A RESPONSE TO RICHARD RUBENSTEIN

Arthur E. Green

A WORD IN PREFACE: Richard Rubenstein and I share the sense that theology is a highly personal enterprise. I find that his paper, with all its Jewish as well as universal implications, is at the same time a highly personal statement. I say this in advance because I want to respond in a very personal first and second-person way, as I think is appropriate.

I want to begin my response with profuse thanks to Richard Rubenstein for having shared his painful and most thought-provoking reflections with us. There is more honesty and willingness to come to grips with reality in a page of Richard Rubenstein than one will find in many a whole book of what sometimes passes for Jewish theology. It is for that honesty that I am most deeply grateful.

If I may share a personal memory for a moment, I'd like to recall that when *After Auschwitz* appeared, during my last year at the Seminary, it caused a tremendous stir of excitement within our circle of friends in the rabbinical school. Here was someone who was finally dealing with the issues—someone finally raising the questions we had been afraid to raise except to ourselves and perhaps to our closest friends. This is not to say that I agreed with everything I read in *After Auschwitz*, as I did not agree with everything Dr. Rubenstein has said tonight. But the power of an honest voice to raise the level of debate, to stir thinking on the most basic human issues, cannot be overestimated. As this was true when I first read Rubenstein, I also find it true this evening.

Because his talk has been so full, touching upon so many crucial areas, I find it necessary to limit my response to three areas in which I feel I have something in particular to say. I'd like to respond to the issues of the future cataclysm and our response to it; the evaluation of Jewish history and especially the role of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai; and, most significantly, the symbol of the Torah of the Tree of Life.

cataclysm and humanity

I SHARE A CERTAIN DEGREE of your apocalyptic consciousness. I, too, read the signs of the times with great distress. The unbelievable self-satisfaction

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of our society, the lack of awareness of the terrible forces at work all around us, are indeed overwhelming at times. To me, the most frightening symbol of our times has been the rapid birth and death of the so-called ecological movement. That concern for the very survival of the human race and the planet turns out to be just another passing fad, to be replaced in the headlines by the petty exploits of the cheap crooks in Washington, gives one pause and leaves little room for hope that man will take his plight seriously before it is too late.

I might add that the two communities to which we both belong, the rabbinic and the academic communities, are particularly disappointing to us in their blindness to the maddening issues that confront the human race. One might have hoped for more from these two groups, the rabbinic and the academic, known as they are for special claims to sensitivity and intelligence. But both rabbis—clergymen, in general, I should say—and academicians alike seem to go on with our small-minded bickering in our respectives races toward ever increasing moral irrelevance, couched in the comforting language of "professionalism," a disease which plagues both the congregational rabbinate and the world of scholarship. "Where will you be on that day, *bayom hahu*?" I sometimes hear a voice asking, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to answer that I was busy worrying about whether I would get tenure.

I see little room, rationally, for optimism. At the same time, however, I cannot share the extent of the pessimism which you project. This may well be a matter of temperament, I admit, as I can offer little realistic hope for universal *teshuvah* with everyone commiting himself to a life of concern.

But I don't think I could live with the intensity of your pessimism. I still believe that one can find *nitsotsot kedushah* (sparks of authentic human life) in the morass of contemporary alienation. I believe that our task is still to gather and fan those sparks, to create small intimate cells of humanity concerned with the awful events of our times, but also not crippled by their weight, capable of loving and of cultivating the spirit of life.

This is what the *havurah* was really about for me, by the way. For a little while, I think we succeeded in some significant degree there. This is what synagogues and churches should also be about in our age: creating small intimate cells where the human spirit will survive. If I understand the use of ben Zakkai and Massada as symbols here, I must say that, in this regard, I am a "ben Zakkai" person. In the face of destruction, in our case not by a foreign oppressor but by the very society in which we are participants, build a small house where humanity can survive.

Will this house, you ask me, survive that "great and awful day?" Unlikely, I suppose. But if nuclear holocaust is going to come upon me,

Pompeii-like, freezing me forever in the final position in which it catches me, I should be quite happy that this eternal pose finds me in that house, engaged in quiet conversations and smiles with people I love.

You understand that the debate between ben Zakkai and Massada was repeated in many ways in the late 1960's by the United States conterculture community, between those who decided to man the barricades and those who decided to build communities. The *havurot* in that sense are a ben Zakkai movement.

Given this position, I find myself uncomfortable with the assertion that the only proper human response to a situation like the Holocaust is to fight to the last man, woman and child. Let us think about the future holocaust in terms of hand-to-hand combat instead of nuclear explosion. The haves against the have-nots. We are the haves. The fact that my sympathies may lie on the other side will make no difference. I will not be able to wear an armband on that day saying, "I boycotted lettuce." Will I have performed some great self-redemptive *mitzvah* if I kill one Asian or Latin American kid before his buddies come in and butcher me?

Perhaps one might say this is unfair. We are often led to think of Nazis as less than human. But neither you nor I want to do that. Undoubtedly, many Jews were simply too frightened or too trained to impotence to resist. But I like to think that somewhere there was a Jew who could have strangled the Nazi who came in to get him but chose not to—dying with *Shema Yisrael* on his lips and no blood on his hands as a last stand for humanity, for religious humanity, in that place where humanity was least to be found. He is my Holocaust hero, at least as much as the Warsaw ghetto fighter. This is why I choose, by the way, not to be an Israeli, why I even dare to take some pride in my heritage, *davka* as a *galut* Jew.

negation of the galut

I THINK I HEAR a strong echo in your piece of what, in Israel, has come to be termed *shelilat ha-golah*, the denigration of these past two thousand years of Jewish existence. And this is something I find very upsetting. You do offer thanks to ben Zakkai for having allowed for Jewish survival, yet he comes across as the villain of your talk. Such words as "servile," "submissive," "collaborationist" are not unloaded terms in our vocabulary. It is not clear to me exactly what sin you accuse him of. Surely the belief that death is punishment is not a creation of the *galut*. Nor is the idea that destruction is punishment for sin a creation of ben Zakkai's day. On the contrary, these attitudes, (and by the way I share your radical critique of their debilitating psychological effect) are the creation of the biblical period, not of the Pharisees and Rabbis. They emerged in that period when

the tough proto-Israeli Iṣraelites were busy killing off their foes. If anyone is to be singled out for "blame" in this matter it should be Amos or Isaiah, not ben Zakkai.

I accept your comments about the repression of the aesthetic and particularly the sensuous in traditional Jewish society—very important comments—and to say this openly is one of the most important things I've learned from you. I believe that in many ways halakhah did serve as the instrument of an overly repressive and self-destructive mentality for the Jew. Again, I would not blame the *galut* alone. Traditional Western religious society was repressive in these areas; I don't think Judaism was any more so than Christianity. Was Yehudah HaLevi more repressed than Augustine? Are the tortuous complexities of sexuality in the Zohar any more perverse and exalted at once than those of Theresa of Avila or John of the Cross? Is not the Baal Shem Tov rather a less emasculated figure than a Calvin or a Kierkegaard? If the problem of repression was really a result of the *galut* experience and the doings of ben Zakkai, an Alan Watts or a Harvey Cox would not have to fight the same ambivalent battle with his Christianity that you and I fight with our Judaism.

I see ben Zakkai's decision as a political decision and as quite politic. I see him as an important, positive model, as a cell builder of humanity in the hostile and destructive world. Sure, Massada has great appeal, but how can we talk about Massada after October 1973? That, to me, is the real lesson of this war: Massada went bankrupt.

Here we are in the Middle Ages, with the new Jew of Israel taking off his Uzi to curry favor, through the *Hoffude* of Washington, with the real powers-that-be—powers that wouldn't give much of a damn if we all blew ourselves to bits in a Massada-like stand in front of a transformed *kotel*. I'm afraid we live in a world where Massada has become dysfunctional. Only ben Zakkai can help us survive. I only hope Mr. Rabin is able to play that role.

Please understand that I am in no way happy about this. The political life of the *galut* is no cause for pride and joy. But that seems to be the reality with which we are faced, and let's hope that we don't have to grovel too much.

Given the fact, however, that I agree with much of your rebellion against the repressions of traditional Western religion, and since I choose to let ben Zakkai and the *galut* off the hook, I too am in need of a villain.

I would not seriously blame the prophets. I find their passion tremendously stirring but I agree that their theology of punishment—of death as punishment for sin, of destruction as punishment for sin—is quite dead in our day. This idea does not anger or outrage me at this point. I simply

find it a matter of historical interest. That's not completely true; I still cringe when I have to face it in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

metaphysical exile

THE REAL VILLAIN in my system is not a man but rather a spirit, a spirit which I feel has deeply pervaded and infected the entire history of the Western religious mind since the first century, and a spirit that still lives on in our souls.

I refer to the spirit of Gnosticism, which I would characterize here as the great spiritual sickness of Western man. By Gnosticism, in this context, I mean a religion of exile—not political exile from a homeland, (I think they are quite separate; political exile from the homeland is a fact of Jewish history), but a religion of metaphysical exile, the sense that man is a stranger on earth. This is a religious trend, by the way, that precedes the historical exile and infects Christianity as well as Judaism.

Gnostic man, a stranger on earth, a metaphysical exile, ever yearning for the return to Eden or the return to his true spiritual home or the discovery of his true soul or inner self, can allow himself no peace in this world. His is a religion of yearnings, of constant longings, and of eternal unfulfillment. It is a deep and searing religious attitude—a very profound one—perhaps the richest of all our spiritual treasures, because it so deeply reflects man's desire to return to that lost paradise of the womb, or at least to the polymorphous fantasy world of childhood.

All those wonderful hasidic stories which I love so much about the king's son who has forgotten who he is, possessed with some vague longing to return to his father's table, are right out of the gnostic literature of the first century.

The yearnings of the *devekut niggun*, Rabbi Nahman's story of the heart of the world ever longing to approach its beloved—these hold a tremendous attraction for me. And yet at the same time I realize how dangerous they are. If the Besht is right when he says that "a man is where his thoughts are"—it is the myth of exile that keeps us humans in exile.

It is this exile which is the religiously serious one: an exile from one another, from our bodies, and from the earth. As long as we maintain those mythic structures which separate the soul from the world of *gashmiyut*, our commitment to the earth will not be very strong. As long as we give free rein to those fantasies which tell us that we truly belong to another time or another place, we will not have the openness to the here-and-now which is needed for the true liberation of the spirit.

All of Western thought suffers from the gnostic problem. *Nebekh*, along comes Jewish history and confirms it all for us. Scholem has shown

us how the exile of Israel became a symbol for the metaphysical exile of the human race. At times, the Jew saw himself in a double exile: the wandering *neshamah* dressed up in the body of the wandering Jew. It was in the heart of this world of Jewish Gnosticism called Kabbalah that there emerged the image of the two *torot*, the Torah of Good and Evil for this lower world and the ultimate redemptive fantasy-Torah, the Torah of the Tree of Life. It is to these trees, and your call for the embracing of the Tree of Life—*barukh mattir issurim*—to which I now want to briefly turn out attention.

holiness and chaos

I SEE IN THE HISTORY of religion two tendencies in the determination of the holy. One trend says that the holy exists only in contradistinction to the profane; *ain kiddush bli havdalah;* the light cannot be seen except in contrast to the darkness; Sabbath needs a weekday. The other tendency is more radical, less patient. It says no—all is potentially holy; our job is not to build fences and make *havdalahs,* but rather to work toward the moment when all is holy; *yom she-kulo Shabbat.* This latter tendency is particularly pronounced in Hasidism, which is one of the reasons why I—with Buber—find Hasidism so attractive. And yet it seems to me that Hasidism can do this, can try to assert that everything is holy and that there is no profane, precisely because it still lives within the restricting bounds of the halakhah. Paradoxically, its halakhic conservatism liberates it to allow a radical theology. Knowing that Jews would still make *havdalah,* it could dare to proclaim the weekday holy. I, for better or for worse, am not in that sense a halakhic Jew. Though I may be a traditionalist who can at times appear sufficiently pious to fool anyone but an expert, really I am very far from feeling bound by the claims of halakhah as that word is traditionally understood. I am rather sure that in some previous *gilgul,* along with Scholem and perhaps you, too, I was an anarchist.

The anarchist urge is still there in my soul. It is precisely for this reason that I cannot go along with you when you urge me to abandon the Torah of exile for the Tree of Life. For if I go there, I'll go all the way. And then there will be nothing. That nothing may have a capital "N"—but there may also be simply nothing.

Once the Great Sabbath is proclaimed, you see, there can be no more Shabbos. If Shabbos is "a foretaste of the world to come" and the Great Sabbath is proclaimed, there can be no more foretasting. Since I know that until that day comes, finally, I will have to go on living in the world as a human being, I want to keep that Shabbos; the small one, along with the whole cycle of sacred time and our celebrations of it, small but human and humanizing, giving some order to my inner chaos.

Though I am not present for it as regularly as I like, it seems right to me that we meet the moments of dawn and sunset as times of prayer. I feel that in your world of the Tree of Life there will be no order, no Shabbos, no weekday, no sunrise, no marriage—and I don't know if that's heaven or hell, Eden or chaos. Knowing and facing the absurd, having tasted a bit of chaos, I choose to do what I call playing the "*olam hazeh* game," but knowing what I'm doing.

I think that, if I may say it, each of the two of us has his own *mishugas*. You, I feel, are trying to opt for the *mishugas* of Sabbatai Zevi, longing to be freed of all restriction, greeting the Apocalypse both with horror and, at the same time, perhaps with dance. My choice of *mishugas* these days is rather that of Nahman Bratslaver, but in a heterodox sense: staring into the faceless void, knowing it, not denying the void, living on the edge of chaos, but then coming back desperately to reconstruct some order. Sabbatai Zevi's slogan is *barukh mattir issurim*—all is to be permitted. Nahman's slogan is *Gevalt, yidn! Zeyt eykh nit meyaesh. Gevalt,* Jews! Don't give up!

Know the *gevalt*, Jews. Know chaos, stare it in the face, but ultimately spit in its eye by remaining human.

I conclude with a line from Emanuel Ringelbaum's *Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto,* the entry of February 19, 1941:

"In the prayer house of the pietists (Hasidim) of Bratslav on Novolipia Street there is a large sign—'Jews, Never Despair!' "

"The Hasidim there dance with the same religious fervor as they did before the war."

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