

## The Possibility and Plausibility of Divine Abusiveness or Sadism as the Premise for a Religious Response to the Holocaust<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Why is there such a marked reluctance to engage seriously with any religious response to the Holocaust framed in terms of divine abusiveness or sadism? Such responses are, more often than not, simply dismissed as neither theologically possible, nor emotionally plausible. This paper considers the motif of divine abusiveness in three contexts, namely debates concerning (1) punishment for sin, (2) the complex of ideas concerning divine providence, covenant and election (with particular attention to the work of Elie Wiesel and David Blumenthal), and (3) Lawrence Langer's methodological division of responses to the Holocaust as embodiments of either a "rhetoric of ruin" or a "rhetoric of consolation." It concludes by suggesting that, in such a context, the insistence upon exploring the possibility of divine sadism functions as a refusal to search for or accept the consolation offered by more traditional responses.

### Introduction

[1] John Hick is representative of "mainstream" reflection on the problem of evil when he asserts (39) that any theodicy should be both *possible* (i.e. internally coherent) and *plausible* (i.e. tally with our religious tradition and with what we "know" about the world on the basis of our experience). The traditional form of the logical problem of evil is that there are three propositions - God is all-powerful, God is all-good, and evil exists - of which, if any two are true, then the third must ergo be false.<sup>2</sup> Within the standard framework of theodicy, there are three possibilities when confronted with this logical dilemma, questioning the reality or "evilness" of evil, the nature or extent of divine omnipotence, or the nature of divine goodness (for an overview of approaches to the logical problem of evil and theodicy, see Peterson: 17-32, 67-109).

[2] The majority of writers on the Holocaust premise their responses upon an assumption that the Holocaust was evil, indeed "injustice absolute" (Berkovits: 89). David Blumenthal is typical in insisting that "the Holocaust remains unadulterated evil in every sense of the word" (1998: 97). Given such views, there is a deep reluctance to respond to the Holocaust by means of traditional theodic strategies involving the redescription of evil. Such redescription normally takes one of two forms. First, the denial that evil is really evil (it only *appears* to be evil). Second, and more frequent, the insistence that although there are indeed "genuine" evils, the possibility of such evils is the logical corollary of a "greater good" (generally identified with human freedom). Evil

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Religion, Holocaust and Genocide Group at the American Academy of Religion, Boston, November 1999. I thank those present for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> There are also those, of course, such as Herbert McCabe, who question the appropriateness of framing the discussion in these terms (25-38).

is therefore redescribed in instrumental terms, with the focus shifting from individual experience to the big picture. Thus, Richard Swinburne can argue that “[t]he only morally permissible way in which God could give the opportunity of exercising such higher-level virtues as compassion is by actually allowing or making others suffer” (165). From this it follows that “what is utterly evil in its inception and commission may nevertheless, under a different description, have served some useful purpose” (Wetzel: 9). For the majority, if not all, theodicians, even the most radical evils can be redescribed in such terms. Theodicy therefore precludes the existence of irredeemable evil, and is reluctant to consider the possibility of gratuitous evil.

[3] Many of those who reject or criticise the project of theodicy as itself an evil, do so for precisely this reason. James Wetzel is typical in noting that “if evils even as grave as genocide can find their way into the scheme of human redemption, it is hard to see how theodicy manages to avoid trivializing human tragedy at the very moment it attempts to go beyond it” (8).<sup>3</sup> Similar concerns underpin Elie Wiesel’s exchange with Alfred Kazin on the subject of the Eichmann trial. Asked whether “the death of six million Jews could have any meaning,” Kazin replied that “he hoped not” (Wiesel 1982: 162).

[4] The reluctance to redescribe evil in instrumental terms is evident in the profound suspicion of attempts to represent the Holocaust as a means to a greater good (whether that be human free will, the opportunity of being of use, or something more concrete such as the subsequent creation of the State of Israel). Even those who do adopt a greater good argument or free-will defence feel compelled simultaneously to insist that the Holocaust remains “injustice absolute,” indeed “injustice countenanced by God” (as in the case of Eliezer Berkovits). The reluctance to go down this particular route can be seen in the critiques of Berkovits’ work, and in the more general criticism of any appeal to human freedom (as for example by Lawrence Langer).<sup>4</sup> It is even more evident in the outraged responses to Richard Swinburne’s argument that, while Auschwitz was a very great evil in and of itself, it nevertheless served a purpose in that

[t]he possibility of the Jewish suffering and deaths at the time made possible serious heroic choices for people normally (in consequence often of their own bad choices and the choices of others) too timid to make them (e.g. to harbour the prospective victims), and for people normally too hard-hearted (again as a result of previous bad choices) to make them, e.g. for a concentration camp guard not to obey orders. And they make possible reactions of courage (e.g. by the victims), of compassion, sympathy, penitence, forgiveness, reform, avoidance of repetition, etc., by others (151).

Thus, for Swinburne, despite its own intrinsic evil, the Holocaust is understood as a practical consequence of the existence of human freedom. As such, it served a purpose: it enabled the victims to be of “use,” albeit against their will, in presenting others with the opportunity, albeit often spurned, for making “very great choices.”

[5] If there is an obvious exception to the consensus that the Holocaust was an absolute evil, then it is those writers, whether Jewish or Christian, who interpret the Holocaust as punishment for

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of critiques of theodicy on these grounds, see the work of William R. Jones, Kenneth Surin, Terrence Tilley, Lawrence Langer, John Roth, D.Z. Phillips, and Frederick Sontag.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the criticism of appeals to free will by Roth (11-14), or Lawrence Langer’s emphasis upon ‘choiceless choice’ as the dominant characteristic of the experience of atrocity in the Holocaust (25-30, 65-74).

sin. Understood as punishment for sin, the Holocaust clearly cannot be “injustice absolute,” let alone “injustice countenanced by God.” Instead, it is entirely compatible with belief in an omnipotent, all-good God.

[6] In order to maintain that the Holocaust was indeed evil absolute, many theodiscists prefer to question the nature of divine omnipotence. Such an approach can take a moderate form, as for example when thinkers who appeal to human freedom redefine divine omnipotence by arguing that it does not extend to what is logically impossible. Thus it is not possible to create human beings who always freely do the good (see, for example, the approach of Berkovits, Hick, and Swinburne). A more radical approach challenges belief in divine omnipotence per se, as in Richard Rubenstein’s critique of belief in a God who is “Lord of history” (1992). From a Christian perspective, such an approach is found in the work of Dorothee Soelle when she argues that the only alternative to questioning the nature of divine power is to suggest that God is less than good. She echoes Rubenstein in asserting that “the two propositions that God is both almighty and just lead to the conclusion that all suffering has to be punishment for sin.” Soelle therefore concludes that an omnipotent God is inevitably a victimizer or tyrant, asserting that it is impossible to combine belief in divine omnipotence with belief in a loving God (24).

[7] By far the least attention has been paid to the third possibility, namely questioning divine goodness. The most obvious recent exception to this rule in relation to the Holocaust is found in the work of David Blumenthal. Others who have at least raised this as a possibility with reference to the Holocaust include Elie Wiesel, John Roth, and William R. Jones. Those who have considered the possibility in more general terms include Terrence Tilley, and a number of feminist thinkers, such as Rita Nakashima Brock and Nel Noddings. In terms of recent writing about divine sadism or abusiveness, there is a clear division of opinion as to whether these are characteristics of God-in-Godself, or of certain models of God (which are to be rejected for precisely this reason). Blumenthal is among those who appear to be suggesting the former. Wiesel merely hints on occasion at such a possibility. However, the majority of critics tend to focus upon particular models or representations of God. Thus, for example, the feminist theologian, Melissa Raphael is highly critical of what she sees as the patriarchal model of God present in a variety of “Holocaust theologies” (53, 67). Brock and Noddings are similarly critical of the patriarchal models of God present in certain classical modes of Christian theology, particularly in relation to atonement and theodicy.

[8] The reluctance to even consider divine sadism as a theological or philosophical option, and the aversion expressed whenever the subject is raised (for example, the levelling of charges of blasphemy against Blumenthal) demonstrate that such an approach is considered to be neither possible nor plausible.<sup>5</sup> As a discourse practice, theodicy excludes the possibility of exploring such questions for the simple reason that they are incompatible with the initial premise: the problem of evil is only a challenge for theism, and theism presumes that God is, by definition, all-good (Swinburne: 3, 7, 30). It is significant that even those who challenge the presumptions of theism, for example, the Process thinker, David Ray Griffin, nevertheless share this assumption. Thus, Griffin introduces his position by insisting, “I . . . consider the perfect goodness of God and the importance of self-consistency not to be negotiable” (3). From the start, he rules out the possibility of “thinking of God as having wholly or partially evil purposes or

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Michael Goldberg observes, “If Blumenthal’s calling God an abuser does not count as blasphemy, then we have no category of blasphemy” (150 n. 12).

impulses, or as being morally neutral or indifferent, in terms of our best judgment as to what it would be for a creator to be ‘good’” (11). Clearly, there is a very powerful sense that a God who is not “good” is not “God.” Yet, as William R. Jones points out, such an argument is often emotional or a matter of conviction, rather than logical. He observes that, logically, “any given occurrence of human suffering harmonizes equally well with antithetical positions, divine favor or divine disfavor, God’s grace or God’s curse. Consequently, in the face of human suffering, whatever its character, we must entertain the possibility that it is an expression of divine hostility” (9).

[9] In the remainder of this paper, I explore the possibility of divine abusiveness or sadism in three contexts: (1) punishment for sin; (2) the complex of ideas surrounding providence, covenant, and election; (3) and Lawrence Langer’s categorization of responses to the Holocaust in terms of either a “discourse of ruin” or a “discourse of consolation.”

### **Punishment For Sin**

[10] As a response to the Holocaust, arguments concerning punishment for sin (*mi-penei-hata’einu*) are interpreted in a variety of ways. More often than not, such arguments are simply dismissed out of hand. Any reference to punishment for sin provokes outraged responses from both the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. Eliezer Berkovits insists that “not for a single moment shall we entertain the idea that what happened to European Jewry was divine punishment for any sins committed by them” (89). Norman Lamm goes further, characterizing such arguments as “massively irrelevant, impudent, and insensitive” and as “an unparalleled instance of criminal arrogance and brutal insensitivity” (122-23). Melissa Raphael simply dismisses any appeal to punishment for sin as “facile” (66). Arguments concerning punishment for sin are rejected on the grounds that they fail to take the extent and nature of the evil that was the Holocaust seriously enough (i.e. the suffering that constituted the Holocaust is out of all proportion to any possible “sins” that might have been committed). Or, it is argued that a God who would inflict a punishment such as the Holocaust is obscene and therefore unworthy of belief (i.e. such a God is neither possible nor plausible). Or, à la Lamm, the argument focuses upon who has the right to make such claims in the first place.

[11] Yet, however uncomfortable it makes many of us feel, such a response belongs to “a central tradition” and should not simply be dismissed (Sacks: 142). It is also a response that can clearly be found among the responses of those who were “there.” It is now commonplace to insist that only those who were “there” can know, that is, to ascribe epistemological and ethical primacy to the responses of those who were “there,” the victims and survivors. However, such an approach has little, if any, credibility if, at the same time, we are screening out or excluding the voices of those with whom we fundamentally disagree. As Gershon Greenberg and others have demonstrated, rabbinic leaders such as Elchonon Wasserman interpreted events, and their own experience, in precisely these terms (431-41).

[12] One of the benefits of interpreting the Holocaust in terms of divine punishment is that not only does it leave the covenantal framework intact, it even serves to reinforce it. A God who “punishes” is one who is still “Lord of History.” Understanding events in these terms switches the focus from the perpetrator to the providential plan in which they are playing a role. Thus, Hitler plays a role analogous to that of Nebuchadnezzar: he is the agent of divine wrath (2 Chronicles 36:17). In effect, the Holocaust is interpreted as an internal matter concerning the relationship between God and Israel, hence the relative lack of interest in the perpetrators in

many Orthodox accounts of events. Such an interpretation renders continuing belief in divine providence and the covenantal framework both possible and plausible. It facilitates continued belief in both divine power and divine goodness. A God who punishes can be interpreted as a God who is just and loving, intimately involved in the fate of Israel. As David Kraemer points out, "If God did not care, God would not punish; thus we who are punished must, by that very existence, be God's select nation" (23).

[13] The obvious question that arises here for many commentators, however, is "at what price?" Wiesel, for one, proffers an alternative explanation as to why Orthodox Jews in the camps preferred to interpret their fate in this way. He suggests that, for many, belief in their own guilt was preferable to contemplating the alternative, namely relationship with the "God of Job," a God who fails to conform to covenantal expectations (1982: 171). Hence Wiesel's conclusion: "It was better to believe our punishments had meaning, that we had deserved them; to believe in a cruel but just God was better than not to believe at all" (1982: 36).

### **Providence, Covenant, and Election**

[14] Richard Rubenstein acknowledges both the traditional nature and the inherent logic of interpreting the Holocaust as a punishment for sin. He insists that the assertion that the Holocaust is a punishment for sin is the inevitable outcome of traditional Jewish beliefs in providence, covenant and election:

(a) if God chose the Jewish people and (b) the major events in the history of that people are ultimately expressions of God's will, we must (c) conclude that a just omnipotent God sent Hitler to exterminate his people either to punish them or correct them (1969: 717).

He concludes that the price of rejecting belief in the Holocaust as punishment for sin is therefore the collapse of belief in theism and, even more so, in the complex of ideas surrounding providence, covenant and election, at least as they have been traditionally understood.<sup>6</sup> Rubenstein is convinced that those who wish to reject the doctrine of punishment for sin, while remaining committed to a covenantal framework, inevitably end up with a God who is a "cosmic sadist" (1970: 921-23). Methodologically, therefore, he interprets responses to the Holocaust in terms of a stark choice: it is a case of all or nothing. If nothing has changed, then the Holocaust can only be interpreted in terms of continuity with the covenantal framework; the only options we are left with are punishment for sin or chastisement out of love. If, however, such responses are deemed to be unacceptable, then an alternative response must be premised upon the rejection of traditional understandings of providence, covenant and election. The price of change, of avoiding asserting that the Holocaust is a punishment for sin or chastisement out of love, is therefore the dismantling of traditional conceptual frameworks.

[15] Significantly, those he is targeting (primarily Wiesel and Fackenheim in this instance) are open to such a charge precisely because they retain belief in divine power or divine involvement in Jewish history (however differently this is understood in each case). Fackenheim recalls a conversation with Wiesel when the latter observed that "he could not respect a God lacking

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that while Rubenstein continues to reject the doctrine of covenant, he has modified his views in one regard: he has come to recognize the role covenant plays in fostering social cohesion and a sense of identity. See, for example, the discussion in his more recent essay, "Covenant, Holocaust, and Intifada" (1992: 140-53).

power.”<sup>7</sup> In refusing to reject belief in divine power and/or involvement in covenantal history, thinkers such as Wiesel, Fackenheim, and Blumenthal are compelled to move in directions that throw into question divine goodness, and even, in Blumenthal’s case, to explore actively the possibility that God is indeed “a cosmic sadist,” at least from time to time. The irony is that, despite rejecting, first, punishment for sin on the grounds that the moral price it exacts is too high, and, second, Rubenstein’s dismantling of the covenantal framework, Blumenthal and Wiesel end up going down a route that exacts an equal, if not greater “price.”

[16] In contrast to Rubenstein, Wiesel, Fackenheim, and Blumenthal all adopt variations of a both-and, rather than an either-or. They reject Rubenstein’s assertion that belief in the absolute injustice of the Holocaust necessitates the dismantling of traditional frameworks of meaning. Rather, those traditional frameworks are stretched - even if this is to breaking point - and combined with the belief that the Holocaust is injustice absolute. Reconfigured in this way, ideas of covenant, election and providence may no longer be instantly recognizable, but they are there nevertheless, albeit often in very strained forms. Covenant continues to provide the framework in which anger, protest, and lament can be expressed. As Blumenthal points out, it is precisely because covenant is “rooted in mutual expectations and obligations” that it can serve as a vehicle for anger and protest when those expectations are not met (1993: 18). He concludes: “God may act in ways that cause us to lose our ability to honor and respect God, but the liaison, the contract, is inalienable. For this reason, we do not reject God; rather, we learn how to cope with God and God’s actions” (1993: 262). In the context of a covenantal relationship, the response to innocent suffering and injustice is one way in which Israel learns to “cope,” and as such it combines “philosophical confusion with bitter feelings of personal betrayal.” Those who continue to rely on such traditional frameworks are struggling to meet the challenge of rebuilding Jewish “community within a symbolic system governed by an uncanny, unreliable God” (Braiterman: 24-25, 27).

[17] In Wiesel’s work, this dilemma takes the form of a recurrent motif, the “trial of God.”<sup>8</sup> Refusing to accept either that the Holocaust is a punishment for sin, or to follow Rubenstein in rejecting traditional beliefs in providence and election, Wiesel feels compelled to interrogate God, utilizing the covenantal framework in an ongoing “trial.” In doing so, he focuses upon the absolute injustice of the Holocaust, an injustice compounded by the “silence” of God in the face of it. Wiesel refuses to compromise his belief in divine power. He states categorically “we do not believe in a weak God. God is the king of the universe, God is strong and omnipotent. God could do whatever God wants. But God does not” (Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig: 97). For Wiesel, it is the fact that “God does not” which constitutes the root of the problem. How can such divine inaction and silence in the face of the Holocaust - defined as “injustice absolute” - be accounted for, let alone justified? By way of response, Wiesel makes a conscious decision to focus upon the human dimension of the covenant, rather than engage in theological speculation as to why God

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<sup>7</sup> Elie Wiesel’s comment is paraphrased by Fackenheim (289). Fackenheim is critical of such a position, ironically by reference to the child-hanging scene in Wiesel’s *Night*. Instead he argues that “[t]he God that hangs with that boy on the Auschwitz gallows, however, does lack power. He lacks it absolutely, and this because He persists in His intimacy with His people. Is the price for that intimacy, then and there, not a *total* loss of the infinity?” Thus, for Fackenheim, the price of God’s presence in history with Israel is the loss of divine power.

<sup>8</sup> Wiesel is well aware of the danger of lapsing into empty rhetoric here. As he observes in *Twilight*, “a trial involves facts and arguments, not clichés” (1988: 208). Nevertheless, Wiesel articulates what is as close to a consistently argued, systematic argument as it is possible to find in his work.

remained silent and/or absent. In this way, although the covenantal relationship comes under severe strain and may well even be broken (at least for a period of time), the dialogue - or more often than not, the monologue - nevertheless continues. Hence Wiesel's oft repeated refusal to speak of God: "I never speak of God now. I rather speak of men who believed in God or men who disbelieved in God" (1974: 271).

[18] Despite such rhetoric, there are some, albeit very few, occasions when Wiesel does indeed "speak of God." From time to time, in reflecting on God's failure to act as God, he hints at the displacement or replacement of God. Structurally, Wiesel's work centers upon the sharp contrast drawn between his childhood home, Sighet, and Auschwitz. Sighet represents the distant past of his childhood, religious fervor, and belief in a God who acts in accordance with covenantal expectations. By contrast, Auschwitz signifies the silence of God, the shattering impact this has upon such expectations, and the ongoing struggle to maintain a covenantal relationship with a more unpredictable and enigmatic God. It is therefore no accident that Wiesel's memoir, *Night*, begins with two chapters recalling life in Sighet, up to and including the deportation to Auschwitz. Every village "surrounded by mountains" that subsequently appears in Wiesel's work intentionally embodies Sighet. The role such villages, and Sighet in particular, play in Wiesel's symbolic universe is evident from the language he uses to describe them. Frequently, such language has a fairytale quality. The classic example of this is found in the opening essay in *A Jew Today*, "Once upon a time, in a distant town surrounded by mountains, there lived a small Jewish boy who believed himself capable of seeing good in evil, of discovering dawn within dusk and, in general, of deciphering the symbols, both visible and invisible, lavished upon him by destiny" (1979a: 3). This idyllic and intentionally idealized description continues for seven pages with the sole purpose of exacerbating the shattering impact of the phrase, "And then came the Holocaust, which shook history and by its dimensions and goals marked the end of a civilization" (1979a: 9). For Wiesel, Sighet embodies the civilization that was destroyed in the Holocaust; the shtetl culture of Eastern Europe which now only survives "in words alone" (1985: 91).<sup>9</sup>

[19] In exploring the effects of the conjunction - or, rather, the disjunction - of Sighet and Auschwitz, Wiesel suggests that in the "kingdom of night" the Nazis assumed the attributes normally associated with God, such as omnipotence and constancy. Thus, the "kingdom of night" is an alternative *heilsgeschichte* in which selection replaces election - "a biblical kingdom, where death as sovereign appropriated God's face as well as His attributes in heaven and on earth and in the very heart of man" (1973: 33). Similar ideas lie behind the many biblical inversions in *Night*, culminating in the claim, "I've got more faith in Hitler than anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people" (1981: 92).<sup>10</sup>

[20] On occasions, Wiesel develops this motif further still with his image of the God of the covenant being displaced or replaced by a God in whose image the Nazis were created, a God

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<sup>9</sup> Wiesel frequently reminds his readers that his purpose in writing is to "rebuild a vanished universe" and, in doing so, "to bring back, at least for a while, some of the men and women the killers robbed of their lives and their names" (1979b: 36). Many of these characters, such as Moshe the Madman, make their first appearance in *Night* and then reappear throughout Wiesel's oeuvre.

<sup>10</sup> *Night* can be read as a series of inversions, particularly of biblical motifs such as the Akedah or the Passover. Here Isaac kills his father - or passively watches while Abraham is killed. Here, the Angel of Death smites the children of Israel while sparing the Egyptians. Here, the Exodus is from the Promised Land into the Land of Egypt, and death.

who is encountered as a stranger or an enemy. Thus, in *Legends of Our Time*, Wiesel describes his struggle to find the appropriate religious resources to commemorate the death of his father: “my father gave back his soul in Buchenwald. A soul useless in that place, and one that he seemed to want to give back. But he gave it up, not to the God of his fathers, but rather to the impostor, cruel and insatiable, to the enemy God. They had killed his God, they had exchanged him for another” (1982: 2). Throughout *The Trial of God*, Wiesel places the emphasis upon the injustice and cruelty of a divine father who stands by while his children are slaughtered. In *Twilight*, he explores - with typical Wieselean ambiguity - the possibility that God was or is mad: “Here is a madman who believes he is God and here I am, addressing him as if he were” (1988: 209).<sup>11</sup>

[21] Whereas Wiesel, with this handful of exceptions, deliberately avoids speculating as to why God did what God did, or failed to do what God failed to do, preferring instead to focus upon the dilemmas confronting the human party in this relationship, David Blumenthal is much more explicit. He pushes Wiesel’s occasional speculations to their logical conclusion and insists that we need to acknowledge that God “acts, from time to time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term ‘abusive’” (1993: 247). In effect, he concedes, with significant qualifications, the legitimacy of Rubenstein’s charge: this is indeed a God who is a “cosmic sadist.” The suggestion here appears to be, echoing Wiesel, better a cruel God (if only from time to time) than none at all, or one who is not omnipotent. Blumenthal is adamant that belief in “God’s ongoing providence,” i.e. “God’s presence in all events,” is non-negotiable (1993: 15). He therefore feels compelled to conclude: “God is powerful but not perfect” (1993: 16; original text is in italics).<sup>12</sup> Given their many differences, it is ironic that his strategy echoes, in some respects, that of Eliezer Berkovits. For Blumenthal, the gift of human freedom necessarily means that although “God’s power is absolute,” nevertheless, “God must limit God’s own power so as to empower the being God created” (1993: 16). God is thus both “absolutely omnipotent” and “fragile” (1993: 32).

[22] The immediate response to such arguments is simply to dismiss this kind of language and thinking as hopelessly anthropomorphic, as little more than the projection of human characteristics onto God. Yet, even if this objection is granted, the question remains as to whether the language of covenant encourages, even demands, an understanding of God in precisely these anthropomorphic, personal terms.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Discourse of Ruin?**

[23] Rubenstein highlights one potential consequence of the strategies adopted by Wiesel and Fackenheim. Do thinkers such as Blumenthal and Wiesel follow their own ideas to their potential conclusion? In other words, what kind of consequences flows from allowing the possibility of

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<sup>11</sup> Having said this, it is important to note that Wiesel also explicitly distances himself from the suggestion that God is mad: “the madness of God means that our understanding of God can be filled with madness. It does not mean that God is mad. We project our madness onto God” (Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig: 98).

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that this position is in sharp contradiction to that of Diane, a survivor of child abuse, with whom Blumenthal is in dialogue. Diane prefers a non-omnipotent or powerless God to one who is an abuser (1993: 198-99, 202, 209).

<sup>13</sup> Such a case is argued most strongly by Abraham Joshua Heschel in articulating his understanding of divine pathos.

the abusiveness or sadism of God? Is it indeed possible to combine recognition of this possibility with a commitment to worship and the possibility of healing, as Blumenthal asserts we can? Or does the recognition of such a possibility run counter to any affirmation of healing or redemption?

[24] The literary critic, Lawrence Langer suggests that there are two primary strategies towards remembering and writing about the Holocaust: a discourse of consolation or a discourse of ruin. For Langer, a discourse of ruin unflinchingly confronts the radical negativity of the Holocaust and the vista of chaos that it opens up. By contrast, a discourse of consolation seeks to avoid acknowledging the existence of such possibilities by grafting “a heroic face on to the Holocaust.” It does so by appealing to traditional categories of meaning, such as “choice,” “heroism,” “martyrdom,” and “suffering.” Such terms represent an attempt to locate meaning and dignity in even the most horrific of events. For Langer, theodicy is a classic strategy of consolation. If he is correct, then it is hardly surprising that it necessarily excludes the possibility of considering divine abusiveness or sadism. As Wendy Farley points out in her response to Blumenthal, the very possibility opens up the prospect of nihilism and moral chaos: it seems to run counter to the understanding of God, the values and, in particular, the hope embodied in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Thus, if we apply Langer’s categories to this discussion, Blumenthal’s insistence upon such possibilities can be interpreted as a rejection of consolation in favor of the harsh realism of a discourse of ruin. The same could also be said of Diane and Beth’s doubts concerning the possibility of healing or an ongoing relationship with a God who, from time to time, acts in a way that can only be characterized as abusive.<sup>14</sup> Diane suspects that “perhaps ultimate healing cannot exist” (letter dated 30.1.90 in Blumenthal 1993: 206).<sup>15</sup> Beth concludes, “I think I now need to heal spiritually. But I am not sure I know what that means” (“Beth’s Psalm” in Blumenthal 1993: 232). In such a context, Wendy Farley’s critique of Blumenthal’s emphasis upon healing and continued relationship is particularly telling. She suggests that this emphasis on healing is inconsistent with the nihilism present elsewhere in Blumenthal’s work. Thus, rather than integrating the two emphases, they are simply left to stand side by side: “there is healing because you do not acknowledge the brokenness. You do not take seriously your own claims about God, about anger, abuse, etc. You just lay them side by side. . . . Your multivalency - perhaps esotericism - has become an excuse for not taking your work seriously” (letter dated 26.5.89 in Blumenthal 1993: 224; for a more developed version of this response, see Farley).

[25] Thus, there appears to be a basic inconsistency in Blumenthal’s work, with this emphasis upon healing and community sitting uneasily alongside that upon divine abusiveness and its consequences. Blumenthal is acutely conscious of such criticisms and vehemently rejects them. His response is twofold. First, he insists that such criticism arises from a basic rejection of the possibility and plausibility of divine abusiveness. Blumenthal dismisses Farley’s objections, suggesting that they are rooted in “a very, very deep pre-judgment about the non-evil,

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<sup>14</sup> Blumenthal goes to considerable lengths to incorporate critical voices into his text and to engage with them. Central to *Facing the Abusing God* are two “dialogues” (consisting of exchanges of letters) with colleagues: Wendy Farley, a systematic theologian (and colleague of Blumenthal at Emory University) and Diane (who is simply described as “a survivor of abuse”). These are then followed by “Beth’s Psalm,” an interpretation of Psalm 22, written by a 21 year old student of Blumenthal in the light of her experience of rape.

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Farley makes a similar point: “If it were true that God were an abusive father, the only psychologically, religiously, and morally adequate response would be rebellion à la ‘Prometheus Bound,’ *The Plague*, and ‘Rebellion’ in *The Brothers Karamazov*” (letter dated 26.5.89 in Blumenthal 1993: 221).

omnibenevolent nature of the divine, the evidence from the common-sense view of reality as well as from the tradition to the contrary notwithstanding” (1998: 101). However, this response fails to engage with Farley’s point concerning the way in which abusiveness and non-abusiveness, trauma and healing, simply coexist in Blumenthal’s work. We can accept the possibility of divine abusiveness, yet still be concerned about this insistence upon the possibility of healing. My criticism here is not that Blumenthal advocates a theodicy of divine abusiveness, but rather that he fails to follow this argument through to its potentially nihilistic, unbearable conclusion. After all, it is not that Diane and Beth question the need for healing. Their objections, rooted in their own experience of abuse, center on its attainability and desirability - particularly in the event that healing involves continued relationship with an abusive God, even if that God only acts abusively from “time to time.” In effect, Blumenthal conflates two different sets of objections in order to dismiss them both, while only responding to one of them.

[26] A stronger counter-argument would appeal to the very nature of Blumenthal’s work which, as he freely acknowledges, proceeds seriatim, in zigzag fashion. Unlike Rubenstein, he refuses to be forced into a situation that is an either-or: God is abusive or God is not; healing is possible or it is not. It is partly for this reason that Blumenthal incorporates four “voices” commentating on the Psalms into the central section of his book, while remaining adamant that he identifies with *all* of them despite the tensions and contradictions between them. It is also for this reason that the dissenting voices of Diane, Beth and Wendy Farley are incorporated into the text. In resisting consistency and homogeneity, Blumenthal is not alone. Many memoirs and representations of the Holocaust constantly vacillate or alternate between the poles of consolation and ruin, depending on the context at any given moment. However, such a strategy begs the question of whether it is indeed possible to adopt both strategies rather than choose between them, even though they are undoubtedly contradictory. To a certain extent, such a response echoes, but renders more concrete, Wiesel’s determined refusal to privilege any one set of responses. For Wiesel, a focus upon the human response to catastrophe means engaging in a constant struggle to acknowledge *all* responses by those who were “there,” despite the ambiguities and unresolved tensions between them: “there must be an open question, a conflict” (de Saint-Cheron and Wiesel: 9). Although, it must be said, Wiesel himself seems to stop short of accepting those voices advocating punishment for sin simply on their own terms. Some responses, some contradictions, it seems, still need to be explained away.

[27] In effect, Blumenthal offers a further rationale for the determined plurality of such an approach. Having said this, Blumenthal freely acknowledges that his insistence on going beyond a one-sided interrogation of God in speaking about healing is the point at which he parts company with his two key models, Job and Wiesel. Building on Job, he shares with Wiesel a conviction that “protest is a religiously proper faith stance toward God” (1993: 253). However, he freely admits that, in contrast to his own position, “[t]he book of Job and [Wiesel’s play] *The Trial of God* . . . are both silent on the religious nature of life after suffering. In both works, abuse has traumatized the text into a deep silence” (1993: 256). Despite this, Blumenthal insists that there must be something placed alongside “ruin.” However, that “something” does not deny the existence of catastrophe and its aftermath, hence his image of healing taking the form of scar tissue (1993: 184).

[28] By contrast, Wiesel’s reluctance to speak of God, or theology, or healing, except very occasionally, could be interpreted as an explicit rejection of a discourse of consolation, and/or as a strategy of avoidance. A seriatim methodology is all very well, but he remains extremely wary

of going beyond the “deep silence” to which Blumenthal refers. Like Blumenthal, Wiesel critiques God’s silence in the face of the Holocaust while also affirming covenantal ethics. Like Blumenthal, he employs a covenantal framework to place God “on trial.” However, unlike Blumenthal, he leaves unasked and unanswered the question of where these divine “failings” leave God and the Jewish people, and God and humanity. As he says repeatedly, he never speaks of God now, but rather of human beings who continued to believe or lost their belief. Wiesel is prepared to extend such speech to a re-engagement with the faith of the “masters” of the Jewish tradition, but such engagement is still figured as a means of “looking away.” Hence his insistence that “the tales that I tell are never the ones that I would like to tell or ought to tell” (1990: 143).

[29] Blumenthal’s emphasis on the need for healing can be interpreted as yet another, albeit very different, strategy designed to enable us to “look away.” The fact that, despite their insistence on emphasizing the “injustice absolute” of the Holocaust and the need for a theology of protest within the framework of the covenant, both Blumenthal and Wiesel ultimately also employ strategies of avoidance, enabling us to look away, suggests that we cannot focus solely upon ruin or upon the abusive God. To do so would be to ignore the positive legacy of the covenant (as embodied for Wiesel by Sighet). Yet to focus solely on consolation or healing is to minimize or ignore the realities of “Auschwitz.” The two exist alongside each other. Neither invalidates nor cancels out the other, although in coexisting each serves to throw the other constantly into question. However, in continuing to affirm covenant alongside “Auschwitz,” the nature of any possible consolation or hope inevitably changes. It becomes more ambiguous and partial. Consolation in the form of the denial of irredeemable evil (arguably the strategy of many theoretical theodiscists) is unacceptable. However, consolation that comes *after* anguish, co-existing with an acknowledgement of ruin, is something very different. Hence, Wiesel and Langer’s reflections on tainted memory and tainted lives in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In many ways, the emphasis upon an abusive God functions as a refusal to search for explanations or to be consoled, if the price of such consolation is the denial of the absolute injustice of the Holocaust or the innocence of its victims (in the sense that they in no way “deserved” such a death). Yet, alongside the refusal to be consoled stands Blumenthal’s healing scar and Wiesel’s qualifying “and yet.”

[30] As Langer has pointed out, afterwards catastrophe is what we make of it, not what it once was. Survival for those who come after is grounded, in part, in devising ways of looking away from ruin in order to facilitate continued living. The point of course is to remain constantly aware that these are nothing more - and nothing less - than necessary creative strategies of avoidance, and to remain acutely conscious of their limitations and contradictions. Ultimately, if there is a weakness in Blumenthal’s emphasis upon healing and remaining in relationship with an occasionally abusive God, it lies in the confidence with which he asserts that this is the way forward. It is not *the* way forward, it is *a* way forward, and while it clearly works for David Blumenthal, it clearly does not work for Diane, Wendy and Beth. The importance lies in ensuring that all four voices are heard, as indeed Blumenthal recognizes in incorporating such contradictory voices into his text. Likewise, it is important that we hear both those voices advocating punishment for sin and those rejecting it as obscene; those voices advocating belief in an abusive God and those rejecting it. By silencing such voices, by refusing to even consider them as possibilities, we misrepresent the variety of responses among those who were “there.” We also censor out some of the more challenging and destabilizing voices in the present.

Consciously choosing to look away is one thing; denying that this is what we are doing is quite another.

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