

# Introduction

Post-Holocaust Jews who are religious and self-critical find themselves in a dual struggle for survival. The first struggle is within the Jewish community where critical thought related to Judaism and Jewish life is frowned upon or even prohibited. The second is within the larger academic community where Jews are typically denied the expansive terrain that scholars of Christian background take for granted. The Jewish thinker and writer thus experiences a solitude because one's natural constituency and larger community both see her as suspect or out of place. A double bind is erected and the difficulty of post-Holocaust Jewish life is exacerbated.

It is less a question of privilege, ideology or extra-scholarly identity that troubles engaged Jews like myself. Rather it is a struggle to survive the double solitude and the lack of support for a tradition that has often been demonized or romanticized but rarely engaged. Just as Christian scholarship has in many cases become a thinly veiled parallel church, where innovative theology and spirituality can be explored relatively free of church authority and parishioners needs, so, too, engaged Jewish thought needs a safe haven and a caring community where the future of Jewish life can be envisioned.

The central question of contemporary Jewish life is framed by the displacement and oppression of Palestinians. This process has been ongoing now for more than five decades. It is now becoming permanent. The sealing of the borders of an expanded Israel and a ghettoized and fragmented Palestinian autonomy has arrived. There are few places in academic or public life for Jews who oppose these policies in a public way.

Like other committed theologies across the globe, Jewish theology cannot afford an abstract stance toward identity and life. The Jewish need for engagement comes at a time when other community theologies are reflecting back on their origins and questioning their next steps. They are questioning their vision at precisely the time that Jews are finding our tradition systematically stripped of its covenantal and ethical bases.

This memoir enters the discussion of public life from an autobiographical perspective. I try surface elements of a post-Holocaust journey in dialogue with the issues that confront Jews and Judaism. I also reflect on the double

bind many Jewish intellectuals face. I present a challenge for Jewish inclusion in the broader tradition of faith and struggle.

There is little sense in underestimating the difficulty of responding to the challenge. This difficulty is not objectively difficult: it is distant and costly. Perhaps it would also be freeing. At stake is the integrity of the religious search as a truly ecumenical adventure in the twenty-first century.

Like many contemporary Jews, I live a life of exile. An exilic life is difficult to choose and even more difficult to live. And since the Jewish exiles of our day tend to be relatively affluent and successful it is even more difficult, perhaps even presumptuous, to claim this designation. Nonetheless it is the case as the following pages hope to elucidate.

When Jews in exile begin to relate to other exiles more deserving of the appellation, the possibility of a diaspora community comes into view. As an exile who travels this diaspora, I know first-hand the difficulties that present themselves. What does it mean to be a Jew in exile? What does it mean to be Jewish in exile with other exiles from around the world? Is this another community in the making, a diaspora that contains Jews but is not Jewish? What does exile and diaspora mean for Jews and Judaism? What do the travails of exile mean for my journey and for my children?

Exiles are famous for predicting the return to their homeland. It is a life-long preoccupation that betrays an underlying anxiety. If exiles return they do so only in the physical sense. They have touched other worlds and the world they return to has changed as much as they have. It is no longer their world. This is true of the architectural geography of home; it is also true of the symbolic landscape of culture and religion. The exile loses the physical and spiritual touchstones as known and embraced by the majority.

Most exiles will not return even in the more limited sense of land and extended family. The gates are closed. A void lurks beyond those gates. In the beginning of the journey the landscape is unknown and vulnerability seems defining. Over time a landscape emerges that seeks a new connection, this time within the context of exile. This is the diaspora where particular backgrounds and traditions meet and are reconfigured. There is pain in this journey. There is also hope and possibility.

All journeys are unfinished, even when predicted and planned in advance. So it has been—and will be—with my own life. I offer my own journey into exile

and the new diaspora as a testimony to myself and to others. It is a memoir in the middle that seeks a chronology and sometimes deviates from it.

Exilic journeys defy the linear even as they seek a coherence that is understandable to self and others. They double back and around. Middle feature endings and beginnings in a variety of configurations.

In writing this memoir I re-experienced both solitude and solidarity. Aloneness permeates these reflections. But not only aloneness. Reflection allows the gathering of life into a broader arc of vision. In this arc I experience a peculiar sense of gratitude. Like the exile, gratitude is difficult to explain. Originally my memoir was divided into three parts: practicing exile; traveling the diaspora; gratitude. The last section was the shortest.

It is difficult to offer this gratitude to others who are just beginning the journey. Can I suggest this journey to my children? Is this the last exile in Jewish history? My sense is that it might be but an opening remains. The future is open. I can only struggle to be faithful in my own time. I bequeath that struggle to my children.

I am grateful for the covenant. Over time, I have become more conscious of the covenant as the foundation for my struggle and hope. Exilic journeys carry many surprises and this has been one of them. I am also grateful for those who have softened the exile through hospitality and by forgiving the flaws of personality that remain.

By speaking and writing the truth as I see it and by standing in that truth as limited and partial as it might be, I feel a strong connection with God. Once I refused belief because I was unable to define God in a satisfying way. Now I accept God without a sure definition or even the desire for one.

These memoirs testify to this belief. Those who think that certainty and triumph characterize belief in God will be disappointed in my journey. So, too, will those who think that the question of God cannot be approached because of suffering and death. I am in the middle of the journey. I am also in the middle with regard to God.

In the end, however, my position is clear. When an evangelical Christian colleague defined himself a believer, I could only reply that I am as well. A friend sitting next to me suggested that the person was witnessing to me and that he would not see my belief as complete. I responded that my faith is

limited, incomplete and in need of the testimony of others. As is his. I smiled at his presumption and naivete. I had experienced another boundary in the exile and the new diaspora.

Often I am asked about a God who judges. This question comes up in the discussion of suffering, especially in relation to the perpetrators of atrocity. I doubt that a judging God exists. Still this possibility brings me to the question of a broader complicity. Jewish authorities often render judgement on Jews like myself who protest the displacement of Palestinians and the attempt to render it invisible. In conscience I cannot acquiesce to the ethical violations of the covenant that now stand at the heart of what it means to be Jewish. This issue is at *the very center of Jewish life and history*. I am ready for judgement.

The end is near. So is the possibility of new life. In these pages I try to relate how the struggle and experience of endings and new life have shaped my own journey.