalled how in ancient times Hananiah ben Teradyon's body burned, while his soul survived. Now, should he let the body survive while the soul burned because of conversion by a Catholic priest?⁴⁵ In the Lvov ghetto, the wife of a certain rabbi Yitshak Levin could have left her youngest son with the Orthodox Christian Metropolitan Sheftitsky. She determined that he would be too young to resist the inevitable attempt to convert him. She kept the child with her in the ghetto, and the child was killed in the January 1943 *Aktion*.⁴⁶

To the religious thinker Shelomoh Yahalomi-Diamant, the Christian crucifix he saw at Maidanek meant something even worse than death. Heading west after liberation from a Siberia labor camp, he reached Maidanek and found the gas chambers and the unburied bones. He saw 800,000 pairs of shoes, their soles ripped open to search for gold. But there was something even more terrible:

I can still see the great crucifix in the middle of Maidanek. And I tremble. Why wasn't there a *Magen David*? Were not the children of David murdered there? Did not the Jews cry out *Shema Yisrae!* as they were about to be killed? Why was there a crucifix? Not even the ground which became the grave of our holy ones is ours! It is Christian. And so there is a Christian crucifix. We have nowhere to live. Nowhere to die. Thus it is, whenever I

⁴³ "Martyrdom of St. Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna, 2:2," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, 367-411.

⁴⁴ Sh. Noyvirt, *Yahadut* 10 (1962-63): 4-5.

⁴⁵ Cited from Ringelblum Archives in Esther Farbstein, *Be'seter Ra'am* (Jerusalem: 2002): 11.

⁴⁶ Yitshak Levin, *Aliti Mi'Spetsyah* (Tel Aviv: 1947): 128-129, 149-150.

was asked, 'What did you see in Maidanek?,' I answered, 'I saw a crucifix.'⁴⁷

At the same time, the cross had Jewish meaning. Some Jews reached towards the mystery behind the symbol and thought of their suffering in terms of the cross. As such, it provided another ingredient for Jewish unity surrounding sacred death. In *White Crucifixion* (1938) and *Way to Calvary* (1941),



the artist Marc Chagall identified Holocaust with crucifixion. In his response to the Warsaw ghetto, *Obsession* (1943), Chagall depicted Jesus wrapped in a *Tallit*. Jesus was surrounded by a Nazi soldier shattering a Torah-ark, Eastern European Jews being crucified in a burning Shtetl, and a Jew with the face of Christ passing by a cross which had fallen onto a village street.

In response to Kristallnacht, in 1939 two religious Zionists in Jerusalem, Yeshayahu Volfsberg and Shelomoh Zalman Shragai, evoked the Suffering Servant (Is 53) associated by Christians with the cross.⁴⁸ But they also drew a distinction.

⁴⁷ Shelomoh Diamant-Yahalomi, "Bein Hametsarim: Refleksen," *Di Yidische Shtime* 1 nr. 28 (4 July 1947): 3.

⁴⁸ On Christian uses of Is 53 see *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowsky and Peter Stulmacher (Grand

The people of Israel absorbed the suffering of others, not the sins of others as did Christ. The troubles in Germany and Austria belonged to Israel's servant relationship to God, where the Jewish people absorbed the world's suffering which came about because of its sins—lest the suffering spread until the world was itself destroyed.⁴⁹ The motif remained in Jewish thought. In 1979, the Orthodox religious philosopher Eliezer Berkovits of Chicago identified the tribulation of the Holocaust with the Suffering Servant.⁵⁰ The crucifixion was invoked by the Reform Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland in September 1943. At the American Jewish Conference in Pittsburgh, concluding his description of the death camps and mass murder, he declared:

From the infested typhus-ridden ghetto of Warsaw, from a hundred concentration camps which befouled the air of Europe, comes the cry, Enough! Time and again we have been stretched upon the rack of other people's sins. How long is the crucifixion of Israel to last?⁵¹

According to the report of Yehudah Razmivash-Nahshoni of Transylvania, a Hasidic Jew associated with the Spinka dynasty who survived Auschwitz to become a notable journalist and biblical scholar in the Land of Israel, the *Admo"r* of Spinka

Rapids: 2004); and *Jesus the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer (Harrisburg, 1998). On Jewish uses, see *The "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters*, trans. Samuel R. Driver and Adolf Neubauer (New York: 1969). H. W. Wolff, *Jesaja 53 in Urchristentum* (Berlin: 1950). See also Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, p. 36.

⁴⁹ Volfsberg, "Penei Hador: Eved Hashem," *Hatsofeh* 3 nr. 342 (10 February 1939): 6. Shragai, "Be'aspekariyah Shelanu: Yesurei Yisrael," *Hatsofeh* 3 nr. 360 (3 March 1939): 6-7.

⁵⁰ Berkovits, *With God in Hell* (New York: 1979).

⁵¹ Abba Hillel Silver, *Conference Record* (1 September 1943): 4-5.

Yitshak Ayzik Weiss himself employed images associated with the Via Dolorosa and Calvary. He provides a survivor testimony, according to which Weiss was led towards the flames with a wreath of thorns (*Kotsim*) on his head. After washing his hands for the *Vidui* (the prayer recited as one was about to die) he told a certain Hasid from Selish (Ukraine) not to fear—for they were walking towards the messiah. He told the Hasid that the messiah was in Germany, for according to tradition the messiah dwelled in Edom (signifying Rome) and Edom was in essence the same as Germany. There, in Germany, he was bound in chains, bearing Israel's sufferings. By the act of his immolation, the *Admo"r* continued, he would take the chains and place them on his own head, liberating the messiah. According to the testimony of a certain Mosheleh of Orshava, Romania, who escaped Auschwitz, with the words "an eternal fire bound to the altar would not be extinguished" (Lv 6:6) on his lips, the *Admo"r's* body (a "*Kelippah*," or shard of the vessel which exploded at creation) went up in flames. The soul was itself fire, Razmivash-Nahshoni explained, so it did not burn but ascended to heaven with the names of thousands of his Hasidim. Throughout his life the *Admo"r* yearned to sanctify the Name of God in death, as did Rabbi Akiva. He did so, as an *Akedah*-sacrifice. And as with Hananiah ben Teradyon, when the "parchment" (body) burned, the "letters" (soul) ascended to heaven.⁵²

Later, in 1965, the London Reform Rabbi Ignaz Maybaum, a disciple of Franz Rosenzweig who escaped Germany on a Kindertransport in 1939, identified the Holocaust

⁵² "*Gevilim nisrafim ve'otiyot porhot be'avir.*" *Avodah Zara* 18. Yehudah Razmivash-Nahshoni, *Hagut Be'farshiyot Hatorah* (Benei Berak: 1977/78). *Idem*, "Rabenu Kadosh Yisrael z"l," in *Hasidut Spinka Ve'admoredah* (Benei Berak: 1977/78). See further Mikhal Shaul, "Yehudah Razmivash-Nahshoni: Toledot Hayav," in 'Pe'er Tahat Efer': *Nitsolei Ha'shoah, Zikhronah, Ve'hahitmodedut Im Hashlekhotehah—Perek Merkazi Be'shikum Ha'hevrah Ha'hareidit Ha'ashkenazit Be'yishuv U'bemedinat Yisrael, 1945-1951* (Bar Ilan University dissertation, 2009): 281-291.

as the stage of Israel's metahistory following upon the crucifixion of Christ. In *The Face of God After Auschwitz*, Maybaum described how God originally used *Mitsvoṭ* to instruct the world about sin, during the biblical era. This failed, and then He sought to do so with the crucifixion. As this too failed, and once the crucifixion took place no bloodless *Akedah* would deter humanity from transgression, God brought the Holocaust to do so.⁵³

A Concluding Note—on Moltmann

The great Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann went to Maidanek in 1961. The experience, he explained forty-five years later, led him to ask whether God had died:

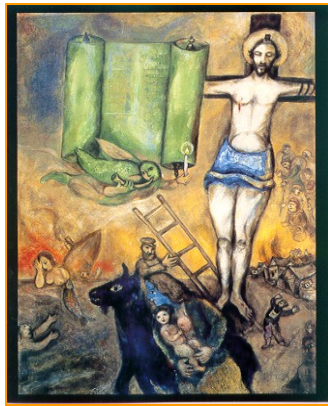
I can never forget my walk through the concentration and death camp Maidanek, Lublin, in 1961, when I wanted to sink into the ground under the burden of shame and guilt. What was it: guilt, or sin, or radical evil, or something which cannot be comprehended through these traditional theological concepts? This dictatorship of the *Nihil* was for me so incomprehensible because the abyss of the mass annihilation is such a bottomless pit. What an apocalyptic eclipse of God lies over the godlessness of Treblinka, Maidanek and Auschwitz! Is God himself dead?⁵⁴

The preface to his work *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, his Christian "theology after Auschwitz," which he wrote on Good Friday 1972, provides an answer: The God over the death camp was the god of the cross:

⁵³ Maybaum, *The Face of God After Auschwitz* (Amsterdam: 1965).

⁵⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place. An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: 2008): 190. Translation of *Weiter Raum: Eine Lebensgeschichte* (Gütersloh: 2006).

In front of me hangs Marc Chagall's picture, *Crucifixion in Yellow* [1943]. It shows the figure of the crucified Christ in Apocalyptic situation; people sinking into the sea, people homeless in flight, and yellow fire blazing in the background. And with the crucified Christ there appears the angel with the trumpet and the open call of the book of life. This picture has accompanied me for a long time. It symbolizes the cross on the horizon of the world.⁵⁵



Two years later, in *Das Experiment Hoffnung*, Moltmann defined Christian faith in terms of the Passion of God and the cross of Christ: "Only a recognition of God in Christ, and above all in the crucified one, makes possible the dialogical life in the spirit, in pathos and in sympathy." In turn, recognition of God in the crucified Christ enabled one to understand Auschwitz, where God was not dead but where suffering and death were in God.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Moltmann, "Preface," in *The Crucified God*, p. 6, Translation of *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (Munich: 1972).

⁵⁶ Moltmann, *Experiment Hope* (Phila.: 1975): 72-73, 77-78. Translation of *Das Experiment Hoffnung: Einführung* (Munich: 1974): 57. See also Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, p. 16.

Writing about *Das Experiment Hoffnung* in 1976, Gregory Baum observed that Moltmann's "definitive and unqualified affirmation of Christ's mediatorship" overshadowed his union of Jews and Christians in "common waiting for the promised fulfillment." While Moltmann wrote with great sensitivity to the Jewish Holocaust, Baum continued, when it came to central dogmas of Christian faith, a "theology of substitution" (a formulation Baum attributed to John Pawlikowski) emerged. For Moltmann, "A direct relationship between God and man severed from the person and the history of Christ would be inconceivable from a Christian standpoint."⁵⁷

While Dubois, Sherman and Thoma found Jewish-Christian unity in their perception of sacred, sacrificial death during the Holocaust, for Moltmann the suffering and death of Auschwitz were in God-in-Christ. It is true that Dubois' reality-of-suffering which passed through Golgotha and the Holocaust lent itself to a Christian universalism:

Everywhere in the world there is an infinite mass of suffering, of wretchedness, an immense capital of distress and agony which risks becoming emptiness, nothingness, despair unless Christ's victory comes to save it and by saving it to give it meaning. The cross of Christ thus appears as an immense sacrament reaching through time and permeating all the secret places of human existence. Its application certainly depends on the penetration of our faith and the intercession of our prayer, but we are assured by this certainty that many people will be saved by the cross which they bore without knowing it and which in their death-ravaged lives was the pledge and the sacrament of resurrection.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Gregory Baum, *Christian Theology After Auschwitz* (London: 1977): 9, 11.

⁵⁸ Marcel Dubois, "Christian Reflections on the Holocaust," p. 14.

But this is modified by Dubois' statements about retaining respective Christian and Jewish identities.

Gregory Baum contended that Moltmann set aside the Jewish religion in-itself:

The negation of Jewish existence is lodged so deeply in Christian doctrine below the level of awareness, that Christian teachers and theologians unthinkingly endorse and repeat it, even when they want to adopt a new, positive stance toward the Jewish people. Typical examples of this are Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Küng, both of whom have strongly reacted against anti-Jewish ideology and favor dialogue and fellowship between Christians and Jews. However, when they deal with the church's central teaching, and do not reflect explicitly on Jewish existence, then even they do what the church has always done, i.e., leave no room for Jewish religion.⁵⁹

I would suggest, that by absorbing the suffering of Auschwitz into the cross, Moltmann set aside the understanding and the reality of sacred death on the part of Jewish thinkers, and thereby precluded any basis for Jewish Christian unity in its terms.

⁵⁹ Gregory Baum, "Catholic Dogma After Auschwitz," in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan T. Davies (New York: 1979): 144. See also *Idem*, "Rethinking the Church's Mission After Auschwitz," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: 1977): 113-128. Gregory Baum wrote me in December 2000, saying that he was uncomfortable with the Jewish references to crucifixion which I brought to his attention, and pointing out correctly that his Jewish theological friends were not acquainted with these sources. He doubted that the ordinary Jewish believer entertained such notions, and thought the motif was limited to the minds of a few Jewish specialists. I would suggest that the presence of the motif across the spectrum of Judaism (from Reform to Hasidism) indicates broader appeal.