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“Jewish Disciples of Jesus & the Wounds of Memory: Source of Healing or Continued Trauma?”

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Sister Therese-Benedict of the Cross (Edith Stein) faces Evil: *Tikkun Olam and Christian reparatio*

Tikkun Olam commonly designates the idea that creation implies a state of brokenness and that, whenever a Jew performs a *Mistva*, a Torah prescription, he or she contributes to mend this state of brokenness and by the same token bring the time of Messianic redemption a step closer. According to this line of interpretation, *Tikkun Olam* is one of the central insights of Isaac Luria's 16th century approach to Kabbalah, the esoteric teaching of Jewish tradition. When one considers the Shoah from this Lurianic perspective, what comes in sight is more than a confirmation of the world's broken condition. The Shoah reveals new and abyssal dimensions of this ontological brokenness. E. Fackenheim, a distinguished rabbi and philosopher, famously referred to *Tikkun Olam* in this context¹. He singled out the brokenness of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, heirs to Europe's Christian heritage, after the Holocaust. Nations that used to call themselves Christians have ended up trying to wipe out Jewish existence from the surface of the Earth. Fackenheim uses the term *Tikkun Olam* to designate deeds that, after this cosmic culmination of Gentile hatred against Jews, aim at bridging the dialogue- and trust gap between the two. Moreover, it can be argued that these specific ethnic/religious wounds represent but one aspect of the state of brokenness induced by the Shoah. In addition to this brokenness *ad extra*, so to say, on

may claim that the Shoah conceals a brokenness *ad intra*, within the Jewish religious conscience. It is this second aspect that I. Greenberg, another rabbi, had in mind when he criticized Fackenheim's use of such traditionally Jewish terms such as *mitsva*, Covenant, etc. in relationship to the Shoah. Those terms cannot be left unquestioned, claimed Greenberg, because the very event of the Shoah puts under assault the most fundamental assumptions of Jewish faith². "I submit," writes Greenberg, "that the Covenant was broken"³. Elsewhere Greenberg explains: "In retrospect, it is now clear that the divine assignment to the Jews was untenable. After the Holocaust, it is obvious that this role opened the Jews to a total murderous fury from which there was no escape...Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the Covenant."⁴. Here also, Greenberg opens the door to a form of *Tikkun -ha-olem*. After the Shoah, keeping *mitsvot* is no longer an obligation for Jews; it has become an act totally free and voluntary on the side of the Jewish people. One could say that, after 1945, each *mitsva* performed as a free, unilateral commitment by Jews, contributes to bridging the gap between God and his people that arose in connection with the Holocaust. In my opinion, it is remarkable that both forms of *Tikkun Olam*, Fackenheim's *Tikkun ad extra* as well as Greenberg's *Tikkun ad intra*, go with the awareness of the *a priori* impossibility and almost self-contradictory nature of this cosmic task. To a large extent, the enduring brokenness of the relationship between Gentiles and Jews, the certainty that there is a fundamental, unsurpassable, incompatibility between Gentile and Jews is what guarantees the survival of the Jewish nation, something which Fackenheim characterizes as the 614th *Mitsva* or the post-Holocaust *Mitsva*. The same self-contradictory character affects Greenberg's notion of voluntary Covenant: What would the final resorption of the gap between God and Israel mean, if not understanding why God did allow such an event to happen to the people He chose and to whom He has repeatedly manifested His steadfast love? However, as Greenberg is the first to declare, there can be no worst blasphemy against God than claiming that one understands the Shoah or that this senseless slaughter can be justified by a divine reason. It seems therefore that post-Holocaust Jewish *Tikkun Olam* is

condemned to preserve the very wound that it intends to heal - this double brokenness that continues to dwell in the hearts of the most open-minded and pious representatives of contemporary Judaism.

Let us look at Christianity now. This religious tradition is based on a principle that is both very close to that of *Tikkun Olam* and fundamentally different from it. There also we see a *Mitsva*, a holy action performed by a Jew with the purpose of mending the brokenness of the world. I am speaking about the death of Christ on a Cross. But, contrary to the Jewish tradition, the *Mitsva* at stake has the form of a self-sacrifice, not that of fulfilling commandment of the Law; it is about giving up life, not about sanctifying it. Besides, this *Mitsva* it is performed only once and for all as it is supposed to achieve Messianic redemption in one single go. Still, the disciples of Christ's religious practice is foreign to the notion of *Tikkun*. The thing is that Christian tradition draws a distinction that does not exist in the Jewish one between the advent of the Messianic age and its complete realization at the end of times. Through Christ's death, Evil is vanquished in the sense that its ambition to conquer the world and snatch it from God's hands is defeated forever. Nonetheless, the effects of its reality are still felt, sometimes in devastating ways, and they will remain so until the second coming of Christ and the end of all historical times. The Book of Revelation evokes the throes of the serpent, the ancient dragon, that continues to ravage the world even as it is being subdued by God and his angels. From this point of view, one could say that the disciples of Christ contribute to healing the brokenness of the world, in the way religious Jews do whenever they accomplish the good deeds that their faith prescribes. Christians do not claim that they are destroying evil in the sense Christ did through this life-giving sacrifice; they believe that, through their own holy actions, prayers and sacrifices, they contribute to the unfolding of Christ's redemption in the world. As Paul writes, they are "filling up" in their flesh "the sufferings of Christ for His body which is the Church" (Colossians 1:24).

In point of fact, this combination of similarity and difference between the Christian notion of *Tikkun* and the Jewish one makes it tempting to decipher the latter

through the lenses of the former. This is nowhere truer than in the case of the Shoah. The Christian *Tikkun* seems to be able to give meaning to what evades the Jewish one. While Shoah refers to the death of 6 million innocent people, the whole Christian tradition shows that the death of the innocent acquires meaning when it is interpreted in terms of Christ's sacrifice. The death of Christian martyrs contributes to the cosmic fulfilment of Christ's sacrifice; that is, to the complete defeat of Evil. Why not see the death of these millions of Jews in this light? Meaningfulness hinges here upon accepting the idea that these Jewish deaths are unconscious witness to the all-embracing truth of Christian faith. This is meaningfulness at the cost of the very principle that has insured the survival of the Jewish nation throughout 2 millennia; namely, the dismissal of Christian faith, the refusal to see the Jewish Covenant absorbed by the Christian one. Ultimately, this meaningfulness makes of God not only indifferent to His Covenant with Israel but one of its most bitter enemies: God lets his own people perish so that the truth of Christianity, the very religion that has steadily persecuted them in the course of History, might triumph. From a Jewish point of view, one deals here with the worst kind of supersessionism, even if it derives from Christian hermeneutics' best and most generous intentions. There is little doubt this issue lies behind the harsh controversy that surrounded, in the 90ies of the late century, the opening of a Carmelite convent and the erection of Crosses on - or very close to - the site of Auschwitz.

Of a Jewish *Tikkun* that is by definition incapable of healing the double brokenness of the Shoah and a Christian *Tikkun* that cannot heal it without destroying the value and purpose of Jewish existence, the question is certainly not which works better. Choosing between faith in the destiny of Israel and faith in Christ is not a matter of calculating theological wins and losses. The question is rather whether one needs to choose between the two. In other words; is it so that there is no way to render the Shoah theologically more tolerable, or more in tune with the reality of the Covenant between God and Israel, than by letting Christian truth deprive Jewish existence of purpose and value?

In the considerations that follow, I will argue that the witness of a Christian, a

nun and a saint who, not content with openly clinging to her Jewish identity, died because of it amid millions of her Jewish brothers and sisters, helps us to conceive of a third way - a path ahead between the Charybdis of Jewish post-Holocaust consciousness and the Scylla of Christian senseless triumphalism. To state it shortly, I claim that Edith Stein's death at Auschwitz is a Christian *Tikkun* that brings to the fore the unbroken nature of God's Covenant with Israel as well as its unique role among the nations. Accordingly, this is not about whether a traditionally Jewish or traditionally Christian approach to the Shoah can or cannot endorse such a notion of *Tikkun Olam*. This is about whether this Judeo-Christian notion of *Tikkun* that we want to single out here, in the case of Stein, manages to go further than the traditionally Jewish one without providing an additional illustration to traditional Christian supersessionism.

Accordingly, what we first and almost exclusively need to do here is to define in what sense one can and should speak of Stein's death as a contribution to a divine *Tikkun Olam*. Is it possible to claim that Stein herself saw her destiny in that light?

In an autobiographical piece written in 1938, Stein recalls how she started pondering, ten years before; that is, in 1928, not very long after her baptism, traveling to Rome and submitting a request to the Pope – that of writing an encyclical letter dedicated to the *Judenfrage*, the Jewish issue⁵. There are reasons to believe that this idea has something to do with the encyclical letter, *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, that Pius XI released that very same year. The encyclical did not touch on the *Judenfrage*, but, its core concept corresponded word for word - albeit certainly not intentionally - to the Jewish concept of *Tikkun*. *Miserentissimus Redemptor* aims at promoting the idea of *reparatio*, spiritual reparation, according to a very Catholic understanding of the term. There, Pius XI argued that, as a result of the multiple sins of Christianity, the name of Jesus is openly scorned and vilified in modern European societies. For this reason, Christians have the duty to carry out works of reparation to the sacred Heart of Jesus. In other words, they must compensate for the sins of the enemies of Christ, and this, insisted the Pope, not only by producing works of piety but also through works of penance and expiation, whatever these may entail. Stein has certainly read this

encyclical letter with attention, because it is the very same type of logic that she applied to the issue of the Nazi anti-Jewish persecutions in her letter to Pius XI of 1933, a letter where she tries to convince the Pope of the necessity of publicly defending those she calls her own people: “Is the effort to destroy Jewish blood not an abuse [*Schmähung*-scorning, insult] of the holiest humanity of our Savior, of the most blessed Virgin and the apostles?”. In this letter, Stein used the very logic of *Miserentissimus Redemptor* in a way that reversed the Pope’s implicit view regarding those to whom it should apply. According to Stein, the abuse of the name of Christ did not primarily involved the Catholic faithful but the Jews – these same Jews whom the teaching of the Catholic Church used to describe as the traditional enemies of Christ, liable to divine punishment for that very reason. According to Stein, Christ stands *de facto* on the side of persecuted Jews - or vice-versa- whereas “a nation that calls itself Christian” – I quote the words of Stein- is described as playing along with the Antichrist.

If it is true that Stein is both following and bending the logic of the Pope’s 1928 encyclical letter, a specific *reparatio*; that is, a work of expiation carried out by Christians that compensates the greatness of the abuse, must necessarily correspond to the Nazi profanation of Christ’s name. Actually, the hypothesis that Stein came to see her own death at the hands of the Nazis as such an expiatory work of reparation, of Christian *Tikkun* , is corroborated by her own writings. In 1939, on the third Sunday of Lent, the so-called Passion Sunday, sr. Therese-Benedict of the Cross, alias Edith Stein, was staying at the convent of Echt, in the Netherlands, where she had been transferred in the hope that she would escape the Nazi threat. That Sunday, she heard Hitler declare on the radio that the Jewish race was to be eliminated from Europe. On the same day, she wrote to her superior the following note: “Dear Mother, I ask your blessing to give myself in sacrifice as an offering directed to Christ’s heart [NB-this corresponds exactly to Pius XI’s notion of *reparatio*] on behalf of peace. Let the power of the Antichrist go asunder before a new war breaks out, so that a new order might take place instead. I wish it because the 12th hour has already come. I know that I am nothing, but it is the will of Jesus, and he shall call many others to do the same”.

If Stein believes that the sacrifice of her life can achieve peace, it is because this peace has to do with the healing the wound consubstantial to the conflict; namely, the wound between Jews and Gentiles embodied by the Nazi *Hilul ha-Shem* or profanation of God's name. Being a Jew, sister Benedict of the Cross knew that, in spite of her most conspicuous conversion to Christianity, she was bound to suffer the whole impact, down to death, of the Gentile persecution of Jews. But being a Christian, Stein knew that by offering her life to the heart of Jesus, by way of a Christian *Kiddush ha-Shem* or sanctification of the Name, she could contribute to make amends for the sins of her own people, so that a new life, a new order as she writes, might see the light. I believe this notion of spiritual substitution conveys the deepest meaning of the few words that Stein said to her sister when three years later the Gestapo came to arrest them at the Echt convent: "Come, we *go for our people*".

I cannot dwell on all the texts, written during this period, where Stein develops the parallel between religious vows in the Carmelite order - the wedding of the bride with the Lamb - and the definitive offering of one's life as a participation in the mystery of the Cross. The question we are asking here is to what extent Stein's personal *Tikkun* enables us to envisage the *Tikkun Olam* associated with the Shoah in a new light. From this point of view, I would like to shortly reflect on and somehow further one short meditation written in 1933 where Stein evokes the history of Humanity as marked out by three transgressions: that of Adam first, that of the Jews who contributed to the death of their Messiah second and thirdly, that of the Gentiles that apostatized their faith in Christ by persecuting Jews⁶.

According to Fackenheim, the whole metaphysical issue of the Shoah boils down to one question: "Where was God at Auschwitz?"⁷. Claiming with Stein as well as a number of contemporary Christian theologians that the Nazi persecution reversed the relationship between the Jews and the crucified Messiah, so that at Auschwitz, God was to be found on the Cross in the midst of his own people, is probably the only answer that measures up to Fackenheim's question. The crucifixion provides the best analogy to conceive the attitude of God in front of the unfurling cosmic chaos that was

destroying his people at the time. But this analogy does not provide any answer to the question of all questions; namely, why did He allow this to happen? Why the Shoah if the answer to the why of the Cross – achieving cosmic Salvation – is a non-repeatable one by essence? Applying the logic of Christian martyrdom to the death of six million Jews, we might well claim that this devastation brings the time of the fulfilment of Redemption a step closer. But then we need to understand *in what manner*. It is clear – because it is the teaching of Paul himself (Rom.11:11)- that the second transgression described by Stein, the “stumbling” of Jews persecuting their Messiah, brought about the communication of Salvation to the Gentiles. Following Stein’s symmetrical pattern of thinking, what then would the third transgression; i.e., the persecution of Jews by Gentiles, bring about? There is hardly more than one possibility: the opposite movement to the extension of the Covenant to Gentiles as a consequence of Jewish fault is the recovery of the Jewish Covenant as a consequence of the Gentile transgression. The renewal of God’s ancient Covenant with the Jews, damaged by their previous transgression, this after little less than two millennia of exile, cannot be a justification of the Holocaust – but it might well be its most decisive outcome.

Through her death at Auschwitz, Stein administered the proof of this theoretical possibility. Murdered as a Christian who was a Jew, Stein simultaneously unmasked the anti-Christic nature of Gentile fury against Jews and revealed the Messianic or Christic dignity that is integral to Jewish identity. Her death is the ultimate manifestation that God never ceased to regard Israel as his special people. We are far here from any sort of triumphalist supersessionism. The manifestation of Israel’s ontological rootedness in Christ-Messiah does not carry with it the cancellation of the Old Covenant, but on the contrary, its fundamental renewal as it marks the end of *Galut*, the age of exile. This renewal points towards the moment when Israel *qua* Israel will again become the light of all the nations of the Earth, the moment when Israel’s closeness to God will definitively heal its wounded relation to the Gentiles. By way of conclusion, let me end this presentation with a fairly well-known quote from *Conversation at Night*, a short dramatic piece that Stein wrote in 1941, a few months before her arrest. It features the

visit of queen Esther to her prioress and the exchange both had about the ongoing devastation. Here is the prophecy that Stein puts on the lips of queen Esther:

“Now in the mirror of eternal clarity, I saw
What happened *after that* on earth.
I saw *the church* grow out of *my people*,
A tenderly blooming sprig, saw that her heart was
The unblemished, pure, *shoot of David*.
I saw flowing down *from Jesus' heart*
The fullness of grace into the Virgin's heart.
From *there it flows to the members as the stream of life*”.