



The Uprising
and the Future

**Toward
a
Jewish
Theology
of
Liberation**

Marc H. Ellis

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*To my father and mother
Herbert Moore Ellis
and
June Goldwin Ellis*

*who first taught me the meaning
of Jewish ethics and liberation*

*and
to my son
Aaron Moore Ellis*

*May he be a blessing to the household
of Israel*

*Blessed is the match that is consumed
in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns
in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop
its beating for honor's sake.
Blessed is the match that is consumed
in kindling flame.*

Hannah Senesch

Stop the beatings, stop the breaking of bones, stop the late-night raids on people's homes, stop the use of food as a weapon of war, stop pretending that you can respond to an entire people's agony with guns and blows and power. Publicly acknowledge that the Palestinians have the same right to national self-determination that we Jews have and negotiate a solution with representatives of the Palestinians!

Michael Lerner

Preface to the Second Edition

Writing this preface provokes mixed emotions. On the one hand, I am pleased, as is any author, that my book has found an audience, that my ideas have elicited a response and often a sense of solidarity. On the other hand, I am saddened that the realities which I analyze in this book continue and in some ways have worsened. The Palestinian uprising has brought to the attention of the world and, in a profound sense, to the attention of the Jewish people, the suffering and hope of the Palestinian people. It has forced all of us, myself included, to deepen our reflection and encourage action on behalf of peace with justice in the Middle East. Hence, this edition carries as a final chapter an afterword which calls for a theological conversion of the Jewish people toward those whom we often see as the enemy. How many people will be beaten, tortured, or murdered, how many imprisoned or deported, before we understand that solidarity is the way toward a future worth bequeathing to our children? My hope is that this edition will bring us one step closer to the ethical witness which lies at the heart of what it means to be Jewish.

Preface to the First Edition

Like any study, this book is informed and limited by the particular experience and background of its author. A practicing Jew, I am a student of contemporary religious thought rather than a trained Jewish theologian. This book, therefore, does not attempt to expound an academic Jewish theology but rather to surface dialectics, issues, and possibilities that might give birth to a Jewish theology of liberation. Depending on one's perspective, my study of and work with progressive Roman Catholic groups and institutions such as the Catholic Worker movement and the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers may evoke fear or wonder. These affiliations, however, rather than impeding my faith, have yielded a perspective that has renewed my Jewish outlook and commitment. Like many other Jewish and Christian believers, I affirm the continuity of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I regard Christianity, or perhaps more appropriately, contemporary followers of Jesus, as issuing from the Jewish community and following a stream of ideas, beliefs, and values that are similar and yet distinct from those of the contemporary Jewish people. I view the separation of faith communities as tragic, for it is a source of much pain and confusion. The Jewish prayers said each morning that thank God for making one a Jew and calling one to be free, represent for me a hope that my faith can lead to authentic solidarity with all those who struggle for human dignity and justice.

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Introduction

The history of the Jewish people is filled with anguish and struggle. More often than not, the defining motif of Jewish life has been exile, forced wandering, and lament. And yet, through this travail the Jewish community has bequeathed much to the world: a developed monotheism, a prophetic social critique, an awareness of God's presence in history, and the foundation of two other world religions, Christianity and Islam.

As important as these contributions are for the Jewish community, of which I am a part, the paradigm of liberation that forms the heart of the Jewish experience, the dynamic of bondage confronted by the call to freedom, has been appropriated also by struggling peoples throughout the ages. The songs of African slaves in nineteenth-century America calling on God for freedom echo the lamentations of the Jews in Egypt. The Exodus tradition, articulated in the writings of Latin American liberation theologians, again emerges within the struggle of Latin Americans for justice.

To cite these contributions of the Jewish people is to pose a fundamental contradiction of world history, one posed often but answered only weakly. Why is it that a people that has contributed so much to the world has received such scornful treatment in return? Why is it that Jews today are considered not as principal contributors to Western religious and intellectual heritage, but only as victims and survivors? And why is it that in these allegedly enlightened times a people born of suffering is doubted and dismissed, as if the world should have no concern for a people's long and difficult history? And finally, why is the quest for a just and safe existence, so prized by the secular and religious left, denied to a small and suffering people just emerging from the death camps of Nazi Germany? Have not the Jewish people been ostracized, even condemned, for their difficult passage to empowerment in the State

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of Israel? Indeed, to a progressive Jew who has tried to understand the rebirth of a prophetic Christianity and affirm the humanist community of our day, comprised of nonreligious persons who embrace the values of dignity and justice, these contradictions are haunting.

The paradox of achievement and suffering is only part of Jewish history. To be sure, the overwhelming motif of wandering and exile flows from a fidelity to covenantal truths and values, an innocence often rewarded with brutality. On the other hand, the Jewish community's struggle to be faithful to those values has been shadowed by the reality of betrayal, for in advance of our own interests we have been slave merchants and masters, supported corrupt kings and governments, and even at times oppressed one another.

Today, in Israel and in the Jewish community in North America, policies and alliances increasingly resemble those historically used to oppress our own people. On the Israeli side one need only mention the recently-concluded occupation of Lebanon and the continuing subjugation of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians; just as horrific are the relations Israel maintains with South Africa and Israel's military assistance to the murderous governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. In North America efforts continue to establish Israel as a U.S. outpost by building up its military. Relations between American Jewry and the poor and oppressed of North America remain strained, and the ambivalent courtship of Israel by fundamentalist Christians continues. It is not too much to say that these developments threaten the very existence of the Jewish people. A crossroads appears that calls us to fidelity to our values though it may yet tempt us to betrayal of those values.

The choice between fidelity and betrayal arises from the history of our people, guided as they are by the image of "enslaved ancestors," as Walter Benjamin once wrote. To be faithful to our ancestors, particularly those who have struggled, suffered and died in the Holocaust, is to be attentive to their cries, which must guide us. But fidelity to our own values and history is intimately connected to the struggles for liberation of others; the brokenness of our past is betrayed, our political empowerment made suspect, when others become our victims.

Poised between Holocaust and political empowerment, we in the Jewish community find it increasingly difficult to articulate a

witness consonant with our past. The thunderings of expansionist Israelis and of neoconservative North American Jews witness to the haunting possibility of a Judaism lost. Other Jews, often less articulate and removed from centers of power, are caught within this dialectic, fearing to speak yet distinctly uncomfortable with the direction our community is taking. Still others, intellectuals and activists within Israel and North America, actively oppose the paths already chosen by the institutional representatives of the Jewish community. Yet how, in our post-Holocaust world, do we articulate these feelings and opposition? And who is to name betrayal and fidelity?

Although there is no corner on truth here and the risks for the Jewish community are great, the discussion cannot continue to be censored. Every community has patterns of fidelity and betrayal, points of paralysis and breakthrough, and the Jewish community is no exception. Patterns move us beyond the incidental and isolated example to movements toward and away from the central ideals of the community, ideals forged in historical struggle and affirmation. In history final resolutions are impossible. What thus becomes important is the direction in which a community moves.

However, at certain times in history the community reaches a crossroads it cannot seem to articulate or acknowledge. This is the point of paralysis where rational thought, even the wisdom of one's tradition, seems to falter. The community drifts; the rhetoric drones on; judgment becomes clouded. Paralysis is less an evil than an indicator that the community needs to review its inner dynamic and its relations with other communities. Questions are posed. Does our present situation, if pursued, lead us to justice and renewal, or to emptiness and oppression? Are our discussions addressing the values and witness we are called to live, or are they covering over a hope we refuse to face because of its difficulty? Some historical situations might demand accentuation of particular values and the de-emphasis of others, and there are times no doubt when the community is simply bereft of values, exhausted, as it were, by history's travails. Are we willing to admit this state so we can begin the process of renewal?

If we come to understand points of paralysis, the possibility of breakthrough increases. Of course, the problem is that patterns of fidelity and betrayal occur in the mix of history, and the lessons of

history are often as ambivalent as they are terrifying. Proponents and opponents, prophets and villains appear at every turn, defined by angles of vision and experience that depend on various propensities and points of view. What to one faction is a breakthrough may be to the other an apocalypse. This is the dilemma in which the Jewish people of North America and the State of Israel—the two most articulate and politically powerful Jewish communities—presently find themselves.

To say that the questions raised by this situation are controversial is an understatement. The deep hurt of the Jewish people, their historical and contemporary sense of isolation, their feeling of being adrift in a hostile world: these are intensely subjective memories and emotions which spring from our history. To speak publicly on issues of the Holocaust and Israel in a critical manner is to court suspicion and raise the spectre of treason. The result may be excommunication from the Jewish community, or worse, the accusation that one is supporting the climate for another holocaust. But the difficult questions remain, and the movement of our lives and community, toward fidelity or betrayal, lies before us.

This book is one attempt to address the crisis that confronts us. Chapter One begins with the Holocaust and the pain and vision that issue from it. Theology that emerges from the Holocaust is crucial, for to a large extent it responds to a consensus within the Jewish community. Controversial in its origins, Holocaust theology now is accepted as the way to the future.

A central theme of Chapter Two is political empowerment and the theological rationale that undergirds it. At the same time, certain persons are trying to assess the cost of this empowerment, something to which Holocaust theologians initially gave little thought. We find a debate over the relationship of political empowerment and ethical concern—a debate that is crucial for the future of the Jewish community.

The concrete expression and limitations of ethical concern is the subject of Chapter Three. The findings are ambiguous, because the depth of ethical commitment is astounding while the acceptance of movements of renewal in the larger community is less than encouraging. Although the theology of empowerment leaves little room for prophetic challenge, such a prophetic voice continues to be heard in an exilic way.

Chapter Four is an excursion outside the Jewish community to Christian liberation movements that, paradoxically, despite Christianity's long history of abuse and oppression of the Jewish people, carry forth the tradition of the Exodus, of the prophets and the refusal of idolatry that we bequeathed to the world. The question posed here is whether we will show solidarity with those struggling for justice and, in so doing, recover our own history and witness. The Holocaust is again discussed, now in the broader framework of other suffering peoples, and the issue of Jewish contribution to suffering in North America and Israel is brought to the fore. Can we bond with those who are suffering today if we do not look honestly at the history we are creating? To enter into solidarity with suffering peoples, however, we need to look again at our own history, especially in relation to the Holocaust and the State of Israel.

Chapter Five suggests that one way of doing this is to allow the journeys and visions of dissenting Jews to reemerge. Of the many we could choose, we discuss Etty Hillesum and Martin Buber because they address the difficult question of God's presence in an age of holocaust and the essential link between the Jewish return to Palestine and the Palestinian people. In order to move beyond the unexamined assumptions and the inflexibility of certain positions, the path untaken forces us to reexamine the "truths" we affirm. Could it be that the majority Jewish understanding of God and the State of Israel, reinforced with emotion and argument, covers over another perspective on what it means to be Jewish?

From the preceding discussion the themes of contemporary Jewish life that have surfaced are brought together in Chapter Six in a new framework. The dialectic of the Holocaust and political empowerment, confronted by renewal and solidarity as the way to recover our history and witness, is the path of liberation. Liberation cannot avoid the difficult questions, and this chapter seeks to move beyond Holocaust theology to a Jewish theology of liberation. Such a theology represents a willingness to enter the danger zones of contemporary Jewish life and examine the liberal rhetoric and activity that protect our recently acquired affluence and power. The aim is to help create, in concert with others, an atmosphere in which the deepest parts of our tradition can speak in the language of fidelity.

CHAPTER 1

A Shattered Witness

One cannot understand the Jewish community today without a sense of its past, for it was born in struggle and hope. Geographically, the beginnings of the Jewish community obviously lie in ancient Egypt, as is recalled in the Hebrew Scriptures. The experience of slavery and liberation, though, repeated time and again in Jewish history, marks the last two thousand years as a time of movement in exile rather than of liberation. To repeatedly withstand intense communal suffering is necessarily to take seriously both the community's history and its promise of freedom. Interpretation of events becomes crucial, even consuming: at the heart of Jewish life is the dialectic of slavery and liberation, a paradox to be thought through in each generation.¹

For contemporary Jews, the overwhelming experience of suffering is the Jewish Holocaust, the death of six million Jews and the attempted annihilation of our entire people. Interpretation of the event is omnipresent, though insights are diverse and often controversial. One might say that the Holocaust is the formative event for the Jewish community of today and provides the framework from which the struggle to be faithful to our values takes shape.

To delve into the Holocaust world is to be surrounded with the agony of a people on the threshold of annihilation. Survivors' accounts, histories, even the documentary *Shoah*, which includes testimonies of both survivors and perpetrators of the Holocaust, all point to the same incredible reality: a Kingdom of Death built by the Nazis to consume an ancient people—quite simply, to eliminate