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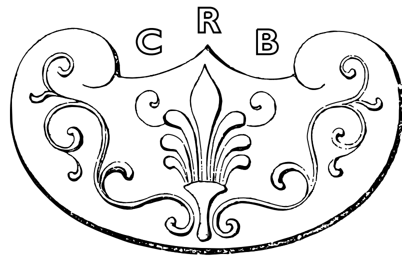

Quarreling with God

Book Review by Louis Greenspan

Emil L. Fackheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew,
edited by Sharon Portnoff, James A. Diamond, and Martin D. Yaffe,
Brill Academic Publishers, 339 pages, $146

Emil Fackenheim has appeared before the public in various personae. In his early years he was best known as a "neo-orthodox theologian" whose message to modern Jews revived Pascal's call for a return to "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"—that is, the God of biblical Commandments—and to give up "the God of wise men and philosophers." Later, as "holocaust theologian" (a title he rejected but could not shake), he spoke as the prophet of "the commanding voice of Auschwitz" who, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, issued inescapable and non-negotiable imperatives. This book of essays, written by former students, colleagues, and other scholars of Judaism reminds us that Fackenheim was first and foremost a philosopher—the companion, not the adversary, of "wise men and philosophers." This is evident in the introduction, where editor Sharon Portnoff poses the following questions:

> Did Fackenheim maintain his earlier stance against radical historicism, or did he acquiesce entirely to historicism in his later thought? Did Fackenheim succeed in retaining clear lines between reason and revelation and so not compromise one on behalf of the other? ...Finally does Fackenheim's thought focus too emphatically on the holocaust and so traumatize Judaism for future generations?"

The essays responding to these questions are lively, lucid, and, I would say, indispensable for anyone who wishes to study Fackenheim. The topics remain urgent; Fackenheim's approaches to them are stimulating, but his conclusions, especially on philosophy and the Holocaust, not always persuasive.

The book opens with a memoir by John Burbidge, now a noted Hegelian scholar, but once a student of the young Fackenheim. We learn from him that Fackenheim's approach to philosophy took shape very early, that from the beginning of his career he rejected the view that the task of the philosopher was to seek unity with a universe of timeless essences. For him the philosopher was engaged in a Buberian dialogue with a universe that was not necessarily hostile, but problematic, fragmentary, and unresolved. His procedure, we learn, was to uncover "horns of dilemmas" such as those "continually surfacing throughout his writing on Kant, Schelling and Hegel," and to negotiate an acceptable even if shaky resolution. Burbidge provides an example in Fackenheim's approach to the traditional but abstract problem: "how can Matter be *included* in Spirit and yet, real in its own right, be and remain *opposed* to Spirit?" An analytic philosopher may see this as a meaningless puzzle; a Hegelian will seek a synthesis between spirit and matter, pushing the two into the philosophical equivalent of a hostile merger. Fackenheim proceeds like a negotiator in a labor dispute, respecting the claim of each of the elements to "remain real in its own right," knowing that the results are "fragmentary."

One can follow Fackenheim's procedure in his discussion on the conflict between faith and reason in a Jewish context. As always, Burbidge explains, Fackehnheim begins by framing a dilemma—in this case that of the progressive Jew:

> His Jewish conscience urges him to look for an authority that might guide and direct his Jewish life. But his liberal conscience frowns on that desire, as a temptation to be resisted.

Editor James A. Diamond in his essay "Rabbi Fackenheim and Philosophical Encounters with Elijah's Wager" takes up this issue in the spirit of Fackenheimian mediation. He notes, as does Facknheim, that philosophers such Kant misrepresent the Bible as a narrative of obedient robots, when it is plainly a drama of "lonely men of faith" who are constantly wrestling with God—as in Abraham's protest against God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, or yet again in Elijah's burning of sacrifices outside the altars of the temple. Diamond notes also that these philosophers are ignorant of the long tradition of rabbinic commentary and its arresting

stories of rabbis who reject God's interventions into their disputes about His Law. Diamond cites one lovely tale of Moses listening to a rabbinic discussion with baffled incomprehension. Judaism, in this rendering, is an argument with God, a loyal opposition, rather than a herd of yea-sayers. In reply to Portnoff's question about the relation between faith and reason, then, Fackenheim does respect the separation between them and gives each its due.

Fackenheim addresses the complex but urgent issue of the validity of historicism through similar procedures. Today, historicism is the subject of cultural wars, especially in the universities influenced by historicist writers from the continental tradition who reject the view that western culture and philosophy are autonomous. For them "unaided reason" is a subterfuge, a handmaiden of political and imperial agendas. Fackenheim, however, seeks to uphold both the independence of reason and the inescapable fact of our historical situations. Thus the issue of historicism can, like all other issues, be framed as a dilemma. Michael L. Morgan's essay "Fackenheim's Hermeneutical Circle" along with other essays, especially Martin D. Yaffe's, formulate this dilemma with admirable clarity. Morgan writes:

> The crucial element in the hermeneutic is that is that it takes all human existence as historically situated, with all that implies about encountering one's situation with presuppositions of all kinds not being able to escape one's locatedness in traditions, practices and so forth.

On the other hand:

> Fackenheim as philosopher takes himself to be engaging in philosophical reflection of ultimate significance, from a detached, objective point of view from the perspective of reason with the aim of arriving at secure and unconditional philosophical conclusions.

The first horn of the dilemma represents pure historicism now so prevalent in much of the social sciences; the second represents the view of Leo Strauss, well represented in this volume (as well as in the modern university), that regards historicism as the lethal intellectual and moral poison of the era. Martin Yaffe's "Historicism and Revelation in Emil Fackenheim's Self Distancing from Leo Strauss" mediates between them in good faith and ends diplomatically:

> [Strauss] praises Fackenheim for articulating the relationship between philosophy and revelation as well as it can be done from within historicism itself.... Strauss is more appreciative for having considered as well, and at the same time, the premodern alternative to that premise.

In spite of the obvious merits of Yaffe's essay, I wonder whether either of the hostile parties in the current cultural wars will accept this open-ended solution. Morgan's proposed solution settles for the modest view that when we compare different solutions to any problem in an open-minded spirit we find that some are more plausible, more convincing than others. He concludes, and I sympathize, that this "might be all the objectivity we get and all that we hope for." His position is honorable but also may not cool the passions of current controversies.

Fackenheim's name is as closely associated with the Holocaust as Rousseau with the French revolution or Plato with the Greek city-state. It is his signature issue. Most of the essays touch upon it in some way. Those of Michael Oppenheim, Lionel Rubinoff, Aubrey L. Glazer, and Martin J. Plax deserve special mention. But the most important shortcoming of this volume is that none of the essays prepare us for the intensity and even bitterness of the controversy Fackenheim's writing has provoked among Jewish writers (though Oppenheim's makes a good start). He is accused by both Orthodox and liberal thinkers of turning Judaism into a Holocaust cult in which the symbol of Auschwitz devours every other sacred symbol of Judaism. Israeli liberals often accuse him of arguing, on the one hand, that the Holocaust is a *novum*, incomparable, that it cannot be used as a paradigm for any other criminality, and then drawing on it as a political tool to support his hawkish politics in Israel. Finally, his account of the Holocaust as history has generated much skepticism, especially from historians.

This latter criticism that Fackenheim has in fact dehistoricized the Holocaust gives rise to a paradox. Time and again Fackenheim claims that his discovery of the Holocaust has been a discovery of history—a revolutionary event in his thinking precisely because it taught him that philosophy and Judaism could not make themselves immune to historical reality. History, of course, was an important subject in his pre-Holocaust writings, but he treated it as a philosophical abstraction. Because of the Holocaust, he is forced to a new awareness of the inescapable specificity of history. But his critics charge that his new Holocaust awareness has led to an erosion of real historical awareness. Two important articles in this volume, one by Sam Ajzenstat and the other by Kenneth Hart Green, take up this theme.

In his essay "Judaism and the tragic Vision: Emil Fackenheim and the problem of Dirty Hands," Ajzenstat shrewdly recalls that the problem of dirty hands is central to Fackenheim's earliest theological essays where, perhaps echoing Reinhold Niebuhr, Fackenheim struggles with the tragic consequence of our involvement in history—an involvement which is fraught with unintended consequences, wherein actors who set out to do good are driven to evil means and bring about evil results. Ajzentstat's view of rabbinic realism is starker. For him rabbinic tragedy implies that we are driven to act immorally, that God recognizes the necessity of such action but holds us accountable anyway. Such an understanding of historical action is, in Ajzenstat's view, in accordance with rabbinic realism and the realities of human action that are recognized in Fackenheim's early theological essays. But he points out that in Fackenheim's later writings, where he often addresses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the problem of dirty hands disappears. Ajzenstat sees his earlier tragic vision as an appropriate moral context for the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and for that matter any vision of humans as historical actors. Ajzenstat complains that Fackenheim "was unable to hold on to this difficult vision to then very end. The word tragic disappears in the later work," implying, of course, that his work before he wrote about the Holocaust was more rooted in the real agonies of historical action than his later pronouncements on Israel, the Holocaust, and Jewish power.

Kenneth Green's lengthy and fascinating article "Leo Strauss's Challenge to Emil Fackenheim: Heidegger, Radical Historicism and Diabolical Evil" is a careful exegesis of a short letter of recommendation that Strauss wrote to a publisher in support of Fackenheim's projects. The letter, though generally encouraging, includes a short passage querying Fackenheim's puzzling mention of the demonic. Space does not allow a proper engagement with this article in which, building on this passage, Green offers illuminating discussions on Heidegger and the differences between idolatry and the demonic. Suffice to say that in the end "Strauss seems to have thought that this notion—evil as a primordial force, willed by man, which either enters him from a demonic realm, or makes him receptive to demons—is fundamental to Fackenhein's argument." But this is to say that Fackenheim has taken the category of the demonic out of the context of the well known historical categories of racism and mass murder, transforming the Holocaust from modern history into mediaeval demonology.

Benjamin Pollock's elegant and exhilarating article "Thought Going to School with Life?: Fackenheim's Last Philosophical Testament" is an exegesis on an even tinier document than

Strauss' letter, a note found after Fackenheim's death in his personal copy of *To Mend the World* confessing the failure of his attempted mediation of the Holocaust. This mediation called for a philosophical participation in the experience of resistance much as the Passover ritual calls for all Jews to consider that they were slaves in Egypt. The latter brings us to the consciousness of freedom just as the former brings us to the possibility of a human confrontation with the Holocaust. This mediation has failed according to Fackenheim because the Nazi concentration camps had succeeded in creating the Musselman, a zombified creature, neither dead nor alive for whom resistance was meaningless. But this "failure" is based on a view that the underlying Satanic purpose of Nazism was not the destruction of bodies but the destruction of souls: the creation of Musselman, and hence the destruction of humanity and of God. In some realm of explanation this may be a profound insight, but I do not find any support for this view in any historical or autobiographical account of the Holocaust—even that by Primo Levi. The Nazis did destroy souls, and even the idea of humanity, but, strange to say, only as a side effect. Musselmanner, a horrible and imprecise word, were also the products of the trenches of World War I and the Soviet Gulags.

In my own view, which space compels me to state briefly, a problem lies at the heart of Fackenheim's endeavor to stage an encounter with the Holocaust as history. He insists that the philosopher or theologian who struggles to face this unprecedented manifestation of radical evil must remain chained to a historicism that refuses to interpret the Holocaust *sub specie aeternitatis*. Many of the most arresting passages in Fackenheim's writings are those that show how the Holocaust has shattered all traditional strategies of comprehending evil in the light of some higher Providence. But his determination to look unflinchingly into historical reality gives rise, perhaps unwittingly, to an account heavily penetrated by a theological agenda.

In Fackenheim's historiography, the Musselmanner, in whom the image of God has been despoiled, bear witness to the Nazis' victory over God. But in this account, Fackenheim has framed the Holocaust as a theological drama, a quarrel with God as betrayer of the Covenant. This theme is prominent throughout his Holocaust writings, which sometimes read as though they were written by Ivan Karamazov, who calls upon God to rationalize the murder of innocent children. Certainly the Holocaust has provided believers and unbelievers with abundant material for such a quarrel, but for the historian, the vision of the Third Reich as a regime whose primary significance lay in a Mephistophelean destruction of souls threatens to shift the discussion of the Holocaust from its real historical context into a branch of demonology. The task of the historian, however impossible, is to keep the Holocaust in our world.

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