

*"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)*

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## JEWISH MINISTRY IN THE POST HOLOCAUST ERA

by Galen Peterson

*Over the past three decades it has been my privilege to minister to many Holocaust survivors. In time it became the focus of my doctoral dissertation on "Communicating the Gospel in Light of the Holocaust." Earlier this year I was asked to present an update on this special ministry approach at the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, an international conference of Jewish ministries. This is a summary of that report.*

Every culture can point to a master story that forms the basis for its unique identity. The history of the Jewish people is without equal in terms of longevity and complexity, and thus is shaped, not by one, but three master stories. The first is Mt. Sinai when Israel was called to live according to literal applications of Torah and life was centered around the Temple. The second is the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. and the subsequent compilation of the Talmud, when significant portions of Torah were reinterpreted to accommodate life without a place of sacrifice and a priesthood to carry them out.

The third Jewish master story is the Holocaust. The attempted annihilation of the Jews of Europe has not just left a legacy of lost lives, but has had an impact on the world view of those who survived and the generations to follow. But now, nearly 65 years after the liberation of the last Nazi

concentration camp in 1945, as fewer and fewer survivors remain, we are on the verge of entering a new phase of the Post Holocaust era—a story without the actual victims. Thus the question arises to what extent will this master story continue to influence the Jewish world view?

Jewish history might be compared to the way that earthquakes occur. The departure from Egypt in haste and the giving of Torah on Mt. Sinai fifty days later was a shocking upheaval for the Jewish nation. Suddenly they were confronted with the call to be faithful to ordinances and practices that were significantly new to them.

A series of aftershocks followed as subsequent generations experienced repeated cycles of renewed dedication to Torah followed by its neglect.

And then another major quake was thrust upon them. With the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the priesthood, the

Jewish people had essentially three choices: They could abandon their heritage completely and become absorbed into the dominant world of Hellenism. They could become followers of Yeshua (Jesus). Or they could reinterpret their belief system so that religious practices could continue, only without the literal application that came with the Temple and priesthood. Most Jews chose this latter option. The Talmudic period was a time when Jewish sages redefined biblical concepts so that Judaism might live on after the great shock of 70 A.D. For nearly two millennia, the Jewish community carried on in this manner.

But it was a silence utterly shattered by the great shock of the Holocaust. It is what has been called a *tremendum*, a happening so intense that there is no prior reference point. The lives of survivors were dramatically impacted. They frequently suffer from depression and survivor guilt and cannot escape the inner pain

of being unable to change history. In the aftermath, some survivors continued maintaining their traditional means of worship. But many others were unable to reconcile belief in God with the circumstances of the Holocaust.

The questions that they have asked are provocative. "Where was God? If He is so powerful and righteous, how could God allow such a thing to happen? Without satisfactory answers, many of them have reasoned, "God does not exist." Statistically, nearly half of the survivors who were religiously observant before the Holocaust no longer expressed belief in a personal God who is involved in the lives of people.

This impact is illustrated by the following story, which was told to me in Jerusalem by a man who lived in Poland:

"I lived across the street from where they hanged Jews in the ghetto. At that time I was thirteen years old. Many of them would say the Shema Israel prayer when they were executed. Now when Jews go to the synagogue and we say Shema Israel, by custom we cover our eyes. But when I put my hands on my eyes, I can always see a man swinging on the rope and hear his voice shouting "Shema Israel." I just cannot say it anymore. So I started to ask questions. After the war, everything that I learned collapsed. Today I am a traditional Jew. I don't know the answers why the Holocaust happened, and it is something that bothers me very much."

Others, while not denying God's existence, have accused Him of being cruel. Such was the conclusion made in the recent movie, "God on Trial" that was

broadcast on PBS. In this dramatization, Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz hold a mock trial in their barracks, and they reach the verdict that God is guilty of breaking His covenant with Israel because He pledged to preserve them as a nation.

A God who is guilty. Personal guilt and doubt. Abandonment of faith and practice. This is the rubble of the massive shock of the Holocaust. And then the aftershocks came.

The impact of the Holocaust is not limited to first generation survivors. Because many families of survivors have been regularly exposed to depression, anxiety, overprotection and distrust, they have adopted many of these traits as well. The world was presented as being dangerous and bent on the destruction of the Jewish people. As a matter of survival, children were often expected to join in their parents' distrust of all Gentiles and most authority figures.

Children also became a way for giving special meaning to the empty lives of the parents. They enabled survivors to replace lost goals and dreams while vindicating past suffering. Thus for the children, the expectations have been enormous. As a symbol of prosperity in a new world, they are counted on to succeed in all they attempt. Faced with such pressure, many children have grown up to be highly successful professionals.

The ripple effect of the Holocaust from generation to generation has also carried over spiritually. The issues of sheltering and distrust have direct spiritual counterparts. Many Jewish children from survivor families have received little or no religious training. They have been kept in isolation from a spiritual dimension in their lives and consider God to be untrustworthy, if He exists at all.

Thus many offspring consider themselves atheists or agnostics who choose to be resentful at the God of Israel.

After the Holocaust, most Jewish people have become disciples of "civil Judaism." In this way of thinking, God is not involved in the affairs of humanity. Instead of God, civil Judaism's center of devotion is the commitment to Jewish survival. Given the history of the persecution of the Jews, it is understandable that causes of social justice have become so important. By defending the rights of all groups who are vulnerable to discrimination, the Jewish community is able to work in a practical manner toward the prevention of another Holocaust. Likewise, the inclination toward humanism is also consistent with this emphasis on taking matters into one's own hands. If God failed in prior times, it will be up to the people to assure that their destruction doesn't happen again.

In many ways the Holocaust has superseded Torah and Talmud as the master story of the Jewish people. It is the Holocaust that most popularly expresses the nature of Jewish survival and provides a basis for meaning. While many Jewish families will still make a token acknowledgment of the Exodus account during annual commemorations of Passover, the Holocaust has become a theme for every day of the year. Books, motion pictures, the introduction of Holocaust curricula in public schools, and memorial services all serve to reinforce this master story dimension. *Yom Hashoah*, (Holocaust Remembrance Day), is the only observance throughout the year when secular, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews will gather together in a common

observance. *Yom Hashoah* contrasts God's deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt with the deliverance of themselves after the Holocaust.

For a vast number of Jews born in the wake of the Holocaust, the search for meaning is taking them outside traditional Judaism. In recent decades the number of Jews embracing Buddhism and other Eastern religions is substantial. In many parts of the world you can find Jews who attend the synagogue, keep kosher and observe Jewish holidays, yet also meditate, follow the teachings of Zen masters and attend Buddhist retreats. In the United States there are now 35 Jewish congregations that are explicitly Buddhist in orientation. Buddhism teaches that suffering originates from our desires, but we can live in peaceful harmony by ceasing to strive in all things. In other words, Buddhism presents a means of coping with the suffering caused by the Holocaust. Thus any ministry to Jewish people who are devoted to Buddhist ways must take into account the importance of finding meaning in suffering.

The question now becomes, what more changes are in store in this time of supposed tranquility and silence? The number of survivors continues to diminish year by year. Since the Jewish population of Germany plus the 22 countries occupied by the Nazis was nine million, and two-thirds of them perished in the Holocaust, around three million Jews could be considered as survivors after the war. Today that number is estimated to be slightly over 500,000. With three-quarters of them currently being 75 years and older, we are now entering a time with just a small percentage of people who were adults during the Holocaust. And with an ever-

increasing mortality rate, by 2025 the few remaining children of the Holocaust will be above 90 years in age.

A day is coming when no physical survivors will remain. But their master story experience will live on, not just in books and on film, but in the very core world view of the Jewish community as a whole. Because of these considerations, it is important for us to apply them in the context of ministry.

### **Are we aware of the underlying effects of the Holocaust?**

I once had an opportunity to spend some time talking to a Hungarian Jewish woman who managed to survive the genocide and ultimately made it to the U.S. She told me about her experiences in life and in the course of our conversation I asked her if she had ever been in a church. She replied yes but added that she did not like fire and brimstone style preachers. Alluding to the torment of hell, she said, "I just can't imagine a loving Father putting His children in ovens." I was able to express to her using Psalm 88 that the Bible also describes eternity for the unrighteous as being separated from God and His people. This led to a discussion on the concepts of holiness and atonement and, in the end, she affirmed her faith in Messiah. But it began by recognizing that her experience in the Holocaust had affected her perception of divine judgment. It called for finding a different starting point in witnessing with the hope that, in time, she would be able to deal with the heavy implications that were initially on her mind, much in the same way that Paul began his ministry with the Corinthians using "milk to drink, not solid food" (1 Cor. 3:2).

### **How well-equipped are we to deal with distrust?**

One of the common characteristics of survivors has been their distrust of others. Stories of broken trust abound in this context. Acquaintances and co-workers, many of whom identified themselves as Christians, readily assisted the Nazis in sending Jews to the camps. Countless Jewish families were betrayed by Gentile neighbors who were motivated by duty, greed and hatred. Broken trust also occurred within families, particularly those comprised of intermarriages.

I have been able to get to know one woman whose story exemplifies the intensity of betrayal that was produced by the Holocaust. She was born in Germany to a Jewish father and Gentile mother. As the Nazis were coming to power and the persecution began to intensify, the father decided to flee the country, leaving his family behind. Later, as people were threatened with death for harboring Jews, the mother turned her own daughter over to the Nazis. But she managed to survive the concentration camp and eventually immigrated to the United States. Today her life is marked by more than just a tattoo on her arm. She bears the emotional scars of abandonment by her father and betrayal by her mother. Consequently, she finds it difficult to develop close relationships and acutely distrusts others, especially non-Jews.

Gaining her trust required a long-term commitment on our part. In time she became more open to what we had to say, particularly regarding Jesus being the Messiah. Our experience with her has taught us much about the importance of intentionally seeking to establish trust in our relationships.

### **Are we prepared for another great shock?**

In spite of the recurring cry, “never again,” the Bible seems to indicate that the Jewish people will face yet again a *tremendum* (Zech. 13:8,9; Luke 21:12-24). Another attempt to annihilate the Jewish people is always within the realm of possibility. The audacious Adversary of the Jews has not yet been confined to the bottomless pit. And as such, we need to be alert to his schemes. Voices can be heard in our world today that echo the call for a world that is free of Jews. Most people discounted Adolph Hitler as being a blowhard. The world was wrong then. We would be likewise wrong today to ignore calls to wipe Israel off the map.

We have an opportunity to be very different kinds of voices in our world. We can heed Isaiah’s words to “comfort My people” (Isa. 40:1) and to stand with them in times of persecution.

### **Has the Holocaust spawned another Gospel?**

Today when truth is widely considered to be relative and left to the whim of the individual, the Holocaust has caused many theologians to back away from biblical absolutes and to deny the applicability of the Gospel for Jews.

Having compassion for the Jewish people in light of the Holocaust is commendable, even essential. But withholding the Good News for Jews is not. It requires a logic that says Jesus was born a Jew, lived a Jewish life, taught as a Jewish rabbi, preached about the Kingdom of Heaven, died just as the Jewish prophets foretold, thus fulfilling the biblically Jewish element of atonement, but then you refuse to apply it to Jewish people? Such reasoning renounces the line of continuity in the Bible from the Garden of Eden to the Cross in which God affirms a singular plan to bring about salvation and reconciliation with *all* humanity. As Peter unequivocally declared about Jesus:

*There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)*

Moreover, as Paul writes, it is a plan that specifically mentions the Jewish people:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)*

Denying the resolute truth of these statements is the equivalent of climbing aboard a train supposedly going to a relocation camp that in reality turns out to be Auschwitz. It offers the Jewish people a sense of co-existence and temporary peace of mind but ultimately leads to spiritual disaster. It is this “other Gospel” of salvation that ignores extensive portions of Scripture and substitutes well-intended platitudes, but actually strikes at the very core of Christianity. Either Jesus died as the atonement for Gentiles and Jews alike or for none at all.

Christians need to resist the temptation to abandon one’s convictions in exchange for expediency. We need to stand as resistance fighters who realize that while others might get in line and go quietly, we will take a stand for the Good News. And we will do so with the proper weapons that God has given us (Eph. 6:13-18).

May we never forsake our dedication to the Good News that remains the same for every generation. Paul’s words to the Corinthians resound equally true today in the shadow of the Holocaust:

*Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love (1 Cor. 16:13,14).*

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