

ELIEZER BERKOVITS' "In the Beginning Was the Cry: A Midrash for Our Times" is presented for the first time in this anthology. Like its author, this contemporary midrash is bold and brave, wrestling with the two central questions of Jewish mysticism: why did God create the world, and why do the righteous suffer?

These questions have preoccupied Berkovits for a quarter of a century. For many years the Rumanian-born scholar taught at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, an Orthodox rabbinical seminary that unites secular learning and traditional Talmudic study. A distinguished Talmudist and student of Jewish law, Berkovits is equally well-versed in Jewish philosophy. Among his other works are *Toward Historic Judaism; God, Man and History; Major Themes in Modern Jewish Thought*, which won the National Jewish Book Award in 1975; and *With God in Hell*.

Berkovits is the first Orthodox thinker who responded to Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* with a book-length work reassessing traditional Jewish theodicy. "Man can only exist," Berkovits writes in *Faith after the Holocaust*, "because God renounces the use of power on him. . . . History is the arena of human responsibility and its product." For Berkovits, the question raised by the Holocaust is not "where was God?" but "what is man?" How can we believe in human goodness after Auschwitz? Man—not God—must bear chief responsibility for the event.

How, then, are we to understand divine omnipotence? According to Berkovits, God shackles His might so that history may be possible. For Berkovits, history is the domain of human activity: "Yet all this does not exonerate God for all the suffering of the innocent in history. God is responsible for having created a world in which man is free to make history." Berkovits maintains that there must be a dimension beyond history where all suffering finds its redemption through God.

While the responsibility for history belongs to humanity, the responsibility for the *creation* of history belongs to God. In effect, Berkovits has deferred the problem of history to the end of days. His

attitude toward that end is one of trust—and of expectation. He trusts "that in God the tragedy of man may find its transformation."

More than two decades after writing *Faith after the Holocaust*, Berkovits has presented a visionary image for the end of days. This midrash invites interpretation.

Like many of the scholars who have wrestled with Holocaust questions, Berkovits' images of the divine and human predicament have grown more bleak over time. As we read his modern midrash, let us ask ourselves about the end of history: Why is resurrection not the answer? What is the limit to God's power? What is the role of those who have experienced the absurdity of existence? What must they do for humanity and God?

Eliezer Berkovitz
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 Michael Berenbaum
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