Reconciling God’s Role in the Holocaust through Feminist Theology

According to Sandra Lubarsky, the “classic Jewish hope is for a world that is in accord with God’s will”. This world would be one of justice, peace, and a fulfillment of God’s promises [289]. During the Holocaust, six million Jews were killed, nearly two-thirds of all European Jews [Tolstoy, 60]. Today, Jews struggle with this classical view of a God, and their trust in their Lord has been shaken. Many ask, “Where was God in Auschwitz?” [Tolstoy, 61]. But was God hidden, turning a blind eye to the atrocities, as many philosophers argue? Or was God present, in forms not often recognized due to classical perceptions of an all-powerful, patriarchal God? Was God, in a feminine form, present throughout the horrors of the Holocaust?

Most scholars and philosophers of religion assume that God is omnipotent and uses his power in a coercive manner. This is a hidden God, who according to Jewish mystics is unknowable [Lubarsky, 291]. Philosophers argue that this hidden aspect of God is necessary to preserve human freedom [Raphael, Female Face, 43]. However, the problem of evil arises. “As the classic statement of the problem of evil dictates, an all-good, all-powerful God would not remain passive in an encounter with undeserved suffering [Lubarsky, 292].”

How then, can a Jewish individual reconcile an all-powerful God to the crimes of the Holocaust? When capable of intervening, why did God allow the continued crimes against humanity and the Jewish self-respect? Classic philosophers provide two reasons for this lack of intervention. One is that God’s intervention would impinge upon human freedom. Should God have intervened at any point in the Holocaust, his actions would have diminished at least one individual’s free will. The second reason for non-
intervention is that God would impede on man’s becoming; that is, God must allow humans to fail, suffer, and overcome in order to reach their greatest potential and truly live in his image [Raphael, Female Face, 43].

Many often relate our relationship with God as one of parent and child. If one were to take these arguments from above into this context, one would immediately see how one would question God’s benevolence and contract with humankind. For instance, if God were a mother witnessing the abuse of her child by her spouse, many in this society would insist that she contributes to the suffering of the child and is as responsible for the pain of the child as the abuser. Regardless of the fact that she is not directly imposing the abuse, her “turning her back” allows her child to continue to suffer. If our society does not condone this behavior in a parent, why is it so willing to condone it in God? To turn his back, to remain hidden, during the Holocaust was either a desertion of the people with whom he held a covenant, or an undeserved punishment [Raphael, Female Face, 46].

Instead, how might God be viewed in light of the Holocaust, if one rejects the patriarchal, all-powerful God? Would there be healing if instead we believed that “presence, keeping watch, is a function of love. That a present God paces back and forth, circling the object of her concern [Raphael, Female Face, 47]?” Rather than view the holy in Auschwitz in terms of masculine values, what if God’s presence was instead seen in the relational acts of the people?

While Jewish philosophers might often espouse a transcendent God, one removed from our human suffering, Jewish tradition adds a personal God [Raphael, Female Face, 52]. To be holy in the Jewish faith is to model oneself on divine
attributes, those of compassion and loving kindness, through service of the heart and the worship of God through everyday actions [Raphael, Holiness *in extremis*, 392]. The relational, “female” Jewish values and practices of washing and caring for the sick and dying, of caring for the dead by washing and covering their bodies, were enacted throughout the camps for the sake of human dignity, and therefore for God [Raphael, Holiness *in extremis*, 383]. Wherever people gathered in support, Auschwitz and other camps were sanctified and made fit for God’s indwelling [Raphael, Holiness *in extremis*, 392].

It is the problem of power-over, rather than power-with that lies at the heart of this confusion. According to Lubarsky, the heart of Judaism is a divine-human relationship and a coercive power violates this relationship [300]. Relationship cannot truly exist if one entity has the ability to force an action or reaction from the other. Therefore, the heart of Judaism is that of a God which persuades in light of greater wisdom. The true God of the Jewish faith would be unable to stop the Holocaust. Instead, if God is relational, as espoused by feminist theology and process philosophy, the Holocaust was an effect of human action, and God, or perhaps Goddess, was ever present, guiding her people through their continued observance of tradition and in their relational acts.


The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: a Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust.
