Why? Holocaust Survivors Reflect on God

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A photograph of Israel and Lea Hudesman sits on my end table; my great-great-grandparents came to the United States for a better life and religious freedom. He was a rabbi and she was a traditional Jewish mother, the keeper of a kosher household. Next to this picture is a recent family portrait; a menorah and a Christmas tree both stand in the background. How did we change from an Orthodox home to a godless family in just the span of a century? How did my ancestors’ quest for the freedom to worship end up with my sisters’ general disdain for organized religion?

All through my childhood, I tried to seek out the answers to this paradox. When I asked my father, he said that we had the science to know better than to believe. When I asked my mother, she posited that it might be a result of the Holocaust. When I asked my grandparents, they were quiet for a long time. They never spoke much about the Holocaust; this silence was at times deafening. Papa eventually answered me, just before his death. “Maybe it was the Holocaust,” he said, “Or maybe it was America.”

For this study, I sought to explore my grandfather’s proposals. Had America changed before the Holocaust such that belief in God was no longer central to mainstream Jewish culture? Did the Holocaust lead survivors to lose faith in God, or did it lead them to believe even more devoutly? How did the Jewish God change in America over the course of the twentieth century?

In order to answer these questions, it was important to see what the theologians said. However, I did not want their answers to be the be-all and end-all of this pursuit. It was important to look at American Jewish culture from a sociological and historical viewpoint, too. Above all, it was crucial to hear what the survivors had to say.

The USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education has over fifty thousand recorded oral histories of survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides. Founded by Steven Spielberg after the production of Schindler’s List, this organization aims to preserve and share the memories of survivors, rescuers, witnesses and aid providers so that humanity can move beyond the century of genocide. One branch of the Shoah Foundation is the iWitness program, providing a searchable database of many of these interviews. For my research, I made use of this educational service.

A search for “Holocaust Faith Issues,” filtered by language (English) and country (United States or Canada) came up with 308 different film segments from 264 unique oral histories. Many of the interviewers wrapped up their discussions by asking survivors questions like “How
did your experiences affect your faith?” or “What role do you think God had in your survival?” I listened to each of these clips and have included the survivors’ own words whenever possible.

When considering the survivors’ lay commentary about God, acclaimed theologians’ insights serve as a backdrop. Five theologians whose views I will connect to the survivors’ testimony are as follows: Richard L. Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Yitzhak Greenberg and John K. Roth. They describe many diverse visions of God, from present to absent, benevolent to cruel, engaged to aloof. Not surprisingly, the same diversity of lay theology exists among the survivors.

American Zeitgeist

When my grandfather explained to me that “America happened,” he was referring to the expansion of community away from the shtetl and the burgeoning of a less traditional way of life. He had watched his native Yiddish retreat into the cultural background for the benefit of fitting in to the new country. He watched his grandfather’s world fade into that of his grandchildren.

The rise and decline of Yiddish can give us further insight into the changes in American Judaism over the past one hundred years. In his study on Yiddish social groups before and after World War II, sociologist Simon Bronner wrote about the cultural shifts in Yiddish usage among Jewish immigrants. The turn-of-the-century immigrants spoke “a rich Yiddish interspersed with Hebrew phrases and Talmudic proverbs” but the interwar era Jewish community spoke a mix of Yiddish and English. By the time the 1940s rolled around, most Jewish people in America spoke fluent English “with occasional Yiddish sayings.” Yiddish was a secular language spoken by the Jews of Eastern Europe, and the decline of the language is complicated by many factors other than religion. However, the language of the earliest immigrants of the twentieth century was dappled with biblical phrases; by the time the wave of Holocaust refugees arrived in New York, English had taken root and the biblical language had lost its prominence.

However, both Bronner and Annette Aronowicz, an American Theology professor at Franklin & Marshall College, agree that the rise and fall and rise again of Yiddish may also tell a tale about Jewish religiosity in the United States. Bronner posits that Yiddish was a way for non-pietistic Jews to form a connected community. In Yiddishkeit’s heydey, the theater offered the equivalent of synagogue socials by providing “a social connection in tradition and values.” However, as the Americanization process progressed, the Yiddish theater went into a steep decline. The era of Jewish vaudeville was long gone by the eve of the Holocaust. However, after

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1 It was an active choice to name each survivor; the Nazis’ actions were completely dehumanizing, and the least I can do is give the survivors their names within this paper.


3 Yiddish is now a common language in the Hassidic communities, and is experiencing a secular renewal among youth who are trying to get in touch with their Jewish roots.

the Holocaust, it showed a renaissance. Aronowicz describes it as a “communal return to life”\(^5\) and a “sacred space”\(^6\) that filled a quasi-religious need.

A similar pattern of glory, decline, and rebirth appeared in the building of American synagogues and hometown associations in the twentieth century. Displaced European Jewish communities often created hometown associations in the United States. These \(\textit{anshey}\) were at first “congregational groups that established their own synagogue buildings.” As with the Yiddish language, the 1930s was a time of decline for construction of synagogues. Instead, 70% of the hometown groups were based on fraternal orders, ladies’ auxiliary groups and independent societies.\(^7\) However, when world was beginning to come to terms with the total destruction wrought by the Nazis, these same associations reconvened to create detailed \(\textit{Yizkor}\) memorial books recollecting all they could about villages and people that were no more. The act of putting together these books took on a religious nature as generations of rabbis’ names were listed, and great detail was put into describe every relic in each synagogue. At the same time as the \(\textit{Yizkor}\) books were being produced, Jewish communities erected synagogue after synagogue. In his chapter on Renewal in \textit{American Faith}, Sarna explains that “Judaism strengthened institutionally” through this rebirth of building.\(^8\) The surge of antisemitism in the United States follows an inverse pattern; it was much higher during years leading up to the Holocaust, then declined as Judaism became America’s de facto “third faith.”\(^9\)

As Judaism became more mainstream, however, the push for cultural assimilation grew. There was a push for becoming Americanized in the 1950s because it was considered “healthy” and thought to “moderate divisiveness” between the diverse Jewish communities.\(^10\) This is no surprise if one considers the storms that had developed within the Orthodox community in the 1940s. Rebbe Schneersohn, the legendary leader of Chabad, escaped Europe and arrived in New York in March of 1940. Also known as “the Lubavitcher Rebbe”, he immediately made his disgust for American Jewry clear. He called secular Jews the “human agents” of Satan\(^11\) and aimed to “salvage the American children of the lost generation” by bringing them back to a strict religious regime.\(^12\) He blamed the behavior of Jews for causing God’s punishment through Hitler and threatened that if they did not follow his purification routine, they would “be stricken by a “destroying angel.”\(^13\) However, he also gave urgent demands to prepare for the upcoming Messiah. “Only when every Jew worshiped like him” would there be this peace on earth. Suffice it to say, his harsh rhetoric did not result in accord among the Jewish groups. They heard

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\(^6\) Ibid., 359.
\(^7\) Bronner, “\textit{Vinkln},” 138.
\(^9\) Ibid., 275.
\(^11\) Bryan Mark Rigg, \textit{The Rabbi Saved By Hitler's Soldiers: Rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneersohn and His Astonishing Rescue} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 216.
\(^12\) Ibid., 212.
\(^13\) Ibid., 230.
\(^14\) Ibid., 215.
his fear of the *treife medina* (unkosher state) and “established enclaves” which grew ever more apart.\(^{15}\) Assimilation was a way to alleviate this splintering effect.

Ironically, assimilation also was part of the resurgence of Judaism in the years right after the war. Many scholars have given examples how religion increased its societal role in America during this time. “Under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954; just two years later, the United States acquired its official motto: In God We Trust.\(^{16}\) Brenner’s recent monograph on the faith and doubt of survivors focuses exclusively on Israeli Jews because part of the American assimilation process involved membership in a religious community. Jewish immigants “conformed to the mores of the American majority by” professing their faith.\(^{17}\) This was particularly prudent; the threat of being viewed a “Communist” sans religion was worse than ordinary antisemitism, especially with the escalation of the Cold War.\(^{18}\) At the same time, as more Holocaust survivors arrived in the United States and our society suffered a post-war emotional fatigue, antisemitism began to show itself again. After films like Lanzmann’s *Shoah* increased awareness of the Nazis’ horrors, “this intense involvement with the Holocaust was accompanied by...mounting antisemitic activities.”\(^{19}\)

This is the America that the Holocaust survivors adopted as their new home: a religious and cultural community in flux, balancing itself between fitting in and standing out, shifting languages, shifting faiths, and increasingly shocked as the reality of Hitler’s Europe unveiled itself. What beliefs did these survivors have about God and Judaism? It will be apparent that their views are as diverse as the views of their new homeland.

**Continued Faith**

Many survivors kept their faith in God because they needed constancy and support. Rubenstein poses a rhetorical question in *After Auschwitz*: “How could a Jew ignore history?”\(^{20}\) Conversation and wrestling with God was a connection to the past and a hope for the future. In a world where families were separated, villages were destroyed and communities were murdered, an eternal God became the one being that survivors could count on. David Abrams needed the consistency of the divine in a world of insecurities. He prayed every day, hoping for a reprieve. He felt that God listened to him, and answered daily. “The only problem was, his answer was ‘No, not today.’” Abrams waited and held on, knowing the day of his rescue would come with his God’s help.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{16}\) Sarna, *Judaism*, 275.


\(^{18}\) Sarna, *Judaism*, 274.

\(^{19}\) Kauvar, “Reflections,” 344.


Family tradition was enough to keep many individuals active in their relationship with God. Tania Kauppila remembered being punished by the Nazis as a young teenager in a concentration camp. As she stood in a confined space for hours and hours, she talked to God “because there’s nobody there but God” and then began to pray to God to let her “hug your parents, embrace them, tell them what happened to you.” That day never came, but she felt stronger knowing that she was in contact with the same God who her parents had loved.

Along the same lines, there were Holocaust survivors who had Judaism so imbued in their being that they could not imagine life without their God. “If you don’t believe in God,” said Ralph Abramovitch, “you live like a behaimeh (animal).” Indeed, the Nazis systematically took the humanity away from Jewish people, portraying them as poisonous mushrooms, vermin, and then creating extermination camps. So many of the survivors spoke of the animal-like treatment they received in the concentration camps; for some, faith in a Supreme Being helped them maintain some humanity. Furthermore, it provided them with hope during impossible times. Helen Handler acknowledged that she could not believe in “human compassion or justice or law” but she had to believe in something, so she chose to believe in God. This choice kept her alive: “You couldn’t let go [of the belief] for a second because if you let go for even a second, you couldn’t get out.” God was her lifeline.

A common theme among survivors was the notion of angels among us, or God working through the kindness of humans. In his theology, Eliezer Berkovits was able to acknowledge the “ultimate evil” of Auschwitz, but he also noted that one also faces “the ultimate goodness.” Sometimes an especially loving act restored faith for victims of the Nazis.

Norbert Friedman shared one such memory that helped him keep his belief in God. He was in a crowded cattle car, thirsty to the point that people were licking the condensation on the walls. When the train stopped in Nuremberg, “all you could hear were cries of Wasser! Wasser! through the windows” as captives begged the free army nurses for something to drink. Friedman noticed Reb Meyer, a religious man whose “lonely silhouette” could be seen at night, steadfast in prayer. This believer put his hands out and received a bottle of water from one of the nurses. The tension among the captives was so unbearable that “had he taken the bottle and drank from it, they would have torn it from his hands.” Then, Friedman witnessed the act that solidified his belief in God. Reb Meyer turned to a man next to him and said, “Trink mayn fraynd, aber nar a bissel” (drink my friend, but just a little), making sure there was room for the next person, and the next, and the next after that. “This bottle of water kept passing on even after it was empty, and we became transformed. His act of sacrifice returned to us our sense of dignity.” With this dignity, for Friedman, faith was also restored. As Murray Bergman said it, “I had a malech

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(angel) next to me all the time.” These godly messengers, like Reb Meyer, were evidence of a benevolent God even in the bleakest of times.

Miracles of survival also kept God alive for many survivors. Jacob Geldwert felt that God was somehow guiding him on a path to survival. He remembered hiding in a cellar with his brother when the German soldiers opened the window in search of hidden Jews. Young Jacob could fully see the soldiers, but they did not see him. “I was so afraid that I made in my pants,” he recalled, but the boys remained unseen and the soldiers left. Another time, in Buchenwald, he saw a bucket of potatoes and was about to grab one when a friend pulled him back. This saved Geldwert from being shot. Two days later, the friend who rescued him was killed. “There was always somebody who guided me to do it this way. I’m not that smart,” he said, attributing these guides to God.

A similar tale was told by Stephen Nasser. One day, he lashed out at God for all the atrocities he had to endure. “What kind of God are you? You even begrudge a couple of berries from a few starving children!” he cried when he was not allowed to eat the coveted treat with captives from the next barrack. The next morning, however, many of the people from that barrack had died from poisoning; had he eaten those berries, he too would have been dead. “I looked up and said ‘Thank you, God.’ It shows you, sometimes you are fighting fate...and you cannot tell that in everything bad there is always something good.” Miracles were evidence of God’s intervention.

Although most survivors could not find meaning in the suffering and despair wrought by the Nazis, some were able to piece together a cause, a greater cause. One of the most creative explanations came from an Ultra-Orthodox survivor, Chaskel Besser. He rationalized that the World War had to have an end, and if it were not for the atomic bomb, the United States might not have prevailed. God needed to send Albert Einstein and other leading scientists out of Germany. Besser ends his explanation for God’s reason in this chilling way: “if Einstein had stayed in Germany, Hitler would have had the atomic bomb.”

Wisdom was another purpose survivors attributed to God’s rationale for the Holocaust. Salomon Carlebach professed his Hassidic view while explaining how he felt closer to God for having suffered. In moments of safety, he could not conceive of “the trials and tribulations of man in relationship to his Creator,” but after the Holocaust he understood more.

Relationships with God also helped survivors understand themselves better. Many of them used God-imbued language (e.g. “God forbid” and “thank God”) in the same conversation as professing their atheism. Some even noticed the irony of how language is so imbued with faith. Ernest Friedman pointed out another irony of faith: the fickleness of humanity.

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camps, he noticed how prisoners questioned God, because they could not figure out what they had done to deserve this fate. Many prayed for a quick death, because “no one with a healthy mind could imagine that you would get out of there alive.” Once liberated, however, all questioning ceased. “You could see the wondrous work of the almighty.” While it might make sense to have such distinct mindsets from two different people, Friedman explained how individual people could hold two such conflicting views. Humans are not divine and cannot understand the ways of God, let alone the ways of humanity. Vacillating between faith and doubt is always part of the faith experience and the severe circumstances of the Holocaust augmented this human condition.

For many, the creation of Israel was God’s ultimate purpose for the Holocaust. At the dawn of 1970, Eugene Borowitz expressed surprise at the “complete rejection of Death-of-God theology” in favor of a continued affirmation of God. Israel prevailed after the Six-Day War and this added hope to many Jews. Fackenheim placed great importance on Israel for the survival of the Jewish people. His messages coincided with an increase of American Jews becoming Israelis.

Every American survivor who spoke about Israel in the Shoah Foundation testimonies emphasized the importance of Israel in the post-Holocaust world. Few of them described it as a promised land; instead, they highlighted the need for a country where they could escape to if need be. Isaac Avigdor even went so far as to call Israel the “consolation prize” for all the moments of struggling with why God’s Chosen People should be so assaulted.

Henry Levy was one of the Jews from Salonika, and he spoke with pride about how the “Sephardim never lost faith in HaShem” because of an elderly man among them. With great devotion, this man regularly said the Kaddish. His bunkmates, mostly younger men, thought he was crazy to waste his time on prayer, but he assured them: “Something good will happen after this...we’re going to have the State of Israel.”

Jacob Jungreis told another powerful story to illustrate the divine meaning of Israel. A New Yorker, he frequently passes Kennedy Airport in the afternoon while driving past the ocean. When he sees an El Al plane coming in for a landing he pulls over and recites the Sh’ma. “This is proof there is God in the world. There is a plane, a Magen David, a Jewish pilot, all coming from our homeland.” Even in the camps, in the direst of times so far from Brooklyn, the hope of Israel still kept God alive for some.

33 Ibid., 29
For Leslie Lefkovic, faith was lost in the camps and only regained when he reached the Holy Land. During the Holocaust, he was so angry at God that he began to doubt. He even remembers appreciating jokes about putting God on trial for the devastation of the Jews; this was his way of wrestling with God. However, when Lefkovic arrived in Israel, he understood God’s purpose: “the liberation was an act of God, a miracle of God.”

Another category of people who did not give up on God was the believers who were certain that the horrors of the Holocaust were simply heralds of the Messiah. Hansi Bodeman remembered conversations in Auschwitz. People enjoyed talking about their memories of food, but “the big talk was about Mashiach. It was Mashiach’s time. Machiach is coming for sure; it’s such a bad time!” All of the men who expressed this belief were dressed as traditionally as my great-great-grandfather all those years ago. Several of them acknowledge being followers of Chabad, linked to the Lubavitcher Rebbe I described in my cultural analysis.

Theologian Irving Greenberg did not reject the coming of a Messiah, but believed that humans had to work for it by doing their part to repair the world. After the Holocaust, God’s original covenant with the Jewish people was broken; the renewed covenant would be voluntary. Tikkun Olam became an important part of Judaism in this voluntary covenant: “the only way to wholeness is to heal the world.” Ethical concerns remained a part of many survivors’ mindsets as they tried to heal themselves. This may also explain the rise in Reform Judaism in the post-Holocaust era; this branch had already begun to place a strong emphasis on social action and social justice even before the rise of Hitler.

Survivor Harry Bloxenheim told a story about how he learned about hypocrisy. He spoke about his upbringing and how he was taught that his local Germanic culture was very proper, very polite, and very ethical. In his young mind, etiquette was equivalent to ethics. Therefore, something struck him, even as a child, about the cruelty of a Nazi guard who “played around with his gun”, making shots, and then approaching a man who was shaking with fear: “Warum sind sie so nervös?” Bloxenheim code-switched between the German of the power figures of his youth and his safer language of empowered adulthood, even when recounting the incident. “Since then, I don’t accept that if someone is polite, this is a good human being,” he reported, extending this lesson to more brutal experiences of the years that followed. A hitherto unethical act became ethical for the Germans when done on behalf of the Fatherland. This led Bloxenheim into a theological dilemma: he claims that “ethics is rubbish,” but the code of ethics was given to us by a Supreme Being. How can one call a gift from the Supreme Being “rubbish”?

Instead of using the general term “ethics”, some survivors called upon the Ten Commandments. One survivor remembers her childhood confusion: there were only ten

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commandments she knew to follow, and she followed them dutifully. “Why didn’t they?”**41** Similarly, Rose Murra took a thorough look at her family’s loyalty to God’s commandments. “If I should see the Jewish religion teaches something believe me, I wouldn’t be Jewish,” she claimed and then reflected on how her mother gave clothes, food and lodging to the poor, how there was no violence in the family. “My brothers didn’t throw stones or break windows,” she recalled, stirring memories of Kristallnacht where her non-Jewish neighbors did. In her child’s mind, the conflict was very clear: “The Ten Commandments says not to kill. Why did they?”**42**

There was one other interesting category of people who continued to believe in God. These were people who did not want to believe in God because their world was so devastating, but instead of losing faith, they grew angry at their Supreme Being for turning away. The apparent abandonment by God in times of need can be spun into a positive light when viewed through the eyes of theologian Eliezer Berkovits.

Berkovits was an Orthodox theologian and rabbi who believed God was still very much alive and benevolent. However, he referred back to the old belief of Hester Panim: God’s hidden face. This traditional view originally referred to times when God turns away from people it is as a punishment, somewhat like a “time out.” Berkovits extended this idea to a new kind of hidden face of God. For Berkovits, God now turned away to allow people free will. With free will comes the possibility for great good, but also the possibility for great evil. “Man left to his freedom is capable of greatness in both—in creative goodness and destructive evil.”**43** The Holocaust was a result of humanity’s free will, and not a punishment for the Jewish people’s sins.

Walter Kase worded it this way: “I have seen with my own eyes people dig their own graves, get into them, and pray to God, and be shot while they were praying to God. This made me angry at God.” However, one cannot be angry at something that does not exist; his anger at God kept the deity alive for him. Before long, his anger turned on the religion; why did the people pray instead of “attacking their oppressors”? Eventually, when he was resettled in the United States and had a family of his own, he realized it was not God to whom he needed to direct his fury but on humanity.**44** He reclaimed his faith in God, entering into the new voluntary covenant of which Greenberg spoke. If humanity is broken, humans can work to fix it. Herbert Achtentuch similarly kept his faith in God by blaming mankind: “God didn’t do it. Man did it.” Achtentuch acknowledged that he could not understand why God did not stop man from the evil acts, but rather than causing him to lose faith in God, this uncertainty urged him to remain vigilant against other signs of humanity’s inhumanity to itself.**45** This was his way of using free will and faith to practice Tikku Olam.


**43** Berkovits, Faith, 107.


Shattered Belief

Richard L. Rubenstein shocked the world with the publication of his radical text, *After Auschwitz*, in which he posited that “we live in the time of the death of God.” Without God, there is no covenant. Without God, there is no omnipotent savior or punisher. Without God, “we have lost all hope, consolation and illusion.” This God-is-Dead theology created great waves in Protestant religious circles, but Rubenstein’s slant was a little different. He gave great importance to the Jewish value of the past, and to society’s need for religious communities even without God.

Just as there were pivotal moments that confirmed certain survivors’ faith in God, there were key moments that caused survivors to become atheists or to understand why Murray Lynn said “my god was desanctified and died in Auschwitz.” These stories were told in sorrow and anger, but always filled with detail. For example, David Lipstadt described the intense hunger that pushed him to smuggle some lard into the ghetto. Lard is a product of pig, and thus it is not kosher. His mother was outraged that he would bring such an item into their Jewish home made it clear that as long as she survived, he would not eat it. “Three days later, my mother was taken away and the lard was still there.” Lipstadt frequently wiped his eyes and took sips of water while telling this story. Then, quietly, he added, “The faith is gone...you ask questions and you can’t find any answers.”

Clara Kramer also told a vivid story about her loss of faith in God. In her town, there was a synagogue that dated back to the sixteenth century, its adjacent cemetery with tombstones dating back farther than she could imagine. After the Nazis burned the synagogue, they required the forced Jewish laborers to remove all the gravestones and use them to pave roads. Watching these stones being carted off in wheelbarrows, Kramer “expected God would strike the Germans who desecrated graves.” In the absence of such intervention, Kramer began to doubt God.

For Kramer, it was God’s inaction to the Germans that gave him religious doubt. For others, it was Nazi messages about God that ended faith. Henry Goteiner recalled watching as the Germans attacked his father and then ridiculed him. As a little boy, he saw the buckles the Germans wore. Engraved on them was the phrase “Gott ist mit uns,” God is with us. One of the

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47 Ibid., 70.
48 Over time, Rubenstein shifted to a more mystical, hopeful theology. However, the view I will highlight in this research is the one professed in his 1966 edition of *After Auschwitz*, because it is most relevant to the time when survivors were reconstructing their lives and faiths.
men went up to Goteiner and asked him “Wo ist euer Gott jetzt?” Where is your God now? The child learned quickly that “he was right and I was wrong.”

Many survivors sought divine intervention and when it did not come, they lost faith. As Samuel Burke said, “It’s good to believe, but after Auschwitz you wonder why someone doesn’t come down Jacob’s ladder and say ‘Don’t do that anymore. Stop.’” Branko Lustig, for example, remembered a specific Kol Nidre in the barracks, and deep prayer spoken to the endless night sky. God did not answer this prayer: “the sky didn’t open, no one came to help us.” Once he was liberated, he only went to synagogue once a year, to honor the dead rather than to honor God. Although a faithful person may question God with a personal trial or a local disaster, the Holocaust becomes the ultimate and most significant loss of faith for many.

Ester Fiszgop remembered playing outside while her parents used to celebrate the High Holidays. Though she was just a child when she arrived in the ghetto, she decided to act grown-up for the first time and fast on Yom Kippur. With magical thinking, she explained, “I thought if I would be good my parents would survive.” When they did not survive, she felt betrayed by the belief in God and never fasted or prayed again.

Whether a survivor believed in God or not, the great majority of those interviewed expressed some moment of doubt. This is not a surprise, given the Jewish tradition of “questioning and challenging God.” In *Faith After the Holocaust*, Berkovits stated that “the man of faith questions God because of his faith.” Even the devoted believers shared the big question: Why? In the transcripts I typed of the interviews, the precise question “Why me?” came up 109 times! This is not including other “why” questions: Why didn’t God intervene? Why did God bring this upon us? Why punish innocent babies? Why punish the righteous? The list goes on and on.

Sometimes, the questions led individuals to painful answers. After searching in vain to find a reason for all the suffering, Joseph Kempler became more than just an atheist, but a “God-hater.” This combination of atheism and ardent hatred of God seems self-contradictory; if you don’t believe in God, how can you hate God? The awareness of this conflict led Kempler to feel emotionally paralyzed. He needed a God, but not the Jewish God of his youth. He eventually became a Jehovah’s Witness.

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57 Berkovits, *Faith*, 68.
Ester Lebensold wanted to have the deep faith of her siblings, and for a long time she followed the path of questioning. One day, though, she was in a hospital where she saw the work of cruel Nazism: babies “stuck to the wall and everything got smashed.” This was the end of questioning for Lebensold. “A child was born an hour ago or yesterday; what has the child done? That’s shit, excuse me, Scheisse. I saw it with my own eyes.” Her use of an expletive in two different languages against God is very telling. Even years after, her anger, outrage and sense of deception remains strong.

It wasn’t only innocent babies who caused people to question a God who would choose individuals for such an awful fate. Many of the most observant Jews who were noticeably religious were killed first, or abused most publicly. This frequent occurrence led many survivors to doubt God. Nathan Pollak remembered an attack on his synagogue on Yom Kippur. As the community elders were taken away on a truck, they sang “Ani Ma’amin”, a song proclaiming steadfast belief in God. Trying to make sense of this, young Nathan looked to his father for an explanation. “Everything you taught me, everything I learned in cheder, everything is going against it,” he moaned. Years later, Pollak would remember his father’s answer and how it destroyed the young boy’s faith: “What right do you have to question the will of God?” This never made sense to Pollak, because it was those who had the most faith who were taken away.

Likewise, Nathan Farb emphasized the immense death toll in Poland. “We were famous for our rabbis...You have no idea what kind of rabbis we had. They did nothing but pray!” Farb saw how the rabbis were tortured more than he was, and he just could not fathom a God who would target the faithful. He placed ultimate responsibility for the murders on God, rather than on humanity. The injustice was incompatible with his belief in God, and the tangibility of injustice prevailed over his faith.

Some survivors handled the struggle of theodicy by reshaping their vision of God. God did not die for them, but was instead defined differently. For example, Abraham Foxman compared his own belief with his father’s. His father believed in miracles, expected divine intervention, and was disappointed when God did not intervene. Foxman, on the other hand, came to peace with a deity who is no longer active. He believes we need to “inoculate ourselves against” the potential destruction of and by humanity but acknowledges “in a very amorphous unspecific way, there is something out there.”

Not everybody sustained belief in a benevolent God. Margo Heuman broke away from organized religion, claiming that it was all man-made. However, she did not give up on a God. It was the benevolence she questioned. Her Supreme Being is “so horrendous that my little mind

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62 Four of the interviewed survivors in this study were able to acknowledge God as male or female.
cannot begin to understand.”64 She would be likely to relate to Christian theologian John K. Roth’s declamation of God. Not only did he do away with the concept of a benevolent God; he placed direct blame on God for the “persistent inactivity” that led to “evil and suffering.” Roth and Heuman both saw the dark side of God.

**Passing on the Faith**

Emil Fackenheim was a Reform rabbi and Holocaust survivor. He believed that God still exists and that God spoke through the Holocaust, giving a “moral imperative” to humanity. The 614th Commandment, as Fackenheim called it was a call to faith. Jewish people must keep the religion alive and relevant because not to do so would give Hitler “a posthumous victory.”

For many survivors, even those who had disavowed their faith in a Supreme Being, passing on Judaism to the next generation(s) is crucial. Eli Banyacar exclaimed toward the end of his testimony, “I just can take God, take it or leave it.” Then, with a wry smile, he added that he wouldn’t discourage his grown children from believing, “God forbid,” because he didn’t want to lose Friday nights with the family. He added that his grandson stands on a chair to lead Kiddush, an enduring blessing to sanctify the Sabbath.

There is also the hope that future generations will understand what we cannot. Comedian Victor Borge described this very poignantly in his testimony. Despite the Holocaust, he expressed gratitude for having lived in the twentieth century, the time of “the golden transformation.” Though each of us is unable to see the purpose of God or the trajectory of decades ahead, our children’s children will know if the transformations of a century of global war are worth the devastation suffered for the sake of Israel and for the sake of international standards for human rights.65

**Conclusion**

Hours of listening to survivors’ testimony left me with more questions than I began with. A simple question about how their faith was affected by the Holocaust elicited such a vast range of responses! Some wavered in their faith, and some clung firmly to their benevolent, omnipotent God. Some rejected God completely and even cursed the very deity that others credited with saving their lives. The constant theme that rang through almost all of the survivors’ answers was a love for people that extended beyond a lifetime and the urge to do something to improve the world. Even the most God-centered yeshiva men who were interviewed spoke about the need to do better as human beings. *Tikkun Olam* grew as a Jewish priority for survivors, from atheists to theists and everything in-between.

As far as the generational shift from Rabbi Israel Hudesman his atheist or agnostic descendents, I am left with a different view of American Judaism of the twentieth century. It was in flux, and without one steady path. Antisemitism grew and faded and grew again; with its ebbs and tides, so went the religiosity of more moderate Jews. A great wave of immigrants came

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in and assimilated before the wave of survivors; the pattern of Americanization was present for both waves, but at different times. The need for Jewish community remained strong even for those who no longer had a religious notion of Judaism; Yiddish theaters became the new sanctuaries and homeowner associations shifted from religious organizations to independent ones. Theologians published books announcing the death of God, but they also published ones commanding the continuation of the faith.

My grandfather was right: America happened and the Holocaust happened. In the midst of both “events”, Jewish people loved and prayed and raged and asked questions. One question will always remain: Why?
Bibliography


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