

Introduction to
Emil L. Fackenheim :
The 614th Commandment
in John K. Roth &
Michael Berenbaum :
Holocaust Religious &
Philosophical Implications,
Paragon House, St. Paul,
Minnesota 1989

FOR MORE THAN twenty years, Emil Fackenheim tried to establish that nothing between the revelation at Mount Sinai and the Messianic Redemption could decisively challenge Jewish faith. Like Franz Rosenzweig, the distinguished German-Jewish philosopher of the early twentieth century, Fackenheim tried to insulate Jewish faith from history. In his own estimation, he failed.

Fackenheim could not shield Jewish faith from the ashes of Auschwitz or the stones of Jerusalem. In the middle of the twentieth century, Jewish history was assaulted by events unequalled in magnitude by any other generation of Jews—save perhaps the slaves who escaped Egypt, crossed the sea, and stood at Sinai.

Once Fackenheim recognized the failure of his theological endeavor to establish an ahistorical faith, he embarked upon a long and distinguished confrontation with Jewish fate. The result was a series of important works: *God's Presence in History*, Fackenheim's initial attempt to define a theology of the Holocaust; *The Jewish Return into History: Reflections in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem*, a theology for the generation that experienced both tragedy and triumph; and *To Mend the World: Foundations for Future Jewish Thought*, the mature statement by a senior scholar who acknowledged the rupture of the Holocaust.

In retrospect, Fackenheim's initial effort to detach faith from history appears incomprehensible. Born in Halle, Germany, in 1916, Fackenheim was trained as a Reform rabbi. A survivor of Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which he entered at the age of 22, Fackenheim came to Canada two years after *Kristallnacht* (the burning of synagogues, Jewish businesses, and homes that took place on November 9–10, 1938). After serving as a rabbi for a number of years, Fackenheim moved to the University of Toronto where he swiftly established himself as the preeminent Jewish philosopher and a brilliant interpreter of Hegel, the revolutionary German thinker who united philosophy and history.

In 1983 Fackenheim observed, "Ever since 1933, or shortly there-

after, I have been trying to respond through philosophical understanding and Jewish religious thought, to what gradually emerged as being a catastrophe without precedent, the Nazi assault on God and Man, on the human family in general and, in particular, on the Jewish people, the most radically singled out victim. And, after fifty years, I believe that the bulk of the task still lies ahead."

In the essay reprinted here, Fackenheim first articulates his view of the Holocaust's implications. Judaism maintains that God is present in history, but Fackenheim asks how one can speak of God at Auschwitz or Treblinka? If God was not present at the death camps, perhaps Judaism's faith claims are invalid.

Though such is the conclusion of Richard Rubenstein in *After Auschwitz* and Elie Wiesel in *Night*, Fackenheim disagrees.

In order to speak of God's presence in history, Fackenheim turns to the midrashic tradition—the body of rabbinic legend, myth, allegory, and exegesis—which daringly affirms God's presence in history "in full awareness of the fact that the affirmation is strange, extraordinary, even paradoxical." Fackenheim distinguishes between two root experiences of the Jewish people: the Exodus and Sinai. In the Exodus, Israel (the Jewish people) experienced God's saving presence; at Sinai, Israel heard God's commanding presence which proclaimed the Ten Commandments. Surely, God's saving presence was tragically absent at Auschwitz, but in its aftermath the Jewish people felt duty bound to obey what Fackenheim calls the "Commanding Voice of Auschwitz."

Fackenheim has captured—perhaps more intensely than any of his contemporaries—the modern Jewish response to the Holocaust. He has developed the intellectual justification for the ideology of survival. "*Jews are forbidden to grant Hitler posthumous victories,*" Fackenheim proclaims. In the following essay—first presented in the late sixties at a symposium on "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future"—Fackenheim explains the implications of this commandment. Subsequently Fackenheim has followed a path that has taken him from Toronto to Jerusalem, from political and religious liberalism to militant Zionism and Orthodox Judaism.