

Arthur Green

I was born in March, 1941. I have no direct memory of the war years and the holocaust. I have at times tried to fantasize what must have been going on somewhere in Europe at the time of my birth. But I have decided not to find out . . .

Of course I feel that I as a Jew am a product of the holocaust and the return to the land which have taken place during my lifetime. These are the backdrop events to all of our lives. Without them we never would have happened as Jews. Coming from an assimilated and largely secularist Jewish family, the fact that there was enough concern to expose me even minimally to Jewish education cannot be seen except as a reaction to those epoch-making times. To put it most directly: all those of us in America who are the products of the so-called "return to the synagogue" of the fifties would not exist as Jews were it not for our parents' collective reactions, both in shame and pride, to the holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Backdrop. Yes, that's just what it is—and in some ways ironic backdrop at that. Even given the place of those events as motivation for our Jewish lives, how terribly well shielded we were from it all. What were we ever told about what it means to be a Jew in these times? Our parents understood so little, and our Jewish education was all hung up in "*ha-yeled yoshev al ha-kiese* . . ." How many American Jewish kids do I know who grew up in this era and only in June, 1967 found out about Jewish peoplehood? How many American Jewish kids who still (this being written as we await the fate of the Jewish prisoners in Amman) don't know that there's a Jewish people.

It happens that a number of the people I'm closest to were either born of refugee parents or came out of the D.P. camps right after the war. I guess I feel a special love for those people, for having come from there and emerged human—but in some perverse way I also envy them; I envy their being right there at the center of Jewish historic consciousness. These are the last generation of international Jews, somewhere knowing so well who their people really is, knowing what it means to be a Jew in these times in a way that I will never understand, and knowing—no matter how deeply they become a part of this culture—that they are in America only by chance.

I am an American. That means I have had to *discover* the holocaust. I grew up in a Jewish community that was in terrible flight from it. And having come of age in the sixties in America, the forces of work on me have pushed our great Jewish events into the background, to the point where I would say that (except for moments like June '67) my consciousness has to *choose* to focus on them. Everything that's happened in this decade has left a serious mark on my generation: Civil rights, non-violence, riots, assassinations, black nationalism, the war and the peace movement, psychedelics, the rise and demise of hippie identity, the deepening alienation of sensitive American kids from the fifties lifestyle in which we were raised—all these, to be honest, are the more direct setting within which we happen. And how much psychic room is left for events that impinge less directly?

If I look at the groups around RESPONSE and our Havurot, for example, I

see almost pure products of the American sixties. The holocaust and Zionism are not the real issues that brought such groups together. You said it, Bill, in your editorial last spring: RESPONSE is part of the Jewish wing of the late sixties—hopefully seventies—young American counterculture. The Havurot have to do with American mass society, with the search for new community, with alternatives to suburban living sought by Americans of this age. They have to do with religious search in a generation that has read Hesse, Suzuki, and Tim Leary even more widely than it has read and been influenced by Wiesel. They have to do with the alienation of the young from the university, with the renewed search for personal religious learning that we have not found within the confines of academia.

Holocaust? Israel? Yes, we are deeply moved by the literature that speaks to us of the Hitler era. Wiesel is somehow our *rebbe*. We do think a good bit about Israel, and I now find more and more of my friends considering *Aliyah*. But these are not the events that have most deeply shaped us. I could spend the next forty years on Kibbutz or (a still less likely alternative) sitting in Me'ah She'arim, and I would still be Brandeis '61, New York '65, and Cambridge '67.

Let it be fully clear that this is merely a descriptive statement. I do not *choose* to value the more contemporary American events over the great changes in the Jewish people; only to a very small extent does a man choose which events in the world about him will influence his life.

Having said this, I turn to the perhaps more serious question of how living in this age of Jewish history affects my personal life and my relationship to Jewish religion. Strangely, I find myself resisting the influences of both the holocaust and Zionism.

I want to be able to *daven*; I want to be able to love and allow myself to enter the religious world of R. Akiva, who sees the central spiritual metaphor as that of loving embrace. But how do you love God in a post-holocaust mental set? I feel great power in the religious tradition of Abraham at Sodom, Job, Kazantzakis, and Wiesel: "Who is like You among the silent!" But a spiritual life centered around outcry and confrontation will not allow me to be myself. I then at times, in the midst of prayer, feel myself to be a liar, trying to deny evil in order to go on praying. I look around, in such *moments*, with a kind of horror: "My God, after all that are we crazy Jews still sitting here praising Him?" And that praise seems to be both blasphemy and madness. But somehow that moment is overcome, and I find myself again able to pray in joy.

In some different way I find myself joining with Reb Pinhas Koretzer, who thanks God that he was born in a time when the Zohar was known to the world. Only the Kabbalistic model, somehow reread, can make a bit of sense to me. A God who is struggling to assert His own Love, who has to do battle with a very real demonic force that has its ultimate origin in His own self, and Who has a terrible need for man's soul to bring His Love into the world—that God at such times seems a bit like the One I know.

I would also have to thank Him that I live in the days when I can read and in part follow the path of Reb Nahman Bratzlaver, who seems to glimpse the total absurdity of the life of faith, and who yet knows, through endless struggle, that the assertion of faith is his only goal. A God who can be totally present and

totally absent, who can fill the soul and yet make one cry out to overcome the distance, who can be spoken of only in the language of absolute paradox: that face of God too I can somehow make my own. Only that sense of movement in transcending paradox and confronting paradox can keep me from that most dangerous of sins, despair.

Relating my religious life to Zionism and the State of Israel is problematic in entirely different ways. I deeply resist the re-birth of sacred history that some Jews proclaimed after the six-day war. God leading us in battle against the foe, miracles of conquest—these things horrify me, in good part, of course, because I have absorbed the attitudes toward war and violence that characterized the early sixties in America. Despite the real moral and political differences between the Vietnam and Israel situations, one who recoils in horror at the “God is on our side” mentality is one case just cannot comfortably slip into it in the other. I am willing in a broad sense to see miraculous presence in the re-birth of Israel—but I am frightened to go further.

I know, of course, how deeply religion and peoplehood are linked in the mind of classical Judaism. In terms of the totality of our national covenant, I find this link very exciting. But the re-emergence of our people into the national/political scene makes that link at the same time problematic. I don't like secular nationalisms very much, but religiously justified nationalisms frighten me even more. Insofar as our *volk*-oriented covenant is able to uplift and transform the nationalistic urge, we are truly a sacred community. But when the thing is turned around, and God's word becomes a justification for our national/political ambitions, I feel a perversion of faith.

I think I am deeply a *golus* Jew. Very sensible people in Israel tell us how diaspora has made us other-worldly and abstract; How removal from soil has meant removal from the concrete. But I rather cherish that abstraction. My Jewish religious life can exist because of it. When I pray to God for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, I really don't have in mind a political program that says “Annex the Old city and build yeshivas there”. The Jerusalem of my prayers is really quite totally a symbol. While I do feel a real holiness in the very real stones of the city, I'd hate to think that such a political move, fraught with moral ambiguity, is to be the fulfillment of my prayers.

I love Jews in some special way, and I'm no longer ashamed to say so. The ingathering of exiles since '48 is tremendously exciting to me. My wife and I plan to spend some more time in Israel soon, and I would say that *aliyah* is an open question for us. But as to certain Zionist redefinitions of the meaning of Jewish peoplehood—that is another matter. If the return to the land is going to mean that the sacred community which lived beyond time is going to embrace all the values of a land-centered, secular, temporal national group, I will have to join with those voices in the Orthodox community who know that this is not redemption.

I don't think that I romanticize Eastern Europe, although I have been accused of it. But I do somehow long for the time when one knew that to be a Jew meant to belong to a community that stands before God, and when to come before Him in love was just a little bit easier. Such wholeness is not given us today without terrible struggle; that is the blessing and curse of living in this age.

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