Studies in Judaism and Christianity

*Exploration of Issues in the Contemporary Dialogue between Christians and Jews*

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Post-Shoah Reflections on David Hartman’s Theologies of Suffering

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In the wake of the Shoah, I struggle to look confidently toward the future without being devastated about the past. Unprecedented and unimaginable suffering raises terrible questions about God’s goodness and omnipotence, and casts doubt upon fundamental religious claims. Many, with great sensitivity as well as anguish, have delved into these questions, which have been so prominent in theological reflection over the last half-century. The subject is inescapable. Steven T. Katz writes, the Shoah “raises the most difficult intellectual, phenomenological, and existential issues with which reflective men [sic] have to deal.” David Halivni puts the Shoah in the broadest of terms: “Every aspect of spiritual life is affected by [it].” For Jews, the Shoah has, therefore, led to profound, sometimes radical, reconsiderations of traditional religious beliefs, most of all about God’s nature and covenant with the Jewish people. It has also ushered in remarkable changes in the ways Jews and Christians, after centuries of estrangement and the occurrence of mass slaughter of Jews in “Christian” Europe, relate to and view the religious claims of each other. Because of the enormity of the event, it can dominate—and sometimes overwhelm—both Jewish theology and Jewish-Christian relations.

It is a painful challenge to my own Jewish faith, as I struggle with a tradition that, while accommodating terrible earlier losses (for example, military defeat and exile), is unprepared for loss on this scale. Even though I was not personally affected by the event (no one
in my family was a victim or survivor), and I have not experienced religious persecution, the challenge is unavoidable. As an observant Jew, I regularly join in prayer that praises God's might and God's love for the Jewish people. I feel the tension between traditional claims and actual events when I pray to God as "shiel of our salvation in every generation" and thank God for "miracles which daily attend us." It is tempting to do this unthinkingly, but when I reflect on what I say, I find it difficult because of the sad facts of history.

Admittedly, I often choose not to dwell on this tension, but get caught up with (or distracted by) the cycle of Sabbath and holidays or family rituals. Recently, my wife Rahel and I had the great joy of creating a ceremony to welcome our new baby girl into the covenant with the Jewish people. We also built a sukkah for the first time in our new home. These celebrations and rituals are the "stuff" of Jewish living, and the content that infuses a religious life seemingly separate from theological speculation. Still, this tension cannot be entirely bracketed, for Jewish religious life rests on a relationship with a God in covenant with the people of Israel. This relationship is shaped by convictions about God's nature (for example, divine love of Israel), experiences of God's actions (for example, deliverance from Egypt), and expectations (for example, eschatological redemption, intervention on behalf of the afflicted). While Jewish religious faith and specifically views of God should not be evaluated solely by the adequacy of explanations for innocent suffering, these challenges are enormously serious.

As a Jew, must I ignore or minimize the theological challenge of the Shoah to these traditional claims about God in order to sustain a viable religious life? Should I seek a persuasive theodicy that defends these views? What is the cost—psychologically, theologically, or even exegetically—of these choices?

DIVERSITY WITHIN JEWISH TRADITION: DAVID HARTMAN'S APPROACHES TO SUFFERING

To explore some of these questions, I want to engage critically with the thought of modern Jewish theologian David Hartman (1931–2013). His award-winning book A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism responds creatively to the challenge of unmerited suffering. Hartman, who is not usually categorized as a post-Shoah theologian, is nonetheless grappling with the event, though in a complex and largely indirect way. Nearly the entire second half of his book is devoted to the general topic of suffering, though, significantly, he rarely mentions the Shoah itself. He writes for contemporary Jews, but his examples of suffering are typically ancient, from the rabbinic and biblical periods. This approach is paradoxical—intensively discussing suffering and loss while almost entirely avoiding the unprecedented recent event—and highly revealing. Because of his decision to focus on suffering, I believe the Shoah is never far from his view, nor is he able to ignore completely the theological challenge it offers to traditional claims about God. In a post-Shoah world, his defense of "A Living Covenant" with a living God suggests his recognition of the prominence of radical claims about the "death of God." I believe that the fact that Hartman so seldom refers explicitly to the Shoah, despite devoting approximately one hundred pages to the theme of suffering, is not an oversight but a careful effort to limit the danger it poses to his defense of a traditional yet modern Jewish faith.

Hartman's analysis of suffering helps us to understand this seeming paradox. It must be seen in terms of his overall purpose for writing, which is to help Jews to cultivate "a viable way of life." Such a life is based on traditional religious observance and reinterpretation of sacred texts. The virtues of such a religious system are demonstrated not by arguments for its "metaphysical truth" but by its contribution to the Jews' "psychological and existential vitality." Although he is a philosophically trained theologian, Hartman recognizes the limits of abstruse theological speculation, especially for answering perhaps insoluble questions or for providing guidance for religious living. He, therefore, emphasizes observance of the mitzvot as a practical way of life that promotes joy and a sense of meaningfulness. He wants to help Jews to continue to live "Jewisly," and to draw closer to God through daily rituals and prayer, rather than by engaging in inconclusive theologizing or awaiting God's intervention in history.

I find much that is appealing and constructive about Hartman's views, above all a practical focus on what is conducive to Jewish faith. To return to the topic of suffering, he faces it by shifting the terms of the discussion in ways noted above. That is, he attends to the
question of the suffering of the innocent not in order to "solve" it but in order to limit its potential to undermine Jews' ability to maintain their commitment to God and mitzvot. He, therefore, sidesteps the morass of unsatisfying theodicies. In a key move intended to bracket the most painful or difficult theological questions, he rejects "philosophical theology" in favor of "religious anthropology." The former phrase, like the metaphysical speculation that he also criticizes, includes efforts to "reconcil[e] what seems to be an incompatibility of facts and beliefs. How is it logically possible to claim that God is the just Lord of History in the light of the senseless evil manifest in the world?" This philosophical approach opens up doubts about God's power or benevolence and, without much hope of convincing resolution, threatens Jewish faith. By contrast, the latter phrase, "religious anthropology," eschews theological speculation and emphasizes that which is useful for maintaining one's faith. Taking the covenant between God and the Jewish people as the starting point, Hartman offers a religious anthropology that enables the suffering Jew to practically "respond to events" in order to "preserve the continuity, stability, and predictability" in that relationship. Doubts about God brought on by suffering and which are shocking or challenging are necessarily minimized because the goal is to "sustain commitment to a way of life predicated on God's covenantal love and justice."  

Reviewing classical Jewish texts, he surveys various options without endorsing any one in particular. Perhaps Jews can be satisfied if they "eliminate every expectation of reward in this world" and yearn for the rewards of the next world. On the other hand, Jews can discover that, despite suffering, "everyday reality can also contain joy" if they follow the mitzvot. Alternatively—and provocatively—he suggests that even unmerited or inexplicable suffering nonetheless provides opportunities to repent and to "examine one's conduct" in order to avoid a sense of despair. Hartman also lowers expectations about what God might do to end suffering. In contrast to the biblical "Exodus model" of divine intervention in history on behalf of suffering Israelites, he endorses a "Sinai-model" in which God, having given the Torah as a guide to the Jews, no longer intervenes in history. All of these responses are intended to buttress Jews' faith despite suffering. Hartman does not claim that one perspective is true, only that they are all potentially useful.

HARTMAN AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE SHOAH

I appreciate Hartman's shift away from theodicies and his emphasis on a viable, living Judaism. He prizes continuity in the face of historical events and losses—a key aspect of any religious system—and aims to minimize the shock of disappointment of finding one's beliefs potentially undermined. However, in the wake of the Shoah, I also find his approach inadequate. By taking traditional faith as a given and avoiding serious consideration of the unique challenge of the Shoah, his analysis is severely circumscribed. Hartman's almost complete refusal to allow this experience of incomparable Jewish suffering to intrude on his thinking suggests that, for faith to abide in a broken world, perhaps one must avert one's eyes from the abyss. His ultimately practical goal—that Jews find "some approach that will enable them to maintain their commitment to the mitzvot"—in effect precludes a direct confrontation with the shock of the Shoah. While Hartman does not say he will not address the event, in his only direct comments on the Shoah, he appears to dismiss its significance out of hand: "If Jewish theism was not destroyed by two thousand years of exile, it should not be imagined that even the Holocaust could destroy it." I agree that a traditional faith such as Judaism depends on steadfastness and continuity. However, I yearn for serious attention to the reasons why so many Jews, myself included, find the static portrait of a covenanting God troubling in the wake of the Shoah. Even when Hartman recognizes that (generic) occasions of "acute persecution and catastrophe" might undermine commitment to Jewish life, he puzzlingly does not apply this observation to the greatest challenge to Jewish faith in history.

Because his claims are grounded in biblical and rabbinic texts, I want to consider his interpretations of some of these texts, and specifically his efforts to grapple with the challenge of innocent suffering to Jewish faith. This provides me an opportunity to survey the tensions in his approach in light of my own (but not only my own) powerful sense that the Shoah is a novum in Jewish history and must be faced squarely. A few themes recur that I find relevant in the post-Shoah era. Prominent among these is Hartman's interest in minimizing the shock of suffering by demonstrating how earlier Jews, in coping with disappointment and loss, offer a model to modern Jews. For example, he draws on a vivid scene from the Book of Nehemiah.
In the fifth century BCE, an assembly of Jews, returned from exile, gathers to make a public statement. Though subjugated by foreigners and “in great distress,” they affirm their commitment to God and to the Torah (9:36—10:1). Hartman interprets this as evidence of abiding faith despite their oppression and the perceived failure of God’s promises to protect them. Contemporary Jews, Hartman says, ought to emulate them.

There are two difficulties with this interpretation. First, Hartman omits to mention that these Jews offer the type of explanation for suffering that Hartman otherwise rejects. They are afflicted by God, they say, “because of [their] sins” (Neh 9:37). Their suffering is not a challenge to their faith in God’s justice and goodness. Rather, it confirms it, a type of claim that is widely rejected in the post-Shoah period as “blaming the victims.” Second, Hartman appeals to their steadfast faith as a model for Jews today. Their losses, he says, did not threaten their affirmation of “the ongoing covenantal drama of Jewish history.” In a post-Shoah period, however, Hartman’s claim that ancient, colonized Jews’ holding onto their faith offers a “great spiritual bequest” to contemporary Jews is, I believe, unacceptably ironic. For some contemporary Jews, the incomparably worse afflictions during the Shoah undermine the relevance to them of ancient Jews’ responses to drastically different experiences. There is an enormous difference in the losses each group faced: ancient Jews’ hopes for security and independence were dashed by foreign oppression; modern Jews’ hopes for acceptance in non-Jewish society were dashed by the genocidal slaughter of millions.

The claim that modern Jews should emulate ancient Jews and accept a less-than-satisfying reality appears elsewhere. For another model of admirable piety, Hartman quotes Talmudic praise of Jews who thanked God for small portions of food even though they did not receive a full meal (as promised in Deuteronomy 8:10). The rabbinic text puts these words in God’s mouth: Jews “are particular to say grace if the quantity of bread they eat is [equivalent to only] an olive or an egg.” While the original purpose of the text was to explain God’s wisdom in electing the Jews, Hartman makes a different point. He praises the Jews’ faithfulness to God even when afflicted or hungry. They accept “the partial and incomplete conditions of unredeemed history” in spite of the imperfections of life and the lack of divine intervention to change them. The Jews focus on what they have received, not on what they lack.

Again, Hartman’s praise for their gratitude to God is unsuitable to the contemporary theological challenge. Millions of Jews, only a few generations ago, received not a “meager meal” or an “incomplete meal” but, to continue the metaphor, no meal at all. The analogy of insufficient material support grievously underestimates the seriousness of the loss that I believe we must face in the wake of the Shoah. The suffering that threatens faith in God’s covenant with Israel is not just that God, Hartman says, was “not visibly triumphant” in intervening to end the Jews’ suffering and to satisfy all their desires. The gap between expectations and reality in the Shoah is nearly unbridgeable. In his use of this text and elsewhere, Hartman consistently minimizes that distance and fails to face the full shock of these events. This undermines the relevance of his model in relation to the most painful and pressing Jewish doubts. I appreciate his desire to refrain from offering a theodicy and to shift the discussion to maintaining Jewish faith in a God who does not directly intervene in history. I also do not want to deny that some Jews even in Auschwitz praised God, as do some survivors. However, his examples of faith that can withstand suffering rest on a limited view of the depth of the rupture that I, and others, feel has occurred.

I want to shift to another theme in Hartman’s work illustrated by his interpretation of another Talmudic text. While his Sinai model presumes divine non-intervention in history, even to end suffering, Hartman is unable fully to let go of the idea of an interventionist God. On the contrary, he upholds a minimal level of divine intervention at least to limit the oppression of Israel. Hartman’s inconsistency between non-intervention and limited intervention is significant, for it illustrates his unease with a completely absent God. This raises serious and unanswered questions about why and when God might choose (or not choose) to aid the afflicted people. It also threatens Hartman’s optimistic assumptions about human freedom. Such freedom can have truly dreadful consequences, both practically and theologically, which raise doubts about God’s failure to limit it.

This tension appears in his interpretation of a rabbinic text discussing the different glorious attributes applied to God. Rabbis ask why Jeremiah and Daniel omitted terms such as awesome and mighty that were earlier used for God by Moses. Strikingly, one rabbi says
that they were unwilling to “ascribe false things” to God because they lived at times when the people were oppressed. After Jeremiah and Daniel, the “men of the Great Assembly” properly reapplied to God all of the attributes mentioned by Moses. How could they call God “awesome” and “mighty” when they too were humiliated and powerless and lived under foreign oppression? The rabbinic text says that one should not suppose that God’s non-intervention, evident in the people’s suffering, reveals God’s inability to intervene. Rather, God partly manifests these attributes through voluntary non-intervention and partly through covert intervention: “Therein lie [God’s] mighty deeds, that he suppresses his wrath, that he extends long-suffering to the wicked [that is, the nations that oppress Israel]. Therein lies his awesome power, for but for [the nations’] fear of him, how could [Israel] persist among the nations [who would otherwise seek to destroy them]?” God, though seemingly not active, allows the nations freedom of action to oppress Israel but ensures that they limit themselves so that God might not intervene and take vengeance on them. In the language of the text, God is involved in history through “mighty deeds” of self-restraint along with “awesome power” that encourages the nations, out of fear of God, to restrain their violence. Israel’s suffering is painful, but not beyond the purview of God, who ultimately ensures the people’s survival.

In his use of this text, Hartman, contrary to what he says elsewhere, is engaged in philosophical theology, and a very traditional version of it. Despite his best efforts, Hartman veers into attempts to explain why suffering occurs and implicitly to exculpate God from responsibility for it. He says God’s partial withdrawal from history, though allowing for suffering, gives Jews a chance to maintain their faith in God. The evil they face is subsumed into a fundamentally good, purposive theological system that encourages their development of a “mature faith.” This system is somehow under God’s providence and reflects God’s will and intentions for the development of this faith. This is because God, even passively or distantly, ultimately is responsible for the world and would only have allowed such a system if it was conducive to some greater religious good.

This is actually a free-will theodicy. According to Hartman’s interpretation of this text, human freedom, granted by God when God voluntarily ceased intervening in history, explains why suffering occurs (in this case, caused by the nations that oppress Israel). This, however, raises the same questions asked of all free-will theodicies: why is God’s grant of human freedom preferable to limiting (even some) freedom in order to prevent the unimaginably evil deeds that can result? Would it not be better for God to intervene, especially when God can do so? That is why Hartman’s praise for “God’s patience,” in his comment on this text, makes sense only when the suffering is minimized. When the suffering gets too great—in the words of the text, when it threatens Israel’s “persistence”—it no longer seems worth it, and indeed contradicts the limits in the text. Hartman, however, attends only to the religious benefits of the freedom of God’s withdrawal and not the costs. This model is, therefore, defensible only in the case of limited suffering. Unbridled, devastating violence cannot be accommodated by it. In the case of the Shoah, I find it impossible to see God’s might and power in allowing this to happen. The massive destruction of nearly an entire continent’s Jewry seems incompatible with a divinely ordained limitation on violence.

FACING SUFFERING AFTER THE SHOAH

While I have been critical of some of Hartman’s arguments, I do not want to minimize the significance of his contribution. His project is valuable, prompting reflection on this important topic and responding to a real need for a modern defense of traditional Jewish faith. It is also frustrating. This is precisely why I have chosen to focus on it. It illustrates the remarkable challenge of writing theology after the Shoah and the struggle to look hopefully toward the future while relying on traditional sources and claims. Hartman looks toward the future but seems not to grapple with the past. This is often seen in his interpretations of classical Jewish sources, which he uses without much attention to the shock of twentieth-century events and the ways they undermine the uses to which he puts these sources.

He has his reasons for doing so. As an advocate of a practical religiosity, Hartman aims to help Jews to “take the disappointments [in God] in stride.” But I am disappointed in God, and I cannot avert my eyes from the suffering that prompts this, as I believe Hartman averts his. Though the tradition seems inadequate to answer terrible questions about divine absence and innocent suffering, I yearn for some frank admission by Hartman of the depth of suffering and the
anguish it causes many post-Shoah Jews. Of course, this yearning reveals something about me as well as about him. For me, contemplating the abyss of the Shoah is simultaneously unavoidable and agonizing: unavoidable, for loss on such a scale cannot but be faced theologically (politically, pastorally, and so on); agonizing, for it challenges my faith in the covenant between God and Israel and the traditional image of God. Hartman, because of his circumscribed focus, in effect, sides with the view that it is too agonizing.

How else to account for our differences? By treating commitment to Judaism and God as a given, Hartman’s argument is most suitable for those already convinced of central Jewish affirmations about God’s love, the covenantal relationship, and the joy of mitzvot. I begin in a more ambivalent place. I share joy in Jewish living and relate to God in these distinctly Jewish categories and terms of mitzvot and covenant. However, I do not have as much optimism about the possibilities of a life of faith as Hartman or confidence in traditional religious affirmations. These differences in perspective explain some of my resistance to resolving these problems as he does, by bracketing the shock of disconfirmation or forcing traditional texts into a modern theology. He wants to find resources in the tradition that will buttress his faith in a living covenant and quiet the deafening screams lamenting the triumph of evil. I am far less willing than he is to deflect my “attention from absorption with the irrational forces” in order to concentrate on a life of mitzvot. The irrational forces haunt me, hinting at something terrible about both human depravity and God’s powerlessness and unfaithfulness to the covenant.

However, this does not mean that doubt defeats faith or nullifies my Jewishness. Rather, I embrace a paradox of living with both. As an observant Jew, I follow the mitzvot and live a religious life. It is organized around celebration of Shabbat and the holidays, attendance at synagogue, and study of Torah. I celebrate God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the remarkable persistence of Jewish faith despite terrible losses. My doubts about God, along with a commitment to a religious life, do not prove that theology does not matter. Rather, it is important but not determinative. Or, to be specific, theology does not exhaust the full range of Jewish theology. It is one facet of a multifaceted religious identity that is only partly theological. The identity includes a wider range of beliefs and activities, some easily separated from theological reflection, either inherently or by some-
times averting my own eyes from the theological issues. The tension remains unresolved, one of the most serious of my life.

I approach such an inquiry then with humility, recognizing my inability to systematically defend or reconcile all my claims or commitments. This can be difficult but is perhaps inevitable, and should be embraced as reflecting different ways of living “Jewishly.” This is not unprecedented or untraditional, for Jews have long held that consistency is not the highest value. While not endorsing total relativism, rabbis welcomed diverse and sometimes contradictory views. The tradition is comfortable with genuine attempts to wrestle with the irresolvable in a spirit of truth-seeking. In particular, this approach is supported by the non-creedal nature of Judaism, which, in comparison with Christianity, downplays the importance of theological speculation in favor of ritual and praxis.

Furthermore, in grappling with paradox, I am influenced by recent essays by Catholic scholars Gregor Maria Hoff and Terrence Tilley on Jewish-Christian relations. They both struggle with competing claims about, on the one hand, salvation of all humanity in Christ alone and, on the other, a refusal to say Jews who do not believe in Christ are rejected by God. Rather than force a reconciliation between these claims, they grant that, as finite humans, we are precluded from making definitive, universally true statements about God and God’s will. There are unavoidable limits to our speech about God. That is why our efforts to reflect on “experiences or thoughts about the Ultimate Mystery” and topics such as soteriology and theodicy must involve “paradox, contradiction, and not fully compatible concepts.” This is inherent to the nature of the subjects being discussed. Much as they, in their own ways, hold fast to seemingly paradoxical ideas, I too refuse to sacrifice Jewish life in its entirety in the name of a superficial consistency. Doubts about God in the wake of terrible suffering do not undermine Judaism entirely, nor do all contradictions need to be resolved for one to live a rich religious life.

The differences between Hartman and me are in the end not large; our levels of observance are probably quite similar, and we share an interest in cultivating viable religious lives. However, I believe my own approach to suffering more frankly preserves these tensions between faith and doubt than does Hartman’s. He cautiously considers suffering but then tries to redirect the focus elsewhere. Yet in the wake of the Shoah, I doubt whether one can face suffering, and
the terrible suffering of the Shoah in particular, and then redirect one’s focus away from it. Still, I continue to engage in a religious life of worship, study, and practice, partially but not completely unaffected by these theological questions. The absence of persuasive answers to immensely difficult and important questions is genuinely troubling but not disastrous. There can be no solution to the theological challenge of the Shoah, but I refuse to let it dominate everything as much as I refuse to avert from eyes from the challenge.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to have been asked to contribute to a volume in memory of Rabbi León Klenicki. With a painful awareness of the traumas of the past, he successfully strived for decades to improve relations between two long-strained religious communities. May his successes encourage both Jews and Christians to continue his work, and may his memory be for a blessing.


5. This is a quotation from the daily Modim prayer of thanksgiving.

6. David Hartman, A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997). The book was first published in 1985 and won the National Jewish Book Award in Jewish Thought. It has been the subject of numerous reviews and full-length essays.

7. There are only a few references; some are incidental, and a few are substantive; see ibid., 202–3, 77.

8. Ibid., 203. The most prominent Jewish exponent of “death of God” theology is Richard Rubenstein.

9. Ibid., 193, 200.

10. His phrase “metaphysical truth” refers to the Talmud, though it reflects Hartman’s goal.


12. Emphasis added.


15. Ibid., 194.

16. Ibid., 203.

17. Ibid., 224.

18. Ibid., 214.


21. Ibid., 220.

22. See ibid., 47, 186.


24. Ibid., 221.


26. On the unprecedented and “irredeemable destruction” that occurred in the Shoah, see Halivni, Breaking the Tablets, 18.


28. Ibid., 196.


30. A well-known example is the preservation of mutually exclusive legal opinions in rabbinic texts, as well as the stunning affirmation that divergent opinions are nonetheless “the words of the living God” (b. Erub. 13b).


33. Hartman is a modern Orthodox Jew. I am a Conservative Jew toward the “right” end of the observance spectrum.