

# TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POST-*SHOAH* INTERFAITH DIALOGICAL UNIVERSAL ETHIC

by Steven Leonard Jacobs

*Abstract.* The essay is an attempt to construct a new interfaith dialogical universal ethic after the Holocaust/Shoah, after first examining several biblical passages of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, namely Leviticus 19:13–18; Matthew 22:34–40; Matthew 5:43–48; and Luke 10:25–37. The author contends that the foundational Jewish and Christian scriptural texts can no longer be read, understood, and either interpreted or reinterpreted the way they were prior to the events of 1933–1945. Thus, following an examination of the scriptural passages in question, a new direction in the construction of such an ethic is suggested: that the only kind of holiness that merits our support is one grounded in ethical relations between all human beings, regardless of particularistic identities, and scriptural support for positions that exclude and distance rather than include and embrace must, ultimately, be rejected.

*Keywords:* Christian; dialogue; ethics; Hebrew Bible; Holocaust; interfaith; Jewish; New Testament; *Shoah*.

---

I have purposely titled this paper, somewhat clumsily perhaps, “Toward the Construction of a Post-*Shoah* Interfaith Dialogical Universal Ethic” because, even prior to any examination of the texts under discussion—Leviticus 19:13–18, Matthew 22:34–40 and 5:43–48, and Luke 10:25–37—this title reflects the very necessity of its component parts.

*Toward the Construction:* The task before us, now more than fifty years after the horrors of 1933–1945, has, at long last, only just begun: namely,

Steven Leonard Jacobs is Aaron Aronov Chair of Judaic Studies at the University of Alabama, Department of Religious Studies, 212 Manly Hall, Box 870264, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0264; e-mail sjacobs@bama.ua.edu. This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Lecture Series in Science and Religion at Aurora University, Aurora, Illinois, 17 May 2001. An earlier version was presented at the 31st Annual Scholars Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, St. Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 3–6 March 2001.

[*Zygon*, vol. 38, no. 3 (September 2003).]

© 2003 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

the construction of an ethic that will ensure nonrepetition of that past—or, more realistically, if not nonrepetition, then minimizing the repetition of those horrors.

*Post-Shoah*, but by no means post-genocidal. The very events of Nazi destructiveness will not be repeated in their fullness either today or tomorrow, for historical events do not repeat themselves in either exactitude or ferocity; but they have been and are being repeated with catastrophic regularity and frightening variations in the years since 1945. The ethical challenge before us is to break these cycles of cataclysmic horrendous violence before they ultimately overwhelm us.

*Interfaith*, because the profound lesson of these past years is that goodness is not confined to one community; that we Jews need to realize that, confronted with the nightmares of yesterday, some Christians would have stood with us even at the moment of our deaths, just as they might now know and understand only too well that the Christian faith they take seriously and preciously came close to abandonment because of the obscenity of its silence during the years of the *Shoah*.

*Dialogical*, because it is out of our conversations, looking directly into each other's faces, eyes, and hearts, that a shared tomorrow will emerge. And *universal*, because we Jews cannot, in the years since the *Shoah*, draw our metaphoric wagons in a circle—in our beloved Israel or elsewhere—and expect to protect ourselves and survive a future genocidal holocaust; and we Christians will not survive such either in a terrorist world gone mad.

With these initial thoughts in mind, let us, even more hesitatingly perhaps than in the past, approach our texts—but let us do so with a caveat, that of Primo Levi's *Shemá*:

You who live safe  
 In your warm houses,  
 You who find, returning in the evening,  
 Hot food and friendly faces:  
     Consider if this is a man,  
     Who works in the mud  
     Who does not know peace  
     Who fights for a scrap of bread  
     Who dies because of a yes or a no.  
     Consider if this is a woman,  
     Without hair and without name  
     With no more strength to remember  
     Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
 Meditate that this came about:  
 I commend these words to you.  
 Carve them in your hearts  
 At home, in the street,  
 Repeat them to your children.

Or may your house fall apart,  
 May illness impede you,  
 May your children turn their faces from you.  
 —Primo Levi (1919–1987)

#### THE HOLINESS CODE RETHOUGHT

Chapters 18–20 of Leviticus have been adjudged by the rabbis of the Jewish Tradition as the “Holiness Code,” for which the word *holiness* [*kiddusha*] remains at the core, and Chapter 19 as the heart of that core. And yet, contained herein are not meditative discussions on the role of holiness in daily life, or the centrality of ritual-ceremonial behavior in the life of ancient Israel, or prescriptions on how to follow a life of prayer and liturgical affirmation. For even our predecessors wisely knew that the truest measure of holiness was not to remove oneself from one’s community or one’s community from the larger society. Thus, we may correctly term this understanding of holiness *practical holiness*, lived in the context of society among one’s fellow human beings. Its affirmative mandate is found in Leviticus 19:2, mistranslated by far too many for far too many years:

*Kedoshim tiyu ki Kadosh Ani Adonai Eloheinu:*

NOT “You *shall* be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am Holy.”

BUT “You *must* be holy for I, Yahweh your God, am Holy!”

For Israel of old, for the Jewish People today, and for those who wish to stand in solidarity with the Jewish People, post-*Shoah*, “*Ayn breirah!*” There is no alternative!” Holiness, as further defined below, is not an alternative possible lifestyle, one among many; it is the *only* option available to us in a world increasingly capable of destroying itself and the totality of its inhabitants.

Realistically, for one who wishes to continue to affirm the viability of a Jewish or Christian *religious* life, in light of the *Shoah*, this mandate now takes on an additional dimension: To affirm the integrity of the Divine Presence demands that this God, too, rethink and renew and reaffirm God’s commitment to holiness: God, too, *must* be Holy, because this People Israel demands holiness of God; its unmerited suffering and near total annihilation and extinction but yesterday give it an ethical claim upon God to live up to the voice of holiness found not only in the sacred Torah but in the life of the saving remnant of its survivors and their descendants.

With these thoughts in mind, then, we turn to a simple listing of the ethical mandates found in Leviticus 19:13–18:

- You shall not oppress your neighbor
- You shall not rob your neighbor
- You shall not withhold your hired servant’s wages until the [following] morning

- You shall not curse the deaf
- You shall not put a stumbling block before the blind
- You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment
- You shall not respect the person of the poor, nor favor the person of the mighty [in judgment]
- You shall judge your neighbor in righteousness
- You shall not go up and down as a tale-bearer among your people
- You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor
- You shall not hate your brother in your heart
- You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him
- You shall not take vengeance against the children of your people
- You shall not bear any grudge against the children of your people
- You shall love your neighbor as yourself

Contained within this list are the three universal principles by which post-*Shoah* ethics must now be governed: “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” (19:16); “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (19:17); “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18).<sup>1</sup> *Neighbor*, not Israelite, not Jew, not Christian, not German, not Palestinian, not Arab; *neighbor*. Not yesterday, not today, but forever and all time.

(Parenthetically, perhaps the major accomplishment of our post-*Shoah* world is not the requisite theological rethinking of both Judaism and Christianity mandated by the silence, indifference, and/or complicity of too many so-called religious people, and the paucity of both righteous gentiles and righteous Christians during the long dark night of Nazism’s reign of absolute terror and evil, but, after the International Military Tribunals of Nuremberg in 1945, the creation of both the International Criminal Tribunal for (the former) Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda at the end of the twentieth century, still functioning at the beginning of this twenty-first century. Hence, Leviticus 19:15: “You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment; you shall not respect the person of the poor, nor favor the person of the mighty; but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.” These international public condemnations of genocidal behaviors, these legal and moral and ethical expressions of global outrage with their concomitant refusals to acquiesce in silence and indifference after Auschwitz, are, in all honesty—despite the hesitancy of this country to affirm these tribunals—the true first steps in the construction of this post-*Shoah* dialogical universal ethic.)

#### TURNING TROUBLINGLY TO THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

I continue to approach these New Testament texts with trepidation but with respect—for they are not mine and there remains that point of accep-

tance beyond which I simply cannot go. Turning first, therefore, to Matthew 22:34–40, whether in truth it was Jesus the Christ or the author or editor of Matthew who regarded Deuteronomy 6:5 as the “great and first commandment” and Leviticus 19:18 as the “second commandment” is of lesser importance to me than their grounding in Jewish authenticity. Nor am I disturbed by the affirmation in verse 40 that upon them “depend all the law and the prophets.”

Post-*Shoah*, then, the message of this first set of verses in the construction of a interfaith dialogical universal ethic is not to Jews at all but to those who profess faith in this Christ and label themselves as Christians: Their authenticity is akin to their willingness to incorporate into their very beings the understandings of both the divine-human encounter and the human-human encounter as they have been adumbrated in the evolving Jewish religious tradition in the personhood of the Jewish People. They can no longer claim legitimacy as Christians, if indeed they ever could, apart from the Jewish People. Pushed even further, their historic distancing of themselves from both the Jewish People and the Jewish tradition must now be recognized, appreciated, and ultimately accepted as among the primary foundational causes of two thousand years of antisemitic hatred and activity, culminating in the horrendous epidemic we now call the *Shoah*. *Not that Nazism was Christian, but the very rejection of Christianity!* With open hand and open heart, then, I invite Christians to continue to reclaim that which is authentically Christian, namely, their Jewish heritage, as they go their own way. This becomes a second moral mandate in the construction of this ethic: solidarity with the Jewish People as both evidence of and model of their sincerity to stand with all peoples who are “other,” who are not like them, who do not believe as they believe, who do not pray as they pray, who do not worship as they worship, whose God or gods may not be their God or Christ.

But I remain deeply and disturbingly troubled as I turn to the second Matthean passage under consideration, 5:43–48, specifically verse 44, which would mandate love of my enemies and prayers for the well-being of those who have persecuted me.

I am the child of a survivor-escapee, now deceased. One hundred fifty members of my large and extended family were murdered before my birth, including my grandparents, all of my father’s aunts and uncles except four, and all of my father’s cousins except two. Regardless of whether or not it is Christ to whom these words are attributed, there is in me no love or compassion whatsoever for those enemies of my family—May their names be blotted out for all eternity!—for those who perpetrated these evil deeds upon us. Am I not a “son of the Father who is in heaven,” according to verse 45? Am I outside the pale of those who must be “mature,” “completely pure,” “holy,” or “perfect” as my “heavenly Father” is, according to verse 48?<sup>2</sup> Even now, more than fifty years after my own birth, the rage remains, the anger burns white-hot within me, as I feel ever more keenly

these losses, knowing full well that what could have been for my own family and so many others, will never be. No: I simply cannot accept the so-called truth of these verses, and I publicly call upon my Christian brothers and sisters to reject them too in light of the *Shoah*. Anger and rage at those who would perpetrate Holocaust and genocide does not diminish us in God's sight or in our own; morally and ethically, they energize us to commit ourselves to work ever more diligently to construct a world where these horrific acts of the past do not become the rationale for present and future behaviors.

#### WHAT ABOUT LUKE?

Even more disturbing than the second passage of Matthew is Luke 10:25–37, the so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan. Assuming that the “lawyer” of verse 25 is himself an Israelite, in all likelihood a Pharisee, the ultimate result of its telling is and has been for two thousand years a denigration of Jewish religious leadership and, by extension, the Jewish People as a whole. It is we Jews who are neither merciful nor compassionate toward those who are not of our own people; rather, it is the representative of that people whose own temple was “rebuilt by the Romans as a reward for the aid given them by the Samaritans during the Bar Kokhba rebellion” (“Samaritans” 1972), who, according to Josephus, also suffered under Pontius Pilate (*Antiquities* 18:85–89), but who, at least according to 2 Kings 17:34–41, practiced a form of religious hybridization, merging Israelite worship with their pagan origins, and thus took themselves out beyond covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who *is* both merciful and compassionate.

We Jews and Christians are thus obligated today, after the *Shoah*, to ask ourselves, What, indeed, is the purpose of such a parable? If its purpose was to denigrate the Jewish People, then it remains successful. If its true purpose, however, was to equate mercy and compassion as keys to inheriting eternal life, then it has been and remains unsuccessful; for by setting up what must now be viewed as a far too dramatic literary fiction, it has caused countless generations to negatively remember the characters themselves—lawyer, priest, Levite, and Samaritan—rather than the intended lesson.

But what about the lesson and its intended implications? To be sure, both mercy and compassion, both subsumed under the Hebrew term *rachmanut*, are and always have been Jewish values. Are we not the compassionate children of the Compassionate One, according to our own Jewish religious tradition? Would Christ himself, steeped as he supposedly was in the ways of Judaism, so bitterly condemn his own with a blind naiveté that the generations who would succeed him and bear his name would push their conclusion to its own inevitable violent end? Was he so

unsophisticatedly wrapped up in the drama of his own oratory that he failed to truly and accurately perceive the implications of his story?

Perhaps the parable was not his at all but that of the Lukan author, attributed to Christ to heighten his own agenda—which was, indeed, to denigrate the Jews and hold up the superiority of an educated Greek audience of potential Christians?

Either way, after the *Shoah*, we Jews must say to our Christian brothers and sisters: Here is a text that causes us pain and suffering, as it has for two thousand years. If Christians are in truth committed to the values of mercy and compassion, let them reject the parable itself and give evidence of their commitment to these values of mercy and compassion by standing with us in our pain and our suffering.

#### TOWARD A “UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF A GLOBAL ETHIC”

In preparation for this presentation, and quite by accident, I stumbled across a new book by Leonard Swidler of Temple University, Pennsylvania, and Paul Mojzes of Rosemont College, Pennsylvania, entitled *The Study of Religion in a Age of Global Dialogue* (2000). Of particular interest and relevance are chapters 12 and 13, “Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic” and “A Proposed Draft: A Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic” (pp. 179–94), and the “Appendix: Explanatory Remarks Concerning the ‘Declaration Toward a Global Ethic’” (pp. 197–212).

Basing itself upon the Golden Rule, whether defined positively (“What you wish done to yourself, do to others”) or negatively (“What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others”), it is an attempt at building an international, interfaith, dialogical, universal ethic of shared consensus in the aftermath of the genocidal tragedies, including the *Shoah*, which nearly overwhelmed the twentieth century. The document itself that highlights the text—“A Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic”—is both an answer to the *Shoah* and all other past, present, and future genocides, and well worth the investment of serious discussion and response. But there is yet more.

In his “Introduction: Ethics after Auschwitz,” Editor John Roth, known to many of us for his own moral integrity, posits seven themes that lay the foundation for the collection of remarkable essays and responses by Roth, Leonard Grob, Peter Haas, the late David Hirsch, David Patterson, and Didier Pollefeyt (Roth 1999, xiv–xv):

1. Auschwitz was not only an assault on millions of innocent human beings—Jews first and foremost among them—but also an assault on goodness itself.
2. After Auschwitz, the most difficult questions for ethicists include: How do ordinary people come to do extraordinary evil? What, if anything, can ethics do to check such evil? Or put otherwise, how did human beings who had previously lived unexceptional and inoffensive lives end up watching, condoning, or inflicting continuous acts of intense cruelty and unprecedented genocidal

- destruction against the aged, women, children, and generally helpless people who engaged in no acts of provocation and committed no crimes, as crime is defined by advanced societies?
3. After Auschwitz, the simple reaffirmation of pre-Holocaust ethics will not do anymore, because the Western religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions have shown themselves to be problematic.
  4. The Holocaust is not so much the end of ethics as it is the proof that ethics can be misused and even perverted into pseudo-ethics.
  5. Ethics after Auschwitz must be characterized by openness to the Other.
  6. Ethics needs the support of politics, lest it be ineffectual. Politics also needs ethics, lest it waste human life.
  7. The ethical study of the Holocaust should not only be a particular discipline, but also it should penetrate the heart of every other discipline—from education to science, from medicine to theology, from the arts to philosophy, from politics and law to everyday life.

Roth concludes his edited book with “the note on which ethics after Auschwitz should always begin” (Roth 1999, 137): “If we want to know whether we are on the right or wrong track, individually or collectively, we can hold ourselves responsible by asking: Would action like mine, would policies like ours, have tended to help or harm the Holocaust’s victims? For post-Holocaust ethics and the future, helping or harming those most in need measures the difference between right and wrong.”

As Jews and Christians, as good people of faith in the aftermath of that monstrous atrocity which almost succeeded in destroying both goodness and faith—often *despite* the sacred texts we hold precious, both individually and collectively, rather than because of them—it may very well be our coming together after generations of apartness and distance that may yet prove the final hope of a desperate humanity before it is too late.

## NOTES

1. The late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire Joseph H. Hertz’s comment is particularly noteworthy: “These three Hebrew words were early recognized as the most comprehensive rule of conduct, as containing the essence of religion and *applicable in every human relation and toward all men*” (Hertz 1961, 502; emphasis added).

2. Along these same lines, is Simon Wiesenthal to now be publicly condemned and repudiated for the silence he informs us was his own response to the dying soldier who requested absolution of him? See both his *The Sunflower* (1976) and *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (1997).

## REFERENCES

- Hertz, Joseph H. 1961. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*. London: Soncino.
- Roth, John K, ed. 1999. *Ethics after the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*. St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House.
- “Samaritans.” 1972. *Encyclopedia Judaica* 14:730. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House.
- Swidler, Leonard, and Paul Mojzes. 2000. *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press.
- Wiesenthal, Simon. 1976. *The Sunflower*. New York: Schocken.
- . 1997. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. New York: Schocken.