

Introduction

A Name, Not an Essence

They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so.

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

Ours is an age of high technology and globalization. It is an age of post-modern nihilism and philosophical solipsism, of cultural paganism and religious fanaticism. It is an age of murder on an unprecedented scale, a scale so vast that the numbers truly numb. The convergence of these various “ages” is no coincidence. The ways of thinking that drive these -isms lead to ways of acting, as well as to ways of avoiding action. Because thoughts beget words, and words beget deeds, both action and the failure to act invariably stem from reflection – not so much from the content of thought as from the *mode* of thought. Indeed, the roots of genocide extend much more deeply into modes of thought than into social mores, economic conditions, or political movements. So the question poses itself: What is the nature of the thinking that has made ours the age of genocide? This book is a response to that question. It is also a response to the question of what sort of reflection might serve as a corrective to the thinking that has resulted in the murderous actions that sweep our shrinking globe.

A fundamental feature of the mode of thought that lies at the root of genocide is, I shall argue, a thinking that locks us into the isolation of an illusory ego and that blinds us to the face of our fellow human being. It is an abstract mode of thought that reduces the flesh-and-blood human being to an abstraction. Such thinking assumes both philosophical and theological forms. A Jewish reflection on the nature of reflection, this

book is a philosophical critique of certain strains of philosophy, as well as a theological critique of certain forms of theology. It is not a critique of philosophy or theology as such; nor does it cast Jewish thought in the mold of “good” and label everything else “evil.” Neither philosophy nor theology, however, is innocuous; what begins as a philosopher’s introspection or a theologian’s meditation can soon become a way of life.

The overall critique is undertaken from the perspective of Jewish teaching and testimony. As a Jewish reflection, this volume draws heavily on the texts of Jewish tradition, both ancient and modern, as well as on the Hebrew language; if language shapes thought, Hebrew language shapes, or at least informs, Jewish thought. The book’s thesis consists of three key components: (1) the mass murder of humanity begins with an abstraction of humanity from concrete individuals of flesh and blood into faceless members of a species; (2) a corrective to mass murder must be grounded in a concrete mode of thought; and (3) Jewish thought provides a good beginning for such grounding. To be sure, much of the thinking that has produced an earth littered with mass graves and a sky transformed into a cemetery is deeply anti-Jewish. The book maintains, therefore, that the mending of a world awash in blood lies in a restoration of the very teaching and thinking that many of the murderers would eliminate, either directly or indirectly. The event that embodies the annihilation of Jewish thought through the annihilation of the Jewish people is, of course, the Shoah. This Jewish reflection on humanity, then, comes in a post-Holocaust context, unfolding as it does in the shadows of Auschwitz. Indeed, it was in the midst of the shockwaves of the Shoah that Raphael Lemkin coined the term *genocide* in 1944.¹ The shadows of Auschwitz have cast us into a darkness in which, as in the time of the ninth plague of Egypt, “no one can see his brother” (see Exodus 10:23).

If a Jewish reflection on genocide is needful in the aftermath of the Holocaust, it does not mean that humanity must become Jewish. However, as Elie Wiesel has said, there are times when one cannot be a human being “without assuming the Jewish condition,”² or at least not without engaging in a Jewish reflection on humanity. That reflection is fundamentally a concrete reflection on the flesh-and-blood human being, one who bears a name and not an essence. One who “has a name,” as Franz

¹ See Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Clark, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, 2005), 79ff.

² Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After*, trans. Lily Edelman and Elie Wiesel (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 77.

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Rosenzweig states it, “can no longer be a thing. . . . It is incapable of utter absorption into the category for there can be no category for it to belong to; it is its own category.”³ With regard to the “essence,” “self,” or “being” of a person, in fact, the Hebrew language has no precise equivalent. The word used in this connection is *etzem*, as in the line from the Psalms, “My entire being shall declare, ‘Lord, who is like You?’” (Psalms 35:10), where “my entire being” is *kol atzmotai*. The word *etzem*, however, also means “bone,” and, unlike an elusive “essence,” it is as peculiar to an individual as his name. Therefore, although the phrase “concrete thought” might seem to be something of an oxymoron, the difference between abstract and concrete thought lies in the categories that shape our thinking, and not the nature of our actions. People who think concretely are also capable of murder, but, it is maintained, they are less likely to go genocidal. The point to be made is this: Genocidal actions are rooted in speculative abstractions.

Thinking of humanity in terms of essence is a way of dividing humanity into the camps of We and They, thus rendering others faceless and ourselves either indifferent or murderous or both. (Yes, one can be at once indifferent and murderous.) Such thinking, as we shall see, is at the bottom of modern and postmodern categories of race and gender, of ethnicity and culture, which define a human being in terms of natural accidents. History has shown, however, that when natural accidents become first principles, people die from unnatural causes. Similarly, forms of religious thought that divide people into believers and nonbelievers, the saved and the damned, according to the content of their belief rather than the kindness of their actions, may also lead to mass murder. When the creed thus becomes absolute, there occurs an appropriation of God that is catastrophic for humanity.

Judaism, by contrast, teaches that each of us, in our flesh and blood, is tied to the other, as members of a family are bound to one another, for we all have our origin in a single human being. The Hebrew word for “human being,” in fact, is *ben adam*, which literally means “a child of Adam.” Judaism also teaches that the Hebrew word for “face,” *panim*, is plural because each of us has two faces: our own unique face and the face of Adam. In these simple words, we have an inkling of what it means to think Jewishly, which is to think concretely. One whose face is unique is beyond the categories of essence, uniquely singled out for a responsibility

³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 186–87.

and a mission that no one else can perform, for the sake of a human community. To think in such terms is to transcend the distinctions of natural accidents or the content of a creed; it means being attentive to the outcry of the other human being. It means being able to answer the questions put to the first murderer: Where is your brother?" (Genesis 4:9) and "What have you done?" (Genesis 4:10). God does not ask Cain about his race or his gender or his reasoning. He does not question him about his belief or his catechism. No; He asks him about a physical relation rooted in a physical action.

Without the physical bond of flesh and blood, nothing metaphysical is binding. The physical bond, the flesh-and-blood relation that is unique to each individual, singles us out by name. Operating in terms of essence, whether as philosophy's rational being or as religion's sinner in need of salvation, we are turned over to a sameness in which each may take the place of the other and all are expendable. Here we attain an equality in which everyone is truly equal – equally meaningless. By contrast, one who bears a name is not only irreplaceable but, according to Jewish teaching, indispensable to all of creation. Thus, according to Jewish legend, when we die and lie in the grave, the Angel of Death comes to us so that he might bring us into the presence of the Holy One. However, in order to draw nigh unto the Divine Presence, we must answer a certain question. The question is the same for all, but for each the answer is different. So, with his thousand eyes gazing on us, the Angel poses the fearsome question, the very question he put to Jacob when he and the Angel⁴ wrestled till dawn: "What is your name?" (Genesis 32:28).⁵ But what do we know when we know our name?

To know our name is to know the names of those who confer a name on us, the names of our mother and father. It means knowing a tradition borne by those who have borne our names before us; it means knowing a teaching that harbors our future and our mission in life, as inscribed in our name; it means recognizing that we are called by name, singled out, and must answer to our name. Hence Chayim ben Attar teaches

⁴ It should be noted that in the biblical text the mysterious figure with whom Jacob wrestles is referred to as an *ish*, or "man" (Genesis 32:25), and not an angel; the tradition that identifies the figure as an angel is from the Midrash; see, for example, *Bereshit Rabbah* 77:2–3.

⁵ Nachman of Breslov says, "All a person's deeds are inscribed in his soul. That is why after death a person is asked if he remembers his name." See Nachman of Breslov, *Tikkun*, trans. Avraham Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1984), 102; see also Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom: Shevachay HaRan and Sichos HaRan*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan, ed. Aryeh Rosenfeld (New York: A. Kaplan, 1973), 148.

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that one who knowingly violates God's commandment forfeits his name (*Or HaChayim* on Genesis 3:30). Asking our name, the Angel tries to establish something about our being that is intimately tied concretely to our doing: knowing our name, like knowing God, means knowing what must be done.⁶ To have a name is to be blessed because to be blessed is to be connected, and to be connected is to be commanded, as the word for "commandment," *mitzvah*, implies: its root is *tzavta*, which means "connection." Connected to what? To the commanding Voice that reverberates in the human outcry. Lost in the abstract categories of essence, we are locked into the desolate isolation of the self, where we curl up in our solipsistic cave, connected to nothing and to no one. Like Cain.

Indeed, that is the meaning of the mark of Cain: It casts him into a radical isolation, in which no one can touch him (see Genesis 4:15). Thus, his punishment eloquently articulated his crime, for no action is more isolating than murder. Sent into the land of Nod, a word that means "wandering," Cain became "a fugitive and a wanderer" (Genesis 4:12). His name is significant; it reveals to us a dark dimension of ourselves: It means "acquisition," the acquisition of power and possessions, of pleasure and prestige, in a horrific confusion of being and having, as we succumb to the illusion that the more we have, the more we are, only to be beggared by our abundance. It is a confusion that invariably leads to the murder of our brother. Murder is always the murder of our brother, not of some other "race" or "ethnic group." Thus, Cain was turned over to a deadly condition of exile, for exile is both the bane and the breeder of murder, as we see in his son Lamech, who cried, "I have slain a man!" (Genesis 4:23). After Auschwitz we all bear the mark of Cain; after Auschwitz we are awash in genocide.

How does a human being in the post-Holocaust era penetrate the concealment of God, of the One whom we call "the Name?" How do we undertake a movement from exile to dwelling? By wrestling a name from a concealed God, as Jacob did at Peniel (see Genesis 32:25–31), and by answering the summons of "Where are you?" with a cry of "*Hineni!* – Here I am for you!"

It is written that Jacob "prevailed" by wrestling a name from the mysterious figure who fell on him in the night (Genesis 32:29). The word

⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 17. It is also edifying to note that in the Talmud the rabbis refer to the teaching of the truth about God from one generation to another as a "handing down of names" (see *Kiddushin* 71a).

translated as “prevailed” is *vatukhal*, a cognate of *takhlit*, meaning “aim” or “purpose,” which is to say: He received a renewed sense of mission, a renewed soul, with his new name, the name Israel, which means “one who strives with God.” What, then, is the difference between Jacob and Israel? The psalmist states it this way: “He [God] has established a testimony in Jacob and placed a teaching [Torah] in Israel” (Psalms 78:5). In the wrestling we have the testimony; in the name we have the teaching. Wrestling a blessing from the Angel, Jacob attained meaning and purpose, a teaching, and with it a way of thinking grounded in concrete action. Indeed, the concrete action is prior to the understanding, as taught in the cry of the Israelites when they were asked whether they would live by the Torah they were about to receive: *Naaseh v’nishma*, “we shall do and we shall hear” (Exodus 24:7); we shall act and we shall understand. For the name *Yisrael*, Rashi points out, is a cognate of *serarah*, which denotes a blessing received through “noble and open conduct” and not through reasoning or belief (see Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 32:29). That is how we strive with God in a world from which He seems to be absent: by engaging in noble and open conduct.

Interestingly, the Zohar tells us that the dust raised when Jacob wrestled the name “Israel” from the Angel “was not ordinary dust, but ashes, the residue of fire” (*Zohar* I, 170a). From the residue of the ashes of the Jewish people and the fire that consumed them, we must wrestle a name, and not an essence, from the Angel of Death. Otherwise, it is not the Angel of Death who will prevail but the Angel of Murder.

Everything said so far has been said from the perspective of Jewish thought. Only by adopting the categories of Jewish thought is any of this intelligible. Certainly it is unintelligible to ontological speculation, postmodern -isms, or the creed-based thinking of various religious traditions, particularly certain forms of Christianity and Islam. I have selected these traditions, rather than the Eastern religions, because they have ties to the Judaic religion of Abraham and therefore provide the most immediate points of comparison and contrast. These, then, shall come under scrutiny in what follows: the Western speculative tradition, as well as certain forms of Christianity and Islam. The modes of thought that have at times characterized these traditions represent modes of thought that have contributed to numerous genocides in the West. Genocides in the East, such as those perpetrated under Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and Pol Pot (1925–1998), have also been influenced by Western ontological thought in the form of communism. I know of no Buddhist or Taoist movements of systematic mass murder. Judaism, moreover, has had a history of

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engagement with Western philosophical and theological thinking that it has not had with Eastern traditions.

This book begins, then, by elucidating the question of “Why Jewish Thought and What Makes It Jewish?” This first chapter opens with an exploration of the historical background and contexts for the question. It briefly addresses the thinking of Jewish “philosophers,” from Saadia Gaon to Bachya ibn Paquda, from Maimonides to Gersonides, to show that they do not, in fact, fall into the mold of the Hellenistic thinking that has so heavily influenced modern abstract thought. The difference lies in the primacy of Torah in shaping how these thinkers, as well as modern Jewish thinkers, understand God, the world, and humanity. As we move into the modern period, speculative thought becomes a means of thinking God out of the picture. Moreover, thinking in a concrete mode, modern Jewish thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Lévinas have responded to that philosophical move.

Chapter 1 next outlines the categories that define concrete Jewish thought, as contrasted with the abstractions that shape ontological speculative thought. One of the most fundamental categories is creation. Because Christian and Muslim thinkers ostensibly adopt this category, the chapter considers how and why their abstract thinking might open the ways to justify mass murder, despite their view that God created the heavens and the earth. These modes of theological reflection, it is argued, are characterized by egocentric, creed-based approaches to life that negate this flesh-and-blood life for the sake of an afterlife in some otherworldly realm; hence such outcries as “We love death more than life” come to mean “We love inflicting death more than preserving life.” Such traditions often embrace a mode of thought in which the flesh and the blood of the human being are viewed as something vile that threatens the soul, and not as part of the soul.

The second chapter explores the murderous nature of “Deadly Philosophical Abstraction” as it has characterized modern speculative thought in general and German idealism in particular. It exposes the dangers of key concepts inherited from the Enlightenment, such as freedom, autonomy, self-legislation, the will to power, egocentrism, nihilism, and so on, to show that a major contributing factor to mass murder lies in the modern and postmodern abstractions of our thinking about humanity. The chapter begins with a brief consideration of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) to explain how and why such a line of philosophical reflection opens the way, by

degrees, to mass murder. This thinking is characterized by an equation of thought with being that renders God superfluous and results in the radical appropriation of the other human being on the part of the thinking self. The chapter goes on to show that, in contrast to this mode of thought, Jewish thought situates the “being” of the thinker in the between space of relation in such a way that the other person is not appropriated but rather is situated in a dimension of height. Here, subjectivity is responsibility to and for the other.

Chapter 2 shows, therefore, that not only did modern “enlightened” thought fail to prevent the Holocaust, but it contributed to it. The genocide of the Jews of Europe was not the result of unbridled, irrational hatred so much as it was the outcome of a calculating, logical, systematic mode of very sophisticated thought. It is argued further that the exterminationist assault on the Jews was an assault not only on Jewish teaching and testimony but also on a mode of thought that cannot abide in the same universe as the ultimately totalitarian ontological tradition. It was, in brief, an assault on the absolute, divinely commanded prohibition against murder. Finally, Chapter 2 argues that the postmodernism so fashionable in intellectual circles is just as bankrupt in objecting to genocide as the thinking that results in genocide. Indeed, among the greatest influences on postmodern thought are Nietzsche and Heidegger: In the end, there is no logical inconsistency between engaging in mass murder and espousing a postmodern viewpoint. A response to the mode of thought that contributed to the extermination of the Jews comes, if not exclusively then primarily, from Jewish thought.

Moving from the philosophical to the theological abstraction of the human being, Chapter 3, “The Stranger in Your Midst,” examines the deadly attitude toward the stranger within the Christian and Islamic religious traditions that insists on the affirmation of a specific creed in this life for the sake of a reward in the afterlife. When we strive to get into God’s kingdom rather than to draw God into this kingdom, it is argued, the value of the flesh-and-blood human being is inevitably diminished – and murder ensues. This chapter shows that religious traditions that refuse a place for the stranger often end up murdering the stranger. In this connection, two points are examined and contrasted with Jewish thought: (1) the tradition’s teachings concerning the status of the stranger; and (2) the abstraction of the flesh-and-blood human being in the accent on an afterlife. When the concrete human being is delegitimized as one who is essentially or dogmatically in need of salvation, regardless of his or her actions, murder becomes justified. The justification of murder is a necessary precondition for genocide.

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An important point of contrast lies in the Jewish teaching concerning the Righteous Among the Nations, namely that one need not buy into the specific belief – one does not even have to be a follower of Judaism – in order to have a place with God. Righteousness here is determined by concrete action toward another, not by abstract belief within oneself. This is elucidated through an examination of the Covenant, the notion of chosenness, and the commandments of Torah pertaining to the stranger. One point to be made here is this: Contrary to traditions that seek converts supposedly for the sake of their souls, Judaism dissuades converts for the same reason. The chapter ends by addressing the topic of eschatology and afterlife, where I argue that a tradition that sees the last days in terms of separating the sheep from the goats on the basis of belief, and not on the basis of concrete action, may engage in the murder of the nonbelievers not only in the last days but here and now, for the sake of their own self-righteousness.

Chapter 4, “*Nefesh*: The Soul as Flesh and Blood,” contrasts a concrete spiritual reflection on the soul with the foregoing philosophical and religious abstractions. After a brief explanation of Jewish thinking about the five levels of the soul (*yechidah*, *chayah*, *neshamah*, *ruach*, and *nefesh* in Hebrew), the chapter explains that one level of the soul, called *nefesh*, is the flesh-and-blood “body” of the human being. Unless we can determine the absolute sanctity of the body as a dimension of the soul, it is argued, we cannot provide any response to mass murder other than more power, which leads to more murder. Judaism does not subscribe to the dualistic view of body and soul found in the philosophical and theological modes of thought under investigation; the body and soul are interwoven, so that the body does not have a soul, but rather the soul has a body. Jewishly speaking, the soul is tactile: It can be *felt*, in a kiss or a caress, in a hug or a handshake. This is why, as is explained, a soul can be assaulted in the assault on the body; this is why the mass murder of bodies always entails an assault on the soul. Philosophical and religious traditions shaped by abstract thought generally subscribe to a radical distinction between body and soul that reduces the body to foul insignificance and elevates the soul to sublime holiness. Such a move often proves to be genocidal.

Chapter 4 also argues that an ethical relationship is always a material, flesh-and-blood relationship. Such a relationship is most fundamentally about eating: viewed as *nefesh* emanating from above, the human being is not what he eats – he is what he offers another to eat, in a sacrifice of his own physical space, comfort, and complacency for the sake of another. A related point made in this chapter is that a physical body is necessary to the human-to-human relationship that nourishes the soul. Inasmuch

as the flesh-and-blood sanctity of the human being is lost in abstractions, relationship collapses, which is the first step toward violence. A significant category of Jewish thought in this connection is the face, through which a metaphysical reality announces itself both from within and from beyond the physical presence of the face. Without that physical presence, there is no metaphysical injunction. As the weight of the material reality of the human being comes to bear, then, life grows heavy, but heavy with meaning. As Lévinas has maintained, it is the face that forbids us to kill.⁷ Therefore, whenever the assault on the body is part of an assault on the soul, the prohibition against murder comes under assault.

Concrete souls live in a concrete world, and how we think about the natural world is related to how we think about the other human being. Chapter 5, “The Environmentalist Contribution to Genocide,” examines why seemingly benign ecological positions might play into the hands of genocidal agendas, particularly with regard to certain pagan forms of environmentalism, and particularly in the case of Nazi environmentalism. Inasmuch as ontological thought in its environmentalist mode levels human beings to the status of animals, it opens the way to treating human beings like animals. An alternative to such a position lies in the Jewish category of creation, which both sanctifies nature and places it in our care by elevating human beings above the status of animals. Only with such an elevation of human beings, it is argued, can animals be placed in the care of human beings. Central to this view is the premise that creation originates in the word of a Creator, with whom human beings stand in a covenantal relation. The pagan care for nature, by contrast, nearly always leads to an ideological struggle for power and not to a movement into a higher relation, without which there can be no human relation. Whereas the commanding voice of the Creator elevates the human being, the totalitarian voice of the pagan levels the human being into a sameness with all creatures and thus opens the way to the extermination of human beings, now deemed a source of “contamination” for nature by their very existence. From the standpoint of many such environmentalist movements, the human sin is the same as the sin of the Jews under the Nazis: being alive.

Chapter 5 then outlines the Jewish basis for our stewardship of the environment and its creatures, beginning with a correction of the view that environmentalism is contrary to the biblical commandment to “have

⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.