

Introduction to
Richard Rubenstein, *The Dean of the
Chosen People* in: John K Roth
& M. Berenbaum
Holocaust Religious & Philosophical
Implications, Paragon House, St Paul

SOME BOOKS ARE GOOD—they warrant attention and are well worth reading—but a few distinguished works become classics that shape the intellectual heritage of generations. A few important works are revolutionary. They change the way in which we speak about issues and set the agenda for subsequent scholarship. Richard L. Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* determined the nature of Jewish theological debate for the past quarter-century. Rubenstein's central premise, seemingly so obvious now, was that Jewish theology must grapple with the two radical events of modern Jewish life: the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel.

After Auschwitz, Rubenstein argues, the belief in a redeeming God—one who is active in history and will bring an end to the vicissitudes of the human condition—is no longer credible. Belief in such a God ultimately implies that Hitler was part of a divine plan and that the Jewish people were being punished for their sins.

Two decades following the publication of this book, Rubenstein's views may have lost some of their original sting; a consciousness of the Holocaust and its devastating implications have become central to Jewish identity. As a result, Israel and the Jewish community—rather than the synagogue and God—have come to dominate Jewish life. However, in 1966, Rubenstein's words were explosive.

For the first decades after the Holocaust, Jews responded to the catastrophe with silence. Survivors were stunned and grief-stricken. What they had seen seemed beyond communication. Furthermore, few people were interested in hearing their tale. Survivors intuitively knew that to look back too soon or too intently could be dangerous. American Jewry in particular was unprepared to listen to the survivor (then called a refugee) or to accept its current or past responsibilities. A sense of the tragic was antithetical to the American sensibilities of a post-immigrant generation.

There were a few breaches in the wall of silence, but not many. Some testimony had been given by survivors, a few works of literature had been written, such as Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*, and an occasional book of scholarship had been completed, such as Raul Hilberg's

Minnesota 1989

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classic, *The Destruction of European Jews*. But these pieces were read by only a limited audience. Meanwhile, suburban religious life continued to grow at a record pace. Seemingly, nothing earth-shattering had happened—either at Auschwitz or in Jerusalem—that should challenge religious belief.

The silence was broken by *After Auschwitz*. This book was accorded a significant gentile audience since Rubenstein was considered to be the Jewish participant in the then-fashionable death-of-God debate. He was featured in *Time* magazine, and soon the subject of God and the Holocaust was too timely to be ignored. Even if the messenger was denied a hearing by his own people, his message had to be pondered.

However, it was history, and not solely Rubenstein's literary achievement, that gave *After Auschwitz* its lasting impact.

Within a year of the book's publication, the Six-Day War had broken out; both Israel and the Holocaust suddenly and irreversibly returned to Jewish consciousness. In 1967, Israel—and with it the Jewish people—once again faced destruction. While the stunning victory, including the triumphant reunification of Jerusalem, reduced the level of anxiety, American Jews have never forgotten the lessons of vulnerability and abandonment.

The linkage between Israel and the Holocaust has intensified rather than diminished with time. *After Auschwitz* was the first work to connect the two events as revolutions that required a rethinking of conventional wisdom and a redirection of Jewish—and Christian—religious life.

In this part's selections Rubenstein's influence on Jewish theology can be measured. Each thinker—Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Irving Greenberg, and Elie Wiesel—feels obliged to counter Rubenstein's challenge. While his work may not have provided the answers that either Jews or Christians seek for their religious life, Rubenstein has certainly raised the questions they must confront.

It is also a measure of our ecumenical age that the conversionary moment for an American-born rabbi came in the privacy of a German minister's study as the two sought to find common ground at a frightening moment—when the Berlin Wall was being constructed and the major powers appeared at the brink of conflict. The rabbi and the anti-Nazi pastor parted as friends. But if the latter seems to have been unchanged by their meeting, the former left with his faith shattered.

The echo of this encounter has reshaped Jewish thought for our time.

Rubenstein, the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of Religion at Florida State University, was born in New York City in 1924. He serves as president of the Washington Institute for Values in Public Policy, in Washington, D.C.

A prolific author, Rubenstein has many other books to his credit; the best known include: *The Religious Imagination; Morality and Eros; The Cunning of History; The Age of Triage;* and *Approaches to Auschwitz* (with John K. Roth); as well as *Power Struggle*, his autobiography.