PASSAGES OF ANNIHILATION: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AS MIDRASH

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PASSAGES OF ANNIHILATION: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS AS MIDRASH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: The Phenomenology of Midrash

I think we live in Biblical times. This is the conclusion I have reached.

Elie Wiesel

He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity. We tell them to each other in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, the Ukraine, and are as simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?

Primo Levi

Is Primo Levi correct in his assessment that the tales told by those who suffered under the Nazis constitute a new Bible? If he is, then in what ways would such stories form a new Bible, and

how would it differ from the old? What might it mean when, in the telling of those stories, a person uses imagery from the old Bible while creating a new one? In this dissertation, I will examine autobiographies--that "new Bible"--created by Holocaust survivors when they employ Scriptural allusions to mediate their experiences, ordeals which are "simple and incomprehensible." I will argue that the allusions participate in, and contribute to, Midrash, a centuries-old Jewish tradition of Biblical commentary. The limitations I place upon myself are these: the Biblical allusions must be made by Jewish Holocaust survivors in their autobiographies which have been written in, or translated into, English. All of the allusions considered herein come from *Bereshit*, more commonly known as Genesis. Furthermore, the lifewritings I am using have all been written by lay people. While a few rabbis lived through the Nazi genocide (a common assessment is that eighty per-cent of the world's Torah scholars perished by Nazi hands) and some of the surviving rabbis wrote their autobiographies, those works are not included in this study because it seems only logical that a rabbi would find the Bible useful in communicating his experience.[1] A rabbi is a student of the Bible, but what does it mean that a lay-person, who may or may not know Scripture well, finds in that ancient text the exact image by which an ordeal of Nazism may be effectively communicated? Therefore, in this dissertation, I will examine Scriptural allusions by Jewish survivors who may or may not be religious, yet who turn to the Bible in order to elucidate their points. This project necessitates concentration on three major areas: literary theory with a particular emphasis on autobiography and intertextuality, Judaism, and the Holocaust.

Consequently, each chapter will attempt to balance these three factors of literature, religion, and history as I examine the Scriptural allusion made by the autobiographer, situate it in rabbinic thought, and show how the allusion simultaneously comments upon Nazi and Biblical times. While I choose neither to defend or challenge Levi's assertion that survivors' stories create a new Bible, I keep his compelling statement at the forefront of my mind. If the Bible is understood to be a closed canon of sacred writing inspired by (or written by) God, then current-day autobiographical accounts can not form a new Bible. But if the Bible represents humanity's interaction with God as recorded by human beings, then perhaps Levi is correct: maybe Holocaust autobiographies are a new Bible. Those who endured the Holocaust wrestled with God and with humanity; those who write their autobiographies leave a record of that struggle. Their writings testify to their perceptions of God's presence or God's absence. In any event, by alluding to the Bible, the autobiographies become *de facto* Scriptural commentary and thereby join in the Jewish tradition of Midrash.

Prior to the analysis of the allusions themselves, I would like to set the framework for two of my principal concerns: autobiography, particularly in regard to intertextuality, and Midrash. Autobiographies about the Holocaust are multifaceted works, and their complexity invites continued scholarly attention by literary critics. In an essay examining the Holocaust novel, Ozsvath and Satz argue: "Never has there been a literary topic that engenders as many paradoxes as the Holocaust" (197). "But," they continue, "Holocaust fiction is not only historical

fiction but, *a priori*, philosophical fiction as well" (200). The Holocaust is, above all, a philosophical question. How could it have occurred? Why did it exist? How could humanity have permitted it to happen? If there is a God and if that God is omnipotent, then is it possible that such a God would have become an impassive bystander while an entire people is annihilated? As Elie Wiesel asserts throughout his work, Auschwitz is neither conceivable with God nor is it conceivable without God. The philosophical paradoxes and practical conundrums raised by novels set during the Holocaust are all the more present in autobiographies. Autobiographers expose the choiceless choices, to use Lawrence Langer's term, that the Nazis forced their victims to make daily. Which line leads to death or to life? Should you volunteer for special work duty or try to remain invisible? If you are ill, do you have a better chance of living if you report to work or to the camp hospital? Is it better to be killed than to kill? Should you stay in the camp, hoping for liberation, or join the march out of the camp, trusting that you are walking towards freedom? Moreover, the act of writing engages ontological decisions, decisions with which such authors as Wiesel constantly wrestle. How does one convey the inexpressible? Given the magnitude of evil, is silence the most appropriate response? Or should one speak out in order to tell the world and honor those who cannot speak? Can one write about something that defies comprehension? Add to the burden of philosophical questions the insistent theological dilemmas about God. Where was God during the Holocaust? Should God be blamed, or does the burden of guilt fall entirely upon human beings? Does the prisoner's anguish prove that God was there, suffering

with the victims, or rather are camps in themselves proof that God was dead, absent or ineffectual? One concentration camp survivor was challenged as to where God had been during that time; the survivor "responded calmly [in Yiddish], 'He was with us'" (qtd Carmy 7, brackets in text). Yet for every declaration of God's presence is the assertion that God could not have been there. Lucille Eichengreen, for example, recalls preparing to say the *kaddish* for her father: "I wondered if I should recite the Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead. Its words glorify God and his mercy, but after Auschwitz, I had stopped believing in either one" (198). The Jews have long had a concept of being the chosen people. What does it mean to be chosen, be it by God or by the Nazis? Do such questions dictate that a Holocaust autobiography must be a spiritual autobiography? Yet how would we evaluate a "spiritual autobiography" written by a woman who confesses that her belief in God evaporated alongside the smoke of the camp's crematoria or by a man perplexed that the Nazis tortured him because they deemed him to be a Jew when Judaism was never part of his life?

Such questions suggest the manifold difficulties contained within the subject matter; furthermore, the difficulties extend even to the point of what to call the systematic Nazi murder of the Jews. Given the magnitude of the slaughter and the moral questions that consequently arise, we should not be surprised that words fail. The most common term is *Holocaust*. The word is understood to mean the Nazi genocide upon the Jews and others and is generally capitalized to

distinguish the Nazi endeavor from other destructive acts, such as a nuclear holocaust. Many prefer *Shoah*, which implies global disaster; this will be the term that I will generally use. A few prefer the *Event*, with the capital "E" symbolizing its primal place in our times; some use *whirlwind* to convey the violent, exterior force that swept away so many. Still others employ *Night and Fog*, which alludes to the official Nazi euphemism for the Final Solution and conjures the era's dark, oblique nature. Less well known among non-Jewish readers is the term *hurban* (sometimes transliterated as *hurbn*), which connotes violation and destruction. These terms may be viewed as synonyms and will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation; however, I share in the wide-spread regret that *Holocaust* has become the most familiar term because its Greek etymology connotes a wholly burnt sacrifice with which God is pleased.[2]

The manifold issues raised by the Shoah, contained within the controversy over its terminology, will be a constant undercurrent in the consideration of Scriptural allusions found in survivors' autobiographies. Allusions to the Bible raise religious questions; allusions as a literary device point to authorial decisions. Peter J. Rabinowitz goes so far as to declare that "any intertextual connection whatsoever is significant" (142) and "any intertextual connection is interpretively relevant" (143). Rabinowitz's assertion may be hyperbolic; nevertheless, it raises the stakes for the intertextual connection. Robert McMahon maintains that "a highly literate autobiography will contain explicit references to literary works, allusions, and perhaps more subtle intertextual patterns" (338); such heteroglossic devices are ripe for interpretation. However, he

observes that, by and large, "autobiographical theory has not raised the question of intertextuality" (337). He points out that while theorists have been preoccupied with "the dynamic engagement of the writer's self with the work-being-written," such a focus ignores "the dynamic engagement of the writer with other works and literary traditions in the the work-being-written" (337). McMahon's critique is a pertinent one, particularly as he grounds his study of Augustine's *Confessions*, often considered the West's first autobiography, in light of its literary allusions. By examining the intertextual connections between autobiography and the Bible, I hope to rectify, at least in part, the relative lack of critical attention to this subject.

Any consideration of intertextuality will benefit from Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on heteroglossia, a term which includes, but is not limited to, literary allusions. Heteroglossia denotes a full range of literary devices by which multiple voices are introduced through allusions, quotations, dialogue, and other novelistic techniques. When authors synthesize dialogic interaction from conversation, allusions, or other languages, Bakhtin theorizes, the text pulsates with greater life. "Heteroglossia," he explains, " . . . is *another's speech in another's language.* Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse.* It serves two speakers at the same time" ("Discourse" 324, emphasis in text). In the case of intertextual allusions, those "two speakers" are the existing work and the newly created work, with meaning subsequently resonating between the two. Bakthin asserts that the creation of multiple voices gives life to the text; it becomes a more dynamic work, a vital organism, a work that is paradoxically more lifelike and

more literary. Literary allusions would appear to be a device easily classifiable as overtly literary, but how does heteroglossia make a text more lifelike?

Bakhtin understands heteroglossic discourse to endow a text with life since we can scarcely get through a day without quoting someone else. We repeat things we heard or read from a book, television, newspaper, radio, or the Internet; we quote friends, loved ones, and even people we do not like. The act of quoting invigorates our own speech, making it dialogic. This in itself emphasizes our human need for connectedness. We do not exist in isolation and our quotations prove it, both in our speech and in our writing. McMahon observes that intertextuality "represents reading as well as writing, an interpretation of the earlier work as well as a critical response to it" (338). The fusion of reading/writing, of past/present, and of interpretation/re-creation combine to bring life to the literary allusion. Literary allusions abound in Shoah survivors' texts. Allusions should even be expected, given the classical education so many received and the multicultural world in which they lived. For instance, apt references to Damocles, Sisyphus, and Niobe appear; allusions to figures familiar in Jewish thought, such as Moloch and the golem, also are present. The autobiographers frequently refer to beloved regional poets as well as to Shakespeare, Goëthe, and Dante. Dante surfaces in many autobiographies and who more appropriately? Dante too described hell, but survivors find that even his imagination failed to envision the Nazi inferno.

If quoting from a literary work brings the contemporary writing to dialogic life, then what

might occur when the literary work being quoted is the Bible, a book that many interpret as life-giving? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel argues that the Bible is inherently a dialogic entity. "The Bible has shattered [our] illusion of being alone," he says, for it teaches that "life is a response, not a soliloquy" (*God in Search* 238). The Bible's existence implies an I-Thou relationship, to use Martin Buber's terminology, because the Bible is an account of the interaction between God and humanity. An allusion to it therefore asserts a dialogic continuity with the past, at least, and, at most, with the Creator.

When autobiographers select words and images from the Bible, they create a heteroglossic, intertextual work. The allusions provide vivid intertextual dynamics as they comment on the Bible while, at the same time, they explicate Nazi oppression. In subsequent chapters, we shall see the manner in which the Nazis inverted, no doubt unconsciously, the action or theme of a particular Biblical story. I have found in the course of working with this material that I can no longer read about such figures as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or events such as the Flood and Babel without the spectre of the Holocaust allusion hovering over the text. Artistic intertextual meanings can and will work retroactively, as T.S. Eliot proposed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot argues that ". . . the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (467). Eliot asserts that while art may never improve, it is dynamic:

> . . . what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (467)

Eliot's position that the new retroactively invigorates the old is a hallmark of literary modernism. Allusions are a form of heteroglossia which move across time but not in one direction only. As Eliot suggests, former meanings can deepen, grow, or change because of their contact with the present.

While heteroglossia, allusions, and rereading the past in light of the present are often credited as gifts of literary modernism, rabbis have long incorporated other voices dialogically and heteroglossically in their contemplations. Subsequently, both old and new benefit from the interaction. Rabbis, in particular, have necessarily grounded their written and oral pronouncements concerning Judaism upon their reading of the Bible, primarily the Torah.[3] The core of rabbinical literature may be classified broadly into three traditions: the legal questions that

are addressed in the *halakha*; the nonlegal issues that are contained within the *aggada*; and the hypothetical exegeses which are collected under the rubric *Midrash*.

Midrash is a form of rabbinic literature wherein commentators engage in exegetical, philological, and hermeneutical interpretations of a Bible story. The rabbis might concentrate on just a short passage, a line, or even an individual word, as every element is worthy of scrutiny. The term *Midrash* is derived from the word *search* in Hebrew, a connotation which it maintains (Neusner *Introduction* ix). Appropriately, the Midrash records the rabbis' search for meaning within Scripture, and the compilation of rabbinic insights preserves the disagreements, elaborations, and speculations over any given Biblical passage or phrase. While today's computer enthusiasts revel in the computer hypertext and the links it generates, they may be unaware that Midrash exists as an ancient form of hypertext. Midrash contains dialogic interaction which moves across millennia. A word, an idea, an insight: any of these may form links which cross continents, interpretations, and time.

Midrash is a compilation of rabbinical exegesis, so a reader may go to the bookshelf and pull out *Genesis Rabbah*, the Midrashic commentary on Genesis, say, or Exodus. However, Midrash is by no means limited to that singular denotation. In *Midrash for Beginners*, Edwin C. Goldberg explains that while Midrash is "a specific body of classical rabbinic commentary on the Bible, edited from approximately the year 200 of the Common Era (C.E.) to the ninth century" (xii)[4], it is more than that because "any comment which is directly or indirectly related to the Bible is

midrashic" (xi-ii). Jacob Neusner offers a threefold definition in his guide, *What is Midrash?* When people announce that the Midrash says such-and-such, they could mean "*a concrete unit* of scriptural exegesis," or "*a compilation* of the results of that process" or "*a process* of interpretation" (i, emphasis in text). Neusner identifies three Midrashic attributes: paraphrase, prophecy, and parable (7). As paraphrase, Midrash may bring "fresh meanings" to Scripture (7). As prophecy, it "addresses contemporary times as a guide to what is happening even now" (7). As parable, the final component in Neusner's triad, Midrash finds "the exegete read[ing] Scripture in terms other than those in which the scriptural writer speaks" (8). Midrash, then, serves multiple functions: it speculates about the literary text of the Bible; it records how rabbis, throughout the centuries, have interpreted Scripture; and it contains insights into how existing text can be retroactively charged by contemporary reading in the dynamic, dialogic manner Eliot described.

Midrash is firmly rooted, Walter J. Houston explains, in a fundamental "rabbinic principle" which finds "that difference is more fruitful than similarity" (344). It bears lively proof that a text may render radically different interpretations as rabbis speculate upon a Biblical passage and wonder about the story behind the story, about the words used and the words not used, and about the letters themselves that create the words. Yet for all its lack of consensus and its celebration of argument, Midrash always keeps the Jewish people in its heart of hearts. Midrash, says Gary G. Porter, "is a term given to a Jewish activity which finds its locus in the religious life of the Jewish community" (62). Emil Fackenheim also asserts that Midrash "reflects upon the root experience

of Judaism" and that time is transcended because Midrash looks upon the Biblical passage as both a past and a present event (*God's Presence* 20). If a quality of Midrash is to express a central experience of Judaism, then Jewish lifewriters of the Shoah participate in Midrash because their use of Scripture explicates a "root" phenomenon of all European Jews of the 1930s and 1940s, with all its lingering effect.

In *What is Midrash?*, Neusner characteristically picks out three essential ingredients of Midrash: it is the *exegetical* activity which is based in *Scripture* and which finds its fulfillment in the *Jewish community* (10, italics mine). To read Scripture, to comment, to wonder, to question, to argue, to let the past have meaning for today and today have meaning for the past: all these are aspects of Midrash. Byron L. Sherwin also emphasizes community when he says that Midrash provides "a means by which our story may become incorporated into the continuing story of Jewish experience. Midrash insures a relationship between an ancient text and a modern problem, between ancient events and contemporary experiences" (117). When the Bible is used to explicate Nazism's impact upon the Jewish community, there is Midrash, that is, the nexus of "an ancient text and a modern problem," as Sherwin defined it. Scriptural allusions used by Shoah autobiographers may be understood to be Midrash. Midrash, as we have seen, is more than a bound compilation of rabbinic commentary. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin believes that Midrash "continues to be created" (157); similarly, Rabbi A. David Packman argues that "Midrash is on-

going" (personal interview). The autobiographers' allusions join in the on-going creation of Scriptural exegesis. Ancient as the Bible is, the allusions illustrate an aspect of the Jewish community in modern times. When survivors draw upon Scripture to mediate their experience, their allusions become commentary, and the writers assume a place amidst other readers of the Bible and other Midrashic commentators.

Both Midrash and allusions necessarily imply the activity of reading. Judaism celebrates reading and studying, and throughout Jewish history, the Bible has influenced, inspired, and puzzled ordinary reader and rabbi alike. The rabbis have always read Scripture deeply and actively. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick credit the rabbinic manner of reading as the source for our modern-day close reading of literature ("Introduction" x). Hartman notes that "literary criticism and midrashic modes" have begun "to blend into each other" ("Struggle" 12). "We usually tend to think of reading as a passive occupation," observes Barry W. Holtz, "but for the Jewish textual tradition, it was anything but that. Reading was a passionate and active grappling with God's living word" (16). As a "living word," the text is dynamic, making claims and demanding responses. When Heschel calls the Bible "the perpetual motion of the spirit" (241), he asks his readers to think of the Bible as ever-new, continually creating itself energetically each time it is read or heard. It transcends time and the static imprint of the letter. Buber argues that if the Bible is patronized "as merely religious writing . . . it will fail us and we must needs fail it," but if "we seize upon it as the expression of a reality that comprises all of life, we really grasp it, and it

grasps hold of us" (*On the Bible* 4). Hebrew Scripture, in such a view, is life-giving and life-enhancing.

Hebrew Scripture records Jewish history; Jews are asked to remember their history and to make it a living presence, both in daily life and when such holidays as Passover are celebrated. Heschel succinctly states how important memory is in Judaism: "The Jew says, 'I believe,' and is told, 'Remember!'" (*God in Search* 21). Essential to the core of the faith is the injunction to remember: remember that you were slaves in Egypt; remember to keep the Sabbath a holy day; remember when you see the tassels on your prayer garments to follow the Lord. Such exhortations are but a few of the nearly seventy injunctions to "remember" in the Hebrew Scriptures. A cognate of "memory" is "not to forget," and that, too, has its Biblical place. As the Jews were led into Babylonian captivity, the psalmist urges memory: "If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem! let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you . . . ." That pivotal text from Psalm 137 eventually became the rallying call during the first half of this century of Zionism , a philosophical and political movement which concerned many of the Shoah lifewriters. Remembering, not forgetting, is at the heart of Shoah autobiographies. Remembering is the reason some lifewriters pick up their pens. Honoring the injunctions to remember is what propels some autobiographers to face excruciating memories, if for no other reason than to perform a literary *kaddish*, a prayer for the dead.

Although Judaism has no prescribed dogma nor creeds to which all believers must

submit, there is, in fact, a central principle: the *Sh'ma*. The *Sh'ma* is the divine revelation which Moses imparts to the people in Deuteronomy 6:4 and may be transliterated as "*Sh'ma Yisra'el, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ekhad*." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The Deuteronomic passage, occurring just after the review of the Ten Commandments and other ordinances, continues with the instructions to teach one's children about God and to bind the commandments upon one's body and one's house. Shortly following the *Sh'ma* comes the cautionary ". . . take heed lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Judaism, then, requires remembering agonizing times as a necessary component of understanding one's self and one's community. Although Freud receives contemporary credit for discovering how unresolved traumas affect a person's behavior, the Jewish faith has, for millennia, recognized the desire to suppress such memories while urging people to face them in order that life may be full.

In the spirit of the commandment to remember, the community of Jewish survivors demands: "Remember!" and "Never again!" These two admonishments call out across time's chasm, a half-century after the Nazis pursued with single-minded determination the annihilation of European Jewry. Those two cries demand that we remember a time when Hitler's regime almost accomplished that resolve and that we do all within our power to never allow such an event to happen again. Only a small percentage of European Jews survived the war, the *sh'erit hapleita*, the saved remnant; they ask us to remember history, recent history. Still, we need not be labeled

skeptics if we look at current events and wonder if "Never Again" is a futile exhortation, given the proclivities of the human heart. How can we say "Never Again" when, only recently, newspapers reported "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia-Herzegovina and genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda? Headlines today focus on Kosovo as reporters describe actions that seem reminiscent of the Holocaust. But to "Remember"? So easy; so impossible. Time may erase details, conflate facts, and blunt the sharp edges of emotions. Certain events seem too painful to remember, and so it seems better to forget. Yet Judaism is a faith whose cornerstone is memory. The Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, asserted that "just as oblivion is tied to exile, so is memory tied to redemption" (Patterson "Twilight" 19). It is an uncomfortable feeling to use the term "redemption" when discussing the Shoah, and there are those who would argue that no redemption is possible from the ashes of that disaster. Still, the Jews are told--by God, by Scripture, and by religious leaders--that they must remember.

Remembering is an essential element in writing an autobiography. In a Jewish autobiography which describes a time of Jewish persecution, memory's importance is elevated. Autobiographical theorists, as a rule, warn that memory is a faulty, flimsy and unreliable thing. However, Roger Porter and Daniel Reisberg challenge those theorists in their analysis of "Autobiography and Memory." They assert that psychologists have come to dramatically different conclusions than have literary critics about memory and its validity, and they argue that memory

can be remarkably trustworthy. A key aspect concerning memory centers upon how important the particular event was to the person who is remembering. Using a seed metaphor, that which is remembered plants itself, as it were, by a "series of biological events" which roots itself in "memory consolidation" (62). According to a Dutch psychological survey of survivors' recollections, specific occurrences described were verified, where possible, by camp records and others' memories; the survivors' memories "were impressively accurate--regularly preserving both the gist of many episodes as well as a striking level of detail" (62). Deeply rooted memories were therefore found to be reliable.

Similarly, in Yaffa Eliach's collection of survivors' memories, published as *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, survivors' stories were subjected to scrutiny. Eliach employed historical fact-finding methods to verify survivors' accounts. One aspect that helped root memories was being aware of time--the month, the season, and the religious association with that particular time. What Eliach discovered was that despite the seemingly timeless feel of the camps, Jewish prisoners were often keenly aware of time. Because certain religious practices must take place at specific times, Eliach argues, devout Jews were trained to be cognizant of the sun, the moon, and the time. "Even in the skies about Auschwitz," she writes, "the full moon always appeared on the fifteenth of the Jewish month. A person brought up in this tradition, where time plays such a major role, has a constant awareness of time" (xxix). "Consequential events," Porter and Reisberg find, "are likely to be remembered more completely, more accurately, and for a longer time than

unimportant events" (63). Those who suffered under the Nazis found their lives filled with consequential events demanding to be remembered.

An autobiography written by a Jewish survivor of Nazism is valuable for three reasons: it is a recorded memory of an individual, it is a historical account of war, and it is a testimony concerning sacred history--that is, it will discuss God's presence or absence during a cataclysmic event so centered upon the Jews. I propose that each autobiography bears merit simply because it is a memory of an individual. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, among others, point out that there is a myth of autonomy and individuality pervasive throughout Western civilization (6-7) and while they are not alone in critiquing the "auto" in autobiography, these distinctions falter before the Shoah first-person account. Precisely because the Nazis strove to eliminate an entire people without regard to the individual and precisely because the Event reckons its destruction with numbers in the millions, the Shoah autobiography is important. It matters that one voice can speak of its own experience. It puts a face and a personal history to what is otherwise a numbered entity of the murdered and victimized. Our minds can not conjure with the overwhelming and bizarre statistics which emerge from the *hurban*, but we can sympathetically imagine what an individual went through if that person tells us. This fact alone may explain the longevity and popularity of Anne Frank's diary. Primo Levi, himself a survivor whose writings will be examined in greater depth in Chapter Three, wonders at Frank's appeal and concludes, "a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image remains in the shadows.

Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so. If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live" (*Drowned* 56). Any autobiography serves as a textualized remembrance, and so refers to the people, places and events that shaped the author's life, thereby becoming a "referential art," to use Paul John Eakin's term. References are especially poignant and horrific in the Shoah text as the author mourns loved ones' deaths and recounts the tortures which the Nazis inflicted. A Shoah autobiography's very existence heightens the effect of the recorded memory because the autobiographer was one of the few who survived.

The second inherent value a Shoah autobiography contains is its historicity. Such autobiographies do more than tell the story of one life: they are valuable historical documents. Lucy Dawidowicz calls autobiography the "most direct form of history," history at its most "intimate" (*Golden* 6) and she approvingly quotes Wilhelm Dilthey: "'Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us'" (qtd 5-6). The Shoah autobiography, then, assists the reader in imagining, albeit incompletely, what life was like before the Event and during it. Many autobiographers honor places that no longer exist, ways of life now destroyed. Autobiographies written by Eastern European Jews often evoke bittersweet memories of the *shtetl*, those small Jewish villages which were annihilated by the Nazis, whereas lifewritings by their Western European counterparts frequently describe the sense of betrayal by their home countries. Holocaust autobiographies bear inherent historical value because they record the impressions of a dramatically violent time. As historical documents in a literary genre,

Shoah first-person narratives conflate autobiography and memoir. Literary critics argue over precise definitions which would distinguish memoir from autobiography, but common criteria suggest that an autobiography focuses more on an individual's private life and interior development, whereas a memoir deals more with the historical time and exterior events during which the author lived. The Shoah texts record both internal and external dynamics: most authors present their personal lives, private thoughts, and singular ambitions even as the Final Solution rages about them. Shoah texts examine the mortal clash between interior life and exterior times that occurred when a private life collided with the Third Reich.

As a historical document, the Jewish autobiography is important as testimony of an extraordinary time. Wiesel has aptly noted in a variety of places that although not all of Hitler's victims were Jews, all Jews were victims. Therefore, the Jewish minority who survived, and those fewer still who wrote their autobiographies, testify to what it meant to be Jewish under Hitler's regime. At this juncture, I would assert the primacy of written memories over Langer's preference for oral history. Langer's thesis, as he presents it in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory,* is that oral history represents the most immediate and honest presentation of survivors' accounts because oral accounts are not artfully filtered or composed the way written accounts may be. Both written and oral accounts have their valuable place, but, as Wiesel observes, "[t]he spoken word and the written word do not reflect the same experience" (*All Rivers* 150). The

spoken word can be heard by a hearer in the speaker's presence or it can be recorded. A survivor speaking forth his or her experiences to a listener--be it a solitary hearer or an audience in a lecture hall--gives an immediacy and a physical embodiment to the Event. Oral accounts can also be written down, as in a transcript from a television show or a trial. One problem that sometimes occurs when hearing testimony by a survivor is the listener's discomfort. The listener may be too horrified by what the survivor is saying to listen well, and certain studies have been weakened by an interviewer too overcome to ask follow-up questions or to press for details. The written autobiography represents the words chosen by the author to create a textual world. The autobiography is a form of testifying in which the author may select words and images to convey that which the author chooses to convey without the emotional response of an interviewer or an audience. Written accounts are potentially capable of wider distribution and a larger audience than the oral account. A written account may well be more artful than the spoken word, and all of the autobiographies I consider within this dissertation are, I would argue, art. Langer asserts his fear that the written word, or even a speaker's reliance upon any literary conventions, such as metaphor or simile, creates a situation wherein the "literary *transform*[*s*] the real in a way that obscures even as it seeks to enlighten" (*Testimonies* 19, italics in text). Art does not necessarily make the survivor's account more obscure; its artfulness potentially can bring the enlightenment which Langer calls for all the more devastatingly to the fore.

I have stated that Shoah autobiographies are important for three reasons, and I suspect

that my first two reasons--they are the recorded memories of an individual's life and they are historical documents--are not controversial. My third marker for the Shoah texts' inherent value is an argument with which some will disagree: I propose that they are valuable works because they participate in sacred history. I must hasten to clarify that the Holocaust was not sacred. Everything about it was evil. Yet I suggest that the autobiographies written by Jewish survivors participate in sacred history because the autobiographers must contend with God. Without fail, the lifewriter will assess his or her religiosity and ask religious questions. Why, asks the non-religious Jew, am I imprisoned for being a Jew when I don't even know anything about Judaism? Where, asks the religious Jew, is God? Will this present suffering bring about the Messiah? Has God gone into exile with the children of Israel or has God abandoned those children? Questions involving God reflect the dynamics of sacred history--that is, the interaction between a people and that God, even if it is a God who fails--and as such they substantiate Levi's claim that Shoah tales form a new Bible.

Other victims of the Nazis, among them political prisoners, homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, and more, wrestle with different questions. Charlotte Delbo, for instance, was sent to Auschwitz because of her Communist activities, and a number of Norwegians were imprisoned due to their public protests over Quisling. Many Christians who were in the concentration camps were there because their political activities, based on their theological beliefs, ran them afoul of the Nazi regime. However, the Communists, the Christians, the homosexuals, and others who

were incarcerated were not automatically doomed to death, although gypsies and Slavs were condemned as *untermenschen* under Nazi law and were therefore slated for the same genocidal fate as the Jews. More pressing for the Nazis, though, was to kill each Jew.

Regardless of the individual's embrace or rejection of the God of Israel, the European Jew under Nazi dominion was under a death sentence. It did not matter whether or not the individual Jew was religious or practiced his or her faith or had even converted to Christianity; simply possessing Jewish heritage was enough to put a person under a death sentence. Because the Jewish text concerns God--either God's presence or absence as well as the author's rejection or acceptance of God--it is an important testimony concerning the Jews during a time in which being Jewish was a crime. David Patterson maintains in his examination of the Shoah autobiography, *The Sun Turned into Darkness*, that "denied or embraced but not ignored, God dominates the memoir" (76). God, it seems, refuses to be separated from Jewish history.

I distinguish the Shoah text as being part of sacred history rather than considering it to be a spiritual autobiography. Spiritual autobiography bears two characteristics, at least as I discern from my readings of some of the genre's seminal texts. One characteristic of the spiritual autobiography is the lifewriter's expressly stated intention to trace the development of his or her spiritual journey with God or spiritual principles. The second aspect is individuality: the autobiographer's *I* meets God's *Thou*. Spiritual autobiographies, particularly conversion narratives, typically feature a personal crisis which precipitates the search for spiritual truths and

enlightenment. Such a search compels the author to adopt a manner of living or a code of behavior. A spiritual autobiography therefore traces the author's acceptance of a new-found Ultimate Reality and his or her faith development and, while it may assert itself as a model for others to follow, is solidly based in the writer's individual life. Lifewritings do exist which chronicle the disillusionment with and subsequent rejection of God, or the idea of God; however, none of these texts are likely to be classified as spiritual autobiographies. Sacred history seems to me to be a different genre from spiritual autobiography. Sacred history is a larger portrait, painted with broader strokes, of pivotal or mythic events through which a people perceive their God. Rather than a personal crisis instigating a private search for meaning, sacred history situates itself in a group, a tribe, a people and their common struggle to find a purpose amidst trauma and transition. A collective crisis generates sacred stories. A person's story becomes the people's history, and that historical event becomes pivotal in the people's self-understanding and self-identification.

The Bible is not a spiritual autobiography, although perhaps a claim could be made that the first five books are Moses' spiritual autobiography, but it is, instead, a recounting of sacred history. Written by different authors, the Hebrew Scriptures tell how a people see their world and their God. Not every character described within the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures is a Jew nor a believer in God; yet all whose stories are told, however tangentially, are part of the sacred history related in its pages. One Biblical book that may serve as a paradigm for Shoah autobiographies as

sacred history is the book of Esther. Esther's inclusion in sacred Scripture was not without controversy, not the least of which centered over its relative lack of Jewish motifs and, more significantly, its complete absence of any reference to God. Esther's identification with her people and her fight to save the Jews from the evil and anti-Semitic Haman is remembered by Jews each year during the festival of Purim. The oppression of the Jews is a pattern that naturally characterizes Shoah autobiographies; whether or not the lifewriter considers himself or herself a devout Jew or even a Jew at all, the author's individuality remains even while caught up in the Nazi whirlwind against the Jews. Like the book of Esther, Shoah autobiographies may not mention God, and yet, like its ancient predecessor, the texts may be read as sacred history because they are concerned with the collective crisis endured by a people which has historical and theological consequences.

One scholar who has interpreted Shoah writings as something larger than autobiography is Frederick Lee Downing, whose unpublished dissertation examines Elie Wiesel's books. Downing proposes that "through autobiography Wiesel engages in the creations of a public self and the writing of a new biography for Jewish people" (135). Downing thus specifically asserts that an autobiography of an individual Jew can be a biography of all Jews. Can one speak for the whole? Is it right to lay the burden of biography of a people upon the autobiography of the self? It is tempting to jump immediately to a negative conclusion. However, Emil Fackenheim states emphatically that the Jews have become a heroic people--not just the individual survivor, but all

Jews collectively--"*because the survivor is gradually becoming the paradigm for the entire Jewish people*" ("Human Condition" 11, italics in text). Any European Jew who lived during the period of 1933-1945 carried the weight of sacred Jewish history on his or her back, regardless of that person's own religiosity. An autobiography of a Jew under Nazi law may well be the story of every Jew, particularly every Jew who lived in that time and place.

If the survivor is a paradigm for the entire Jewish people, and if the stories they tell constitute a new Bible, then here we might do well to turn to Heschel's description of the Scripture. The Bible, he says, is not a book concerned with heroes but rather it is "the story of every [person]" (*God in Search* 239). Readers of the Bible may identify with characters--even those held up as God's beloved--not because they are so good but precisely because they are not. Characters in the Bible are flawed; their faults and sins are full-blown, and they struggle with their fellow human beings and with their God. Human interaction with God and with other humans is, according to the Bible, a messy, often deadly, business. Shoah texts also tell not so much about heroes but about everyday people, people who possess both weaknesses and strengths. The survivor's autobiography is surprisingly free of hagiography, given the human tendency to beatify the deceased; rather, the author presents the self and fellow individuals whose attributes and deficiencies are recognizably human. An individual is described with personal qualities and private memories, yet every experience the author lived through was something any Jewish person of the time faced or could have potentially faced.

If an autobiography written by a Jewish man or woman serves as a biography of the Jewish people, as Downing asserts and as Fackenheim suggests when he called the survivor a paradigm for the Jewish people, then perhaps it is only natural for the autobiographer to turn to the Bible in order to illustrate a point. Not every autobiographer makes allusions, of course, to Scripture or to any other text, but the autobiographers considered in the following chapters have found in Scripture an image that helps them convey the unimaginable. Heschel states that the "Torah is not the wisdom but the destiny of Israel; not our literature but our essence" (167). The Scriptural allusions employed by the autobiographers considered herein draw from the "essence" of Jewish life as their allusions participate in the threefold aspects of Midrash, which, as we have seen, are paraphrase, prophecy, and parable. The allusions also raise questions, questions about the Event and about God, questions which will be explored in the individual chapters, and yet the very art of raising questions is part of the Midrashic hermeneutic. The Midrash constantly asks questions of the Scriptural text. In several places within his writing, Wiesel comments that God seems equivalent to a question. "God is in the question," he observes as he points out that in Hebrew, "God's name [is] part of the fabric" of the word for "question" (*Against* 3: 297). Is the Bible a question? Some would say so, but Heschel sees it as an answer. "The Bible is an answer to the supreme question," Heschel insists, "*what does God demand of us*?" (168, emphasis in text). Is the Shoah autobiography a question? I concur with Wiesel's consistently stated position that the Holocaust cannot be understood, grasped, or explained; it can only be a question.

Therefore, a text concerned with the Shoah must itself be a question. If Shoah autobiographies create a new Bible, then what is their supreme question? From my readings, I propose that the autobiographers' question may be phrased thusly: having endured the Holocaust when so many of our loved ones were murdered, what do we demand of humanity and what do we demand of God?

Publication of Shoah autobiographies, with their attendant moral and theological questions, began immediately after the war's end; Leon Szalet, for instance, published *Experiment "E": A Report from an Extermination Laboratory* in 1945, followed relatively quickly by Viktor Frankl's 1947 publication of *Man's Search for Meaning*. Wiesel, the best known of the Shoah autobiographers, vowed that he would not write about his experiences until ten years had passed, a vow he kept. Other seemed to wait until their children were grown. The vast majority of survivors have not written of their experiences nor spoken formally, and while that will probably remain the case, I suspect that a rush of first-person narratives will be produced in the next few years. As survivors age, some will feel a sense of urgency to convey before they die what they endured. Certainly the persons involved with such archival projects as Yale's Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies and Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation believe that they are in a race against time, which indeed they are.

The initial response to Shoah autobiographies was tepid, both in terms of sales and critical

analysis, and that is to be expected, if we read Wiesel's memorable character of Moché the Beadle as a paradigm of the survivor. Moché has witnessed Nazi atrocities and returns home to sound the warning, where he is heartbroken to discover that his fellow villagers neither wish to hear what he has to say nor want to believe him. Moché's testimony is almost too much to bear, both for himself and for his audience. Other survivors would discover how like Moché they were. Lawrence Langer, one of the earliest and most prolific of the literary scholars in this field, observes that even before the war's end, concentration camp survivors were already asking forgiveness for presenting material concerning Nazi tortures which were already so well known (*Versions* 36). Survivors seemed to feel that their testimony had to be accompanied by an apology. Like Moché, the survivors face an audience who are profoundly uncomfortable with what they have to say.

The first set of publications concerning the autobiographies came not from literary critics but from social scientists, namely, psychiatrists. A psychological interpretation of the concentration camp experience was the declared intent of two earlier autobiographers, themselves psychiatrists: Viktor Frankl explored the significance of hope in *Man's Search for Meaning* and Bruno Bettelheim examined concentration camp prisoners' regressive behavior in *The Informed Heart*. Early criticism focused on the question of survival. "How Did They Survive?" was the titular question asked by Hilde O. Bluhm in an article published in January 1948, based on her reading of twelve survivors' autobiographies. Literary questions did not concern Bluhm; rather, her interest was in "the mental mechanisms of survival," that is, those defense

mechanisms which "protect[ed] the individual from physical death and mental disintegration" (4). While her study was based in psychology, her data base was grounded in survivors' autobiographies.

Questions concerning survival drive one of the major texts in Shoah studies, which is the 1976 work, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* by Terrence Des Pres. One of the first major thematic studies emerging from survivors' written and oral accounts, *The Survivor* presents a sympathetic evaluation of the acute dilemmas endured by those who run afoul of totalitarian regimes. The chapter titles--"Nightmares and Waking," "Life in Death," and "Us and Them"--suggest the camps' binary conundrums. Des Pres is interested in proving that totalitarian governments maintain their powerful control by systematically debasing their people. While highly influential, Des Pres has been criticized for not differentiating between Hitler and Stalin and their victims. One such objection argues that Stalin's imprisoned victims often had a family and a home to which they could return, while Hitler's imprisoned Jews could only assume that their families had been murdered and that they would not be welcomed back to their towns--assumptions that were generally accurate.

Literary scholars turned their attention to Shoah writings in the early 1970s. Irving Halperin was a pioneer with his 1970 *Messengers from the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust.* He focused primarily on fictional texts which were overtly autobiographical and so included Wiesel's *Night*; yet, for whatever reason, Halperin's text has not proved to be influential. A

presiding figure, however, in this field is Lawrence Langer. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination,* the first major analysis of Shoah literature in English, finds Langer admitting that, in 1975, the existing scholarship on the subject was so negligible that "[a]cknowledgments are few" (xiii). Langer has amassed a considerable body of work, including the recently published *Preempting the Holocaust*, although since the 1991 publication of *Holocaust Testimonies*: *The Ruins of Memory,* he has concentrated upon oral accounts.

Religious interpretations of Holocaust autobiographies have been neglected. David Patterson, already noted, is the exception among literary critics, and so the interested reader should turn to his 1992 text, *The Shriek of Silence* and his most recent publication, *The Sun Turned to Darkness.* Other major works centering on religious questions are not based in literary studies. Still, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* by Reeve Robert Brenner is a relevant text; Brenner packs his study with charts, graphs, and statistics based on his sociological survey of survivors' religious beliefs and practices. *The Spirit of Renewal: Finding Faith After the Holocaust* by Edward Feld considers how Judaism might exist after Auschwitz. *I Will Be Sanctified: Religious Responses to the Holocaust*, edited by Rabbi Yehezkel Fogel, contains fifteen essays written by religious Jews who contemplate post-Shoah faith issues. In contrast, Richard L. Rubenstein takes a historical/theological approach to his assertion that God is dead in *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism.*

For years, autobiography was not considered a literary genre worthy of scholarship.

However, with the rise of autobiographical theory proposed by such early thinkers as Georges Gusdorf, James Olney, Louis Renza, and Roy Pascal, and later contested and refined by such scholars as Sidonie Smith, Estelle Jelinek, Elizabeth Bruss, and John Paul Eakin, who are among the best known theorists, autobiography's status in the academy eventually gained respectability. While scholars in the social sciences focused their attention on survival itself, literary critics have singled out such crucial elements as testimony, memory, and gender in Shoah narratives.

Testimony interests James Young as he contemplates the peculiar responsibilities and limitations of survivors' writings in his "Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs." Barbara Foley argues for non-fiction's primacy and immediacy in "Fact, Fiction, Fascism: Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives." Memory is necessarily an important component of the survivor's testimony, and questions about memory's reliability and accuracy must be faced. In *Versions of Survival,* Langer cautions students of the Shoah to examine critically the survivor's memories, and in *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory,* he insists that oral accounts are less subject to distortions of memory than are written accounts. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi examines the relationship between memory and language in her book, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature.* Dominick LaCapra's recent *History and Memory After Auschwitz* interprets several genres of Shoah art (a philosophical problem in itself, given Adorno's oft-quoted pronouncement that there should be no poetry after Auschwitz) through a Freudian filter although LaCapra does not include non-fiction. Marlene E. Heinemann focuses

her attention upon the particular problems faced by women in *Gender and Destiny*, as do Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman in their 1998 anthology, *Women in the Holocaust*. Both texts argue that the Nazi oppression raised dynamics of special concern for women, among which were rape, forced prostitution, anxiety about their children, and fear of future infertility.

Questions currently debated within the academy continue to include testimony, memory, and gender. Have we become so sensitive about Shoah survivors' words that we fail to subject them to scrutiny? Will survivors who are only now discussing the Event be capable of accurately remembering what happened to them? Is gender relevant when the Nazis were so ruthless to both men and women? Were Jewish men in fact more vulnerable, especially during the Nazis' rise to power, because of their circumcision? Has the bar of scholarship been set high enough in Shoah studies? Scholarship questions are raging over Goldhagen's thesis and methodology in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, to the extent that Goldhagen's potential tenure hangs in the balance. Academics battling one another rarely make the popular press as Goldhagen's case has, and it presents an important question: to what extent might a scholar's own prejudices mislead him or her?

The literary study of Shoah narratives, then, is a perilous field. Saul Friedländer states that the phenomenon of Nazism forces a "paralysis of language" (*Reflections* 120). The effect of this paralysis has proven to be long-lasting. Consequently, a problem facing the literary critic is it that

of language and its threatening paralysis. *Writing and The Holocaust* is an anthology, edited by Berel Lang, dedicated to examining the tension existing "between the moral implications of the Holocaust and the means of its literary expression" (Lang 1-2). What language do we use to describe that which defies imagination? How should a scholar critique the Holocaust text, particularly the autobiography? Knowing what the autobiographer has endured, how can we subject the text to the cold eye of literary scrutiny? "We may begin with a suspicion that it is morally unseemly to submit Holocaust writings to fine critical discriminations," admits Irving Howe, "yet once we speak, as we must, about ways of approaching or apprehending this subject, we find ourselves going back to a fundamental concern of literary criticism: namely, how a writer validates his material" ("Writing" 194). Howe's comment is helpful; he gives the literary critic permission to treat narrative as narrative. In what manner has the survivor written? How is the story imparted? What literary devices are at work? How effective are the author's literary techniques in textualizing the author's life?

Still, the practice of Howe's "fine critical discriminations" contains a multitude of traps. Terrence Des Pres addresses this issue head-on:

> . . . to write about terrible things in a neutral tone or with descriptions barren of subjective response tends to generate an irony so virulent as to end in either cynicism or despair. On the other hand, to allow feeling much play when speaking of atrocity is to border on hysteria and reduce the agony of

> millions to a moment of self-indulgence. There seemed one language left --a kind of archaic, quasi-religious vocabulary, which I have used not as a reflection of religious sentiment, but in the sense that only a language of ultimate concern can be adequate to facts such as these. (vi)

He is right: to loosen the reins of emotion undermines the tragedy about which the lifewriter is concerned, yet not to address the emotions suggests that the Event summons no emotions at all. Aharon Appelfeld notes the effect incurred when taking too detached a tone: " . . . I do wish to point out that the numbers and the facts were the murderers' own well-proven means. . . . They tattooed a number on his arm. Should we seek to tread that path and speak of man in the language of statistics?" (84). The Event continues to confound. Saul Friedländer, himself a survivor of the war, acknowledges that any attempt to understand Hitler or Nazism "defies all customary interpretation" (*Reflections* 120). As we have seen in our struggle to name the 1939-1945 war against the Jews, language fails; and the failure of words is but one battle that a scholar of that time and its literature must face.

The challenges facing the literary scholar who examines Shoah narratives is daunting; therefore, I enter this scholarly field with fear and trembling. The systematic murder of six million Jews--not forgetting that millions more were also terrorized and killed--defies comprehension; even Wiesel, who was there, states in the video "Facing Hate" that he reads everything he can on the subject in the hope that he will finally understand it, but that hope is always confounded.

Wiesel maintains that the only response to the Event is silence. But while I understand the appropriateness of silence in the aftermath of horror and death, I concur with the majority of scholars who believe we must speak out in order for the silence not to lapse into forgetfulness. As the Baal Shem Tov warned, forgetfulness is tied to oblivion. "Remember!"

Remembering is at the heart of the autobiography, that testimony of the self. "The self," James Olney theorizes, "expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors" (34). And I believe that we shall know the textualized self of the Shoah lifewriter--his or her individual life, and the historical events, and the period of sacred history--by the Biblical allusions used. In the following pages, we will explore those allusions and its resulting commentary upon the Holocaust experience. Chapters are organized according to the chronology of events commonly experienced by the lifewriters: transportation to the camps, life in the camps, and liberation. Chapter Two examines Frank Stiffel's allusion to Noah's ark as he describes the inhumane conditions of the cattle cars carrying the Jews to the camps. Chapter Three, which will draw heavily from Primo Levi's writings, explores the ubiquitous allusion to the Tower of Babel as former prisoners inevitably record their amazement at the numerous languages spoken within the camps. Chapter Four focuses upon Elie Wiesel's allusion to the *Akeda*, the Hebrew term for Abraham's acquiescence to God's enigmatic command to sacrifice his son Isaac. Chapter Five concludes with the camp's liberation through the filter of Jacob wrestling with the

angel, an allusion made by Ka-Tzetnik 135633. In each chapter, I plan to demonstrate the multiple levels of meaning created by the Scriptural allusions as the lifewriters use them to comment at once upon Hebrew Scriptures and upon the Nazis' Kingdom of the Night. André Neher states that the Bible is "the most disturbing theological document ever offered up to human reflection" (136). What better source, then, to mediate survivors' reckoning with the most disturbing Event of our century.

END NOTES to Chapter One

The Phenomenology of Midrash

1. Two autobiographies written by rabbis who survived the Holocaust are *To Deliver Their Souls* by Emanuel Frieder and *The Coldest Winter: The Holocaust Memoirs of Rabbi Samuel Freilich.* I am aware that I used the masculine pronoun "he" in the text when I referred to a rabbi, an appropriate usage when speaking of a time when only men were rabbis.

2. The Greek word *holocaust* is found in the Greek translation of the Bible and means wholly burnt. When this word appears in Scripture, it is in the context of God commanding a sacrifice which should be wholly burned and consequently made holy by God (Ezrahi 2). Thus, many people find *Holocaust*, with its connotation of burnt offerings and holy sacrifices, repugnant, even obscene. Wiesel is sometimes credited with popularizing the term; however, in a 1990 interview, while he defends the term by observing that "[f]ire was the dominant image in this tragedy," he declares that he no longer uses it because "it has been so trivialized and commercialized" (*Evil* 39). *Shoah* carries with it the image of complete disaster, but its etymology, stressing a natural disaster, isolates it from any other tragic events within the Jewish

community. *Hurban*'s etymology, as Andrew Vogel Ettin points out, "places the destruction of European Jewry within a historical pattern including the destruction of the First and Second Temples" (187). Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi elaborates that because *hurban* recalls the "destruction of the two Temples of Jerusalem," the connotation becomes "the *violation* of the continuity of sanctified life within the community" (221, emphasis in text). Clearly, the genocide of 1933-1945 violated the continuity of Jewish life.

3. Many Jews prefer the Hebrew appellation *TaNaKH* to the Greek-derived word *Bible*. As Naomi M. Hyman succinctly explains, "TaNaKH [is] a word made up of the first letters of the Hebrew names of the three sections that make up the Bible. Those three sections are the Torah, or Teaching; Nevi'im, or Prophets; and Ketuvim, or Writings" (xxi). I will consider the terms Bible, Hebrew Scriptures, and *TaNaKH* to be synonyms and while I will usually call the first book of the Bible "Genesis," I shall occasionally use the Hebrew term *Bereshit*.

4. "BCE" and "CE" are designations agreed upon by Jewish and Christian scholars and signify "Before Common Era" and "Common Era." Such designations avoid the theological assertions inherent within B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (*anno domini*: in the year of Our Lord) while acquiescing to the calendar most widely employed in Western culture.

Chapter Two

Ark and Cattle Car: Apocalypse *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

Everybody hated everybody, and cursed everybody, and would have liked to survive at everybody's else's expense. It wasn't a car full of Jews; it was Noah's ark all over again.

Frank Stiffel

Noah's Ark: Genesis 6-9

The Bible has long been a best-selling book in the United States. Marketing strategies tend to revolve around images and themes found in the books which Christians call the New Testament; less commercial, it seems, are the Hebrew Scriptures, that collection of writings which Christians refer to as the Old Testament. Commercial representations of stories from the Hebrew Scriptures exist--there is the occasional Daniel-in-the-lions'-den, and one can purchase a menorah which appears to be modeled upon Jericho's walls, and then there is a rock-opera based

on Joseph and his coat of many colors--but one image from the *TaNaKH* dominates modern marketing schemes, and that is Noah and his Ark. As the new millennium approaches, our culture has latched on to images of Noah's ark in an enthusiastic manner unparalleled with virtually any other Scriptural tale.[1] American consumers can scarcely think about Noah and his ark without envisioning the commercial images that surround us. Found in both Jewish and Christian religious book stores, as well as in children's departments, gift- and animal-themed shops, merchandise is sold portraying a happy Noah flanked by pairs of cheerfully incongruous beasts. Pairs of animals stride confidently toward a large wooden boat or gaze beatifically from the ship's deck, as all on board beam, and why shouldn't they? They are riding out the storm on a boat built especially for them, to God's specifications, no less. Noah and his animals have become embodied commerce, asking to be bought in the form of pictures, figurines, flags, gift-bags, and other knick-knacks. Often the iconography includes a rainbow, the sign of God's promise never again to destroy the earth. Presumably, buyers of such objects take them home to bask in the reminder that God does keep promises.

While a community of smiling animals coexisting harmoniously under a providential rainbow possibly foreshadows Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, the popular image leaves out more troubling details from the Genesis story. The sunny pictograph rejects much of the story's drama, a narrative that Eli Wiesel calls "one of the saddest and most oppressive stories in Scripture" ("Noah's Warning" 4). Regardless of whether the Genesis 6-9 passage is read as fable, etiology,

or archetype, the questions it raises are disturbing.[2] Who is this deity who destroys what he has created? What did Noah do to cause only his family and himself to be saved from destruction? What must it have been like to ride out a storm that killed every other living creature? If a holocaust is global destruction, then wasn't Noah the first holocaust survivor? By examining Frank Stiffel's allusion to Noah's Ark in connection with the transportation of Jews to concentration camps, we shall see the ways in which the themes of animalization, enclosure, and apocalypse resonate *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The Genesis account of Noah and the Flood requires three chapters to unfold. It will be the longest section from *Bereshit* to be considered within this dissertation even though I have eliminated some verses. As is common in Hebraic literature, repetition is seen as an elegant element, but in the interest of being as concise as possible, I have deleted passages which either elaborate upon the theme or repeat details just given.[3] The translation below is from the Plaut commentary, one of this century's most respected editions of the Torah; the Plaut edition will be used for all Genesis quotations herein unless otherwise noted. Readers will note that while most of the text is prose, small portions of poetry appear as well. Furthermore, readers will understand that masculine pronouns referring to God are present in the original text and in Judaic understanding of the deity.

The account of Noah and his ark is as follows:

> The LORD saw how great man's wickedness was on earth, and how every plan

devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created--men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." But Noah found favor with the LORD.

This is the line of Noah.--Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God.--Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with injustice. When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth, God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks.

"For My part, I am about to bring the Flood--waters upon the earth--to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark--you,

your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives. And all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female. . . . " Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did. . . . .

Noah was six hundred years old when the Flood came, waters upon the earth. Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood. . . .

And on the seventh day the waters of the Flood came upon the earth.

. . . on that day

All the fountains of the great deep burst apart,

And the flood-gates of the sky broke open.

The rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. . . .

The Flood continued forty days on the earth, and the waters increased and raised the ark so that it arose above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters. When the waters had swelled much more upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered. . . . And all flesh that stirred upon the earth perished--birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind. All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died. All existence on earth was blotted out. . . . Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

And when the waters had swelled upon the earth one hundred and fifty days, God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided. . . . the waters receded steadily from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters diminished, so that in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. . . .

At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out a raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters had decreased from the surface of the ground. But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot, and returned to him in the ark . . . . He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had deceased on the earth. He waited another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him anymore. . . .

God spoke to Noah, saying, "Come out of the ark together with your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives. . . . . " Every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that stirs on the earth came out of the ark by families.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking of every clean animal and of

every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD smelled the pleasing odor, and the LORD said to Himself: "Never again will I doom the world because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth . . . ."

God further said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I set between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. . . . "

Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backwards, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed by Canaan; / The lowest of slaves / Shall he be to his brothers."

(Genesis 6:5-9:26, slashes in text)

Approaching the Flood story with fresh eyes, we witness events that may terrify or baffle us: God's anger which lashes out against all but a select few, the Flood's annihilation of virtually all living things, and Noah's worshipful sacrifice once he is back on dry land, followed quickly by his drunkenness and his harsh condemnation of one of his own sons. This is a passage of Scripture which asks us to leave behind our society's marketing schemes and, by abandoning that, we must also leave behind our late- twentieth-century's approach to the story. The passage also encourages us to wonder about how it had been read by European Jews before the Shoah. Did they too read about Noah's travels through devastation by imagining happy animals and beautiful rainbows? How was Genesis 6-9 read before our own twentieth-century deluge? Was it read in the sunny light of sentimentality or in the dark mood of the destruction?

Asking the question--"How was Noah read by European Jews before the Shoah?"--is necessary, yet it defies a simplistic answer. No single explanation can cover the entire perspective of European Jewish teaching on this or any other Scriptural passage. Judaism finds God in the conflict of interpretations, not in the consensus. Different interpretations testify to the text's vitality. However, a thumbnail sketch of the diversity of interpretations will run along both theological and geographical lines as we briefly examine the conditions of nineteenth-century Europe--the time, place, and culture of the Shoah survivors' immediate ancestors. An Orthodox Jew would have read the Torah as a historically accurate account which had been faithfully

produced by Moses himself. Other Jewish believers would read Scripture as a timeless truth that teaches through metaphor, symbol, and myth. Still others treated the Bible no differently than a fairy tale. Furthermore, the majority of Eastern European Jews were less integrated into the Gentile culture than their Western European brethren, and thus their fidelity to Jewish teaching would be based in a traditional Scriptural exegesis. Jews of Western Europe, however, were more likely to be of nominal practitioners of their faith, if not agnostic or fully assimilated to the point of conversion. Any of these conditions would affect how Scripture was taught and how it was heard.

Jews maintained different ways of life depending on which European area they lived. In his comparative study of Jewish civilization, S. N. Eisenstadt surmises that "rather distinct patterns of Jewish cultural and social" life emerged in the different countries and regions of Europe (103), to the extent that a "great divide" existed, with Western Europe through Germany making up one polarity and Eastern Europe through parts of Russia making up the other (104). Eisenstadt explains:

> The great heterogeneity of Jewish life . . . went far beyond the heterogeneity of customs that could be found in different Jewish communities in the exilic period. In modern times, such heterogeneity entailed not only differences in customs or in the scope of communal, educational, and cultural activities, nor in the relative importance of such activities. This heterogeneity already entailed

> far-reaching differences in some of the very central aspects of Jewish life: of communal organization, in the patterns of Jewish collectivity and collective identity; in the ideological meaning that was attributed to these different patterns of religious observances and in their relations to their host societies. (105)

During the nineteenth-century, Jews of Western Europe were increasingly exposed to Gentile culture and, consequently, secular education. Ismar Elbogen assesses Jewish Western European culture of the time thusly: "Parents responsible for education were concerned lest too much Jewish knowledge should serve to isolate their children, burden them with a heavy load, render them unfit for the struggle of life; and so they hindered rather than promoted intensive Jewish education for their children" (100). Jay R. Berkovitz argues in his study of Jewish life in nineteenth-century France that educators sought "to condense the subject matter of the Jewish religion so that religious instruction could conform to the students' crowded schedules" (182). Jewish teaching in France emphasized less the exclusive claims of Judaism's chosen status and more the universality of all people of good will (184). Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein similarly finds the roots of the Western Jewish assimilation into Gentile society within the nineteenth-century's "seductive call of modernity and emancipation" (193). Thus, the assimilated or even converted Jews of Western Europe may be understood to be the product of the appeals of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on universal brotherhood. (The gendered term must remain, as

it would be false to write "and sisterhood" with regard to European humanism and Jewish teaching at that period of time.)

On the other side of Eisenstadt's "great divide" is Eastern Europe, and there the Jewish culture as found in the *shtetl* (village) and the *beth ha-midrash* (house of study) was a flourishing, lively, and mostly segregated culture fully immersed in Judaism. Eastern Europe was where Judaism's "spiritual hegemony" reigned (Elbogen 520). This is a world that exists no more as the Nazis and their collaborators destroyed it.[4] The Jewish enclaves found in countries drawn upon maps currently as Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Belarus and other areas of Eastern Russia exist only in the memories of a generation who, if they survived the war, are now at an advanced age. Prior to the destruction, Eastern European Jews lived, by and large, within Jewish settlements and maintained a Jewish way of life, although daily demands of education and commerce might bring some in contact with their Gentile compatriots. Abraham Joshua Heschel remembers in his poetic tribute to this vanished civilization that in virtually "every Jewish home in Eastern Europe, even in the humblest and the poorest, stood a bookcase of volumes . . . The Book, the Torah, was their essence, just as they, the Jews, were the essence of the Torah" (*Earth* 42). This was the soil out of which sprang Hasidism, an expression of Orthodox Judaism that stressed joy in the Torah and constant awareness of God's presence. This, too, was the soil which would later host many of the Nazi concentration camps, the Nazis reckoning on the local Gentile's antipathy to their Jewish neighbors. While anti-Semiticism existed, without a doubt, in

Western Europe, it was the Slavic tongue of Russian which contributed the word *pogrom*.

To consider, then, how a Scriptural story was read in any one part of Europe and to generalize it to the whole must lead to a false conclusion; however, the following three men's memories of their childhood reactions to Bible stories, particularly Genesis, may well serve as *exempla*.

Saul Friedländer lived as a child with his parents who, although living in Prague, "felt German" (*Memory* 4) and in whose home "Judaism as a religion had completely disappeared" (6). Despite the absence of Jewish self-identification, young Saul felt humiliated when he and the few other Jewish classmates were required to leave the school-room when the Christian students learned their catechism. He recalls listening vaguely as the rabbi, whom the school has arranged to come, recites Bible stories: "Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the hapless builders of the Tower of Babel and those who *happily* escaped the Flood. I couldn't say whether we listened to these stories eagerly or were bored; all I remember is having heard them" (28, emphasis mine). The adverb "happily" suggests "fortunately "and implies that the rabbi taught the Flood story with an emphasis on the survivors' joy of overcoming tragedy; yet, as Friedländer readily admits, his memory retains no visceral response to the stories. The Bible failed to make much of an impact, and Noah was one name among many.

If Friedländer is representative of the Western European Jew, then Norman Salsitz may speak for those from the East. Salsitz, who was born into a Polish Hasidic family, recalls Biblical

tales firing his youthful sense of wonder:

> When I was only a few years old, I was taught from that book, the Bible, and had my mind and imagination filled with its stories. How I thrilled to those tales--of creation, Adam and Eve, the tower of Babel, Noah and the flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses on Mount Sinai, David and Goliath, Samson, and countless others. So often did we hear these stories, so much a part of our lives were they, that at times we seemed to exist suspended somewhere between the past and the present. (148)

Salsitz's childhood hearing reminds us that children's imaginations can be filled with excitement. For him, the Biblical tales were no fairy tales; instead, they were stories of real people, important people, whose lives could serve as a model (or a warning) for our own. Noah served, as did other Biblical figures, as a dashing hero who participated in God's interaction with human history.

Eli Wiesel was a child of the Jewish *shtetl*. As a boy dreaming of his future in the yeshiva, he read key Biblical stories with a passionate blend of "wonder mixed with anguish" (*Messengers* xi). They were stories, after all, that threw life and death, beauty and horror, into sharp relief, particularly as the stories spoke about the Jewish people. The Bible told stories that raised questions about who God is and about God's nature as it recorded the history of the Jewish people. And so with any questions that would arise concerning God and the chosen ones,

Wiesel recalls, his teachers would "have us read and reread the Bible"--a book which describes the "suffering," the "defiance," and the "permanent conflict" which surrounds the Jewish people (*All Rivers* 19). Biblical stories impressed Wiesel from his earliest days, often in a dark manner, and would later serve him as prophetic paradigms for the events that took place in Nazi Germany. As an adult, Wiesel comments upon how reading the Flood story affects him:

> As I reread Noah, I see myself as a child, younger than my son, in a *cheder*, somewhere in the shadows of the Carpathian mountains, leaning over an old torn *chumash*, under the watchful eye of the teacher. I see myself and the world before . . . before the other deluge, the one my generation had to endure. ("Noah's Warning" 5, ellipsis in text)

Noah ushers him back to a time before the storm, back to his childhood; Noah's story seems to Wiesel not to describe the past, but rather the future that awaited him.

If the written memories by Friedländer, Salsitz, and Wiesel are representative of how the Noah story was read before the war, then Noah evokes a response that appears to be a combination of the quality of the teaching, the imagination of the hearer, and the personality of the child. For Friedländer, the story is one among countless others heard in childhood which contributed little to his life. For Salsitz, Noah was an important component in a grand adventure, an extraordinary man who could inspire a young boy. For Wiesel, Noah's story hinted at all the tragedy that may await an unsuspecting person, an unsuspecting people.

The dark tone that Noah's story possesses, but which our own culture stubbornly ignores, was not lost on Frank Stiffel. His autobiography, *The Tale of the Ring: A Kaddish,* is not one of the better-known survivors' texts, but his dramatic account deserves a wider readership. Stiffel describes extraordinary war-time adventures that include escaping from a notorious death camp, living as an Aryan, and trusting in a ring that seemed to him to possess magical powers. He employs the Noah's Ark allusion when he describes the cattle car transporting him to a concentration camp:

> Everybody hated everybody, and cursed everybody, and would have liked to survive at everybody's else's expense. It wasn't a car full of Jews; it was Noah's ark all over again. Suddenly, these were not people but animals. Sick animals, dying animals, raging animals. The air of the slaughterhouse was all over us. (69)

Stiffel forces readers to put behind them the cheerful image of animals happily co-existing on a safe ship; rather, his imagery causes readers to imagine the dark, dank aspects of animals journeying in a contained space through a harrowing event destroying all that had been previously known. People were no longer people; they were animals, trapped, under the control of malevolent masters. Jews and other victims of the Nazis were treated like animals--confined, contained, deprived, and destined for slaughter. They were suffering from a systematic process of humiliation that began immediately upon the Nazi seizure of political and military power.

Once the Nazis assumed governmental control, previously unimaginable hardships were instituted immediately. The Nazi tactic of strong-arming their enemies into defeat was observable from the beginning of their reign. Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933; legal pogroms against the Jews were instantly instituted. Only six months after Hitler's assumption of power, the German rabbis of the independent Orthodox communities wrote him in protest of the "wholly intolerable" condition of the Jewish people (qtd in Mosse 59). The immediate restrictions placed upon Jews regarding employment, combined with the Nazi boycott of Jewish-owned businesses, made it clear to the rabbis "*that the German Jew has been sentenced to a slow but certain death by starvation*" (60, italics in text). Not content for Jews to experience a slow but certain death, the Nazis accelerated that process. Soon after the Nazis overtook Poland and much of eastern Europe, they issued decrees forcing Jews into ghettos. Stiffel protests that words fail to describe the Warsaw Ghetto, a "shameful monument to the depravity of Western culture" (50). Alexander Donat, whose *The Holocaust Kingdom* will be examined in greater depth in a later chapter, records the severe physical restrictions of life in the Warsaw Ghetto :

> The most unmistakable indication of Nazi intentions concerning the Jews was the food ration. Germans in Warsaw were allotted 2,500 calories a day and could obtain a wide variety of goods at fixed prices in special stores. The Jewish ration came to less than 200 calories a day for which Jews

paid twenty times the price Germans did. (7)

The ever-tightening noose of the Nuremberg Laws and the creation of ghettos served its purpose: virtually all European Jews were physically, psychologically, and spiritually beaten down through starvation, beatings, and abuse. Literally sealed off from the rest of the world, ghetto inhabitants held on as best they could to their dignity, to their humanity. Those who did not die in the ghetto were eventually rounded up, starved, anxious, and ill, for deportation to labor and concentration camps.

By insisting that the cattle car equaled Noah's ark, Stiffel acknowledges that the bestial that so often surfaces in life-or-death situations, and his readers may sympathize with that terrorized collection of humanity who traveled with him to the concentration camp. The Flood signifies chaos, and chaos is frightening. The "concept of the Flood as a returning to primeval chaos," explains Nahum Sarna, "has profound moral implications. For it means that in biblical theology human wickedness, the inhumanity of man to man, undermines the very foundations of society" (55). All who traveled in the modern arks knew that they were buffeted not by the primeval chaos but rather by its modern incarnation. The "animals" who filled Stiffel's train compartment, and so many others like it, were not illustrative of the contemporary American sentimental understanding of animals as either lovable pets or dignified fellow creatures. Rather, Stiffel captures the degraded status of an animal, especially an animal tortured by thirst, by

entrapment, and by fear. Readers may recognize that people are sometimes referred to as beasts or animals when they savagely grasp at something; Stiffel's allusion forces readers to consider multiple levels of the animalization metaphor. In the Nazi lexicon, bestial associations were not attached to the Nazis' own clawing after power but rather were linked to the people whom they deemed inferior, and so an integral part of the Nazi assault on the integrity of the Jews' humanity was the Nazi rhyming of Jew with animal. Such an equation makes all the more apt Stiffel's observation that the Jews in the cattle cars were like animals--in their powerlessness and in their instinctual desire to survive.

Gerda Weissmann Klein recalls the humiliation felt when she and her father's business associate dared to walk past the factory where her father had formerly worked. "Instinctively, I looked toward the windows of my father's office. Then I heard a strange laugh from Mr. Pipersberg. Trembling, he pointed to a large red sign with bold white letters: DOGS AND JEWS NOT ALLOWED TO ENTER" (26, emphasis in text). The Nazis displayed signs with identical or similar wording at such public places as parks, pools, restaurants, and stores. Dr. Samuel Drix describes the Nazis summoning the Jews of his community, not insignificantly, in a stable, as an SS officer called them "'dogs'" (54).[5] Judith Magyar Isaacson remembers that because she had to pull a heavily-laden wagon, the Germans "ordered me about as 'Pferd--horse'" (96). Donat states that the Jews resisted valiantly such assaults on their personhood (7). Nevertheless, the years of systematic attack upon the Jewish community that occurred prior to the Final Solution's

implementation rendered them psychologically and physically vulnerable to the force exerted by the Germans and their collaborators.

Because Judaism is a religion and since most Nazis had been raised in an ostensibly Christian environment, one might think that the Nazis who planned the Final Solution may have been motivated on religious grounds, particularly as the Nazis relished humiliating Jews in ways designed to ridicule their victims' faith. To name only a few examples, the Nazis forced rabbis to spit on the Torah, pages from religious texts were used as toilet paper, synagogues were desecrated, prayer-shawls were given to prisoners to be used as underwear, and tombstones were converted into stepping-stones. Nevertheless, religious and theological differences do not appear to be at the core of the Nazi hatred of the Jews. Feld insists that the "Jews were not persecuted for religious reasons by the Nazis, though their demonic image of the Jew depended on inherited religious imagery" (97). Hitler, by blaming the Jews for everything that was wrong in his world, drew primarily upon two paradigms to mold his hatred: economics and biology. Employing an economics schema, Hitler accused the Jews of being either fantastically wealthy capitalists who controlled the world's wealth or plotting revolutionary Bolsheviks who would undermine the world's governments. More deadly than the economics-based diatribe, however, was the biology paradigm.

Hitler and his followers used a biology model upon which to project their hatred. As Hitler's psychological pathology ultimately became officially sanctioned and embraced by others,

the Nazis created "scientific" institutes where racial superiority and inferiority would be examined. Hitler never hid his disdain. According to Joachim Fest's biography, *Hitler,* the leader's hatred was publicly revealed as early as a 1923 public address and as late as the 1942 Wannsee conference, that meeting of the minds which planned the Final Solution. Fest quotes from the 1923 speech at Krone Circus wherein Hitler calls Jews "the 'parasites,' the 'eternal leeches,' and 'vampires upon other peoples'" (qtd 212). Nineteen years later, Hitler's congratulatory remarks to the intellectuals and scientists gathered at Wannsee leaves no room for doubt:

> The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions which has been undertaken in the world. The struggle we are waging is of the same kind as, in the past century, that of Pasteur and Koch. How many diseases can be traced back to the Jewish virus! We shall regain our health only when we exterminate the Jews. (qtd Fest 212)

The Nazi mania for containing, and then eliminating, the "Jewish virus" led to the segregation of Jews into ghettos and, ultimately, the elimination of the Jews at the death camps. Richard L. Rubenstein, noting the stereotypical German thoroughness with which the Nazi sought to decimate the Jewish people, points out that the gas used in the gas chambers was Cyclon B, "chosen because it could kill large numbers quickly and efficiently. It was a variant of Cyclon A, an *insecticide*" (33, italics in text). If a sign linking Jews and dogs was the beginning of the animalization process and killing with insecticide was the end, then the middle portion was, for

many, the train trip to the labor and death camps in twentieth-century arks.

"The story of the Ark," maintain the editors of *Rabbinic Anthology*, "was often used as the medium for inculcating kindness to animals" (Montefiore and Loewe 42). In the Nazi transmogrification of the Genesis tale, Jews, now linked with animals, were denied any kindness or sympathy. When they began transporting Jews in large numbers to the numerous concentration camps spread across Europe, they did not fail to humiliate their victims even further. Since the Nazi propaganda equated Jews with animals at best and disease at worse, so, reasoned the Nazis, Jews could not be transported in trains fit for human travel. Rather, Jews were sent to the camps in train cars previously used for transporting animals or cargo. Animals in confined conditions cannot control when they eat, drink, or eliminate; Jews and other victims of the Nazis found themselves in exactly the same situation. Being forced into a small, usually wooden, compartment, overcrowded, and deprived of sufficient ventilation, food, water, and toilet facilities, some deportees found the journey to the camps traumatic, as traumatic as the camps themselves. Frightened, humiliated, and parched nearly to the point of madness, those humans in the cattle cars guessed correctly that this phase of the journey was the penultimate moment of their Nazi-engineered degradation. Shoah survivors who endured this torment do not fail to describe the harrowing nature of this part of their long, ever-debasing journey: the fears which seemed to rebound within the close confines of the walls; the transportation in vehicles designed to carry

animals; the lack of food, water, and toilets, and perhaps even worse, lack of privacy when needing to relieve themselves.

The trains' overcrowded and substandard conditions initiated the "excremental assault," in Terrence Des Pres's memorable terminology. He argues that the Nazi assault on human dignity included, but was not limited to, a lack of toilets, and the situation "began in the trains, in the locked boxcars" (203). Such a degradation, which would continue in the camps, was a premeditated move which forced people to wallow in excrement--their own and others'.[6] The lack of privacy and the lack of control over one's body functions had the effect of making a human feel like an animal.

The deportees could scarcely feel like humans in their modern arks. Stiffel notices that the compartment he is being pushed into still bears a stenciled declaration of its limitations from its use in the First World War: "Eight Horses, or Forty Men" but he counts 120 people in his car alone (68).[7] Seventy-five persons were packed in the cattle car that transported Isaacson from her Hungarian home to Auschwitz (58). Primo Levi remembers that there "were twelve goods wagons for six hundred and fifty men; in mine we were only forty-five, but it was a small wagon" (*Survival* 16). None within the wooden confines of the train compartments knew where they were going, when they would get there, and what would happen upon arrival. Rumors of death camps were exchanged, but, as is well known, many people refused to believe that such atrocities could exist. The anxiety concerning the future was compounded by the lack of food and water. If the box-car

had windows, they were barred. Those observers watching from the outside can recall the faces desperately peering out from the bars, crying for basic necessities. Packed into the cars, the deportees often desperately searched for a crack in the walls by which a gulp of air could be gasped or a drop of moisture could be swallowed.

The cattle cars which transported Jews to the death camps were mirror-images of Noah's ark. Visitors to the Holocaust Museum in Dallas, Texas, enter the museum by walking through a cattle car. That simple action--passing through time, as it were, via the twentieth-century ark--appears designed by the architects to inspire vicarious memories: crammed as full of people as physically possible, the cars inverted Noah's story, for the inhabitants were destined not for life, but rather for death. Those contained within its wooden barriers had been shut inside by an outside authority, a power who, at that time, had absolute control over life and death. Like Noah and his animals enclosed within the ship, deportees experienced the phenomenon of enforced enclosure. Both the inhabitants of the ark and of the cattle cars were powerless to know where they were going or how long it would take to get there. They could control neither the storm nor their passage through it.

For some, the trauma of enclosure was murderous; rarely does a Shoah autobiographer who experienced this event describe it without mentioning those who died or became insane during the transport. Olga Lengyel, for instance, uses such charged words as "abattoir" and "gehenna" in describing the conditions (19). The cars were an initiation into, or a continuation of,

death. For Lena Berg, who tells her story at the conclusion of her husband's autobiography, *The Holocaust Kingdom*, the hardship of the Warsaw Ghetto had already issued her a death blow. "We had lived our deaths in Warsaw. What survived of us now was only a cattle-car incarnation. They could destroy us, but they could no longer kill us: we were already dead" (307). Wiesel also describes the experience in terms of death. "Life in the cattle cars was the death of my adolescence" (*All Rivers* 75). Livia E. Bitton Jackson, trapped amidst eighty-five people in her train compartment, tries to comfort herself with her rabbi's final words: "'God is going into exile with his people.' I do not sense God in the cattle car. It is dark and chilly. And I tremble with fear. . . . Oh, God, I do not want to die!" (51). Such fear must have overcome every person within the trains--some felt it more strongly, or for a longer time, and some were driven mad by it.

As the trains travelled throughout Europe, the inhabitants strove to catch a glimpse of the surrounding countryside in order to ascertain where they were. A crack in the wood or a glimpse through the barred windows would sometimes permit the deportees to glimpse road signs, helping them determine what country they were in. Isaacson notices signs in Polish and wishes her knowledge of geography were better than it was (60). Levi similarly looks for information: "Through the slit, known and unknown names of Austrian cities, Salzburg, Vienna, then Czech, finally Polish names" (*Survival* 18). Within the train compartments' numbing crush, courtesy was not instantly abandoned, although some would fight for a certain space, with the corners being particularly coveted. But as the minutes slipped into hours and then the hours into days, the

physical and psychological stress was debilitating, and the situation was underscored by not knowing when or how the ordeal would end. Levi recalls that the daytime was bearable because the "state of nervous tension made the hunger, exhaustion, and lack of sleep seem less of a torment. But the hours of darkness were nightmares without end" (*Survival* 18). The humans, designated by the Nazis as animals, were contained within an enclosed space, their future ominous but unknown.

If we choose to imagine what life might have been like aboard either the cattle cars or within Noah's ark, we must give our senses full play. What would we have seen, or, in the darkness, not seen? What were the smells like? The human inhabitants of Noah's ark presumably knew they were keeping their lives while all else perished; inversely, inhabitants of the cattle cars must have intuited they were on their way to their deaths while those outside held on to life. If we place ourselves within those containers riding through the apocalypse, then we must imaginatively relinquish knowing how long we will be contained. "How long, O Lord?" is a refrain found throughout Scripture, particularly in the Psalms; the question suggests that the Lord is slow to action, and yet people can endure if only they know that their suffering will eventually end. How long will the train journey take, and what happens when we arrive? How long will this ark float upon a sea of death? How long must we be enclosed, and what will happen when we are released?

The waters continued for "forty days and forty nights" after Noah's crew entered the ark,

yet less well known is the Genesis declaration that the waters covered the earth for "one hundred and fifty days" (7:24). Doubtless the "forty days and forty nights" phrase is well known since that number is used throughout the Bible, even into the New Testament, to signify a long time. However, there are two periods of these "forty days and forty nights" within Noah's story; the first occurs when the flood begins (Gen. 7:17) and the second when the waters diminish (Gen. 8:6). Such parallelism invites attention to the story's palistrophic structure--that is, a story whose rising action is mirrored inversely by the falling action, balanced in the middle by the climax. In the Noah palistrophe, the number of lines which are used to describe God's displeasure with humanity and the sending forth of the flood waters are roughly equal to the number of lines used to relate the story's conclusion. Mario DiCicco suggests that the "palistrophe is a literary figure whose essential feature is return" (17).[8] If we apply a palistropic reading to the text, does the climax mean that God returned to Noah? The literary and religious climax of the Flood account is in Genesis 8:1 with the simple line, "God remembered Noah." We have seen the importance of remembering for the Jew. But what does it mean for God to remember?

Many scholars and rabbis read "God remembered" as an emphatic underscoring of God's activity: it was not that God had forgotten Noah, but rather that the time was right for God to intervene once again in the Flood drama. The Plaut commentary affirms that the expression *va-yizkor, God remembered*, "occurs frequently in the Bible and consistently reflects a belief in moral continuity" (72). *Remember* in this context simply emphasizes the on-going care God

possesses for the world and its people, and suggests that, while not forgotten, an event may now take place center-stage in God's view. DiCicco insists that the literary form itself "highlights the fact that it was God who acted decisively to save Noah just at the moment when chaos seemed to overwhelm everything, throwing it back into its primeval state" (20). The climatic "God remembered" may be understood as emphasizing the precise moment when God could dispense God's mercy and justice.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to read "God remembered" without holding in tension its opposite, "God forgot." In such a light, the ringing climax of the Flood story may well convey the impression that God had utterly forgotten about Noah, and, by association, the global annihilation that surrounded Noah had been put out of God's mind as well, perhaps immediately after God sealed the ark's one entrance. This is a God who is capable of forgetting the people. Did God not care about those who died in the waters? Did God not care about Noah and his family as they rode out the storm? Is this the same God who appeared to have forgotten those sealed within the cattle cars?

In the Noah account, God is in the details. "Read the story," Wiesel encourages, "and you will be struck by its realism: dates, figures, measurements. One might take it for a scientific report" ("Noah's Warning" 4). The Lord issues clear specifications for the height, depth, and number of levels, as well as insisting that only one entrance should be made. After Noah, his family, and the animals have entered, the entrance must be closed, and Noah is not given that particular

responsibility. *Bereshit* has it: "They came to Noah into the ark, all flesh in which there was breath of life. Thus they that entered comprised male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him. *And the LORD shut him in*" (7:15-16, emphasis mine). I have chosen to italicize that final line (Gen. 7:16b) because it is so short, so simple, that we may easily overlook its significance. We have heard in movies the grim sound of a jail-door slamming solidly upon the protagonist; we might even recall a time when a door literally shut upon us and upon our hopes. Can we envision the story that Genesis tells? What is the sound of God sealing in his chosen, his elect? Can we imagine how a man might feel when he powerlessly hears God's own hand sealing, from the outside, the only door? Would he feel safely secure or hopelessly trapped?

Carol Gilligan observes that Noah's story "is about enclosure" *(Genesis: A Living Conversation* 121). One need not be claustrophobic to imagine the uncomfortable sensation of being locked in a wooden container with no possibility of opening it. This forced enclosure raises issues of control, power, and authority. It further brings up an image of riding out the storm, a storm surrounding first Noah and later European Jews. When he emerges from the ark--when God opens the door--Noah survives when all others have drowned. He is, in a certain sense, the first holocaust survivor. To view the primeval flood as a holocaust is to ask questions about the goodness of God, questions that haunt the world after the twentieth-century Shoah, questions that hover about the pages of survivors' autobiographies.

God set into motion events which killed every person on earth except for Noah and his

family, according to the Genesis Flood passage, and at a certain time, God remembered Noah enduring his dark confinement. If God remembered Noah, did God remember the people at Auschwitz? In an essay entitled "A Kind of Survivor," George Steiner ponders such questions. Feeling as if he, too, is a survivor--he is alive only because his parents left Europe before Hitler's rise to power--Steiner wonders what sort of God permits the existence of the concentration camp. Who is this God who claims to be good and merciful, and where was this God when so many millions were dying particularly heinous deaths at the hands of the Nazis? In considering these questions and concluding from the evidence that God turned away from God's people, Steiner finds Biblical precedence not in Noah's story, as Frank Stiffel did, but in a curious passage from Exodus. Steiner explicates Exodus 33:22-3:

> Moses is once more on Sinai, asking for a new set of Tablets (we have always been nagging Him, demanding justice and reason twice over). There follows a strange ceremony of recognition: "And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of a rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen." This may be the decisive clue: God can turn His back. There may be minutes or millennia--is our time His?--in which He does not see man, in which He is looking the

> *other way.* Why? Perhaps because through some minute, hideous error of design the universe is too large for His surveillance, because somewhere there is a millionth of an inch, it need to be no more, out of His line of sight. So He must turn to look there also. When God's back parts are toward man, history is Belsen. (142, italics in text)

Steiner describes a God--a God, maybe, of good intentions--who simply cannot keep an eye on the entire creation all at one time. Necessarily, this God fails the creation and the people. Stiffel concludes *The Tale of the Ring: A Kaddish* with a lament directly addressed to God: "Oh, God, how could you!" (327). Most autobiographies emerging from Belsen, Auschwitz, and other Nazi sites wrestle with God's presence, God's memory, and God's absence; the authors come to different conclusions concerning God and God's whereabouts, but all must confront the questions. Wondering about God, taking God to task, arguing with God, or even taking God to trial, as Wiesel did in one of his plays: all these activities, normal in the Jewish tradition but viewed askance in the Christian one, cause the Shoah autobiography to become part memoir, part theological reflection. Questioning God's benevolence contributes to the philosophical current contained within the survivors' stories and within Noah's story as well.

If God remembered Noah, then did God remember the people at Belsen, when, as Steiner asserts, God's glance was temporarily somewhere else? Seemingly, God has forgotten the chosen people, just as the Genesis text implies Noah had been forgotten. "In the vocabulary

of Nazism," Steiner writes, "there were elements of a vengeful parody on the Judaic claim. The theological motif of a people elected at Sinai is echoed in the pretense of the master race and its chiliastic dominion" ("A Kind of Survivor" 153). Steiner is not alone in observing that, during the Nazi era, the Jews were still the chosen people. Silvano Arieti concurs: "The Jewish people has been chosen again; in this twentieth century, they have been chosen to face the greatest possible evil" (164). Unlike Noah, chosen to live because of his righteousness, the Jews of Europe during Hitler's reign were chosen regardless of their righteousness, not for survival but rather for death.

Although it has been established that no single reading of Noah will accurately represent all Jewish understanding throughout the whole of Europe, one central point concerning Noah consistently has preoccupied the rabbis, particularly in the Midrash, and that point is raised immediately upon Noah's introduction in Genesis 6:9: "This is the line of Noah.--Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age [*ish tzaddik tamim betorothow*]; Noah walked with God."[9] Noah, his family, and the animals in his care had all been guaranteed safe passage through the death that surrounded them for one reason alone: Noah was *ish tzaddik tamim betorothow,* a righteous man, blameless in his age or generation. As Wiesel puts it, "In the beginning, Noah is good. A positive figure. . . . His name means consolation and promise" ("Noah's Warning" 6). Polak stresses the "notion of stability" which is contained within "positive overtones of the name *Noah*" (71, italics in text). The rest of the world, however, was not

blameless: "The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with injustice" (Gen 6:11). Such injustice moves God to repent having ever made the world; consequently, the Lord resolves to destroy the creation. What had Noah done that caused him to be seen as righteous, and thereby allowed his life to be spared?

Rabbinic thinking on this question has been and remains polarized. Most follow the assumption that Noah was a righteous man *in* his generation, and that the prepositional phrase is damning with faint praise, for it suggests *only* in his generation. He would not be righteous in another, less evil time. Adam and Eve had been expelled from their paradise, and one of their two sons killed the other; God could apparently bear that, but by Noah's time, humanity's sinfulness had become too much even for the loving Creator. The Plaut commentary refers to the Flood story as closing "the first era in man's post-Eden story," and calls it a time of "devolution" and of moral deterioration (71). What had humanity done that so caused God to regret having created them? The "Midrash speculates that it was unbounded affluence that caused men to become depraved . . . . Hand in hand with material prosperity went an overbearing attitude toward God, whom people judged to be incapable of hearing prayer and of enforcing moral standards" (Plaut 71). Walking among the people whose hearts were hard and whose lives were filled with sin, Noah, say the majority of rabbinic thinkers, stood out by his righteousness, yet he himself would not have been exceptional in another time, in a better place. While Noah is praised with an approbative verb--he walked with God--most rabbis interpret that action as less prestigious than

the activity enjoyed by Abraham, the father of Judaism, who talked with God. The verb choice is telling. Abraham argues with God (itself a Jewish activity and, consequently, a form of prayer)[10] to spare a mere city, whereas Noah does not argue with God to spare the world. No, say many rabbis, Noah is not righteous among all people, because he did not exhibit compassion for those who were about to perish in the Flood.

Naturally, such an assertion is an argument; therefore, a counterargument exists. There are rabbis who insist that Noah's goodness was absolute, in his generation or in any other. The Talmud records Rabbi Jochanan's insistence that Noah was blameless only in his age while Resh Lakish counters: "'He was righteous even in his age; how much more so would he have been righteous in other ages'" (qtd in Plaut 71). Neusner seems to side with this supportive position; in his compilation of Midrash, Neusner emphasizes the interpretation that "Noah was found able to withstand the trial and so was proved righteous," and that "Noah's obedience, going into the ark when told, coming out when told, explains why he survived the flood, while the rebels, who did not accept God's word, perished" (*Genesis Rabbah* 2). Some maintain that because Noah was given time to build the ark, the construction in itself was a sign to his neighbors. Surely the neighboring people would have asked Noah about his boat-building; surely Noah warned them of the flood to come and encouraged them to join his family. Those who drowned did so, according to this view, due to their sinfulness and their inability to interpret the signs about them.

Striking in the Shoah autobiographers' accounts is the determination to endure the Nazis' inexplicable fury, tempered by the grief that the same violence attacked the writers' loved ones, people who were pure and righteous. The righteous person may have been a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a rabbi, a child. Sorrow over the death of such a righteous one is virtually palpable, and no Shoah autobiography is free from such grief. Grief, often unresolved, over the death of an innocent person contributes to the "survivor's guilt" syndrome. Gerda Klein writes that her dazed reaction to her "first day of freedom" in 1945 was simply this: "'Why am I here? . . . I am no better!'" (261, ellipsis in text). When I heard Klein speak at a Yom HaShoah service in 1996, fifty-one years after her liberation, she used the exact same phrase. It is the phrase of the survivor. The arbitrary nature of who lived and who died haunts the survivors; righteousness or its lack was no marker for enduring the storm.

Silvano Arieti tries to make sense of the Nazi genocide in his examination of *Abraham and the Contemporary Mind* when he states that "Hitler's implicit intention [was] to destroy the Jews not because they were bad but precisely because from a moral point of view they were good" (116). Arieti's assertion that Jewish *tzaddik* was exactly what Hitler sought to obliterate has, unfortunately, an unauthentic ring. While some might imagine that survivors would be comforted by the notion that the Nazis' wrath descended upon them because of their goodness, no Shoah autobiographer whom I have read has made such a claim. Jews of Hitler's era knew well what Hitler believed and preached about them, and nothing Hitler said or did indicated that he

reacted out of fear of Jewish goodness. Hitler's position was made clear from his earliest speeches and his written declaration, *Mein Kampf*; the Nazi refrain was repeated throughout Germany: "The Jews are our misfortune." The Nazis did not cringe before Jewish righteousness because they could not see it or even imagine it. Righteous or not, in this generation or any other, European Jews died by order of the Third Reich.

Unintentionally, the Nazis mirrored much of Genesis 6-9 in an inverse manner. God was dismayed by human evil and so decided to destroy what had been created and to start again with a small human and animal remnant. Hitler blamed the Jews for all the hardships that Germany had undergone and so decided to re-create a mythical Aryan land; in order to accomplish this, he sought to destroy Jews and others whom he dehumanized. "God remembered Noah" can imply that Noah had been forgotten; Hitler never seemed to forget the Jews, as evidenced by the continued, even escalated, killing of Jews during the war's final year, a time when Nazi resources might have logically turned from civilian murder to enhanced military efforts. God's rainbow in the sky is a signal of the promise never again to destroy the world by water; the Nazi sign, during Hitler's reign as demi-god, may well be the crematoria smoke, a promise to bum all the Jews. God destroyed by water; the Nazis, by fire.

After God remembered Noah and brought him safely to dry land, the deity received a thanksgiving sacrifice by Noah.

> Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking of every clean animal

> and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD smelled the pleasing odor, and the LORD said to Himself: "Never again will I doom the world because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth, nor will I ever again destroy every living being as I have done."
>
> (Genesis 8:20-1)

God is pleased with the sacrifice, and because of that pleasure, the first covenant is established. God speaks, or, more correctly, "the Lord said in his heart" (*Genesis Rabbah* 8):

> "'When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember that the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth."
>
> (Genesis 9:14-16)

Neusner glosses Noah's burnt sacrifice as more than a historical record of ancient cultic practices; rather, he says that the sacrifice is "a substantial and important proposition" for today: "The true sacrifices to God come from those who give their lives for his name," he insists. "So the blood-sacrifice is turned into a symbol for Israel's sacrifice of itself in God's name" (*Genesis Rabbah* 9). Such a reading redeems Jewish death, elevating it to martyrdom.

It may be right and good that Noah's first action upon stepping out on dry land, having survived global annihilation, was to offer a sacrifice. Noah's thoughts are not given voice. The lacuna begs the question: what adjective might have been used to describe Noah? Relieved? thankful? traumatized? embittered? overwhelmed? Best not to settle on any one adjective. Rather, the silence attached to Noah might also be the silence of so many Holocaust survivors, the silence emanating from the magnitude of the Event and from the survivors shushed into silence by a world which refused to hear.

Was Noah the first holocaust survivor? If "holocaust" with the lower-case "h" implies wide-spread destruction or global annihilation, then the Genesis story propels us to answer affirmatively. If Noah was the first holocaust survivor, then he did establish a pattern, a pattern Wiesel describes from his own life. "When liberation came," Wiesel told Bill Moyers in a videotaped interview, "our community created immediately . . . a community of prayer. . . . We said *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead. And I am not sure really that God was worthy of that *Kaddish*" ("Facing Hate"). Noah did not seem to question God's worthiness; Wiesel did. Noah, not a Jew, living in the time before God established the Jewish covenant with Abraham, might not have questioned God; Wiesel, a Jew firmly in the tradition of engaging God in lively debate, never shies away from it.

Noah serves as an interesting paradigm for the survivor. Noah emerges from the boat

onto dry land and offers a prayer and a sacrifice. He seeks to reestablish his post-trauma life by becoming "the tiller of the soil" as well as becoming "the first to plant a vineyard" (Gen. 9:20). This is the man who, in the next verse, passes out in a naked, drunken stupor. "Is this a characteristic of a *Tzaddik*?" marvels Wiesel. "To renew history by getting drunk? Most Talmudic interpreters have judged this incident severely" ("Noah's Warning" 15). Should we expect the survivor to live in joyful thanksgiving for having retained his or her life? Or is it more realistic to expect profound difficulties adjusting to life when home, friends, and loved ones have been swept away? Wiesel states that the survivor lives with the "near-impossibility of loving, or of believing in humanity" (*All Rivers* 299). That virtually impossible task of loving seems to encompass both one's self and others. Wiesel's insight may therefore explain Noah's drunkenness and his condemnation of his son. How can a person love or trust having seen so much death? How can a person start again when God, the King of the Universe, either initiates or observes annihilation?

A common idiom describing inebriation is "to drown one's sorrows" and, when applied to Noah, it is a particularly apt expression. Those of us who have not undergone such a trauma can scarcely imagine what a hard, even bitter, situation it must be to survive when others have perished. It may be difficult to survive, knowing of one's own inevitable human failings and foibles, when those perceived to be more righteous, more *tzaddik*, are dead. How appropriately yet poignantly does Noah act out his grief, he who survived the flood that drowned all else, when he drowns his sorrows in his own wine. The flood waters have receded but those who died are no

more; Noah symbolically floods himself in wine in order to drown his own pain. He may have escaped with his life, but he cannot escape the sounds of the dying. If Noah was a holocaust survivor, then he may concur with Wiesel: "For the camp survivor life is a battle not only for the dead but also against them. Locked in the grip of the dead, he fears that by freeing himself, he is also abandoning them" (*All Rivers* 298-9). To forget the dead is to dishonor them; to remember is to burden one's own life with the weight of incalculable grief. If Noah is an archetype, then his story may be less about God keeping promises and more about the torment of surviving.

END NOTES to Chapter Two

Ark and Cattle Car: Apocalypse *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

1. Given the apocalyptic nature of the Flood story, the up-coming millennium might well inspire increased artistic attention to Noah and his ark. A potential precursor of this includes two television commercials which ran in late 1998, an epic TV drama broadcast in May 1999, and the 1998 film *Deep Impact*, with its theme of global destruction. A major plot point of *Deep Impact* involves a group of people who are selected to survive an event that will surely destroy all humanity. The potential survivors make their way to a shelter called "The Ark," and a moment of screen time even shows pairs of animals being escorted into The Ark.

2. Many ancient cultures tell a story concerning the world's earlier destruction, and scholars of early Middle Eastern literature must contend with striking similarities found within the "Atrahsis," the "Gilgamesh," and the Noah passage in Genesis, all of which describe a flood. What does it mean that three different cultures tell of a cataclysmic flood? Does it suggest a historical event or an archetypal pattern? Most scholarly books on the subject of Noah's ark consider such aspects as literary invention, Scriptural teaching, and historical anthropology. Recent texts which examine

the implications of parallel flood stories are *Noah: The Person and the Story in History and Tradition* by Lloyd R. Bailey and Norman Cohn's *Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought.*

3. By deleting repetitions in Noah's story, I have sacrificed key complexities in the interest of conciseness. The Genesis 6-9 passage gives two different accounts of how many animals were brought to the ark, what types of animals they were, and how long the ark spent upon the water. While those specific aspects of the story may be put aside from our consideration, it is important to note that modern Biblical scholarship no longer maintains that the books of the Bible (*Bible* itself being a term meaning many books) were written by a single author. And that interpretation demands a brief examination of twentieth-century Biblical criticism.

Orthodox Judaism teaches that Moses wrote the Torah, that is, the Bible's first five books. Such an assertion in itself has sparked no end of controversy; the most obvious objection asks how Moses could describe his own death and the subsequent activities of the Jews. A dominant and influential strand of twentieth-century Biblical literary scholarship known as "Higher Criticism" proposes that four principal authors wrote the Torah, those books most of us know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Today, most Reformed and Conservative rabbis agree that a number of authorial hands were at work within the Torah as well as other books traditionally assigned to one author, such as Isaiah. Distinct writing styles and theological interpretations point

to the existence of not only the different writers but yet another figure, an editor or redactor. If a reader reads certain Biblical stories, of which Noah's ark is one, and the Creation story is another, without being aware of multiple authors, then that reader must leave the text confused, because contradictory elements appear. Thus, in the Noah story, the lack of congruence over such points as the kinds of animals admitted into the ark and the number of days it rained indicate, at the least, two authors' hands at work. However, by acknowledging multiple authors and editors' mysterious ways, the juxtaposition of different outlooks sharpens the text's intricacies rather than rendering it unintelligible.

4. The sorrow over this vanquished world is the subject of many books, ranging from the scholarly tome to the poetic *kaddish* to the photographic tribute. Of particular note are Lucy Dawidowicz's *The Golden Tradition*, a historical overview comprised of autobiographical accounts; Abraham Joshua Heschel's evocative and poetic *The Earth is the Lord's*; and Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's anthropological study, *Life is With People.* Eva Hoffmann's *Shtetl* is a companion piece to *Shtetl*, a PBS documentary by Marian Marzyinski, wherein the director follows a former *shtetl* inhabitant on his first visit back to Poland since the liberation. *The Face of Survival: Jewish Life in Eastern Europe Past and Present*, edited by Michael Riff, includes survivors' memories, photographs, and images of the Jewish community which is, against the odds, rebuilding itself. Jonathan Kaufman goes to Eastern Europe to see for himself both the

void and the rebuilding of Jewish life there in *A Hole in the Heart of the World: Being Jewish in Eastern Europe.* Irving Howe's *The World of Our Fathers*, while concerned with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century Jewish immigrants to the United States, contains insights into Eastern European culture as so many emigrated from there. *There Once Was A World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishysok* by Yaffa Eliach is a newly-published, massive account focusing on one exemplary village whose existence was destroyed by the Nazis. The book, while scholarly in its historical research, is written for the general reader.

5. The Nazis insistently called Jews derogatory names; others whom they despised received the same treatment. While incarcerated at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Henry Orenstein remembers the day when ". . . the loudspeakers began to blast a message, the same words over and over: '*Der Hund ist Tod.*' (The dog is dead.) This was their way of announcing President Roosevelt's death" (234, italics and translation in text).

6. Leon Szalet graphically describes the degradation in his autobiography, *Experiment "E": A Report from an Extermination Laboratory*, which, having been published in 1945, was one of the earliest accounts of the phenomenon. Primo Levi also discusses this subject in "The Grey Zone" in *The Drowned and the Saved*, wherein he argues that the assault's intent was two-fold: it permitted the Germans to feel superior to the victims and it caused the victims to feel demoralized.

In *After Auschwitz*, Richard L. Rubenstein considers the psychological abuse of the excremental assault while, at the same time, he frames it within a variety of artistic and religious interpretations of the devil.

7. Overcrowded conditions were the norm for deportees, non-Jews included. "Ninety-six men, women, and children," writes Olga Lengyel, a Gentile, "in a space that would have accommodated only eight horses" (16).

8. For more details about the palistrophe in the Flood narrative, see "God Remembered Noah" by Mario DiCicco, O.F.M. However, Lloyd R. Bailey argues against reading the Flood story as a palistrophe in his book on Noah .

9. The concept of *tzaddik* , a righteous person, is an important one in Jewish thought. Noah is the first person in Scripture to be identified as *tzaddik*; later Abraham will bargain with God over Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten (a *minyan*, as it were) righteous men. The concept of *tzaddik* implies its opposite--the unrighteous exist, and they do so in even greater number. Modern usage of *tzaddik* includes its denotation of righteousness as well as its connotation of saintliness. An ancient belief states that as long as there are thirty-six *tzaddikim* alive at any time,

then the world will not be destroyed. Andre Schwartz-Bart draws upon this belief in his Holocaust novel, *The Last of the Just.*

10. See Anson Laytner's lively book on this subject, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition.*

Chapter Three

Babel: The Heteroglossia of Extermination

The confusion of languages is a fundamental component of the manner of living here; one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasp the meaning.

Primo Levi

The Tower of Babel: Genesis 11:1-6

The human cargo, crammed into train compartments originally designed for cattle, shuttled along the railway lines of Europe, destined for labor or death camps. The transport was, in itself, such a gruelling experience, as we have glimpsed, that those who physically lived through it may not have psychologically survived it. Eugene Heimler describes it as a "nightmare three-day journey which bridged the abyss between two worlds . . . I had mounted the train of

death wearing European clothes, a European man; I alighted at the other end a dazed creature of Auschwitz" (23). Scripture has it that the animals departed the ark "by families" (Gen. 8:19). The Jews who entered together by families into the cattle cars viewed with astonishment the sight before them when the doors were opened--those doors which had been sealed from the outside, like Noah's ark. They could instantly surmise that they had arrived at a place like no other. Departing by families, they gathered onto the concentration camp's train platform, soon to be separated by SS according to gender. In a fiercely perverse way, the Nazis, like God, kept their promises, a promise expressed in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and planned in detail during the Wannsee Conference: the Nazis promised a Europe that would be *Judenrein.* Now, as the Nazis exposed their human-engineered nightmare to those in the cattle cars, the inhabitants faced an unbelievable reality. Here was a place so foreign, so strange, that Shoah writers insist on its otherness in the terms they use, the most common designations being "planet Auschwitz," "the Holocaust Kingdom," "*l'univers concentrationnaire,*" and, simply, "hell." Those who had survived the train journey, and inevitably some had not, tumbled into this alternate world thirsty, weary, demoralized, and confused. They were confronted by Nazi guards who characteristically initiated the newly-arrived with a battery of verbal commands and physical blows. Furious orders swirled about the prisoners, whose immediate fates were determined instantly by the flick of an SS man's finger. Urgent instructions were delivered in a language foreign to many--no, most--of the arriving prisoners, but the initiation process demanded that the words be grasped, quickly and correctly.

The arrival was a particularly violent introduction to the camps' pandemonium--nowhere else does the etymology of Milton's coinage serve the language so well. "Dogs snarl, SS men scream orders, children cry, women weep good-byes to departing men," writes Livia Jackson of her entrance into the death camp (56). Some survivors, particularly Elie Wiesel, focus on the phenomenon of silence hovering over the camps' day-by-day existence, an overarching, aching silence emanating from God and humanity; this silence will be considered at length in the following chapter. However, even Wiesel recalls that the "tumult of the convoy disembarking in the night" was augmented by "[h]arsh shouting, stifled crying, soft moans and the barking of dogs" ("Pilgrimage" 106). The noisy uproar caused Primo Levi to observe that he had entered a world "filled with a dreadful sound and fury signifying nothing: a hubbub of people without names or faces drowned in a continuous, deafening noise from which, however, the human world did not surface" (*Drowned* 93-4).[1] Wiesel identifies the noisy confluence that met him upon arrival at the camps to be the actual language of the Third Reich, a tongue he calls throughout his writings "the language of the night." The parlance "was not human; it was primitive, almost animal--hoarse shouting, screaming, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sounds of beating" ("Why I Write" 15). The noise was omnipresent, as were the sounds of all the languages spoken by a defeated Europe. Liana Millu describes the nightly routine in her barracks, when the "angry voices, in various languages, were calling for silence. *Ruhe! Cihò! Taisez-vous*!'" (36, italics in text). With such a cacophony adding to the intensity of an already horrific situation, it is no wonder that so

many Shoah survivors refer to the noise of the camps as Babel.

Babel is no mere simile. The camps were not *like* Babel; they *were* Babel, insist the survivors, many of whom allude to the Genesis story. Indeed, the Babel allusion is the most consistent Scriptural reference made by Shoah lifewriters. Shoah memoirs refer without exception to the strangeness of the imprisoned European languages--from Norwegian to Greek, from French to Russian--as the macaronic turmoil augmented the omnipresent tension.[2] In Primo Levi's first autobiographical account of life in Auschwitz, he stresses:

> The confusion of languages is a fundamental component of the manner of living here; one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasps the meaning. No one has time here, no one has patience, no one listens to you. (*Survival* 38)

Heimler also uses Babel as a metaphor for the camps' confusion: "It was a strange unreal world to which I awoke. People were talking to one another in every language under the sun. Why was there this noise of Babel in the middle of the night?" (118). Heimler's dizzying juxtaposition of sun/night and hypnogogic/ awakened state textualizes the prisoner's disorientation within *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

Most autobiographers, including Levi and Heimler, place the Babel allusion at the beginning of their concentration camp experience. However, the reference may come at any

point in the survivor's account. Henry Orenstein endured several camps, more or less segregated with fellow Polish Jews; only near the end of the war is he transferred to a camp massive enough to contain the gamut of the Nazis' European prisoners and where Jews mingle with non-Jews. Orenstein is astonished. "I had never seen such a variety of nationalities, from every part of Europe, by the thousands: Poles, Russians, Jews, Gypsies, Belgians, French, Dutch, Danes, Czechs, Bulgarians, Spaniards, Yugoslavs--each speaking his own language, a true Tower of Babel" (227-8). Isaacson places the allusion near her autobiography's conclusion, when she describes her work camp's liberation. As a throng of slave-laborers greeted the American liberators, they sing "in a cacophony of tongues. All of Europe seemed represented in the celebration as a friend of Isaacson exclaims, 'It's a veritable tower of Babel!'" (117). Babel, it seems, reigned from beginning to end of the Third Reich's twelve-year grip upon Europe.[3]

Just as the Tower of Babel image is the most common single allusion made by Shoah writers, so too is the Genesis passage itself one of the most well-known stories from the Bible. Such familiarity may lead readers to assume that they know the story well, and that it is about one thing: how multiple languages came into the world. What we shall discover instead is how autobiographers, most notably Primo Levi, find in the Babel tale Jewish history writ small. Babel, to complicate matters, is considered pre-Jewish history, occurring before the appearance of Abraham, the person who ushers in Judaism, yet Babel and other seminal stories found in

Genesis' early chapters--Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his ark--feature significant motifs in Jewish identity. As we examine the short Biblical text of Babel, we shall want to take special notice of the themes concerning bricks, languages, confusion, and dispersal. In order to emphasize those concepts, I have italicized the words related to those themes.

This is the story of the Tower of Babel:

> All the earth had the same *language* and the same *words*. And as men migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make *bricks* and burn them hard."--*Brick* served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.--And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be *scattered* all over the world." The LORD came down to look at the city and tower which man had built, and the LORD said, "If, as one people with one *language* for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let Me, then, go down and *confound* their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the LORD *scattered* them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD *confounded* the speech of the whole earth;

and from there the LORD *scattered* them over the face of the whole earth.

(Genesis 11:1-6, italics added) [4]

I would like to point out some features of the Babel story prior to examining its significance in the Holocaust, in order to appreciate certain details which would be easily missed. As a literary set-piece, the passage is well-wrought. U. Cassuto praises it as "a fine example of Biblical literary art" as he points to the antithetical parallels of the builders' actions and of God's (231-2). Note too the inverse symmetry between the upward, vertical movement by the people and the outward, horizontal movement by God. Inanimate objects in Scripture often take on a life of their own--the walls of Jericho, the manna in the wilderness, and, here, the bricks of Babel. Parallelism similar to that found in Noah's story may be seen in Babel's; an approximately equal amount of text presents the story and concludes it, with God's seemingly sudden awareness providing the climax.

Reading *Bereshit* in English deprives us, unfortunately, of word-play that is a trademark of Biblical Hebrew, a language and a style of writing that so preoccupies rabbis. In fact, Joel Rosenberg insists that an "essential untranslatability of the Hebrew Bible" exists precisely because of "its saturation with extensive and subtle wordplays" (37). We English readers cannot deduce the author's etymological comment, "[t]hat is *why* it was called Babel" (emphasis added) unless we know that the author is playing upon two connotations springing from the sound "babel." Aldo J. Tos explains: "It was quite likely that the city in the story is called Babel because the Hebrews thought that it [that is, Babylon] was the oldest city in the world; moreover, the

Hebrew word *babal*, means 'confuse,' and sounds enough like Babel to be used in folk etymology for the city in which the 'confusion of tongues' first occurred" (68). Thus, *Babel* establishes a negative tone, with its suggestion of Babylon, always mentioned pejoratively in Scripture, and its association with the verb "to confuse" or "to confound." How appropriately Shoah writers will use Babel to illustrate the camps' confusion and the prisoners' bafflement will be demonstrated momentarily.

Similarly missing from the English reader's grasp of the Babel story is the play on words involving two key words: "bricks" and "let's confuse." Rosenberg explicates the literary device when he points out that Semitic languages emphasize "consonants--usually three root letters--as bearers of the concept represented by the word" (38). Echoing, reversing, or restating those consonants allows a wide range of word-play possibilities; for instance, Rosenberg points out that the word for bricks, *levenah*, metathesizes the letters of the word for "let's confuse," *navelah* (38). Babel becomes a meaningful allusion for Shoah writers with its threefold stress on a wicked place, bricks, and confusion. Babel suggests Babylon, a place of evil; bricks, with its associations of toil and slavery; and confusion, when communication fails.

The Tower of Babel is not a figure of speech for Levi when he is sent to the Buna, a huge facility where the Reich's workers are ordered to invent synthetic rubber. He captures the twentieth-century equivalent in his description of the Buna (which we could read as the despised "Babylon") in Auschwitz, wherein stands the Carbide Tower, a place of infinite labor and of sorrow:

The Buna is as large as a city; besides the managers and German technicians, forty thousand foreigners work there, and fifteen to twenty languages are spoken. All the foreigners live in different Lagers [concentration camps] which surround the Buna: the Lager of the English prisoners-of-war, the Lager of the Ukrainian women, the Lager of the French volunteers and others we do not know. Our Lager (*Judenlager, Vernichtungslager, Kazett*) by itself provides ten thousand workers who come from all the nations of Europe. We are the slaves of the slaves, whom all can give orders to, and our name is the number which we carry tattooed on our arm and sewn in our jacket. The Carbide Tower, which rises in the middle of Buna and whose top is rarely visible in the fog, was built by us. Its bricks were called *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglk,* and they were cemented by hate; hate and discord, like the Tower of Babel, and it is this that we call it:--*Babelturm, Bobelturm*; and in it we hate the insane dream of grandeur of our masters, their contempt for God and men, for us men.

And today just as in the old fable, we all feel, and the Germans

themselves feel, that a curse--not transcendent and divine, but inherent and historical--hangs over the insolent building based on the confusion of languages and erected in defiance of heaven like a stone oath. (*Survival* 72-3)

Why single out the bricks of the Carbide Tower? Levi does so when he catalogues the word in seven different languages. Precisely with this emphatic attention paid to a single word, Levi's writing becomes Midrashic, in its fascination with language, in its attention to detail, and in its prophetic proclamation of Jewish experience. A brick, innocuous as it is, is far from a small detail. Levi's brick litany textualizes the camps' linguistic confusion while simultaneously it manifests the history of Jewish slavery, for bricks are a recurrent theme of Jewish slavery.

Long before Germans threw bricks into Jewish stores, homes, and synagogues during *Kristallnacht*, bricks figured prominently in Hebrew Scriptures as a signifier of hardship. Ironically, our culture might associate bricks with stability, permanence, yet Scripture shows that such connotations are a vain illusion, fueled by human hubris, a connotation of which the rabbis were intensely aware. One Midrash proposes that Babel story warns us not to devalue human life. "As the tower grew in height it took one year to get bricks from the base to the upper stories. Thus, bricks became more precious than human life. When a brick slipped and fell the people wept, but when a man fell and died no one paid attention" (qtd in Plaut 107). Ominously, one rabbi describes the linguistic possibilities present in the Hebrew text when he examines the line,

"Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." The exegete includes this consideration: "The word for 'burn them thoroughly' is written as if to be read 'and we will be burned' meaning: 'this people are going to be burned out of the world'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 51). If Midrash is prophecy in the sense of predicting, then this is a case of reality coming to tragic fruition. Levi's bricks, set amidst the smoke of the crematoria, forces readers to consider anew the camps' daily life. His autobiography portrays a place not unlike the midrashic Babel: in both places, powerful men deemed human life valueless.

Although Babel describes a *chronotope* that is pre-Jewish, the story is fully embraced as a part of Hebrew history. Jewish history properly starts with the account of Abraham, or Abram as he was originally known before God initiated a covenant with him. Abraham's story is found in Genesis almost immediately after the Babel tale, and Martin Buber, for one, understands that the world in which Babel was built was the world that birthed Abraham. Buber reads the Babel story as a symbol which reveals that "no one understands the other. And in the midst of the transformed human world, the world of nations, there stands the unfinished, unfinishable city, Babel, city of 'confusion.' Such is the state of humanity into which Abram is born . . ." (*On the Bible* 28). Abram, the first Jew, began his life in a world that was in chaos. It is a world which God has promised not to destroy (by flood, at least) a second time; the postdiluvian world seems to be nearly as bad as the antediluvian one.

The seminal story involving bricks is the Exodus passage which is recalled every

Passover. While in Egypt, Jewish slaves labored under a Pharaoh who continually sought to make their burdens heavier. Exodus 5:6-9 recounts the hardship:

> That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, "You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God!' Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises."

The theme of bricks, then, appears at first innocuous in Levi's account, yet it draws further connections to Babel, to Midrash, and to slavery in Egypt. When the Midrash tells of a time "when a man fell and died no one paid attention," it looks Janus-like, seeing both backward and forward, prophetically, to planet Auschwitz. Here was a place occupied with slave-masters bearing machine guns; here was a new Egypt where men and women were forced to labor in back-breaking conditions and, should they pause to catch their breath, where they would be shot for shirking their work. Here was a place where employment might consist of making products for the Reich, but might as equally consist of the Sisyphean task of carrying heavy stones from one quarry, only to have to haul them back the next day. Here was a place where the loss of an object

might warrant tears, but where loss of life could not, at that time, be fully grieved. Here was a place where Jews, no matter how observant or devout they might have been before or during the Event, were condemned to work harder because those in command mocked the Jewish worship of God.

With their "insane dream of grandeur," as Levi puts it, the Nazi masters became more fantastically powerful and controlling than Pharaoh could ever have envisioned. They, like Pharaoh, added burden upon burden upon the Jews. Like Pharaoh, they invented excuses as they blamed the Jews for any perceived faults or slights. Any slow-down or stoppage in labor was seen as an attempt to subvert the Reich. Stiffel understands the agony the Egyptian Jews must have felt under Pharaoh's lash when he, dehydrated and exhausted, is forced to carry bricks at Treblinka. Bearing bricks upon his shoulders which soon become "two open wounds," he muses: "I kept repeating automatically in my mind, *Avadim Hainu L'Paroh b'Mizraim*--'We were Pharoah's slaves in the Land of Egypt'" (79). Wiesel also understands that pain and humiliation, which is inherent within slavery, transcend time as he links the Jews of Egypt to the Jews of Nazi Germany: "We are in Egypt / And we are the ones / To suffer God's plagues" (*Ani* 101). And now Jews were once again slaves, Hitler's slaves, because their grandparents had worshipped the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.

The story of Babel is better known for the confusion of languages than for the motif of

bricks, and it is in reference to the multiplicity of languages found in the Nazi camps that the Babel allusion serves most often. Prisoners who did not speak German found themselves in a world where the masters shouted commands in German. Levi recalls that his initial "collision with the linguistic barrier" began when Italian guards handed him over to the SS; he and his fellow Italians "immediately realized, from our very first contacts with the contemptuous men with the black patches, that knowing or not knowing German was a watershed" (*Drowned* 91). His entrance into Auschwitz begins with the train doors opening "with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give bent to a millennial anger" (*Survival* 19). A prisoner must learn, Levi observes, "to reply '*Jawohl*!,' never to ask questions, always pretend to understand" (33). To pretend might at least buy the prisoners additional time, to live for another few hours or for another day.[5]

The German language dominated the labor- and death camps. Although German-speaking prisoners may necessarily have had an advantage in understanding the commands, they too suffered by having their language become "the language of the night." Jean Améry protests with palpable sadness that his language had been stolen from him, that he has lost both "home and mother tongue" (54). Born and raised in Vienna, of Jewish heritage but not of faith, he saw himself "shut out from German reality and therefore also from the German language" (52). His language was that of the Nazis, and consequently the "meaning of every German word changed for us," ultimately becoming "inimical" (53). He, and others like him, mourned the loss of his

mother tongue, a previously comforting language now usurped by the Nazis.

German was the language of the camps' supreme rulers, but orders could be issued in a German-hybrid tongue as well as in other languages. "'*Schnella, schnella* (quick, quick), the guard at the door grumbled in the peculiar Slavicized German that was the lager's lingua franca,'" describes Millu (35, italics and translation in text). Wiesel identifies Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and German as the languages which constituted "the concentration camp vocabulary" (*All Rivers* 98). *Kapos*, the SS-appointed prison leaders, expected to be understood regardless of their hearers' native languages.[6] Since the Nazis granted kapos power over other prisoners, commands were issued in whatever language the kapo spoke--Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and so on. Newly arrived groups would thrust to the forefront any person who could serve as translator; polyglots were not only indispensable to fellow prisoners but were frequently assigned choice jobs which did not require physical labor. Levi praises those who served informally as interpreters, for they were invaluable for translating such "fundamental commands and warning of the day, 'Get up,' 'Assembly,' 'Line up for bread,' 'Who's got broken shoes?' 'By threes,' 'By fives,' et cetera" (*Drowned* 96-7). Noting that most of the Italian Jews who were transported with him did not survive two weeks in the camps, Levi argues that their inability to communicate with long-time prisoners was the primary factor in their high mortality rate. "The greater part of the prisoners who did not understand German--that is, almost all of the Italians--died during the first ten to fifteen days after their arrival: at first glance, from hunger, cold, fatigue, and disease; but after a more

attentive examination, due to insufficient information" (93). The confusion of languages exasperated tension, despair, and hunger, even to the point of death.

Language segregates, and because of that fact, the parallels with the Genesis story become all the more vivid. Segregation, by definition, draws sameness together, so, not surprisingly, same-language groups instinctively drew together. Hostility could and did exist toward other language-groups while persons took comfort from surrounding themselves with others who spoke their own language. Many Auschwitz memoirs single out the Jewish Greeks who ferociously clung to each other, eschewing interaction with non-Greeks, be they Gentile or Jew. Levi mentions a lonely Frenchman greeting each new wave of arriving inmates by asking if anyone spoke French. "'Being together with other Norwegians'" is the reason given by the twenty-three Norwegian Jews who survived the camps when asked what most helped them to endure the agony (Eitinger 197). Many Europeans were, and still are, polylinguists; if drawing upon knowledge of a second or third language helped provide a brief respite and build a friendship, then that language was eagerly employed. Orenstein remembers one of his bunk-mates, a French prisoner of war who was "a very nice and friendly man" who congenially helped him when they spoke French together, as Orenstein's proficiency in that language was limited (215). In an environment of extreme stress, being able to speak one's native tongue provided some slight degree of amelioration from the tension. Or, as in the situation that Orenstein mentions, practicing a foreign language learned in a happier time might relieve some of the mind-

numbing rigors of the day.

More so than Western European Jews, who might have been bilingual due to their exposure to other European or classical languages, Eastern European Jews were, of necessity, polylinguists, juggling languages according to the situation. "We spoke Yiddish among ourselves," Wiesel explains, "responded to others in Romanian or Hungarian or Ruthenian, and we prayed in Hebrew" ("Sighet Again" 125). Yiddish helped unite many a Jew despite the differences of national tongue. Edward Feld identifies Yiddish as the language which, for many European Jews, "had formed the most intimate connection between God and Israel" and was therefore the "holiest of Jewish secular languages" (101). "As they used to say," Wiesel observes, "God writes in Hebrew and listens in Yiddish" (*All Rivers* 292). The language was loved, especially by Eastern European Jews, in and of itself. Poet Jacob Glatstein, who was born in Poland and immigrated to the United States as a teenager before the war to escape the pogroms, found in the Yiddish language the ideal expression of Jewish solidarity, and, after the Shoah, the perfect vehicle by which to write lament and elegy (Goldsmith xxv). In one of his poems, Glatstein begs, "O let me come close to the joy of the Yiddish word. / Give me whole days and nights of it" (*Selected* 119). Rarely did Gentiles speak it, unless they were servants in the homes of a Yiddish-speaking family. Orenstein, though, records a chilling story concerning a Gestapo who "spoke perfect Yiddish" and who used his proficiency in Yiddish to trick ghetto Jews

out of their hiding places (120). Yiddish, on the whole, could be understood as a language proclaiming the oneness of the Jews and provided a means of communication when national languages divided.

For all the comfort that Yiddish generally provided to so many Jews from so many countries, it too separated and divided. Levi ironically notes that he is imprisoned by the Nazis for the "crime" of being Jewish, yet some of his fellow Jews do not consider him to be Jewish enough since he is not fluent in Yiddish. He and his Italian comrades were "suspect Jews" because they did not speak Yiddish (*Drowned* 100). Yiddish-speaking Jews viewed non-Yiddish speaking Jews with suspicion since ignorance of the language could signal assimilation into the Christian culture or disinterest with Judaism. Such, in fact, was the case for many, whose participation in the faith of their grandfathers was not a criterion for imprisonment. Many Jews, particularly from Western Europe, had assimilated and consequently were unfamiliar with Yiddish as well as with many practical aspects of a devout Jewish life. Jean Améry addresses his distance from Judaism in his chapter "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew": "If being a Jew implies having a cultural heritage or religious ties, then I was not one and can never become one" (83). For others, Yiddish simply was not spoken in their region of Europe. A lack of fluency in Yiddish was an unreliable guide to a person's commitment to the faith.

No matter what language they spoke, those imprisoned by the Nazis suffered from the Nazi's "language of the night," to use Wiesel's term. Levi felt that the German language, as

spoken and heard in the camps, was a "hollow language" and one which "deprives language of its meaning" (Epstein 33). The emptiness of the language signified the emptiness of the universe sculpted by the Nazis. Devolving from the German, the Nazi "language of the night" was a language whose grammar was rooted in violence, degradation, starvation, and dehydration. The tortures the Nazis concocted defy the imagination, as is testified in autobiography after autobiography. "Torture was no invention of National Socialism," Améry admits. "But it was its apotheosis" (30). Beyond the spectacular displays of sadism, the Nazis made sure that daily life was steeped in their language of humiliation.

The rigors of the days and nights in the anti-world of the concentration camp insured constant degradations and pain. Even the daily distribution of food was engineered to guarantee confusion and heartbreak. The Nazis, mockingly, failed to issue bowls to newly arrived prisoners by which they might consume the so-called soup that served as the main meal, and many autobiographers recount missing their first meal due to lack of utensils. Samuel Drix, M.D., speaks for virtually all prisoners throughout the anti-world when he recounts his initial dinner in the Janowska labor camp: " . . . I had not had anything in my mouth for a day and a half. And here was a new tragedy. . . . we, the newcomers, had nothing to eat from" (64). Such a situation quickly introduced the prisoners to the principle known as "organizing," which, in camp parlance, meant to obtain a valuable commodity by any means possible. Having organized a bowl, the prisoner then had to learn how to consume the food that was served. The food was revolting. In order to

live another day, they had to force themselves to eat the stale black bread, sip the ersatz coffee, and swallow the moldy vegetables floating in the watery soup. Standing in line to receive the food required savvy, since people at the front were given smaller or more watery portions and those people at the rear might receive nothing at all. No matter where one stood in line on a given day, there was never enough nourishment. Nor enough time to consume it, as Drix discovered, when his first meal as a prisoner was interrupted by a German voice shouted "'*Antreten*! *Antreten*! [Form ranks! Form ranks!]'" (64, brackets and translation in text). Ka-tzetnik 135633 describes daily life in this manner: "A thousand hearts breathe prayer, a prayer from the deepest depths. A prayer in all the languages of Europe, each summoning it in his own language, each after his custom. No, it is not summoned--it erupts on its own: 'Please God, a big bowl . . . '" (*Star Eternal* 76, ellipsis in text). Each petitioner in his own language asking for what he or she would not receive--such was life within *l'univers concentrationnaire.*

As *Star Eternal* dramatizes, each European petitions the deity for a simple, yet essential, item by which survival might be obtained, "in all the languages of Europe," a reference which is hardly hyperbolic. The German imprisonment of other European languages, as it were, was a phenomenon mentioned by many Shoah autobiographers. Levi, whom we have seen mention the word "brick" in seven languages, is keenly aware of the languages which swirled about him. He describes the panic after early morning roll-call, when some prisoners "bestially, urinate while they run to save time, because within five minutes begins the distribution of bread, of bread-Brot-

Broid-chleb-pain-lechem-kenyér, of the holy grey slab which seems gigantic in your neighbor's hand, and in your own hand so small as to make you cry" (*Survival* 34). His lexicon for "bread" illustrates the reality of a defeated, starving Europe trapped within the camps' electrified wires. One need not be Jewish to be plunged into the linguistic pandemonium which so often expressed itself in desire for the most basic of requirements--bread and water. Olga Lengyel, a Gentile prisoner, writes of her reaction upon hearing the moans emanating from women in a sealed train. "'*Woda . . . khleb.*' Two words identified them as Russian. We had heard that so often, we knew 'bread and water' in all the languages of Europe" (143). Bread and water: such elementary needs, so utterly lacking in the universe constructed by the Nazis.

Each day was a struggle to hold on to one's life. In the labor camps, prisoners were worked to death. In the death camps, prisoners could either be worked to death or summoned for extermination. The call to Nazi judgment was "the selection"--a process by which a Nazi official would determine with a flick of his finger who would live and who would die. That decision was frequently based on the cursory judgment of how well or how useful a prisoner looked. Ka-tzetnik 135633 describes the tension before a selection: "In all the languages of Europe--Italian and Yiddish, Polish and Dutch, French and Greek--eyes now ask eyes one and the same question: 'How do I look?' But all with one and the same meaning in the question: 'How do I look?' . . . 'Smoke of burnt bodies is one color, no matter what language'" (*Star* 96, ellipsis in text). The

smoke over Auschwitz reminds some of the smoke arising from the bricks made by the Jews in Egypt, but with a difference. The smoke that in ancient days signalled the Jews slaving to meet the demands of their Egyptian taskmasters is now transformed into the smoke that testifies to Jewish death. The bricks that the Jews in Egypt died making, and the bricks of Babel that scattered the workers, become in Auschwitz symbols for the Jews themselves.

The smoke, not of bricks baking, but rather of bodies burning, is the haunting legacy of the death camps bequeathed to survivors and subsequent generations. If a survivor spent any time at all in a death camp, in contrast to a slave-labor camp, then the dread at seeing that visible sign of the Nazi intent to destroy will invariably be mentioned in the survivor's testimony. In some cases, such as Millu's autobiography, *Smoke Over Birkenau,* smoke assumes titular prominence. Smoke, at Auschwitz and other death camps, signaled that here was a place where Nazis ruled supreme, where, as Levi writes in a poem, a person "dies at a yes or no" ("Shemá" Schiff 205). The thought of the smoke haunted Glatstein, although he left Poland long before Hitler's rise to power. He associates it with the giving of the law to Moses: "And above the gas chambers / and the holy dead souls ,/ a forsaken abandoned Mount Sinai veiled itself in smoke" (*Selected* 70). The uncanny parallel of smoke lighting up the evening sky ties in closely to the Exodus story, a tale which celebrates the motifs of Jewish freedom and of a protective God. Katzenelson, a poet, sees a parallel between the smoke issuing forth from the crematoria and the smoke leading the children of Israel through the desert: "At night, the sky is aflame. By day the

smoke coils and / at night it blazes out again. Awe! / Like our beginning in the desert: A pillar of cloud by day, a pillar / of fire by night" (qtd in Laytner 205). Better known is Nelly Sachs' poem, "O the Chimneys," which begins: "O the chimneys, / On the ingeniously devised habitations of death / When Israel's body drifted as smoke / Through the air!" (Schiff 41). The pillar of fire, formerly a sign of God's presence, became in the death camps a sign of God's apparent abandonment.

However, in the Babel story, God is actively making decisions about humanity and therefore, when Babel is invoked by survivors, the allusion begs us to question the activity of both God and humans in the macabre *l'univers concentrationnaire*. Babel teaches that God's omnipotence will prevail. What does Auschwitz teach? Wiesel sees within the image of the smoke the Nazi assumption of divinity and the Deity's resignation from omnipotence. In "Facing Hate," a video-taped interview discussing the fatal consequences of prejudice, Wiesel asserts that the Nazis revealed, through the orgy of death that they unleashed, that they wanted to be gods. They wished to rule as gods, gods of their own universe, and as gods they possessed the power of life and death. The Babel allusion hints at such egotism. One Biblical scholar argues that the Babel tower imagery was patterned after the Mesopotamian temple known as the ziggurat, which "was an artificial mountain, built of clay, bitumen, and unburnt bricks, and . . . was considered a high place for a god, whose shrine was located at the top of the structure" (Tos 67). Thus, when the story is recounted of Babel's architects desiring to "make a name for themselves,"

the lust for height suggests their wish for a majestic, god-like place. One Midrashic gloss on the word "name" maintains that the "'meaning of the word 'name' can only be idol'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 51). Here the Midrash accurately foresees the destructive energy wrapped up in idolatry. The Nazis made no secret of their desire that their name be known and feared throughout the world.

In their idolatry of making themselves as gods, the Nazis inverted the deity's action in Genesis 11. Whereas God dispersed the people, the Nazis gathered people together. Jews, Communists, Gypsies, homosexuals, and any other people whom the Nazis considered undesirable: all were gathered, counted, and contained. Shortly before the Torah concludes, God offers the Israelites a choice:

> "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.
>
> . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life--if you and your offspring would live--by loving the LORD your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him."
>
> (Deut 30:15, 19-20)

God offered the Jews life. In their inversion of God's role, the Nazis ordered death. God scattered the people in Genesis 11 in order that they might live; the Nazis gathered so that death would reign. Ettin contends that Babel is a "de-creative act" (118); certainly the Nazi version of Babel was an extreme instance of the de-creative. Perhaps little else can be seen as less creative than

the Nazi insistence upon the death of others and the exaltation of themselves.

Babel, then, may be read as God's benevolence: in God's concern for humanity and the self-destructiveness inherently contained in *hubris*, God disperses the people for their own good. Yet the Babel story may be read with more than one interpretation, as any worthwhile story warrants. Babel raises questions concerning humanity's potential for working together, people's accomplishments, and God's anxiety.

Such questions are acknowledged in the rabbinic terminology employed for Genesis 11:1-6. The rabbis call the Babel story "the Generation of Division" (Cassuto 226) or "The Generation of the Dispersion" (*Genesis Rabbah* 51). Although the divine action of dividing and dispersing the people sounds harsh, perhaps even petty, the Nazi activity of summoning and collecting demonstrates the opposite extreme. Yet still the question might be raised: What was it about the builders' activity that seemed to have so upset God? Some, we have already seen, believe that the height of the building suggested that humans wished to climb into the heavenly realms and be like gods. Nevertheless, the text may be read as illustrating God's humor. Otto Procksch argues that God treats sarcastically the hubris of the builders. "God must draw near, not because He is nearsighted," Procksch says, "but because He dwells at such tremendous heights and man's work is so small. God's movement must, therefore, be understood as a remarkable satirical contrast to man's behavior" (qtd in Plaut 107). The Babel story reflects more precisely on

human nature rather than divine, say some rabbis and theologians. "The great city and its tower became symbols of the human desire to resist the will of God," suggests Timothy A. Lenchak (44). But one analysis will never suffice for the Midrash. Rabbi Isaac focuses on the word "settled": "'In every passage in which you find a reference to 'settling,' Satan leaps at the opportunity [because Satan is interested in people who live securely]'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 50, bracketed gloss in text). Neusner proposes that such a reading is a majority view within the Midrash, for ". . . the generation of the Dispersion rejected God's rule, and . . . they became complacent in their prosperity" (*Genesis Rabbah* 51).When human beings seek to act as gods, Scripture teaches, their actions will result in folly. The Midrash goes even further: being self-satisfied is the beginning of disaster.

Nevertheless, some readers question God's response to the builders. The Supreme Being's response seems more like that of a bully fearful about controlling his territory than an omnipotent sovereign. "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach. Let Me, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech," says God in Genesis 11:6. God's worried musings do, in fact, sound like the musings of an insecure deity. Lenchak acknowledges the mood set by those words when he asks, "Doesn't God sound rather vindictive in this passage?" (44). However, he proposes that the motif of resisting God found in Genesis 11 echoes an earlier one, the Genesis 3 passage in which Adam and Eve disobey God. Both Babel and the expulsion from the garden maintain a common theme, Lenchek

argues, of humans questioning God's authority, with the consequence being "alienation (between humanity and God, and between individual human beings)" (44, parentheses in text).

God's activities as recorded in Scriptures are often baffling. The action described in Babel may ultimately be benign; however, the consummate demand issued by God in Genesis, that of ordering Abraham to sacrifice his own son, seems inherently malevolent. It is with that divine conundrum and its Shoah parallels that the following chapter will be concerned.

END NOTES to Chapter Three

Babel: The Heteroglossia of Extermination

1. As mentioned in the introduction, Shoah lifewriters frequently allude to literary works other than the Bible. Here, Levi's reference to *Macbeth* captures the futility inherent in the Nazi universe.

2. Most people, if asked to name the languages spoken in the Nazi camps, might accurately venture German, Polish, Yiddish, among other languages of central and eastern Europe. That there were Norwegian Jews present who, naturally, spoke Norwegian, might be surprising. Psychiatrist L. Eitinger, one of only 23 surviving Norwegian Jews out of the 762 who were sent to concentration camps, discusses this phenomenon in his essay, "On Being a Psychiatrist and a Survivor." Henry Orenstein also singles out the phenomenon of Norwegians in the camps, but those whom Orenstein mentions were not Jews but rather young political prisoners who were punished for demonstrating against Quisling.

3. Gentile victims of the Nazis also have recourse to the Babel allusion, although the Midrashic

associations are necessarily missing. A notable example may be found in Olga Lengyel's autobiography *Five Chimneys*. She too notices how the "cattle cars were being emptied of the bruised and starved human beings who had traveled together, about one hundred packed together in each car. From this vast, miserable assembly piteous cries rose in every language of Europe: in French, Rumanian, Polish, Czech, Dutch, Greek, Spanish, Italian; who knows how many more?" (83). The constant influx of internees from across Europe guaranteed the persistence of linguistic confusion. A particularly aggressive round-up of European deportees, says Lengyel, "caused changes inside the camp. More than ever, Birkenau became a real 'Tower of Babel,' with every kind of language spoken and different kinds of customs practiced" (141).

4. Babel cannot be read simply as an etiological account of how different languages occurred. The story confuses that topic by its very placement since it follows the account known as the "Table of Nations." The "Table" records the genealogy of Noah's sons, as each son's heritage is recounted with the refrain, "These are the descendants of . . . , according to their clans and *languages*, by their lands and nations" (emphasis added). Thus, the chapter before the Babel story records the existence of multiple languages, and the passage following it continues the genealogy. Why the ancient compiler of *Bereshit* placed the "Table of Nations" as book-ends around the Babel story is a question with no satisfactory answer, although Buber sees in the motifs of such verbs as "to spread abroad" and "to divide," the foreshadowing of Babel's message

(see *On the Bible*, 27-8).

For a more detailed discussion of the literary devices at work in the Hebrew, see Cassuto's analysis (232-4) and the editors' footnotes found in the Plaut commentary (particularly pages 101 and 105). A more general consideration of literary techniques may be found in Joel Rosenberg's analysis in Holtz's *Back to the Sources*.

5. Roberto Benigni's 1998 Italian film, *La Vita è Bella* (*Life is Beautiful*) features a surprising moment which highlights the "collision with the linguistic barrier," to use Levi's phrase. The film's unusual plot involves an Italian Jew who is deported with his small son to a concentration camp; in a desperate device to shield the child from the Holocaust's bleak reality, the father pretends that the entire event is a game. Part of the father's ruse is that if the son and he play the game correctly, they will win the grand prize, a tank. Just as they are settling into their barracks, a German soldier appears and demands a translator. Not knowing a word of German, the Italian father volunteers and so linguistically constructs the rules of the game in order to provide more convincing proof to his son that their endurance will ultimately win them the grand prize.

6. Kapos, sometimes spelled capos, were infamous for the pain they inflicted upon prisoners as they collaborated with their Nazi overlords. In the German-dominated language of the camps, it is interesting to note that the wide-spread term *kapo* comes from the Italian for "head."

Chapter Four

Akeda: Silence of Perversity

We have known Jews who, like Abraham, witnessed the death of their children;
who, like Isaac, lived the *Akeda* in their flesh; and some who went mad
when they saw their father disappear on the altar, with the altar,
in a blazing fire whose flames reached into the highest of heavens.
Elie Wiesel

The *Akeda*: Genesis 22:1-19

When Saul Friedländer recalls the Biblical stories he heard as a child in the days before the Shoah, he confesses that those tales meant little to him. However, the Genesis story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son seemed to have made an impact upon him:

> We took up the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac: 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee off . . .' The rabbi told us the story but didn't explain anything: Vlasta [his nanny] could shed only very dim light on the subject; as for my

> parents, Biblical questions seemed to occupy them very little at this moment, when the need to flee the country was becoming increasingly obvious. I imagined Abraham journeying into the desert, bowed down by the weight of years, with his son Isaac at his side, and behind them the donkey loaded down with the wood for the burnt offering and the sword of the sacrifice. On the third day they saw Mount Moriah looming up before them . . . Then for a long time I forgot the question raised by the awesome text, only to see it arise again later, and with what forcefulness! (28, ellipsis in text)

The "question raised by the awesome text" permeates many Shoah survivors' autobiographies and, as we shall see, both the question and the text haunt Elie Wiesel. The "question" to which Friedländer alludes should surely be in the plural because the "awesome" story raises so many questions. If we are to imagine the basic plot outline, we must wonder what sort of agony the father and son endured. A father brings his son to the place where the latter will die because the All-powerful has demanded a sacrifice. Are their feelings those of terror, resignation, resentment, fear, courage? Can they express their thoughts to one another? Do they have hope, hope that the sacrifice will not, in the end, be required? What is there to say before death? Will there be an outpouring of hopes shattered and confessions shared, or does the gravity of the situation compel silence?

Such a scene is not an act only of the imagination: countless Jewish mothers and fathers

during the Nazi era experienced such an ordeal. The Nazis summoned Jews to their deaths, typically as an entire family. As families, many Jews felt a violent rupture when they arrived at the camps and they were immediately segregated by age and by gender. The very old and the very young usually did not live out their first night. Those who survived the first "selection," the Nazi decision as to who would live and who would die, were so horrified by the process that some never recovered. An eery silence seemed to fill the air as that initial selection was made. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 agonizes in his first autobiography: "They left you without so much as a farewell glance, without a sound. But they know where they're being taken. Why don't they scream? Why don't they weep?! Why is it so quiet here?!" (*Star* 100). The quiet filled the void with questions. Anguish resonated in the silence.

Yet among the many contradictions that comprise *l'univers concentrationnaire* is the fact that the camps were characterized by both noise, as discussed in the previous chapter, and silence. "Everything was as silent as an aquarium, or as in certain dream sequences," notices Primo Levi (*Survival* 15). The silence, often disconcerting, sometimes comforting, seems a paradoxical situation when contrasted with the omnipresent noise, and yet such a contradiction seems to be a consistent quality of Nazism. Silence, in and of itself, bears paradoxical qualities: it can comfort or isolate; it can imply protest or consent. Something or someone must be present in order for noise to be made. Noise is a physical reality. Silence, on the other hand, may be noise's spiritual opposite. Noise is finite, material, arising from presence; silence is infinite, metaphysical, arising from either presence or absence.

The silence was palpable. Those singled out for slave labor and extermination felt the weight of silence. Voices which longed to cry out in protest had to restrain themselves, lest the sound bring additional attention and punishment to themselves, their family members, and their barracks-mates. Most victims of Nazism learned well before they reached the camps that to speak out, to protest verbally, was to risk the lives of ten or twenty others, or even the lives of an entire village. Their suppressed rage was often their sole survival mechanism, but more disturbing than their own silence was that of others. The silence of others was harder to comprehend. The silence of the free world rang in their ears and, chillingly, there was the silence of God, the same God who was constantly being beseeched and implored. The divine silence was, for many, the hardest to bear. Ettin acknowledges that "discussing silence in relation to Jewish religion and thought may at first seem paradoxical," as the Jews are a people of the word, a people who have listened to God (35). According to André Neher, the weight of silence emerging from, or emanating toward, the death camps has had a long-ranging consequence. Because of that silence--human and divine--Jewish thought is, Neher claims, beset with a pervasive "sense of anxiety" (136). A fearfulness necessarily accompanies any theological debates about the Holocaust, an Event which Neher says serves as a "tragic invitation to an encounter with silence" (137). Why did no one speak out?

Silence preoccupies Elie Wiesel, the most prolific and best known of the Shoah writers. Wiesel constantly wrestles with a paradox: the immensity of the Holocaust demands silence (who

can speak in the face of so much death?) yet the crimes of the Nazis and the memories of those who suffered require testimony. He is torn between the power of words and the authority of silence. Steeped in Biblical and rabbinical knowledge, Wiesel writes tersely, elliptically, rooted in the Jewish tradition of demanding justice from God. He frequently alludes to Genesis 22, wherein God asks Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Wiesel's allusions to Abraham and Isaac's journey toward death raise questions concerning the nature of God and the phenomenology of silence, as well as its perversity.

The story of Abraham and Isaac found in Genesis 22 is known in the Jewish tradition by the Hebrew term, *Akedat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, a more accurate descriptor than the Christian reference, the sacrifice of Isaac.[1] The *Akeda* is a puzzling tale, often taught as a triumph of Abraham's faith, a stance which ignores the aspects of the story that Nahum Sarna calls a "soul-shattering event" (156). Why would God ask a father to sacrifice his son? And not only any son, any beloved son, but Isaac, a miraculous child, in whose light Abraham's other son Ishmael is eclipsed. The *Akeda* may be an extant story borrowed from a neighboring tribe which practiced human sacrifice, possibly rewritten to demonstrate the mercy of the Hebrew God. Nevertheless, God's mercy is called into question when one imagines a father and son journeying three agonizing days toward the place of sacrifice. The pair traveled in silence, and their silence could be that of fear and despair or hope and trust. Why was the sacrifice set in motion before a substitute appeared? Does the substitutionary sacrifice undo what appears to be a cruel action on

God's part? Abraham departs the mountain alone, and since Abraham and Isaac apparently make their way home separately and are never portrayed in Scripture as being together again, a reader may surmise that the ordeal severed their relationship. While death has been stayed upon the mountain, it awaits at home as Genesis 23 reports the death of Isaac's mother Sarah. Some of the rabbis speculate that she died of a broken heart after watching her husband take her only child to be sacrificed.

Here, then, is the *Akedat Yitzchak :*

> Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights which I will point out to you." So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place which God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."
>
> Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my

son." And he said, "Here is the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the LORD there is vision."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the LORD declares: because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall capture the gates of

their enemies. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command." Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

(Genesis 22:1-19)

The importance of the story in the Jewish and Christian traditions can scarcely be overstated. Christians read it as a precursor of Jesus's sacrifice while Jews contextualize it as the supreme last trial of faith to which God subjected Abraham. Its central position in the Jewish tradition may be heard in auditory reminders during the High Holy Days worship, as the ram's horn, the *shofar*, sounds on Rosh Hashana and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. While, for some, the *shofar* may bring to mind Jericho's walls falling at the trumpet's blast, others may think of the ram offered in lieu of Isaac. Consequently, the binding of Isaac symbolically becomes the binding of the Jews to God (Plaut 213). Shalom Spiegel argues that the *Akeda* might contain "the original meaning of Passover" because the Midrash maintains that a drop of Isaac's blood was spilt; thus Isaac's blood foreshadows the blood placed on the Egyptian doorposts immediately prior to the exodus out of Egypt (51-2). Did Isaac know what was to happen to him as he traveled with his father? Who is this Isaac who has achieved such prominence that he embodies, at least for Wiesel, the essence of Jewish history?

Isaac lived an extraordinary life, yet what is notable about that life was the way in which

events acted upon him. He labored under no illusion that he was the one in control of those events. Because he was a patriarch, Isaac is honored in the triune formula which describes the God of Israel in terms of relationship: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Isaac is placed in the middle of the patriarchal schema since he is Abraham's son and Jacob's father, yet despite his privileged position as patriarch, Scriptural accounts of Isaac's life are surprisingly few. He was a child, as was already mentioned, promised by God, a miraculous child born to infertile parents when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was in her nineties. God instructed Abraham to name the child Isaac, a word formed from the verb "to laugh," but that laughter seems to reflect more the parents' skepticism and joy than any characteristic belonging to the child. After brief nods to Isaac's birth, circumcision, and weaning, he does not appear again until God requests his sacrifice.[2] Isaac survived being placed upon the sacrificial altar because his father's hand was stopped, but Isaac's life was never the same. After his harrowing encounter with his own near-death, Isaac leaves Mount Moriah to discover that his mother is dead, and, significantly, the Bible records no further interaction between Abraham and Isaac.

Isaac's marriage to Rebekka seems to have been a happy one, but a strange note is sounded in their engagement story, a tale in which an emissary meets Isaac's future bride by a well. Betrothals by a well are a common set piece in Scripture, as Robert Alter points out in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, but with the second patriarch, a passive variation occurs. A ram had already been substituted for Isaac; now, Alter observes, a substitute for Isaac chooses his bride. "Isaac is conspicuous by his absence from the scene," Alter notes; "this is in fact the only instance

where a surrogate rather than the man himself meets the girl at the well. That substitution nicely accords with the entire career of Isaac . . . " (53). Later, Isaac will repeat family history by pretending that his wife is his sister (Gen. 26, a parallel story to a similar incident involving Abraham and Sarah). Finally, an aged Isaac is tricked by Rebekka and Jacob, the younger of his twin sons. Even here, yet another substitution happens, a sort of mockery concocted by his wife who conspires to play upon Isaac's infirmity by having the younger son act as if he were the elder. Isaac is less an actor in his own drama and more a person to whom things happen.

The *Akeda* is an event which happened to Isaac, and it becomes the defining moment of his life.[3] The *Akeda* has also been understood to be a seminal story for what it means to be a Jew. Rabbi Chaim of Tsans reasons:

> Two mountains were chosen by God: Mount Sinai upon which the Torah was given to Israel and Mount Moriah upon which Abraham bound his son Isaac and upon which the Temple was built. Now the matter makes one wonder: Why, indeed, was the Temple not built upon Mount Sinai which had been sanctified by the giving of the law? The answer is: The place on which a Jew bares his neck is sanctified by God more than any other place.
>
> (qtd in Plaut 213)

"Here," Wiesel declares of the *Akeda*, "is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality" (*Messengers* 69). It is a story that "haunts" Wiesel because it is a tale which has had "a dominant

role" in his life (*Evil* 172). An admittedly strange story, it is, according to Wiesel, a timeless tale, a never-ending story. "Stretched out on the altar, his wrists and ankles bound, Isaac saw . . . that what was happening to him would happen to others, that this was to be a tale without end, an experience to be endured by his children and theirs" (*Messengers* 72). "If Isaac's averted sacrifice had involved only Abraham and his son," he says, "their ordeal would have been limited to their own suffering. But it involves us" (xiii). Part of the *Akeda*'s timelessness is that it tells the story of a father and son responding to a supreme power's demand for death.

Throughout Wiesel's voluminous *oeuvre*, he wrestles with the implications of God's action in Genesis 22. "In my own way, I speak of Isaac constantly, in all my writings," Wiesel admits. "In fact, I speak of almost nothing else" (*Evil* 172). Because Isaac is "the first survivor," his life has something "to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history" (*Messengers* 97). Like Isaac, those who lived through the *hurban* know about the journey of silence, the anticipation of their death, and the lonely walk away from the death site. Survivors know too the impossibility of returning home and resuming their lives, and they also know how unlikely it is that they will find their loved ones alive. Wiesel finds in the *Akeda* a paradigm for his own experience and those of untold others:

> That is why the theme and term of the *Akeda* have been used, throughout the centuries, to describe the destruction and disappearance of countless Jewish communities everywhere. All the pogroms, the crusades, the

> persecutions, the slaughters, the catastrophes, the massacres by sword and the liquidations by fire--each time it was Abraham leading his son to the altar, to the holocaust all over again.
>
> Of all the Biblical tales, the one about Isaac is perhaps the most timeless and relevant to our generation. We have known Jews who, like Abraham, witnessed the death of their children; who, like Isaac, lived the *Akeda* in their flesh; and some who went mad when they saw their father disappear on the altar, with the altar, in a blazing fire whose flames reached into the highest of heavens. (*Messengers* 95)

The *Akeda*, according to Wiesel, occurred not only at Mount Moriah but also at Auschwitz. Wiesel's allusion to Abraham and Isaac's journey contains several themes present within the autobiographies written by Shoah survivors: a family travels together toward death after receiving a summons from a supreme power; a silence pervades the ordeal; and the survivor, shattered, departs the death-site alone.

Genesis 22 describes Abraham and Isaac traveling together, accompanied by a few servants, making their way to a destination unknown. Abraham's heart must have been heavy with dread. "If I were to speak about [Abraham], I would first of all describe the pain of the ordeal," Kierkegaard declares in his consideration of the *Akeda* (53).[4] Isaac must have felt the foreboding tension in the air. The Genesis text's succinct quality contributes to the ominous tone inherent in God's call and Abraham's response. In a well-known section of *Mimesis,* Erich

Auerbach emphasizes the story's timelessness and stillness: "the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed" (11). No one's thoughts or feelings are conveyed--not God's, not Abraham's, not Isaac's. The unspoken weighs heavily, its precarious balance threatening to tumble into a cry of anguish. The entire passage is "the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature," asserts E. A. Speiser (165). The patriarch's twentieth-century children under Hitler lived out the model set forth by Abraham and Isaac. The *Akeda*'s modern parallel is found in the journeys taken by Jewish fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, during the Third Reich's reign.

Wiesel's preoccupation with this theme extends beyond his autobiographical writings and essays; his concerns are also found in his novels, plays, and his cantata, Ani Maamin. With the music composed by Darius Milhaud and the words written by Wiesel, the cantata presents the three patriarchs beseeching God to speak out against or to stop the Nazi slaughter of the Jews. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob beg God to show mercy, but they are met with what appears to be unresponsive silence. The cantata's title is taken from one of Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith, one of them being "*Ani Maamin bevait ha-Messiah*: I believe in the coming of the Messiah" (11). At one point, Isaac sings the following words:

An old man

And his son.

They speak

In a low voice.

The father believes in miracles:

Anything can happen,

Even at the last moment,

If only God wills it.

Avoiding his son's gaze,

He tells him

That now,

More than ever,

One may not despair.

And the son,

Avoiding his father's gaze,

Asks:

"Does it hurt, Father, say,

Does it hurt to die?"

(*Ani Maamin* 43)

Families suffered together. Wiesel underscores that fact in his first autobiographical account, *Night,* wherein he describes the life he, called Eliezer, his given name, and his father

experienced in the concentration camp. *Night* pulsates with the conundrum of a family member being the source of both comfort and anguish in such a circumstance.

Having a family member by one's side often provided much-needed comfort and solace. Isaacson records her mother's reaction once they were reunited after having survived Dr. Mengele's initial selection upon their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. "'You're here!" the mother exclaimed ecstatically, ". . . 'I'm so happy! So happy! I've never been so happy in my whole life!'" (86). Wiesel experiences a similar emotion in those first moments in the concentration camp. "But for the moment I was happy," Wiesel remembers even though he did not know if the line he and his father had been placed in led to life or death; "I was near my father" (*Night* 30). While the joyful emotion expressed by Isaacson's mother and by young Elie are at once believable (they are alive and with loved ones) and bewildering (who could be happy in those circumstances?), the altogether different reaction of Wiesel's father is also understandable. "His voice was terribly sad," Wiesel says; "I realized that he did not want to see what they were going to do to me. He did not want to see the burning of his only son" (30). Wiesel's father was like Abraham, only, unlike the patriarch, he was uncertain as to whether he could bear to witness the sacrifice.

Wiesel identifies Abraham's feelings as he obeyed God as that of "anguish" (*Messengers* 72), an anguish that surely Wiesel's own father must have felt. What other emotion could Abraham have felt, knowing that he had a knife by which to slay his son? Immediately after placing the "wood for the burnt offering" upon his son, Abraham "himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together" (Gen. 22:6). This same knife will later be poised over

Isaac's bound body. Wiesel uses the knife imagery to draw a subtle comparison between his father and Abraham. In the concentration camp, Wiesel's father is not sure how much more he can endure and so he prepares his son for his death. "'Look, take this knife,' he said to me. 'I don't need it any longer. It might be useful to you.' . . . The inheritance" (71). Wiesel's father had been reduced to so little, at least in terms of physical possessions, that virtually the only thing he owned was that knife. The knife, with which Abraham is so often portrayed in art, is not, for Wiesel's father, an instrument for sacrifice. But by handing over his knife, Wiesel's father has also handed over the iconographic image of Abraham, passing the *Akeda*'s burden to the son.

The importance of father and son being together remained paramount for young Elie throughout his concentration camp experience, from their entry into Auschwitz and during the war's final days, a time which became a terrible turning point. With the Red Army fast approaching Auschwitz, Wiesel and his father, both of whom were ill and injured, had to make a decision: should they remain in the camp, hoping that their liberators would come before death did, or should they evacuate the camp, joining the march of victims and their Nazi oppressors, walking toward what they hoped would be life? They made their crucial decision based upon the evidence which surrounded them: surely the Nazis would not leave a single Jew alive. The Nazis would lose the war determined to keep their promise of annihilating Jewish life and Jewish memory; even as it became clear in late 1944 and early 1945 that the Allies would be victorious, the Nazis increased the rate at which they murdered. Elie and his father were forced to make a

decision in an ambiguous arena that Levi calls "the grey zone."[5] Nothing was black or white; no choice was unambiguously right or wrong. Left in the camps, the Wiesels reasoned, death would overtake them, either because of their illnesses or because the Nazis would kill them. If they marched, perhaps they would meet the Red Army, or perhaps they could escape, or at least they would not die within the confines of the hated camp. They took their chances on the march.

"I learned," Wiesel says in an understated manner, "after the war the fate of those who had stayed behind . . . . They were quite simply liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation" (*Night* 78). Eliezer and his father had made a decision that seemed right, but no amount of reasoning or intuition could guarantee that a right choice would be made in the universe that the Nazis created. And so father and son walked. The important thing for them, and for so many others like them, was that they were together. Knowing that his mother and youngest sister had been killed on their initial night in the death camps, young Wiesel valued being with his father above all else: ". . . I did not want to be separated from my father. We had already suffered so much, borne so much together; this was not the time to be separated" (78). But as they walked, it became apparent to them that death was a virtual certainty--the only question was whether it would be from starvation, hypothermia, exhaustion or murder. Prisoners who stopped to rest were shot; prisoners who tried to escape into the forests were shot. Freezing, Eliezer longs for his agony to end. "My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me [from dying] . . . He was running at my side, out of breath, at the end of his strength, at his wit's end. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me?" (82, ellipsis in text). He constantly urged

his father to keep moving, to keep living. They need to stay alive--together.

The emphasis on being together binds the twentieth-century father and son with the patriarchal father and son. Neher argues: " If the *Akedah* had been real (and we know now, through Auschwitz, that real *Akedot* do occur), then everything would have happened to Abraham and Isaac as is related in *Night*" (217). Abraham quietly led his son to a place where he trusted that God would provide; the twentieth-century parallel finds the son leading his father, trying desperately to keep moving, for in movement there may be life. "The march continued," Wiesel states, not about his own forced-march through the snow but about the patriarchs' journey toward Mount Moriah. "The two of them alone in the world, encircled by God's unfathomable design. But they were *together*" (*Messengers* 81, emphasis in text). He continues:

> And so the father and the son walked away together--*ze laakod veze léaked*, the one to bind and the other to be bound, *ze lishkhot veze lishakhet*, the one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered--sharing the same allegiance to the same God, responding to the same call. The sacrifice was to be their joint offering; father and son had never before been so close. The Midrashic text emphasizes this, as if to show another tragic aspect of the *Akeda*, namely, the equation between Abraham and Isaac. . . . . Once more the key word is *yakhdav*, together: victims together. (*Messengers* 88-9)

In his cantata, *Ani Maamin*, Wiesel portrays Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob imploring a mute and

seemingly indifferent God to stop the genocide, or at least to communicate that God cares, if only for pity's sake. Having lived through his own ordeal, Abraham cries out against the modern-day *Akeda*, that replication of the parent bringing the child to death, a murder demanded by a supreme power:

> A field
>
> Jewish mothers,
>
> Naked,
>
> Lead their naked children
>
> To their sacrifice.
>
> I see the priests,
>
> Dressed in black,
>
> Behind the machine guns, And at the peepholes
>
> Of special installations
>
> In Birkenau and Treblinka. (89)

Mothers and fathers leading their children to the sacrifice. Together: journeying together, suffering together, being victims together.

Livia Jackson describes her *Akeda* in her autobiography, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust*. Arriving at Auschwitz and immediately subjected to Dr. Josef Mengele's life-or-death gaze, thirteen-year old Livia stands in line with her aunt and her mother. Jackson's golden hair

saves her from the initial death selection. Mengele separates Jackson's mother and aunt with his riding stick, forcing them to queue up in separate lines. The mother pleads for her sister's life but Mengele refuses: "'You go with your daughter. She needs you more'" (57). The mother, however, soon is injured when her bunk collapses onto the level below. Disabled, the mother is ultimately the one more in need of her daughter. Often the mother begged to be left alone so that she might die, but Jackson refused to let her. The daughter forces the mother to be present at *Appel*, roll call, and to meet the Nazis' demands. As Abraham insisted that Isaac walk up the mountain with him, so too does Jackson command her mother, now lame, to live until the final moment. Determined, Jackson literally drags and carries her mother throughout the remainder of the war in her desperate--and successful--effort to keep her mother alive.

Wiesel and his father survive the march through the snow in one of this century's most bitterly cold winters. They arrive at Buchenwald, more dead than alive. The father is terribly ill but the son encourages him to hold on to life. "'Father,' [Wiesel] said. 'Only another moment more. Soon we can lie down--in a bed. You can rest . . .'" (*Night* 99, ellipsis in text). During the war's final days, he finds himself so ill, so exhausted, that he can neither compel his father to live nor protect him from all the malevolent forces which assail him. Alvin H. Rosenfeld comments upon the inversion of the father/son roles in *Night*: "Wiesel, a storyteller very much within the line of the classical midrashic writers . . . [concludes] his memoir with an Isaac surviving the bloody altar but all the father figures dead" (245). Observing the parallels between the Biblical *Akeda* and Wiesel's *Night*, Neher points out that Wiesel's experience is "an *Akedah* in reverse: not a father

leading his son to the sacrifice, but a son conducting, dragging, carrying to the sacrifice an old, exhausted father" (217). Wiesel is Isaac; he has lived the *Akeda* in his own flesh. Livia Jackson, too, lived an *Akeda* in reverse as she forced her mother to stand, to walk, to work. Like Abraham and Isaac, Jackson and her mother were able to leave the place of sacrifice alive. Not so for young Eliezer. Eliezer, like Isaac, departed the place of sacrifice alive but without his father.

There was no use speaking of the pain or the suffering; being pandemic, what was there to say? Silence hovers over the twentieth-century *Akeda* as well as the Genesis 22 account. The *Bereshit* passage begins as God uncharacteristically breaks the divine silence by asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. By obeying God, father and son travel silently, accompanied by their servants, and the air seems heavy with unspoken thoughts. Isaac breaks the silence by asking where the sacrificial animal is. Abraham responds with the only words that he speaks to his son when he promises that God will provide. Auerbach states that "the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead, and which yet is measured: three days!" (10). Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's agony was so profound that time itself was shattered: ". . . . the journey lasted three days and a good part of the fourth; indeed, these three and a half days could be infinitely longer than the few thousand years that separate me from Abraham" (53). Wiesel calls the journey a "silent march toward that precise point where despair and faith were to meet in a fiery and senseless quest" (*Messengers* 86).

Wiesel's adjectives, "fiery and senseless," describe the ancient *Akeda* well, but are even more appropriate to the modern one.

Abraham, we may speculate along with Kierkegaard, may have been too overwhelmed with his pain to speak. But what of Isaac's silence? "Isaac was no fool," Jeffrey M. Cohen insists. "His father's evasive answer, '*God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son*,' must have left him very troubled and confused. . . . Lambs do not roam wild. They are bred in flocks. . . . After Isaac's question, the dialogue suddenly goes silent. A brooding and telling silence" (241, italics in text). Is Isaac forced by his fear into a paralyzed silence? Does he trust his father? Is his faith in his God so great that no protest can or should be issued?

The silence of God, and the silence of Abraham, and the silence of Isaac exist in a void which Kierkegaard calls "a teleological suspension of the ethical" (54). That is, God, who has defined God's self as benevolent and creative, asks for something evil and destructive. If the Supreme Being undermines the moral and ethical landscape of the universe, how can humans trust that Being? God asks, after all, for human sacrifice; as Kierkegaard puts it, Genesis 22 details a "prodigious paradox of faith, a paradox that makes a murder into a holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again, which no thought can grasp . . . " (53). The ethical requirements we demand of God and that God demands of humanity appear to be abandoned in the *Akeda*. How could a loving and compassionate God ask a father to kill his son? And how could Abraham have agreed to such a request? With God's speech and Abraham's acquiescence

to it, the ethical dimension of the world, says Kierkegaard, has been suspended. All that we know hangs over the abyss as silence reigns: the silence of others, of the participants, and of God.

Genesis 22 records no words spoken by Abraham's servants. They were mute travelers, quiet observers. They accompanied Abraham and his son without comment, and they were silent when Abraham returned to them from Mount Moriah, alone. Might the silence of the servants represent the silence of others? Patterson argues that when "collision with silence" occurs, "it is the silence of the other with which one collides" (*Shriek* 33). Shoah survivors frequently mention the distressing effect silence had upon them. Livia Jackson observes that her entire village seemed steeped in silence as the Jews made their way into the ghetto. As she is herded there, she feels that even the houses seem mute. "Where are our Gentile neighbors? Their doors and windows are shut, shades are drawn on every window" (22). Isabella Leitner admits feeling abandoned when, being marched through the streets on the way to the trains, she looked up at her neighbors' windows and saw no one there. "You could have thrown a morsel of sadness our way while we were dragging ourselves down Main Street. But you didn't" (16). Bakhtin describes silence as a space where there is a voice which refrains from speech (qtd and translated by Patterson, *Shriek* 34). That silence--the stilled voice--was the silence which emanated from the drawn shades; its restraint indicated either a lack of concern, the fear of Nazi reprisal, or implicit consent.

Knowing that silence surrounded them as they left their homes, Jews could accurately imagine that silence would await them upon their return. More haunting than the silence of their

impassive, consenting, or fear-struck neighbors would be the silence of the dead. No longer would the voices of so many family members and friends be heard. Any person sent to a death camp was surrounded by death; however, Filip Müller's experience at Auschwitz was magnified because his job was to put the gassed bodies into the stoves. At one point, Müller decides that he will join the fate of brave Czechoslovakian Jews who were being prepared for the gas chamber. ". . . I asked myself what sort of life it would be for me in the unlikely event of my getting out of the camp alive. . . . In the Jewish school where I knew every nook and cranny there would be silence" (111). One of the doomed Czechoslovakians begs Müller not to join them, urging him to stay alive so that one day he can give voice to their story. Müller acquiesces to the Czechoslovakian's request and finds in his acceptance of life a new desire to help others survive. When he learns that two Jews plan to escape the camp, he donates physical evidence to serve as proof that the gas chambers exist. He is confident that once the world learns of "the whole dreadful truth . . . surely something would be done to put an end to the mass murder. The rest of the world, so I believed, could not remain silent in the face of what was happening here" (122). Yet the world remained silent.

Glatstein proposes that the Nazis counted on the world's silence in his poem "The German Thinks": "It was all calculated on the basis of total victory / On silent world-allies" (*I Keep Recalling* 188). While the Nazis did not reach total victory, they seemed to understand that the world's silence was a phenomenon which, in its turn, silenced their victims. The world's mute

rejection of Jewish suffering so astonished Wiesel that he titled his first version of his autobiography, an 800-page volume written in Yiddish, "And the World Stayed Silent." Paring down the 800-pages to approximately one-eighth of that for *La Nuit*, which became *Night* in English, Wiesel consistently focuses on the theme of silence. Wiesel describes his initial encounter with the bizarre world of the death camp: "I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare . . . " (*Night* 30, ellipsis in text). Dr. Samuel Drix perceives both the victims' silence and the world's as he watches a new group of prisoners entering the Janowska camp:

> Soon a death parade moved on in the direction of the camp. How well we knew this view, which opened our wounds anew--this march of pale, depressed people, broken down physically and mentally, looking about vaguely, with mute expressions of despair on their faces. The silence was a hundred times louder than shouting, than human yelling. This mute cry should have shaken the earth and heaven. (141)

The silence of those who suffered, their "shriek of silence," as Patterson puts it, may have been comprised of survival mechanism, horror, and despair. In one of the most famous passages of *Night*, Wiesel describes the hanging death of a young boy. The "child was silent" as the noose was placed around his neck while the prisoners, also silent, were forced to look at him (61).

The chair was knocked away from the boy's feet. "Total silence throughout the camp," writes Wiesel, a silence of sorrow and disbelief (61). Starved and tortured, living in a world that scarcely seemed possible, the inhabitants could not speak. Eugene Heimler recounts his falling into the camp's silence almost as if it were a pit: "The noises of the camp sounded fainter and fainter. All at once everything became utterly silent. The suddenness with which this occurred threw me into a panic. . . . I longed to cry out, to scream, to break the silence with my voice . . ." (39). Ka-tzetnik 135633 chooses one key word to describe the prisoners standing at attention during the selection process: "Silence. Skeletons arranged row on row, standing silent" (*Star* 93). Chosen for death, the mussulman, that human walking-dead upon whom nothing seems to register, "now drowns in fear. His mouth is full. He cannot scream. But from somewhere within, someone screams a scream . . . " (99). The silence enveloped the victims like a shroud. The chorus in Wiesel's *Ani Maamin* dictates: "Jews, you must die ,/ For the sake of words, / Sacred words / Cursèd words, / Stifled words. / You must die without a sound, / Leave without a prayer, / Saying amen" (85). Young Eliezer asks his father three times whether they should stay in the camps or join the march. "'What shall we do?' My father did not answer. 'What shall we do, father?' He was lost in thought. 'Well, what shall we do, father?'. . . He was silent. . . . He did not answer" (*Night* 78). If Kierkegaard is correct in his assessment of the *Akeda* when he argues that the story itself proves that there has been a teleological suspension of the ethical, then there is no clear course of action for a person to take. If a deity undermines the supposed structure of the moral universe, ethics collapse. "But if the ethical is teleologically suspended in this manner," muses

Kierkegaard, "how does the single individual in whom it is suspended exist?" (61). If a person's very essence is assaulted, at a certain point words of protest and despair seem meaningless. Words cannot sustain themselves with either sound or meaning. Impotent in the face of Nazi power, what use are words?

God is also silent in the *Akeda*, save for the initial request which launches the action. While Neher ultimately concludes that God was present throughout the Event, he admits that God's silence is "serious and alarming" (142). For many inhabitants of planet Auschwitz, the deity's silence was the most difficult silence to understand because the lack of response, especially before so much fervent prayer, suggested that God was either indifferent or dead. Not all assumed God's silence as indicative of God's impotence; as George Steiner states, whole "communities stayed close-knit to the end. There were children who did not cry out but said *Shema Yisroel* and kept their eyes wide open because His kingdom lay just a step over the charnel pit" ("A Kind of Survivor" 141). Avner Cohen asserts that the "obligation to sanctify the Divine name" was frequently realized during the Holocaust, when "many Jews . . . went to their deaths with joy, following the example of Abraham and the Binding of Isaac" (61). But for others, God's silence was the most difficult silence of all to understand, even for those who had been fervent in their faith. While still in his childhood home in Sighet, a passionately religious Eliezer Wiesel had been groomed in his faith by his parents, his teachers, and Moché the Beadle, and it was there that he had been taught that asking questions is an important way to grow in his faith.

"My mother," he recalls, "never asked me whether I had given the melamed [a teacher of religion to the young] good answers, but whether I had asked a good question" (*All Rivers* 379). A teacher who appeared much later in Wiesel's life taught him that it "is because a Jew remains attached to his God that he is permitted to question Him" (380). In Sighet, Moché taught Eliezer that asking questions is at the heart of Judaism. "'Man questions God and God answers,' [Moché] says" (*Night* 2). But when the questions receive no answers, what then? For many believers, God's silence appears to be the ultimate abandonment.

The deity's silence forces Wiesel's violent rupture with his God as the boy experiences his first night at Auschwitz. The heavens rest impassively overhead even as the crematoria's smoke fill the sky, and he discovers that he can no longer worship God. Wiesel hears men praying around him, but he asks himself: "Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for?" (*Night* 31). The silence proves to be the breaking point at which his childhood faith dissolves. "I did not deny God's existence," Wiesel says of this break with his old faith, "but I doubted His absolute justice" (42). Later, on the eve of Rosh Hashana, a service held spontaneously by the Jewish prisoners causes Wiesel to observe his own emotional distance: "How could I say to Him: 'Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised be Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?'" (64). Isaac had not been

butchered upon the altar. God provided a ram for Isaac; why, implies Wiesel, was none given for the millions of Isaacs who lived during the *hurban*?

Arguably, the altar Wiesel refers to is not the altar upon which Isaac is placed but rather the altar of ritual sacrifice in the days of the Temple. Even so, Wiesel asks God for justice. In *Ani Maamin*, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appeal to God for mercy because they, the patriarchs, have seen the children of Israel tortured and killed, and they beg God to break the divine silence by responding to their cries. Consistent with his appeals for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham tries to reason with God:

> The Torah forbids
>
> The slaughter of an animal
>
> And its young
>
> On the same day.
>
> Yet--fathers and sons
>
> Are massacred
>
> In each other's presence
>
> Every day.
>
> Is then a Jew
>
> Less precious
>
> Than a beast? (55)

Still the response from the heavens is silence.

Reflecting on Wiesel's first night in the camps, Neher observes:

> . . . this first story of Wiesel's is from end to end a rewriting of the *Akedah* in the obscure light of the Night of Auschwitz[.] A father and son go to the sacrifice, imprisoned in the silence of God . . . . But with Wiesel the story of the *Akedah* is suddenly singed, so to speak, with the fires of reality. Here it is no longer a story invented in the imagination of a poet or a philosopher, and neither is it the story related in the Bible. It is the reality of Auschwitz: it is thus that the *Akedah* might have appeared in the Bible if, in the Bible, the *Akedah* were not a story and if, emerging from their literary setting, shattering the liturgical, hieratic framework of the Sefer Torah, Abraham and Isaac were suddenly to rise up before us, dripping sweat and blood, exuding life and death, to catch us by the throat and ask us, not "where is the ram?" (Gen. 22:7), but "Where is God?" (216)

It is precisely that final question--where is God?--which rebounds in the silence, forcing many to break their relationship with God.

However, among silence's paradoxical aspects is the fact that sometimes silence implies not indifference but consolation. Jewish mourning rituals acknowledge this fact; those who visit a mourner who is grieving the death of a loved one are expected not to speak until the mourner initiates conversation. As one rabbi puts it in a guide to Jewish grief rituals, the Bible urges silence

upon the visitor and the Talmud promises rewards for the visitor who refrains from speech (Levine 76-7). Moreover, there is a sacred silence, a silence pregnant with divinity. "Just as silence is the most eloquent form of revelation," Neher says, "so the most eloquent means of adoration is silence" (11). Similarly, the religious books of various traditions also carry with them a magisterial, spiritual silence. "The Torah," Wiesel remembers of his devout childhood studies, "demanded silence and a kind of sacred respect" (*All Rivers* 10). In describing the eve of Rosh Hashana in 1944, Wiesel observes that "thousands of silent Jews gathered," fearful with anticipation concerning what God and what the Nazis had in store for them (*Night* 63). Noticing the importance of silence in Wiesel's work, Neher decided to reread the Bible in order to learn more about the Scriptural base of Wiesel's motif. As Neher explains in *The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz*, the Bible is overwhelmingly a "landscape of silence" (9). God "may ultimately be identified only by Silence," he argues (10). Because the Bible is a book about God, God's creativity and God's interaction with the people of Israel, God's silence can be understood to be one with God; consequently, silence can be creative and nurturing. Neher alludes to an insight uttered by Eleazar ben Judah of Worms: humanity should not be too proud of our human words, for "God is Silence" (11). Therefore, to dwell in silence is to be present to God's own language. Arthur A. Cohen also argues against interpreting silence as an expression of God's apathy. In *The Tremendum*, wherein he attempts a theological interpretation of the Holocaust, Cohen criticizes those who would equate silence with

indifference. The "silent God is treated by some of his critics as though speech were the only mark of affect or miracle the only modality of caring; hence silence is ineffectuality and the equivalent of the 'not-God'" (80). A silent God, Cohen asserts, does not necessarily equal an absent one, a *Deus absconditus*. Neher insists that silence is God's own language and, moreover, that God *is* silence. Consequently, God's silence can be a mark of God's presence, according to Neher's reading of Scripture (10-11). How might God's silence as a sign of God's presence be made manifest in the death camps?

If God is good and if God's language is silence, then there must have been moments of silence within the camps that seemed to ring with God's presence. Isabella Leitner recalls a time when the SS physically punished her sister Chicha for a minor transgression. For hours and hours, Chicha knelt on gravel holding a heavy rock in each out-stretched hand. Hundreds of prisoners watch in silence as Chicha's hands never waver. Their unspoken prayer "deafens Chicha's ears. Their silence strengthens Chicha's arms" (44). Leitner insists that because the women's silence was a prayer, their silence supported her sister in that ordeal.

While Neher's and Cohen's arguments asserting a benevolent interpretation of God's silence are defensible, the issue of God's silence nevertheless strikes at the heart of many Shoah victims' fears. Moreover, God's silence seems at odds with the Jewish emphasis upon hearing. "Hear, O Israel," begins the *Sh'ma*, in the imperative. Ettin observes that Judaism is a faith that stresses hearing; in "the familiar antithesis between the Hellenic and Hebraic views of experience," the Greeks emphasized seeing whereas the Hebrews stressed hearing (35).[6]

Nevertheless, a conundrum exists: silence can be destructive and debilitating. Neher states succinctly, "Now Auschwitz is, above all, silence" (141). How can silence be both God's language and Auschwitz's reality? While admitting that God's silence catches humanity in an almost paralyzing negative dialectic, Neher ultimately perceives God's silence during the Event to be the same as God's silence throughout the Bible. Neher rightly observes that the Bible is overwhelmingly concerned with silence, yet *Bereshit* begins with God's speech.[7] Out of the void and darkness with which the first two verses are concerned comes God's voice in the third verse, and that voice launches a creative calling forth of things that previously did not exist by speaking them into existence. "God said, 'Let there be . . .'" and whatever was said, was. Eleven times God speaks forth creation and blessings in the first chapter of Genesis. God spoke, and it was; God talked to Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and others throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

God speaks--sometimes. "God is silent, while all await His Voice," says Neher (15). The waiting for God's voice fills many lines of the Psalms, as people wait expectantly, anxiously, and longingly. But if God speaks in silence, then silence may well be the vehicle by which people are expected to hear. God asks things of people--sometimes. "From Abraham down to the final prophets, there is this succession of men who constantly exist in two dimensions--on the one hand being called, and on the other having the power of responding. And in the dialectic tension of this word extended between a call and a response, silence arises," Neher states (15). The "dialectic tension" is such that silence can be fruitful and productive; but for Abraham and Isaac

and their twentieth-century descendants, God's silence comes at a cost.

Jerome I. Gellman raises a question concerning whether or not humanity can hear God, and specifically, if Abraham did hear God, did the patriarch hear the deity correctly? God's call to Abraham, asking him to take his son to the sacrifice, is, fundamentally, the story of what Neher calls the dialectic between "a call and a response." Gellman argues that the emphasis on divine speaking and human hearing testifies to two problems. God's call as translated into English may be rendered as, "'Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering . . . ' " (Gen. 22:2). In Hebrew, the text is much more ambiguous. As Gellman explains, "the Bible does not record an explicit command to kill Isaac, but only a command to 'offer him up' or 'raise him up,' which can mean either a mere 'raising up' or a 'burnt offering'" (25). "The term is *ola*, which means an offering that has been totally consumed, a holocaust," Wiesel says (*Messengers* 71). Should Isaac have been physically or metaphorically "raised up"? Or was Abraham correct in his interpretation that his son was to have been a "burnt offering"? Gellman argues that God's verbal command to Abraham "constitutes the *problem of hearing*" (2, emphasis in text). But what about Abraham's response? "These questions constitute the *problem of choice*" (3, emphasis in text). The problem of choice is what is so compelling about Abraham's dilemma. "Therefore, though Abraham arouses my admiration," Kierkegaard declares, "he also appalls me" (60). Abraham could have chosen to disobey God, and by doing so, he would not have made the journey in agonizing silence, preoccupied with

worry over the impending death of his son.

Abraham's response to God's request may have been a heroic stepping-out in faith or it may, suggest some, have been something more sinister. A Midrash argues that "[a] God who asks man what the text [Genesis 22:2] appears to ask is not the true God but one whom man fashions in his own image. . . . The history of humanity is replete with misdeeds committed in the name of religion" (qtd in Plaut 213). Lippman Bodoff frames the dilemma in his title, "The Real Test of the *Akedah*: Blind Obedience Versus Moral Choice," and asserts that ". . . God was testing Abraham's willingness to refuse to commit murder even when commanded by God to do so" (72). Norman J. Cohen argues that Abraham's "zealous behavior" and "self-involvement" mean that he is so "oblivious" to what he loves that he is willing to sacrifice that love (83-4). Michael Brown turns the argument on its head in an article published in *Conservative Judaism* when he asserts that it was Abraham putting God to the test: would God prove to be a savage deity who demands infanticide or will God demonstrate mercy?

The more traditional view is that Abraham was an exemplar of faith. Maimonides maintains that God tested Abraham knowing that Abraham would pass the test, and that his faith would be an inspiring light to the nations (Plaut 210-1). Buber asserts that Abraham's "personal mission foreshadows the national mission of Israel, so his biography is the pattern for the history of the people and must be presented as a living prophecy, as it were" (*On the Bible* 31). Despite the seemingly unjust request that God makes and despite the sorrow in his own heart, Abraham trusted that his God was a good God. Kierkegaard, who finds the *Akeda* all but unbearable,

nevertheless deems Abraham a "knight of faith," the term he uses throughout *Fear and Trembling*. The Plaut commentary suggests that Abraham's action demonstrates "*emunah*, adherence without faltering, obedience with complete trust" (210). Abraham may be understood to be a man of great faith, a man who trusts his God, a man who knew that God's ways were both beyond his comprehension and his need to understand. Still, "Rabbi Alter draws attention to the use of '*Elohim*' for the Divine name, in the Biblical text," Gellman observes, "rather than the name '*YHVH*.' It is the latter name that is associated with the love of God, whereas the former, '*Elohim*,' is associated with the fear of God. One loves *YHVH*. One fears *Elohim*" (88, italics in text). Was it love or fear that caused Abraham to take his beloved son to the place of sacrifice? Might it have been fear which rendered Abraham and Isaac virtually mute throughout their ordeal?

Abraham had a choice in responding to God's call. Perhaps "call" should be in the plural since God first called Abraham to take his son, and his beloved son, to the sacrifice, and, secondly, God called out through an angel to stop the patriarch's hand. "And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the LORD called to him from heaven: 'Abraham! Abraham!'" (Genesis 22:10-11). The Midrash speculates why Abraham's name is spoken twice. "The repeated name," explains Rabbi Hiyya, "represents an expression of affection and eagerness'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 283). The affection may have been for either the father or the son, or both; the eagerness might have been to stop an unjust execution or to play the part of a rescuer. Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob counters that the "repetition of 'Abraham' signifies that he was

calling not only to Abraham, but to all subsequent generations. For there is no generation without its Abraham, none without its counterpart of Jacob . . ." (*Gates* 11). However, the generation of Abrahams and Isaacs who lived in Europe between 1933-1945 learned that their *Akeda* was one without a choice. In the Nazi inversion of Genesis 22, the children of Israel had no choice, nor did others, their Gentile neighbors and the world, provide any avenues by which other choices could be made. God summoned Abraham and Isaac and appeared to promise death. The Nazis summoned the children of Israel, giving them no doubt about guaranteeing Jewish death. Might it have been possible that the Nazis intentionally mimicked the *Akeda*?

As systematic as the Nazis were in their oppression and murder of the Jews, no evidence appears that the Nazis were conscious of mimicking Scriptural stories. Since Genesis is a text sacred to both Christians and Jews and since most Nazis and their followers were raised as Christians, such famous stories from Genesis as Babel and the sacrifice of Isaac would presumably have been well known to Germans through church readings, Sunday schools, and catechism. The Nazis, however, intended to change that situation. Holding all religion in complete disdain, the Nazis, knowing that the German people whom they intended to control were predominately Christians, employed Christian motifs, symbols, and imagery to advance their own cause. At one level, the Nazis manipulated Scriptural and Christian themes in order to present a legitimate front while undermining traditional meanings. Christian and Biblical concepts could be used for the Nazis' own ends, particularly as the religious ideals could invoke an emotional response from the

people. According to one historian, the National Socialist Party, born in the Catholic region of southern Germany, endeavored to be Catholicism without Christianity (Grunberger 72). The Nazis exploited pomp, ritual, and ceremony in order to evoke a quasi-religious mood. Ritual enhanced myth; myth and ritual together appealed to devout feelings as Hitler annexed a position of divinity in his own universe.

Early in the Nazis' consolidation of power, they put pressure on the church to ban the Hebrew Scriptures (what Christians call the "Old Testament"). At the very beginning of Hitler's assumption of the Reich Chancellorship in 1933, prominent German Protestants began to remove "Jewish over-representation in the Holy Scriptures and the liturgy" (Grunberger 439). Cardinal Faulhaber pleaded a spirited defense of the "Old Testament" in his 1933 Advent sermon series; nevertheless, he was careful to distance Christianity from Judaism: "Let us venerate the Scriptures of the Old Testament! . . . the Church has stretched forth her protecting hand over the Scriptures of the Old Testament . . . . By accepting these books Christianity does not become a Jewish religion. These books were not composed by Jews; they are inspired by the Holy Ghost" (from *Judaism, Christianity and Germany*, qtd in Mosse 258). The Hebrew terms "Amen" and "Hallelujah" were forbidden in Saxony, and, in another region of Germany, Genesis 22 was expressly forbidden: "Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was excised from the syllabus in Schleswig-Holstein" (Grunberger 439). Such an exclusion may have been the result of rejecting the theological challenges inherent within the text. By attacking and deleting portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Nazis' actions caused many Jews to perceive accurately that the Nazis were

determined to eliminate Jewish history, religion, and memory.

God led Abraham to Mount Moriah, and the most optimistic reading insists that, although the patriarchs did not know what would transpire, God knew all along that Isaac would not be killed. The Nazi inverted parallel finds the Germans summoning the patriarchs' children to the concentration camps; no optimistic reading may be sustained. Death, and the silence which accompanies it, ruled over that time and place. How might one respond to such a summons? Perhaps only in silence--whether it be the silence of disbelief, hope, or grief. Abraham and Isaac walked to the sacrifice together. Isaac carried on his person the necessities for the sacrifice as well as being, ontologically, the sacrifice itself.

The concentration camp was known in the 1930s and 1940s, and is known today, as a site of torture and death, and the word Auschwitz has become a synecdoche not only for the entire concentration-camp system but also for human-engineered evil. Wiesel perceives within the camps the containment of Biblical stories, themes, and ideals. As he puts it in *Ani Maamin*, the concentration camps ironically became "a biblical kingdom" (33).

> A biblical kingdom, where death as sovereign appropriated God's face as well as his attributes in heaven and on earth and in the very heart of man. A biblical kingdom, for every name of every character in every Jewish history book ends up there, extinguished, a forest turned to ashes. . . . Moses and Aaron, David and Saul, Ephraim and Menashe, Sarah and Rebecca,

Eliezer and Tzipora, Rachel and Jacob: it is the Jewish past, the Jewish memory, that is being resurrected, the better to be destroyed. (33, 35)

Eliezer and Tzipora: common names belonging to many Eastern European Jews; the same names borne by Elie--Eliezer--Wiesel and his younger sister Tzipora, murdered on her first night in the camp, and of whom even now Wiesel cannot bear to speak. "[I]t is the Bible that is being killed, the prophets that are being massacred," Wiesel insists (35). Nevertheless, no matter how incomprehensible God's actions appear in Genesis 22, the story concludes with Isaac's life being spared. For the vast majority of European Jews, no ram in the thicket emerged to be sacrificed in their place.

Glatstein acknowledges the twentieth-century *Akeda* and its absence of the sacrificial animal in his poem, "My Father Isaac." Jacob, imagining his father's exhausted submission to a more powerful being, considers Isaac's situation:

When they led old Isaac to the sacred sacrifice,

He raised his dim eyes to Heaven

And said in a weary voice:

I know that I shall be Your sacrificial ram this time,

No good angel has come a-flying;

The fire grows brighter and higher--

It's for my neck that the knife is sharpened.

Old Isaac wasn't fooling himself

As he had when he was a Bible-student;

He wasn't expecting a sacrificial lamb.

When they started tying him to the altar

And when he smelled the acrid smoke,

This is what he said:

God won't interrupt this sacrifice.

He called out, in a weary voice:

Here I am! I am ready to be your sacrificial ram.

(*I Keep Remembering* 124)

As the Biblical Isaac discovered, the shock of seeing the knife hovering over one's body is enough to mark a person forever. Glatstein, in his lament, can look back and declare, "God won't interrupt this sacrifice." However, a few, a remnant, survived.

Isaac and his modern counterparts departed from the death site alone and silenced. But for the survivor, descending from the death-site alone comes at a terrible cost. Liberation brings with it pain as a new life must be created, out of the ashes. Liberation proves for many to be exceedingly bitter as a veil of silence enshrouds and segregates the survivors. Glatstein describes them in his poem, "The Survivors": "Ridden with pain, / Enslaved, trampled, / Tortured, beaten, / Shamed, silenced" (236). Wiesel imagines Isaac's anguish as the patriarch argues with God:

You made me climb, then descend

Mount Moriah--

Crushed and silent,

I did not know, my Lord, I did not know

It was to see my children

Old and Young

Arrive at Majdanek.

(*Ani Maamin* 33)

If Isaac is, as Wiesel suggests, the first holocaust survivor, then the silence that hovers about him as he departs Mount Moriah alone may be seen as an aspect of the survivor syndrome. If to be a survivor means to be alone and to be mute, then an important signifier of silence is Moché the Beadle, who appears in *Night* and many subsequent works by Wiesel, albeit variously incarnated as madman or drunkard. "Perhaps he plays such a central role in the world of my novels because he represents the first survivor," Wiesel admits (*All Rivers* 60). Moché, as presented in *Night*, had been left for dead by the Nazis; however, he returns home to warn his fellow townspeople of the Germans' barbarous actions. His tales seem preposterous. Who would believe Moché? The Germans, after all, were veritable paragons of culture; no, Moché was certainly mad. No one believes him--surely not even Nazis would toss babies into the air as targets for machine gunners. Who could imagine that men and women would be required to dig their own graves and then present themselves to be murdered? The townspeople hush Moché into

silence, and their silence envelopes him. "Even Moché the Beadle was silent," Wiesel writes. "He was weary of speaking" (6). Neither believed nor understood, Moché can only sit and weep. In just a few pages of print, Wiesel creates a paradigm of the survivor: "Messenger of the dead, he shouted his testimony from the rooftops and delivered it in silence, but either way no one would listen" (*All Rivers* 60). The survivor is a messenger of the dead, for the dead; he or she is a person who longs to speak out, to testify, to warn, but the audience does not want to hear. As Patterson evaluates the Moché parable, both the beadle and "many other survivors were locked into their own silence by the silence they encountered in others" ("Annihilation" 214).[8] Like Moché, Wiesel longs to sound a warning; like the beadle, Wiesel finds that sorrow can sometimes be expressed only without words. Wiesel's status as a survivor means he is both Isaac and Moché.

Silence's conundrum--does it signify support or indifference?--accompanies the survivors into their post-war lives. Wiesel is not alone in repeating the muteness which the townspeople of Sighet forced upon Moché, although Wiesel's writings may constitute the most eloquent expression of this paradox. In the documentary film *The Long Way Home*, one survivor explains that others ushered her into silence. "They [those who had not experienced the Shoah] didn't want to listen . . . So, I learned not to talk." Lucille Eichengreen describes the uncomfortable atmosphere she felt when she, a recent immigrant, lived briefly with an American couple while attempting to rebuild her life. "They didn't quite know what to say to this 'creature' from the concentration camps. Most of our time was spent in uneasy silence" (176). So the survivors

learned, as Moché did, that there are at least two reasons why they must be silent: their tales are so horrific that they can scarcely be believed and their stories implicate all who hear them--including their listeners and their God.

END NOTES to Chapter Four

Akeda: Silence of Perversity

1. "Akeda" may also be spelled *Akedah*; I have chosen to spell it without the final "h" as I am following Wiesel's lead on this subject. Readers who wish to learn more about the *Akeda* in Jewish theological development might begin with *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* by Louis A. Berman and move on to one of the most recommended texts on this subject, *The Last Trial* by Shalom Spiegel.

2. God's statement is a polite "please take" (Albo qtd in Plaut 213).

3. Biblical scholars disagree over Isaac's age when he makes this fateful journey. Artistic representations--and here it is worth mentioning that, according to Ernest Namenyi's study, *The Essence of Jewish Art*, the *Akeda* is a dominant and inspiring image in Judaism (34)--typically portray Isaac as a young boy or as a teenager because he was old enough to carry his own wood and yet still young enough to be subject to his father. Iconographically, Isaac's youth and submission therefore inspire a sympathetic response. It would be less evocative pictorially to show Isaac closer to the age of forty. Louis Berman points out that certain "midrashim raise his age to twenty-five or thirty-seven. . . . Since it is known that Sarah was ninety when Isaac was born, and said to have died at 127, this makes Isaac 37 at the time of the *Akedah*" (62).

4. No analysis has had more impact upon either Jewish or Christian thought about Genesis 22 than Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling.* André Neher asserts that Kierkegaard "accustomed us" to know how to read the Genesis story (216). Even a hundred years after the publication of his 1854 work, Kierkegaard inspired a lively disagreement which flourished in the pages of *Judaism.* Marvin Fox dismisses Kierkegaard's relevance for Jewish thinkers, principally because of the Christian insistence upon faith-as-mystery, but Jacob L. Halevi retorts that "Kierkegaard comes as close to Judaism as it is possible for a Christian to come" (14). Popular rabbinic authors Joseph Telushkin and Harold Kushner, writing for predominately Jewish audiences, partially frame their comments upon the *Akeda* by drawing upon Kierkegaard.

5. Primo Levi calls the Nazi creation of a moral and physical universe filled with unknowable and horrible decisions "the Gray Zone." Lawrence Langer captures the same concept with his term, the "choiceless choice." Focusing specifically on the decisions prisoners had to make that may strike us, in the peace and comfort of our homes, as repugnant and immoral, Levi argues that the Nazis created a system wherein traditional ethics, values, and logic crumble. See Levi's chapter entitled "The Gray Zone" in his final book, *The Drowned and the Saved.* I speak of this in connection with Wiesel's dilemma not to imply moral problems in their decision making, but the sheer impossibility of ascertaining which of action might be best.

6. Ettin, drawing upon insights by José Faur, distinguishes between the Hebraic emphasis upon hearing and the Hellenic upon seeing; however, Genesis 22 does contain an important sight motif. Shalom Spiegel examines the relationship between seeing and the fear of the Lord; see

especially pages 67-70 in *The Last Trial.* Moreover, some rabbis speculate in the Midrash that Isaac's poor eyesight, crucial to the plot of Genesis 27, was the consequence of the *Akeda.* Some suggest that the trauma of witnessing his father's preparation for his own sacrifice affected Isaac's eyes while others propose that the splendor of the angel who stopped Abraham blinded Isaac.

7. André Neher addresses the issue of God's speech as the initial point of creating both the universe and the Bible in his *The Exile of the Word.* After he establishes the importance of the Hebrew word *davar,* whose primary meanings include event, word, revelation, fact, object, and commandment, he explains out that *davar* does not appear in Genesis until Chapter 11, verse one (92). "We must yield to the evidence: God spoke, certainly, but not words--*devarim*; He created, certainly, but not things--*devarim*" (92). "It is as if no Word had been uttered during these ten chapters of Genesis . . . " (93). However, the Plaut commentary stresses the activity of God speaking when it glosses Genesis 1:3, "God said," with this: "As though He were addressing the universe" (5).

8. In a 1999 article, Patterson makes a useful distinction between the survivor immediately after the war and fifty years later. "The cultural context of the Holocaust memoir has also changed dramatically," Patterson assesses ("Twilight" 21). He argues that now, over fifty years after the war's end, the survivors have children who are anxious to know what their parents experienced. Moreover, many of those who wish to hear the survivors' tales were not alive during the war years, and thus they may be less likely to reject the survivor's testimony due to discomfort or guilt about their own actions.

Chapter 5

Israel at Auschwitz: A Malediction Forbidding Mourning

Who will wrestle with the angel? I beg you, Rabbi,

let me into the secret of the angel who wouldn't reveal his

name to Jacob! Was Jacob himself the angel? Did Jacob wrestle

with himself? And like me, didn't he know his own name?

Ka-Tzetnik 135633

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel: Genesis 32:23-33

Photographs and newsreel footage from the liberating British, American, and Russian armies captured images from the death camps, existing as an eerie parody of the Western ghost town, now that the rulers of the Night had fled; those images may arise when thinking about the camps' liberation.[1] Too ravaged by starvation, disease, and despair to exult, the faces of the concentration camp prisoners stared blankly into the camera. The camera captured the physical reality of the *mussulman*, well known within the camps but unimagined beyond the electrified

wires, that concentration camp incarnation of the living dead: here they stared blankly by the camp's fence, there they shuffled aimlessly in the dust.[2] Generally, the prisoners displayed little emotion, although occasionally the cameraman photographed a person weeping. As this was the prisoners' first opportunity to feel anything openly, the dominant repressed emotion was grief, and so those tears were palpably those not of joy, but rather of sorrow. Wiesel describes the lack of joy: "Strangely, we did not 'feel' the victory. There were no joyous embraces, no shouts or songs to mark our happiness, for that word was meaningless to us. We were not happy. We wondered whether we ever would be" (*All Rivers* 96). A few prisoners might touch or kiss the hand of a passing liberator, but many were too ill, too close to death, for such an expenditure of energy. Many would die in the days and months following their liberation. Some who survived would be condemned to continue living in the same hated camps, or ones not dissimilar to them, in the months and years ahead as Displaced Persons.

The Allied soldiers who liberated the camps were stunned by what they saw. "The soldiers of Patton's Third Army were shaken as the filthy skeletons in striped uniforms embraced them, weeping, kneeling to kiss their hands, mumbling incomprehensible thanks," says Alexander Donat of his experience. "In that hour of liberation we wept as we had not wept during all the years of martyrdom; we wept tears of sorrow, not tears of joy. Our liberation came too late; we had paid too high a price" (290). Drawing upon his own experience and his formal interviews with other survivors, Emanuel Tanay explains that the "moment of liberation was rarely remembered as a joyful experience. It was the end of one form of suffering and the beginning of

another" (26). Adding to the prisoners' grief was the knowledge that their liberation had not been the goal of the armies that had come their way. They recognized that "we had not been rescued. Our freedom was merely a by-product of the defeat of our oppressors" (25). Wiesel affirms Tanay's perspective: "Yes, Hitler lost the war, but we [the Jews] didn't win it. We mourned too many dead to speak of victory" (*All Rivers* 96). Those alive, surrounded by the bodies or memories of their dead, discovered that their very existence would be criticized. Tanay and his fellow survivors would soon learn that their "survival had to be justified and explained" (25). Shoah survivors, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, become, in some measure, Moché the Beadle from Wiesel's *Night*; they warn, they describe, but few wish to hear or believe their tales, their stories of wrestling with the Third Reich. Once the war was over, those Mochés were challenged by others who had no conception of what the liberated ones had gone through. They were asked how it was they survived when others did not, and often they were suspected of committing immoral or indecent activities which enabled them to live. Victimized again, the survivors either had to remain in the camps as they tried to decide how to rebuild their lives, or they had to make their way back home--a place that for many no longer existed, either psychologically or physically.[3]

Rebuilding a life was difficult; some would even say, impossible. David Wdowinski writes in his autobiography that "[i]t becomes more and more clear to me that it is far easier for people to live with the six million dead than with the few thousand survivors" (16). The documentary film *The Long Way Home* shows viewers the multiple challenges survivors faced. One survivor is

quoted in the film as saying flatly, "It is better to be a defeated German than a liberated Jew." How does one go about creating something from nothing? Survivors who left the camp found in the shattered physical world of post-war Europe a mirror of their own emotional and psychological world. They began to repair their lives, some more successfully than others, as the suicides among some of the Shoah's best-known authors, such as Bettelheim, Améry, Borowski, and Levi, imply. In attempting to recreate a "normal" life, many survivors changed their names for a variety of reasons, some of which will be examined later. At this point, I wish to assert the significance of a name change for the Holocaust autobiographer, and later in this chapter, I will present a number of survivors whose published names differ from their birth-names. The name changes bring to mind, for at least one survivor explicitly, the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Jacob receives a new name, Israel, in the course of his struggle. Lifewriters of the *hurban* often received a new name in the course of their struggle. Because the name on the book's cover does not match the name of the narrator, questions regarding names and identities arise.

One survivor who publishes under a name he was not given at birth is Yehiel De-Nur. The pseudonyms under which De-Nur and other Shoah autobiographers publish transcend the merely literary *noms de plume* as they point to a profound change, an interior transformation brought about by external events. Once De-Nur began writing of his experiences in *l'univers concentrationnaire* , he chose not to publish as De-Nur but rather as Ka-tzetnik 135633. The designation "Ka-tzetnik 135633" is wholly strange to most of his readers, and so his publishers inevitably place an explanatory note in each book, which is quoted below in full:

> K.Z. (German pronunciation *Ka-tzet)* are the initials of *Konzentration Zenter* (Concentration Camp). Every K.Z. inmate was known as "Ka-tzetnik Number . . . "--the number itself being branded into the flesh of the left arm. The author of this book is Ka-tzetnik 135633.

Because he writes under his concentration camp number and not as Yehiel De-Nur, he will be referred to throughout this chapter by his camp identification number or the camp abbreviation, "Ka-Tzetnik." Vividly describing his stay in the Holocaust Kingdom in his two autobiographical works, *Star Eternal* and *Shivitti,* Ka-tzetnik 135633 alludes to Jacob's wrestling match with the angel. The Genesis passage is a particularly apt allusion for survivors, for it contains such themes as struggling against a mighty power, receiving a new name, and being blessed while simultaneously enduring an injury.

In order to appreciate who this Jacob is as he struggles with a supernatural power, a brief review of his story is in order. Jacob, the patriarch whose name will become Israel, is an important figure in Jewish history, and even today his name concludes the three-part formula by which the God of the Jews is invoked in one of the central prayers of the liturgy--"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." However, when readers turn to his story in Genesis, they are often surprised at what a shifty character he is. Rebekah, his mother, had longed for children throughout her marriage to Isaac, the same Isaac who was bound and placed upon an altar and who awaited death at his father Abraham's hand. Rebekah's anguish over her infertility ends when she conceives at long last, and twins at that, but she fears that she might not survive her

pregnancy because the children within her struggle so. Esau is born first; Jacob follows, grasping his brother's heel. The original language stresses this seemingly insignificant detail: Jacob (*ya-aqob*) holds on to his brother's heel (*akev*) with the verb in Hebrew meaning to overreach (Plaut 248). English readers bring their own associations to the word "heel." A positive association suggests that Jacob is grounded; however, a pejorative connotation is that Jacob is a heel. Jacob's grasp on his brother's foot reveals both his fetal struggle and foreshadows a lifelong sibling competition.

From the start, the fraternal twins are completely different from each other. Parental preferences underscore those differences--Esau is the father's favorite son while Jacob is the mother's. By cunning, Jacob twice receives something precious rightfully belonging to his elder brother: Esau's birthright and Esau's blessing, both key elements of primogeniture. Fearing for his life due to Esau's anger over the stolen blessing, Jacob runs away to safety in his uncle's community. Some twenty years later, Jacob desires reconciliation with his twin, and he travels homeward, despite his fears that Esau may still violently resent him. The night before the brothers' meeting, Jacob sends the rest of his traveling companions--wives, children, servants, and animals--across the river Jabbok (note the sound similarity to *ya-aqob*, Jacob) while he stays by himself.

Here is the story of Jacob and his wrestling match with the stranger:

> Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against

him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.'"

Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved.'" The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip. That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip was wrenched at the thigh muscle.

(Genesis 32:25-33)

"This story, unparalleled in biblical literature, is thoroughly bewildering," declares Nahum Sarna (203). Sarna's assessment raises several questions: Why is it such a famous story? Is it that each person struggles, in some way or another, with God? Why did Jacob want to be alone by the river? Who is that person who wrestles with him? Why does the situation appear to be at once

violent yet benevolent? Why the name change? Is receiving a blessing--a new name--worth being hurt?

The Genesis passage demands study with an eye on three of its key ingredients: names, places, and actions. Names are of utmost importance in the Hebrew Scriptures, as evidenced in the Genesis 2:19-20 passage of Adamic naming. A name does more than provide an easy label by which to identify a person, place, or thing; it speaks of that noun's very essence, its ontology. Many, if not most, proper names in the Bible bear etiological or etymological significance, as in the *Bereshit* portion above, wherein four proper nouns are specified: Jabbok, Jacob, Peniel, and Israel. English-speaking readers might catch the homonym of Jacob/Jabbok, but those who read in Hebrew learn even more: "The Hebrew of Jacob's name is *ya aqob*, the river's name is *yabboq*, and the verb for 'wrestle' is *abaq*, so Jacob's name is echoed and emphasized throughout our text" (Weis 103). Sarna points out that "he wrestled" in Hebrew may be transliterated as *va-ya'abek* (204). Subsequently, the repetition of "yah" sounds in the Hebrew rendering of Jacob, Jabbok, and wrestle combine to create an emphatic statement about the importance of person, place, and action, all of which culminate in a name now changed, elevated, to Israel.

The "-el" suffix in Hebrew proper nouns designates God; Israel and Peniel, two of the proper names in the Genesis story, are consequently two nouns with etymological ties to God. "Peniel" is credited in Genesis as signifying having seen divinity "face to face," a word which merges *paneh* or *panîm*, "face" and *elohîm*, "God" (Kodell 65). Jacob's old name stressed his

grasping, fraternal struggle with its word play on the noun "heel," the lowest part of the human body; his new name keeps the struggle intact but replaces it with a higher, heavenly adversary since Israel, Jacob's new name and the Jewish homeland's future name, means "to contend with God." Geoffrey H. Hartman argues that because of "this unmediated encounter, everything shady in Jacob is removed: the blessing he stole he now receives by right; and his name, tainted by his birth and subsequent behavior, is cleared. No longer will he be called Jacob, that is, Heel or Usurper, but Israel, the God-fighter--quite a title . . . " ("Struggle" 8). Anson Laytner sees within the blessing of the name "Israel" the spiritual foundation for what he calls the uniquely Jewish way of prayer--arguing with God. Therefore, the name "Israel"--to contend or to strive with God--suggests that the relationship between humanity and deity is fractious, contentious, tumultuous. Such a vision is quite different from Islamic or Christian perspectives which emphasize submission or docility.

The setting of Jacob's struggle with God is important. Jacob wrestles by the river which echoes his own name, Jabbok. Sarna observes in his reading of Genesis that a river is the site of "innumerable tales in world literature of river-spirits who fight with humans seeking to cross their abodes. Insofar as rivers frequently prove unexpectedly treacherous, they were believed to possess some malevolent power dangerous to life" (204). Sarna's explanation, while helpful, limits the story's power by emphasizing antique fears, particularly among desert tribes. Jungians would see the river's importance in a different light. Rather than water being an environment which hosts hostile, exterior forces, the Jungian reads water as an emblem of interior

transformation. "Water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious," declares Carl Jung. "Psychologically, therefore, water means spirit that has become unconscious. . . . The descent into the depths always seems to precede the ascent" (302). A Jungian reading allows a wider range of psychological and spiritual interpretations than does Sarna's more anthropologically-based assessment. A Jungian interpretation would permit readers to understand Jacob's struggle as a battle from the self-obsessed depths to the God-aware heights, a spiritual transformation worthy of the name "Israel."

Yet the battle that Jacob fights is a mysterious one, and his battle is set amidst a story which in itself is ambiguous. Translators of this passage will assign a proper noun or common noun to the masculine pronoun, but, for most of the Hebrew account of the wrestling match, Jacob and the stranger are simply referred to as "he." Thus, the tale stresses its enigmatic action precisely because, as is so often the case in Biblical Hebrew, ambiguous antecedents make pronouns difficult to identify. Weis notes that "Jacob wrestles with his opponent; the audience wrestles with the text. Jacob wrestles in the dead of night . . . and the text keeps the audience equally in the dark" (101). Who is being injured, blessed, and renamed? Hartman wonders, though, at the "twisted" nature of the story, "because while it is Jacob who is wounded, it is his antagonist who immediately pleads for release" ("Struggle" 11). Why the actions described in the passage happen at all are puzzling. Logic commands us to assign a proper name or at least a common noun to the ambiguous pronoun; even though Hartman observes that it is the "antagonist" who begs for release, the pronouns simply are not clear. Translators assign to the

angel (if that is who or what he is) the lines wherein he nervously observes that daybreak is near, dodges the question of his name, and gives both blessing and injury.

Even as the pronouns are elusive, so too are the nouns. The passage is frequently referred to as "Jacob wrestles with the angel"; the text itself, however, calls the stranger by a common noun, "man," and a proper noun, "God." As Kodell observes, "Jacob's adversary is identified as a man (*'ish*) in verse 25, but in verse 31 Jacob says, 'I have seen God (*elohîm*) face to face'" (65). The text, then, actually does not identify the being as an angel, although later tradition often does so.[4] "Even if he is an angel and not God," observes Hartman, "no other patriarch, no other Biblical characters except for Moses has so direct and dangerous an encounter with a divine agent" (7). A Biblical pattern exists in which a being who first appears to be a man turns out to be the angel of God, who, in turn, may become synonymous with God. A precedent for Jacob's encounter with man/angel/God may be found in a story involving Jacob's grandfather Abraham. Genesis 18:1 opens with "The LORD appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre" and in verse 2, Abraham looks up to see three men near him. The story may be read as simply highlighting Middle Eastern hospitality customs; naturally, Abraham wishes to refresh traveling strangers with a meal. The text suggests that these men are somehow physical manifestations of God. Significantly, it is during this extension of hospitality that the Lord promises Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah in nine months (Gen. 18:10, 14). God is willing, according to these Genesis passages, to speak to humans face-to-face, albeit disguised.

So, with whom does Jacob wrestle? The critical interpretations span the spectrum. One

Midrash says Jacob wrestles with Esau's guardian angel. Fass provides a psychosexual reading wherein Jacob wrestles with himself and his desires; Kodell suggests that Jacob wrestled with the unrecognized Esau; Weiss maintains that Jacob wrestles with the blessings he has received. If the text is ambiguous, the result is less so. By receiving a new name, Jacob has been found worthy of that name. He has contended with God and prevailed, or, as Weis explains, "the verb in v. 28 translated 'you have prevailed,' *tûkhal*, could be translated, 'you have endured,' or 'you have shown the ability to endure'" (104-5). In this respect, Jacob, the one who became Israel, is the spiritual progenitor of Shoah survivors. His children endured, and some prevailed in their dark wrestling match in a place and time that Wiesel calls The Kingdom of the Night. Like Jacob, many contended with a mighty power and left, injured, with a new name.

Ka-Tzetnik 135633 reveals in his two autobiographical works his preoccupation with Jacob's battle. In his first autobiographical account, *Star Eternal*, an elliptical and thematic examination of concentration camp life, he grapples with the questions of self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-identification, all contained within an allusion to Jacob's wrestling match with the stranger. The following passage is a concentration-camp discussion between a beatific rabbi, the Rabbi of Shilev, and a bitter twenty-two-year-old man named Ferber, whom readers may interpret to be the author.

> [The Rabbi:] "Can't you see, Ferber, God's spirit hovering here now above this Destruction and Creation? Can't you feel that Jacob--in our bones--now wrestles with the Angel? We are the sinew of his thigh-

vein in this struggle! Be strong, my son, at this moment you must be strong . . . . " (106, ellipsis in text)

[Ferber asks:] "Rabbi of Shilev, for whose sake does Jacob wrestle with the Angel, if his children did not cross the river, but stayed here in the blackness of the night?"

"From the very blackness of this night Jacob will bring forth the name 'Israel.' Before that, the morning star will not rise." (108)

The Rabbi of Shilev interprets Jacob's wrestling match as indicative of the struggle against the Night, a battle which was even then being fought. Just as Jacob emerged from the battle blessed with a new awareness of his ability to endure, so too does the rabbi imply that something good will emerge from the darkness. God will acknowledge those who contend with God. The rabbi asserts that "we," the children of Jacob now imprisoned within the camps, "are the sinew of his thigh-vein": they are one with the patriarch, they are one with his struggle. More than the children of Jacob, the concentration-camp children of Jacob/Israel compose his body. Yet to be the sinew of Jacob's thigh is not only to participate in his fight against an unearthly power, but it is to be the site of injury as well. It was there, at the joining of the hip and the thigh, that the angel debilitated Jacob.

Still, the Rabbi of Shilev's interpretation of the current battle against dark powers encourages him to be optimistic. Despite the battle, despite the injury, despite the curious timelessness in which the battle takes place, there will be blessing. Just as "Israel," Jacob's new

name, is understood to be a blessing, so too, the rabbi hints, will a blessing come, but it will happen in darkness. Jacob's fight, now continuing with the children of Israel against the power of the Nazis, is fought in a timeless state. A curious cessation of time occurs: the morning star will not rise until an action--Jacob's name change--is accomplished.

Ka-Tzetnik's second autobiographical account is entitled *Shivitti*, which, as he explains in a prefatory note, is an allusion to Psalm 16:8, "I have set the Lord always before me." In *Shivitti*, the author records his own wrestling match with the demons of nightmares and distress resulting from repressed *hurban* memories. He learns of a psychiatrist in Holland who administers LSD to help patients relive trauma in order that they might be reconciled to it, which would then allow them to put the ordeal behind them. Poetic and grueling, *Shivitti* details Ka-Tzetnik's memories and hallucinations as he copes with his fears, both in his normal state and while being given LSD clinically. One hallucination finds the author railing against the Rabbi of Shilev.

> "See for yourself, Rabbi! The barracks is [sic] packed with skeletons.
> Any moment now they'll take us by the truckload to crematorium.
> Did Jacob wrestle with the angel for our sake? Let me into the
> secret, what was the angel after? . . . Rabbi of Shilev, whom did you
> leave us with? Who will wrestle with the angel? I beg you, Rabbi,
> let me into the secret of the angel who wouldn't reveal his name to
> Jacob! Was Jacob himself the angel? Did Jacob wrestle with himself?
> And like me, didn't he know his own name?" (61)

The words of the text indicate the struggling and the questioning that are part of Jacob's story, Israel's story, the story of Israel in Auschwitz. The Kingdom of the Night is both a physical and a spiritual reality. If Israel, that is, the Jewish people, wrestled with an angel, "what was the angel after?" The battle was waged during a period that Wiesel calls "Biblical times" ("We Are" 33). As Wiesel insists: "it is the Bible that is being killed, the prophets that are being massacred" (*Ani* 35). The patriarch wrestles against an adversary, but that incident alone seems unlikely to produce a name change. Perhaps the battle was so pitched that he never felt the same and therefore could not return to his given name. Perhaps the intensity of the struggle was such that Jacob forgot or repressed an essential part of who he was. Was losing his name the source of Jacob's injury? One question posed in *Shivitti* is particularly poignant for those who lived during the Holocaust and who had their names stripped from them: "And like me, didn't he know his own name?"

Most of us take for granted that we know our own names, and most of us assume that we will keep the same name all our lives. At least that is true for men; a woman must decide if she wishes to take on her husband's family name and either give up or hyphenate her own last name. The book of Genesis posits that to know a person's name is to know something of that person's essence. The tale of Adamic naming stresses that Adam understood each animal's unique qualities. To change one's name, or to have it changed, is an unusual situation and could reflect how a person sees his or her self. Did Jacob receive a new name, as Ka-Tzetnik suggests, precisely because he "didn't know" the old one? To what degree are survivors diminished by the

fact that their names had been taken away from them? After the crucible, some survivors were eager to resume their old names yet others were reluctant. Having been transformed, some might need to maintain that break with the past. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 describes his personal life as afflicted with unresolved grief and repressed memories which spilled forth into terrifying nightmares; the rupture between the person he was before the war and the number he became was so violent that even hearing his name caused him fear. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 describes in the foreword to *Shivitti* his first LSD session, a session which he entered into with great anxiety:

> I didn't know why my knees were trembling. It was as if a long-sealed passageway, deep within me, had burst open and a tidal wave of horror was breaking over me, the way it had that other time. Perhaps it was a succession of events that unleashed this wave: being called by my own name . . . . (1)

Disconnected from his "own name," he experiences physical reactions upon hearing it. Possibly estranged from his own name because the Nazis had taken it from him, he might have reacted so strongly to his name because it reminded him of the extent to which the Nazis ruptured his life. Did he suffer, as do so many survivors of traumatic experiences, from an inability to name the event and the feelings that the event aroused? *Shivitti* details the process, terrifying and therapeutic, of De-Nur's attempt to face the pain of his past, yet still *Shivitti* was published under the "name" Ka-Tzetnik 135633. The designation of German words for concentration camp and his own, singular number joins to produces an intricate effect as he chooses to honor the

forgotten inhabitants of the *Konzentration Zenter.* The "Ka-Tzetnik" designation renders him a faceless prisoner in the crowd, and he is emphatic that he speaks *of* the others but not *for* them. Nevertheless, his specific number belongs to him alone. It is he who writes, and no other. Even as he honors the other prisoners in the camp, his concentration-camp designation also carries with it the effect of timelessness. Has the morning sun (how easy it would be to write "mourning son") risen on Ka-Tzetnik's struggle? Is it still midnight as he battles? Is Ka-Tzetnik 135633 still there in the camps?

He feels that way, at least as he describes his world in *Star Eternal* and *Shivitti.* In *Star Eternal*'s penultimate chapter, he, a liberated "Ka-Tzetnik," stands on a street corner and describes himself in the third person. "The sleeve of his Ka-Tzetnik uniform is ripped to the shoulder. He gazes at the six digits of the Ka-Tzetnik number on his forearm. The blue outlines of the digits streak before his eyes: a blue river" (118). No longer does Jacob wrestle by the river Jabbok; his descendents have the site of their battle inscribed upon their flesh. This "blue river" does not hold the psychological or spiritual promise Jung saw in water imagery; rather, the contemporary Jabbok seeks to pull its bearer back into the anti-world. No Jungian ascent into awareness beckons for the Ka-Tzetnik. How can the modern-day Jacobs depart from the scene of their wrestling match when they carry its stain? In the LSD therapy sessions Ka-Tzetnik undergoes, he returns again and again to the site of his trauma. There is no escape, and he knows it: "Where would an Auschwitz Jew run to? Germans inside, Germans outside. . . . It's crystal clear to me that this is Their world, Their planet, Their natural law, and this is Their sky" (57).

In the Nazis' creation of that world, they alone determined who was human and who, therefore, was worthy enough to bear a name.

The subject of naming engages Philippe Lejeune to such an extent in his study *On Autobiography* that much of his theory is based on the existence of the author's name. Identifying what he calls *le pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune insists that the author's name and the promise of the author's life story invites the reader into an agreement, the autobiographical pact. He proposes, even as he acknowledges autobiography's amorphous quality, that most readers assume an autobiography to be a "narrative recounting [of] the life of the author" which "supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about" (12, italics in text). The name on the cover is synonymous with the narrator (typically expressed by the first-person pronoun) which also equals the character's life story which is being related. "In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general)," he says, "the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical" (5, italics in text). The name on the cover should match the name inside the text.

Therefore, a published autobiography initiates a relationship with its readers because "the autobiographical genre is a *contractual* genre" (29, emphasis in text). The fact of the autobiography's publication implies an "implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography" (29, emphasis in text).

Lejeune's emphasis on "the mode of reading" places him in the tradition articulated by Paul de Man, who asserts that "[a]utobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading" (921). According to Lejeune, the reader's response to the text is launched, in part, by the author's name on the book's cover and the absence of any invitation into the fictional pact. For all its myriad ambiguities, autobiography is an extreme proposition, Lejeune believes, for it "does not include degrees: it is all or nothing" (13). Thus the autobiographical pact--that the author's name implies a synonymous relationship between the author's life and the protagonist's story--appears to be one of a serious promise. This may be especially relevant in the case of Shoah survivors' autobiographies, important as they are as non-fiction testimonies and eye-witness accounts.[5]

Lejeune roots his argument in the importance of names. Arguing that "the problems of autobiography" are directly situated "in relation to the *proper name*" (11, emphasis in text), he insists that the text must "honor" the author's name or "signature" (14). Lejeune's analysis of the proper name leads him to create a ninefold schema wherein he places the relationship of the author to the protagonist. He writes,

> . . . we can classify all the possible cases by bringing into play two criteria: the relationship of the name of the protagonist and the name of the author, the nature of the pact concluded by the author. For each of these criteria, three situations are possible. The protagonist (1) has a name that is different from the author; (2) has no name; (3) has the same name as the author; the pact is (1) fictional; (2) absent; (3) auto-

> biographical. In articulating these two criteria, we obtain theoretically nine combinations; actually only seven are possible, the coexistence of the identity of the name and the fictional pact, and that of the difference of name and the autobiographical pact being excluded by definition. (15)

Yet Shoah texts bring up textual circumstances that Lejeune dismisses as impossible. The author's name does not match the name given of the protagonist, even though a non-fiction pact has been established. Shoah autobiographers are modern-day Jacobs. As Jacob left Jabbok injured and with a new name, so too do many Holocaust survivors leave the death camps injured and renamed, yet the wrestling match for their names started long before their arrival at the camps.

When the Nazis began their systematic assault upon the Jews, they targeted, among other personal aspects of human life, names. The issue of names as it involves German Jews arose even before Nazism; Bismarck, for instance, insisted that "national pride is deeply wounded by those cases in which Jews with Eastern Jewish names have adopted particularly nice German surnames" (qtd Friedländer *Nazi Germany* 35). As soon as the Nazis assumed national power in January 1933, they began legal maneuvers to corner the Jews and "Jewish" names. By late April 1933, "the use of Jewish names for spelling purposes in telephone communications was forbidden," reports Saul Friedländer (37). By 1935, as the Nazis sought to de-Judaize the arts, Jews were forbidden to change their names to more Aryan-sounding appellations (134-5). "By the beginning of 1938 all German Jews had had to turn in their passports . . . . [A]nother

decree . . . announced that from January 1, 1939, Jews who did not bear the first names indicated on an appended list were to add the first name Israel or Sara to their names" (254). The names Israel and Sara became, in the Nazi lexicon, a mockingly parodic summation of Jewish appellations. The Nazi-approved list of Jewish names offered "entirely fictitious" and "grotesque" names, according to Friedländer (255). Moreover, some names were insulting: among the state-approved "choices" were the names of Catholic saints, some of whom were known anti-Semites (255). Dictating which names Jews were allowed to use was yet another strategic attack upon Jewish identity.

The ultimate strategy was the Final Solution. For many Jews who arrived at the death camps, their names were duly recorded in the camp's register and would thereafter be used only for official record-keeping. Prisoners now had a number on their prison garb and/or a number burned onto their left forearm. Eliach considers how devastating this must have been the newly-arrived Jews; they had been "stripped of everything, even of their names" (*Hasidic* xix).[6] The Nazis were not unique in assigning prison numbers to their victims; the prison number has long been, and continues to be, an emblem of shame, punishment, and loss of individuality. Most prisoners resume their lives by reclaiming their name and abandoning their number. One enduring consequence of the Shoah, however, is the physical scar many survivors bear on their arms--their concentration camp number. By burning the number into the flesh, the Nazis insured the life-long reminder, all the more poignant for Jews, whose faith specifically forbids tattooing. Not all prisoners throughout the Nazi labor- and concentration-camp system were so marked, but

for those who were, it is a tangible, visual scar. "On my left forearm," Améry considers, "I bear the Auschwitz number; it reads more briefly than the Pentateuch or the Talmud and yet provides more thorough information. It is also more binding as a basic formula of Jewish existence" (94). Their names were taken away. Who, or what, shall restore their names to them? Who, or what, shall bless them with a new name? Or is the fact that they must have a new name an injury in itself?

The strangeness of Ka-Tzetnik 135633's "name" causes it to stand out in a bibliography, and while, to my knowledge, he is the only survivor who publishes under his concentration camp number, most lifewriters typically mention their assigned numbers. Not all had the numbers inked into their skin, but even those whose clothes bore the number were traumatized by being reduced to a number for their crime of being Jewish. "I became A-7713. After that I had no other name," Wiesel recounts in *Night* (39). For those who were tattooed, the number is an inescapable link to that particular time and place. Primo Levi describes receiving his number, 174517, as having "been baptized" (*Survival* 27). His terminology seems quite appropriate. While baptism has, on one level of Christian theological interpretation, associations with being washed clean from impurities, a physical act which links it to the Jewish *mikveh*, there are deeper associations upon which Levi draws.[7] Baptism, for Christians, means being initiated into Christ's death. Levi's baptism signals his immersion into what Ka-Tzetnik calls "Auschwitz death" (*Star* 96)--an entire universe devoted to death.

The prisoners' numbers contained information, both for the camps' interned cognoscenti and their German overlords. The numbers were processing data for the Nazis. The prisoners

learned how to read the subtext of the numbers. Levi calls the system of tattoos "the funeral science of the number of Auschwitz, which epitomize[s] the stages of destruction of European Judaism" (*Survival* 28). He explains:

> To the old hands of the camp, the numbers told everything: the period of entry into the camp, the convoy of which one formed a part, and consequently the nationality. Everyone will treat with respect the numbers from 30,000 to 80,000: there are only a few hundred left and they represented the few survivals from the Polish ghettos. . . . As for the high numbers they carry an essentially comic air about them, like the words "freshman" or "conscript" in ordinary life. The typical high number is a corpulent, docile, and stupid fellow . . . . (28)

Such a fellow, Levi continues, can be conned out of his soup or manipulated for some sort of service, so naïve is he to the way of the camp. Moreover, being called by a slang-form of one's number could reveal how others assessed that prisoner's mental state. Levi recalls a certain individual who was known only as "Null Achtzehn": "He is not called anything except that, Zero Eighteen, the last three figures of his entry number; as if everyone was aware that only a man is worthy of a name, and that Null Achtzehn is no longer a man" (42). Everyone knows instinctively, as Levi states, that a person is "worthy of a name"; the Nazis capitalized upon that fact by taking away the name, thus demoralizing their victims.

The numbers, then, contained information. Sometimes the numbers in themselves were

a reason to bond with another person. Filip Müller, whose harrowing autobiography explicates what it was like to be a *Sonderkommando*, that is, a slave-laborer in the gas chambers and crematoria,[8] remembers a friendship that developed between a French prisoner and himself. "Although I was only an ordinary prisoner, while he was one who wielded a good deal of influence, he was very kind to me simply because the numbers with which we were both tattooed were very similar" (53). In such a manner, prisoners could find ways to subvert the humiliations imposed upon them. However, Erna F. Rubinstein felt a certain relief when she looked at the digits burned into her skin: "I was to be a number from now on, Number A-19348 forever after. Curiously, as a number it was easier to cope. Stripped of clothes, feelings, moral obligations, and human qualities, one was better off being a number" (130). Rubinstein bore her number as an automaton, using it as a shield against any feelings concerning the present and any associations from the past might help her survive. With so much of their former life stripped from them, some prisoners felt it best to leave their names behind as well. Isaacson describes an unusual encounter with a kindred spirit: "I reciprocated by giving my name--a rare exchange in Birkenau" (80). Viktor E. Frankl remembers his first moments at the death camp when he was surrounded by others who were unable to "grasp the fact that everything would be taken away" (12). Everything, including one's name. Frankl evaluates that "the first phase of my psychological reaction" to the death camps was the moment when "I struck out my whole former life" (12). To be reminded of the past was to be reminded of all that had been lost. Such actions seem to internalize their de-humanization, yet ultimately those ways of coping helped them survive.

As soon as liberation came, the prisoners shed their numbers; at least, those who wore their numbers only on their clothes were eventually able to discard them. For those whose numbers were inked into their skin, the prison number could never be left behind. Prisoners were quick to reclaim their names and, as Levi implied in a quote above, their personhood. "Writing their memoirs, all survivors assert their name," Patterson argues, "the name that came under assault during the Shoah" ("Twilight" 22). While I concur with Patterson's statement, I think that a further step may be taken in analyzing the name phenomenon. I am intrigued by the number of Shoah lifewritings where discongruity exists amidst the names. The name on the cover and the name of the protagonist, the "I" who should be identical with the author, do not match. The existence of such texts undermines Lejeune's assertion about the autobiographical pact. "We know all too well how much each of us values his/her name," Lejeune confidently states (14). But if the Shoah lifewriters publish their autobiographies under names not originally theirs, then *which* name is valued? Despite his examination of multiple nomenclature possibilities, Lejeune does not bring up the matter of Shoah survivors' name changes. Shoah survivors' name changes occurred for a variety of reasons: they might have been taken away, destroyed, or transformed, as was Jacob's into Israel. The Shoah autobiographies, with their disruption of name and narrator, signal the cataclysm undergone by the authors. One could quickly challenge my assertion; surely a different name on cover from the author's actual name is that of a pen name--a perfectly acceptable activity in publishing. As Lejeune has it: "A pseudonym is a name that is different from the one found in vital statistics . . . . The pseudonym is the name of an *author*. It is not exactly a

false name, but a pen name, a second name, exactly like the one a religious assumes upon taking orders" (12, emphasis in text). Is it? An author chooses his or her own pseudonym. A person entering a religious order is assigned a new name; thus, while the name may not have been self-selected, the decision to enter an order presumably was. *Hurban* autobiographers do not neatly fit either of those categories. While there are many reasons why a person--and an author--might choose a new name, the Shoah lifewriters reveal in their choices the persistence of the attack upon their personhood. Their lives have been fragmented, and the rupture now reveals itself in the conflict of names. Among such autobiographers whose lives and names were forever changed by the Final Solution are Michael Berg/Alexander Donat; Celia Landau/Lucille Eichengreen; Hans Maier/Jean Améry; and Pavel Friedländer/Saul Friedländer.

The author of *The Holocaust Kingdom* is Alexander Donat, yet the beginning of the second paragraph reads, "My name was Michael Berg" (3). Readers' expectations are thus undermined on the book's first page as the reader might wonder: why does Michael Berg have the name Alexander Donat on the book's spine and cover? Why does Berg refer to himself and his birth name in the past tense? A reader may suspect that the clash of names mirrors the disruption in the lives of those whom the Nazis singled out for death. The dissonance in nomenclature indicates a larger pattern found in Shoah autobiographies, a testimony concerning the absolute break between life lived before 1939 and the life lived after 1945.

Berg/Donat does explain the name change, a change which both blessed him and injured

him in a manner which asks us to recall Jacob's name change to Israel. Before the war, Michael was happy in his life: he enjoyed his work, his wife, and his son. That life disappeared upon the arrival of the Nazis. He suffered through a series of nine concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Maidanek, Dachau, Treblinka, and Ravensbruck. In 1944, barely able to function, Berg kept receiving contradictory information from fellow inmates about whether it was best to stay where he was, in Vaihingen, or to try to get transferred out of the camp with a different work crew. Information valid yesterday was invalid today. When the situation turns against him, he describes how his destiny--his life and death--changed because of his exclusion from the work crew list.

> The list had been turned over to the Germans and there was no room for me. As I stood there in the corridor, dejected, a young boy approached. He was weeping. His family had been murdered, he told me, and he had only one brother left. Now he was being transferred and his brother was remaining in Vaihingen. I had a brainstorm: "Let's swap places," I said.
>
> I could barely keep the boy from kissing my hands. . . . His brother fixed it up with our *Lagerälteste* so that when he called out the numbers of those to be transferred I would step forward and he would simply not notice it: the Germans did not know us by name anyway. And so it was done. When the *Lagerälteste* called out, "Number 1398, Donat," the name by which I was henceforth to be known, I took my

> place in the column to be shipped out. (258)

Michael Berg became Alexander Donat because he and another switched places, a decision that seemed to be mutually beneficial. Berg/Donat learns what happened to the young boy who became Michael Berg:

> Later we learned that two weeks after we left, all work on the Vaihingen construction project ceased and the remaining workers were sent [to a different site]. All of them died in the killing labor of that impassable swamp except one man: the Kapo. . . . Officially, I died there, too. Had it not been for that chance, last-minute encounter, I would have shared their fate. *Hic obiit Berg, Donat natus est*; here Berg died and Donat was born. (258-9, italics in text)

One must wonder at the author's choice of Latin for his explanation. Because Berg's death was decreed by non-Jews, does Berg suggest that it is most appropriate to announce the death and new birth in a language not associated with the Jews? Does the Latin conjure up Catholic associations, thereby underscoring Berg/Donat's death-and-resurrection theme? Or is it simply the heteroglossia of a learned man? Regardless of the Latin, Michael Berg honors the life of Alexander Donat, a young boy who died as a slave to the Nazis in a swamp, and ransoms him, as it were, from anonymous death.

Lucille Eichengreen identifies her pre-war name at the beginning of her autobiography by describing a time when her loving father woke her with a kiss on her cheek. She recalls him

saying, "'It's time to get up, Celia'" (1). Celia Landau survived the Holocaust, but her family did not. War-ravaged and alone, she makes her way to the United States in 1946. "I was a long way, not only in miles, from the life I had known and the little girl I had been," she muses as she enters New York City (175). "Although I told myself over and over again how lucky I was, I felt forsaken in a strange land" (177). Her exile made her feel adrift; and as most survivors experienced, her presence made others feel uncomfortable. Yet Landau tries to cope, and such an adaptation will soon be extended to her very name.

> . . . Lottie suggested that I apply for American citizenship and, at the same time, change my first name from Cecilia to Lucille. Lottie pointed out that my German and Polish nickname, "Cilli,"would be pronounced "silly'" in English. "Lucille sounds more American," she stated. I decided to follow her advice, but I kept Cecilia as my middle name. (178)

Celia experiences a situation common to immigrants to the United States: she must adjust to the American lack of language proficiency by changing her name to make it easier for the Americans to say. A European Celia Landau becomes transformed into an Americanized Lucille Landau and, after her marriage, to Lucille Eichengreen. The transformation of her name testifies not only to the Americanization of a Shoah survivor, but also to the name changes most women undergo upon marrying, a cultural-linguistic signifier which itself proclaims a shift, potentially, in how they might see themselves. If Celia felt any regret upon changing her first name--and her tone of voice

implies that she did--one questions if she were reluctant to part with the family name Landau, her connection to her beloved father.

Michael Berg willingly took on another's name in order to honor that person, whereas Lucille Eichengreen reluctantly changed her name so that she would not appear "silly." Jean Améry rejected his birth name, Hans Maier, because his home country of Germany had rejected him. Neither an autobiography nor a memoir, Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* is, as the subtitle states, a series of intellectual "contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities." Still, his book is insistently autobiographical, as every page records his encounter with the Third Reich and his subsequent scars. Améry himself, though, does not disclose that the name on the book's cover was not the name he had been given at birth. Rather, in the book's foreword Alexander Stille reveals the hidden nomenclature discrepancy. Stille explains that "Jean Améry was born in Vienna in 1912 with the name Hans Maier. Améry is an anagram of the alternate form, Mayer. The story of how Maier became Améry is the story of his life" (vii-iii). Maier's story begins with his father, a Jewish man who "died fighting for his Kaiser before his son could get to know him" (viii). Despite his father's military death in the Kaiser's service, his son would later learn that to Hitler, no matter how long a Jewish family had lived in Germany or Austria, they were still foreigners, usurpers. The dismissal of his father's sacrifice combined with the physical torture the SS meted out to Hans Maier caused him to break with his homeland.

German and Austrian Jews labored, whether they were segregated or assimilated, says Améry, under the mistaken belief that they were at home in a country in which they had lived for

generations. "We, however, had not lost our country," Améry reflects, "but [we] had to realize that it had never been ours. For whatever was linked with this land and its people was an existential misunderstanding" (50). Such a "misunderstanding" would cost their descendants their lives. Surviving the war despite the psychological and physical torture inflicted upon him by the SS, Améry felt compelled to reinvent himself. "Exactly how to define myself I did not know, since my past and my origin had been confiscated from me . . . " (58). No longer willing to accept Germany, the country, its heritage, or its language, Hans Maier became Jean Améry. The German Maier was left behind and was transformed into Améry, a French intellectual. Even that was not enough to transcend his haunted past; acknowledging that to be tortured once was to be tortured forever, Améry killed himself.

Unlike the authors mentioned above, Saul Friedländer did not experience "planet Auschwitz," but his life was radically changed because of the Nazis. Born Pavel Friedländer to non-observant Jews living in Poland, he survived the war in France because his parents placed him in a Catholic boarding school. As a condition for his acceptance at the school, he was baptized, catechized, and raised thereafter as a Catholic. His parents' acquiescence in the school's insistence upon young Pavel's baptism must have been heart-wrenching, the adult Friedländer admits, although he qualifies that by assuming that since his parents had not been religious Jews, the dilemma might not have been too terrible. To survive the war as a Catholic meant many aspects of young Pavel's life would have to change. His name had to be changed; certainly, all Jews in hiding from the Nazis had to change their names if they maintained any

contacts with the outside world. For Pavel Friedländer to keep his birth-name would endanger not only himself and his family, but his protectors as well. Under the potentially fatal circumstances, it was necessary that his name become French and Catholic:

> Paul-Henri Ferland, an unequivocally Catholic name to which Marie was added at my baptism, so as to make it even more authentic, or perhaps because it was an invocation of the protection of the Virgin, the heavenly mother safe from torment, less vulnerable than the earthly mother who at this very moment the whirlwind was already sweeping away. (*When Memory Comes* 79)

Children adapt, and so over time, Pavel Friedländer was forgotten, even by Pavel himself. Vulnerable as children are to their environment, Paul-Henri Marie Ferland became a devout Catholic. So devout, as a matter of fact, that he considered whether or not he had a call to the priesthood. He explored that possibility with a priest, a man who would ask him a question that changed his world. The priest, seemingly casually, stuns Paul-Henri with the question, "'Didn't your parents die at Auschwitz?'" (137). The question became a turning point. In a dark, murky, and mysterious chapel, Pavel Friedländer/Paul-Henri Marie Ferland finds his mind reeling. "What did this name [Auschwitz] mean? He must have understood then that I knew almost nothing of the extermination of the Jews" (137). Yet the priest's simple question launches the young man on a quest to rediscover his identity. "For the first time," Friedländer remembers, "I felt myself to be Jewish" (138). The priest's attitude "profoundly influenced" the boy because the priest spoke

of the Jews "with so much emotion and respect" (138). Among the first actions that Paul-Henri Marie took in reclaiming his past was to return to his first name. ". . . I asked people to stop using my borrowed name and reassumed the name that was mine" (139). But Pavel's name change is not one of mere return, as a reader can tell by seeing the author's name given as Saul Friedländer on the book's cover. Pavel, to Friedländer, represented the child in Prague, a youth whom the Nazis considered Jewish and yet who was completely uninformed about his faith. At the age of fifteen, he leaves France "to fight in Eretz Israel"--the land of Israel (162). His life becomes a spiritual trek to find an authentic and vital Jewish faith. Part of that experience is learning Hebrew and taking the name Saul, the Hebrew form of his name:

> Learning Hebrew meant, above all, discovering the Bible. The Bible soon fascinated me, and the simplest passages we read were perhaps those that bore the most powerful message, that were infused with the most intense poetry. For me, for example, who had changed my name from Paul to Shaul (Saul) upon arriving in the country, the story of this first king of Israel, told in the Book of Samuel with so much controlled force, became the very image of the tragic: called against his will, and then abandoned by all, even by God, who refuses to answer . . . .
>
> (12, parenthesis in text)

Once again the theme of God's abandonment arises. As God forsook the first king of Israel, so too, implies Friedländer, did God desert with the children of Israel. Yet still the people of the

covenant act in good faith with the covenant.

The difference in names used before and after the war points to the battle waged by the survivor, a battle of holding on for survival, just as Jacob held on to his opponent. A physical battle ensued for Shoah victims, and a psychological crisis arose as well. For those with names other than those given to them before the *hurban*, the clash between pre-war and post-war names may itself represent conflict. Steiner argues that recognition, even self-recognition, is at its core an aggressive act. "It is, surely, notable that the theory of personality, as it develops from Hegel to Nietzsche and Freud . .. is essentially a theory of aggression. . . . . All recognition is agonistic. We name our own being, as the Angel did Jacob, after the dialectic of mutual aggression" (*Bluebeard's* 52). If Jacob wrestled with the Other, that man/angel/God, then he contended with and prevailed against other powers. If, however, as mentioned earlier, Jacob wrestled with himself, as some suggest, then his wrestling match was his struggle within himself. Fass asserts, based on a reading by Maimonides, that the story should not be read "as about what was happening *to* Jacob, but as about what was happening *within* Jacob. . . . Alone and in the dark, Jacob wrestled with the darker side of his own being . . . " (147, italics in text). If Jacob wrestled with himself, then his agonistic conflict was within himself. If it was Jacob wrestling, as Fass suggests, with his own desires and fears, then he named himself.

The Jews of the Shoah knew clearly enough who their adversary was and with whom they struggled, but, like Jacob, they were injured in the fight. For many, the injury is located in the psyche. Psychologists attest to a survival mechanism employed by some during extreme trauma:

the individual essentially wills the self into a split personality. As the ordeal progresses, the victim safely tucks away, as it were, the self-perceived true self and creates an exterior self who must physically endure the event. Such a coping mechanism has helped countless victims by enabling them to get through the trauma. This technique can in some cases help victims survive an ordeal, but a lingering negative effect occurs when the self is unable to unify after the event. The reintegration of the "true self" may prove to be a difficult, if not impossible, procedure. The self is fragmented.

The Shoah autobiographer sometimes bears witness to his or her own fragmentation. Ka-Tzetnik 135633 provides one of the more dramatic textual proofs of his life's disruption. How can a lifewriter tell the story of the "I" when the "I" is too daunting or too remote? How does an autobiographer speak when the words that must be spoken convey the scarcely-believable? How does a person with multiple names and a number decide which one to put on the book's cover? With the relatively rare exception of autobiography written in the third person (and Lejeune devotes an entire chapter to that unusual situation), most lifewritings are told in the first person, so that "I" of the text is understood to be identical to the author's name on the book jacket, all of which contributes to Lejeune's assertion that an autobiographical pact exists. Most Shoah autobiographies are written in the first person, with the "I" serving as an eye witness, but some, like Ka-Tzetnik, refrain from the "I." Reclaiming the "I" potentially forces survivors to return to the camps where that "I" was stripped from them; consequently, some Shoah lifewriters seem to testify to their life's displacement not only by the use of their names, but also by pronoun usage.

Star Eternal is written primarily in the second person although eventually all pronoun forms are employed. Writing an autobiography in the second person is extremely rare, and a reader could argue that Ka-Tzetnik chose this unusual narrative strategy because he could not bear to place himself, his "I," back in the camps. It is not Ka-Tzetnik's "I" who is sent to Auschwitz; rather, "you" are. You are whisked away from everything you know; you are starved; you are beaten; you long for release. Is the "you" simply a displacement or a move to universalize the unimaginable? The Event did not happen to someone else's "I" nor to another's "he" or "she"; instead, "you," the reader, is pulled into planet Auschwitz's gravity. Only near the book's conclusion does the author switch to the third person, and only in the last chapter does the first-person pronoun emerge, as he muses over the juxtaposition of *Wiedergutmachung*, German reparations, and his dead mother.

In *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Wiesel is able to speak of himself using the first-person pronoun throughout 416 pages; however, in the book's final two pages, he shifts to the third person. His book concludes with an account of "the groom" who, as he paces before his wedding, is fearful that his emotions will overpower him. Wiesel, now distanced to a more anonymous "he," recalls important family members who cannot be at his wedding--his mother, father, and sister, all of whom were murdered by the Nazis. The anticipation of his wedding, an intimate yet public moment, to "the woman he loves" (418) causes the author to displace himself. Yet it is the same author who began his book by acknowledging the fact that an autobiography promises "a special pact with the reader"--a pact which promises "a willingness to reveal all" (16).

Only a naïve reader would expect an autobiographer to reveal all. Wiesel's shift to the third person at a point in his text which is at once the description of a joyful event and the conclusion of his autobiography, suggests either modesty or the persistence of mourning.

Ka-Tzetnik is keenly aware of the rupture in his life as expressed in his writings, as he admits in *Shivitti* when he describes answering a judge's questions at the Eichmann trial:

> "Is your name De-Nur, sir?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Then why do you hide behind another name in your books?"
>
> A routine question, ostensibly, but the moment it flashed into my brain all hell broke loose. Not only did they want me to melt the two identifies into one, but they wanted a public confession . . . . (*Shivitti* 70)

The first-person pronoun seems to hammer inside his head.

> All I've ever written is in essence a personal journal, a testimonial on paper of I, I, I: I who witnessed . . . I who experienced . . . I who lived through . . . I, I, I, till half through a piece, I suddenly had to transform the *I* into *he*. I felt the split, the ordeal, the alienation of it, and worst of all--may God forgive me--I felt like the Writer of Literature. But still I knew unless I hid behind the third person, I wouldn't have been able to write at all. (71, ellipsis and italics in text)

Shivitti is about Ka-Tzetnik's psychological reintegration through LSD therapy, and the work features an image to illustrate the movernent towards wholeness. An ink drawing of a lion, which

may be understood to be the Lion of Judah, is reproduced from a Hebrew text; the lion, before the text of the book begins, is fierce and whole. The lion, however, symbolizes the author; consequently, once the written word appears, the lion is pictured as broken apart. Over the course of the book, the lion's fragmented body gradually draws closer together, mending, until, at last, it is whole. Ka-Tzetnik indicates in *Shivitti* that through his LSD therapy he made peace with himself. If the lion is the sole criteria by which to judge Ka-Tzetnik's unifying therapy, then its undivided image at the book's conclusion argues that Ka-Tzetnik is similarly whole. His words are less assuring, particularly as his poetic prose seems haunted and distressed.

Some Shoah survivors admit that writing in the first person is a challenge, almost an indomitable one. Heimler explains that he had to disassociate himself from the turmoil that surrounded him in the concentration camp:

> I began to view myself as if I weren't myself at all, but someone quite different, as though I were at home, sitting comfortably in an armchair, watching the scenes of some film of which I myself was the hero being projected before my own eyes. . . . Yet I was aware of what was happening. I seemed to be attempting to justify this trick of thinking in the third person by the conviction that I was watching scenes from the chapters of a book I would one day write, which made it essential to lower this little curtain between myself and the world. That this book might be written in the first person singular I never dared even to

think. (92)

The coping mechanism of splitting oneself into two was by no means restricted to Jews. Charlotte Delbo, who was sent to Auschwitz for her activities as a Communist, explains that she did the same. "I live within a twofold being. The Auschwitz double doesn't bother me, doesn't interfere with my life. As though it weren't I at all. Without this split I would not have been able to revive" (*Days and Memory* 3). Because the camps were an entirely different universe, as the often-used phrase *l'univers concentrationnaire* suggests, then having an "Auschwitz double" may be the most understandable means to survive that a person could use.

The long-term effects of extreme trauma and the incomplete nature of liberation itself have a profound impact upon survivors; nevertheless, it must be said that most survivors were thankful that they did live through their ordeal. Lena Berg rejoices when she discovers that both her husband and her child are also alive: "Life had the promise of new happiness. We were not only liberated, we were saved" (361). Isaacson credits a student putting a question put to her after she gave a speech about her concentration camp experience as the impetus for writing her autobiography. A young man asks her, "'After all you've been through, how can you smile? So freely? So often?" (xi). The autobiographies by Shoah survivors are filled with births of children, many of whom are named for loved ones who perished in the war.

Yet even as they relate happy occurrences, most survivors reveal the effects of having been surrounded by death. Everything is tainted. "Survivors are often asked, How did you manage to readjust to life, to joy, to love?" Wiesel says. "The truth is, it was not that difficult--less

difficult than adjusting to death" (*All Rivers* 115). Isabella Leitner exults when she and her husband learn that she is pregnant; she cries out to her murdered mother, "'*Mama, you did not die*!'" (97, italics in text). Upon her son's birth, she again addresses her mother: "'He is the sound of your soul. He is the voice of the six million'" (98). Significantly, the title of Leitner's lifewriting is *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*. All Shoah autobiographies are fragments: a book can only contain a fragment of the ordeal undergone by the author, and the fragmented author bears the trauma's marks.

The fragmentation of extreme trauma, suggested by Shoah writers in their name changes and in their pronoun usage, is profound. Individuals who have undergone an extraordinary trauma experience long-term symptoms, which include insomnia, nightmares, and an inability to trust. Donat, for instance, reports in a postscript to *The Holocaust Kingdom* that he has enjoyed a happy marriage and a good relationship with his son (363). "Of course," he states, casually yet tellingly, "I have sleeplessness and nightmares . . . ." (363). Having lost so much of their families, survivors may rebuild their lives and create new families, but the old cannot be replaced. Survivors who cannot build trusting relationships experience a solitary life. David Wdowinski admits that "those of us who have survived are condemned unto death to an incomprehensible loneliness" (18). Hartman sees in Jacob's wrestling match a symptomatic essence of solitude. He grounds his assertion upon a rabbinic insight which saw a connection between the initial solitary state that Jacob created by the Jabbok with the descriptive aloneness of God as found in Deuteronomy 32:26, "There is none like God" ("Struggle" 7). Hartman continues: "The word *alone* acquires

two senses: *only* Jacob, among all men, is noble and straight enough to be compared with God; but also, more radically, the *loneliness* of the human Jacob in this encounter can remind us of the *aloneness* of God" (7). If Shoah survivors are like Jacob, then they too bear the traits of the loneliness of Jacob. As Wiesel observes, survivors, who necessarily are in exile from their former lives, are marked by solitude ("We Are" 27). Fractured from the battle with self, with others, and with a higher power, the survivor's autobiography testifies to the long-term consequences of the fight. When the self is broken, can it ever be made whole? The individual departs the concentration camps, the war is over, but the rupture is deep.

The title of Wdowinski's autobiography, *And We Are Not Saved,* emphasizes his sense of liberation as a by-product, not a goal, of the successful Allied armies. In Wiesel's cantata, Jacob cries out to God: "Do you hear, / God of my father and my father's father? / My struggle with the angel / Ended in defeat. / Israel lost-- / And I did not know it" (*Ani* 47). Auschwitz represented defeat, a defeat carried into post-war life. The liberation ended one struggle on one level but those liberated from Nazi tortures had many battles left to fight. "Where is it, this liberation?" asks Ka-Tzetnik 135633 (*Star* 110). Many survivors created new homes and new lives, out of necessity, in countries other than their native homelands. And while some, like Saul Friedländer, found a physical and spiritual homeland in *Eretz Israel* , the land of Israel, others were displaced throughout the Diaspora. Wiesel identifies his situation as "exile" and sees in exile an estrangement. Exile "is total," he argues. "It envelops all endeavors, all explorations, all illusions,

all hopes, all triumphs, and this means that whatever we do is never complete. Our life is not complete, and lo and behold, our death is not complete . . . " ("We Are" 27). Nothing is or feels complete.

Incompleteness is a hallmark of autobiography. All autobiography is fragmentary, the Shoah texts only more so. "In the life I live and experience from within myself," Bakhtin observes, "my own birth and death are events which I am in principle incapable of experiencing" ("Author" 104). Since a person cannot give his or her perspective on the self's birth or death--those significant and dramatic moments of an individual's life--a sense of wholeness is necessarily absent from autobiography. Paul de Man also contemplates the fragmentary nature of autobiography. "The interest of autobiography, then," he writes, " is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge--it does not--but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (922). If de Man is correct in his evaluation that lifewriting "demonstrates . . . the impossibility of closure," then it may be that the Shoah survivors' texts are the paradigms, *par excellence*, of autobiography. No closure exists for the Shoah survivor. Aspects important to closure--a body to view, a grave to visit, a home to which one may return--are, for most, not present. The fragmentation that characterizes autobiography also characterizes the post-war life of those who experienced the *hurban*.

Jacob wrestled by the Jabbok, and his children wrestled in Auschwitz. Were they blessed

in that struggle? Wiesel would refute such a claim. In *Ani Maamin*, Jacob cries out to God:

> As for me, O God, I yearn to die as Jacob--
>
> To prevent Israel from being.
>
> You promised me so many things, my Lord.
>
> You promised me to watch over Israel--
>
> Where are you? What of your promise?
>
> You promised me blessings for Israel--
>
> Is this your blessing? (23)

The question is a legitimate one, both for Jacob, now Israel, and for all those who underwent the Nazi assault: is this your blessing?

David Patterson recounts "an old Jewish teaching": after a person is buried, the Angel of Death escorts that person into the Holy One's Presence where a test is given ("Twilight" 22). "The test consists of just one question; which the question is the same for everyone, each of must must give a different answer. The question is: What is your name?" (22). Patterson uses that story as a launching point to consider the Nazi assault on Jewish names as he argues that writing an autobiography is an assertion of the name, but he does not go far enough. The question for Shoah Jews may revolve around *which* name. Jacob wrestled with a power and received an injury even as he received his blessing--a new name. The Jews of Hitler's time also struggled against a mighty force. They, too, were injured. Survivors might say that their liberation was a blessing, but like Jacob's, the gift is attached to an unforgettable hurt.[9] Jacob's name

change to Israel was described as a blessing, and, as Hartman observed, the name Israel is a more elevated name than that of "heel." Jacob's twentieth-century children also had their names changed; however, their names can rarely be seen as an elevation. Can a name change to a concentration camp number, such as Ka-tzetnik 135633 writes under, be read as a blessing? The scars from their battle are deep within the skin and the psyche. Liberated from a world of death into a world of grief in order to begin their mourning, survivors learn to live with their broken lives, if they can. Less a joyful embrace of freedom, liberation becomes a lacuna.

END NOTES to Chapter Five

Israel at Auschwitz: A Malediction Forbidding Mourning

1. Newsreel footage and photographic images of the concentration camp inhabitants are gruesome reminders of what was suffered under the Nazis. PBS aired *Frontline*: *Memory of the Camps* in 1985; the documentary drew heavily from recently-discovered Russian footage as well as from film shot by British and American cameramen. It is available in video, as is the documentary film *The Long Way Home*, winner of the 1997 Academy Award for Best Documentary. *The Long Way Home* begins in the camps and then chronicles the struggles facing liberated Jews, particularly those who longed for a Jewish homeland, Israel.

2. In the concentration camp vernacular, the word *mussulman* (which may be spelled in a number of ways) signified a person who was alive in body only, and even that, just barely. Derived from the word Muslim, the implication was one of total submission to one's fate. A mussulman was as good as dead for the eyes revealed that the spirit had already died.

3. Survivors' hardships go far beyond the few mentioned in the text. Donat acknowledges that living in the camps had caused him to lose "the habit of freedom"; he feared that returning to a

normal life would desecrate the memories of those who had died in the camps (292). Those who were able to find their way home often suffered during the journey and upon their arrival. Some returned home to discover their houses confiscated or vandalized. Livia Jackson tersely describes her homecoming: "Open gate. Dark, empty courtyard. Bare rooms covered with dust. And something else. In the middle of every room there is a heap of human excrement" (194). Moreover, it is not widely known that some Jews, upon returning to their home-towns, were murdered by their Gentile neighbors. "Incredibly," notes Martin Gilbert, "the killing of Jews had continued in Poland for more than two years after Germany's surrender" (240). Approximately one thousand Jews were murdered in Poland between 1945-1947, according to Gilbert (241). Patterson argues in "The Annihilation of Exits: The Problem of Liberation in the Holocaust Memoir" that because there was no home for survivors to return to, the liberation was incomplete.

4. "Said he, 'You name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:29). It is the phrase "beings divine" that encourage readers to assume an angel was present with Jacob. Those who read in Hebrew know that the actual word used, translated twice in the Plaut as a divine being, is *elohîm*--God.

5. Part of the inherent value I find within the Shoah survivor's autobiography is its eye-witness testimony to the Event. However, autobiographical theorists wrestle with questions involving the concept of truth-telling, especially as whether or not the lifewriter knows or wishes something to

be true comes under scrutiny. An unusual development concerning Shoah autobiographies and truth-telling came to light during the period that I was writing the dissertation. *Newsweek* reported that a survivor's account (not included in my dissertation) has been accused of being a fake (Jones, Jr. and Sawhill 84). Childhood friends of the author have provided evidence and testimony to show that he could not have been at a concentration camp at the time he claimed. The article quotes a Schocken editor as reflecting, "'It's a strange world we live in if one wants to pretend to be a Holocaust victim'" (84). The consequences of a fiction writer impersonating, as it were, an autobiographer are troubling, at least in regard to the *hurban*. As Wiesel states, "The witness has nothing but his memory. If that is impugned, what does he have left?" (*All Rivers* 339).

6. The motif of names is an integral part of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*. Several scenes, including the first major segment of the film, feature close-ups of men and women's faces as they give their names to be recorded by Nazi scribes. A significant aspect of the film's plot revolves around getting "the names"--specific names of specific people--on the list for Oscar Schindler in order that he might transfer those names, those individuals, out of the concentration camp and into his factory where they might be safe. "The list is life," says a key figure in the film. Names, then, equal life.

7. A *mikveh*, sometimes spelled *mikvah*, is a ritual bath. "The Christian ritual of baptism is based

on the *mikveh* immersion," observes Rabbi Telushkin (619). A *mikveh* is most commonly visited by Orthodox married women and converts before their official embrace of Judaism.

8. That Müller lasted three years in Auschwitz, especially as a *Sonderkommando*, was highly unusual. Livia Jackson reports that the Nazis typically killed the *Sonderkommando* unit every four weeks. Primo Levi finds in the *Sonderkommando* phenomenon the essence of Nazi cruelty. Calling it their "most demonic crime," Levi asserts that the Nazis entered in a satanic pact when they forced Jews to burn Jews (*Drowned* 53-4).

9. In a recently published spiritual autobiography, *Turbulent Souls*, Stephen Dubner describes being raised by his devout Catholic parents. He decides as an adult to trace the conversion history of his parents, both of whom had been raised in Jewish homes. Reclaiming a Jewish identity that he did not know he had, Dubner finds the Jacob story an apt one: ". . . for to be a Jew was to live forever with the knowledge that the Holocaust had scarred your people as irrevocably as Jacob had been scarred by his encounter with the angel" (283).

Epilogue

In the beginning was the Holocaust . . .

Elie Wiesel

My examination of Genesis allusions found in the autobiographies of Jewish Shoah survivors began with an overview of intertextuality, an introduction to Midrash, and an assertion of why I believe the lifewritings to be important. We considered, safely and vicariously, what many Jews went through: the containment in the cattle cars, the hellish life in the camps, and the liberation which was not quite as freeing as one might expect. My goal was to explore, in depth, the manifold implications present in the Biblical images employed by the autobiographers and to demonstrate the ways in which the heteroglossic allusions constitute Midrash, for the writers participate in the prophetic interpretation of Jewish history as read through a Scriptural filter.

Genesis is a text concerned with beginnings. How appropriate, then, are the survivors' references to it because at every stage of their Nazi-engineered degradation, life began anew. An old life passed away and a new one began when places of employment, education, and recreation were forbidden. An old life disappeared as food restrictions and as name manipulations were instituted. An old life disappeared and a new one began over and over again. For twelve years, the Nazis shrank the world of the European Jew until, for most, there was no life left at all.

That those who did survive had the courage to put their memories down on paper for the world to read is, I think, remarkable.

Some assert that Exodus serves as a more appropriate text than Genesis for the model of the Jewish experience. Michael Goldberg, for instance, argues in his provocatively-titled book, *Why Should the Jews Survive? Looking Past the Holocaust toward a Jewish Future*, that Exodus, with its themes of freedom and empowerment, should serve as an inspiration to Jews, too long pulled down by the gravity of the Holocaust. There is merit in his argument, but I agree with Fackenheim and others who see in the *hurban* a rupture that mere passing time will not be able to mend. I would say to Goldberg that, while Jews should be able to draw strength from Exodus, the stories told in Genesis, especially as they were relived during this century, are critical for self-understanding. Genesis, the beginning, contains stories that haunt readers. "The Jew," says Wiesel, "is haunted by the beginning more than the end" (*Messengers* xii). If Wiesel is correct, he may simply be acknowledging that a person has more time to ruminate upon that which began first. More than that, though, is implied: if we can learn more from our beginnings, perhaps that which follows will be better understood.

This study has by no means exhausted the subject of Shoah autobiographies and their Biblical allusions. In future projects, I should like to revisit this subject and broaden the focus beyond Genesis. I have noticed references to Job (but not to the extent that some would expect) and Elijah, both figures who could be profitably studied. I would enjoy examining the way prayer

and religious services were conducted in the most unlikely of circumstances, and I am interested in the perceptions of non-religious persons within the camps toward their religious compatriots. I am also intrigued by numerous Christian allusions made by Jewish authors; such references include Calvary, crucifixion, and resurrection. While crucifixion has overtly Christian overtones, we may need to be reminded that "if being a Christian meant taking up the cross and being crucified for God, then the only practicing Christians were the Jews" (qtd in Greenberg 36). The subject of the Moloch and the golem, too, are promising.

Another subject that beckons to me is time. Time ceased in the camps, according to many lifewriters, and yet there was a curious sensation of an eternal time, suspended over the abyss, combined with another perception of life being lived in an accelerated fashion.

"In the beginning," Wiesel says--some would accuse him of being too pessimistic--"there was the Holocaust. We must therefore start all over again" ("Jewish Values" 285). But to start over again is not to ignore everything that came before. To read survivors' texts may be, in some small measure, a way to honor those whom Hitler sought to annihilate. To read is to participate in memory--a critical element for both the Jew and the autobiographer. We who read have much to learn.

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