

EXISTENTIALISM IN A JEWISH CONTEXT

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A central tenet of existentialism is founded on the assumption that there is a problematical relationship between *faith or moral engagement* on the one hand and *logical or scientific reason* on the other. It was not only the Christian founder of modern existentialism Søren Kierkegaard, and the atheist Nietzsche who dared to proclaim that “we” have made God “absurd” or “killed” the conventional God of organised religion. Martin Buber, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Lev Shestov, Franz Kafka, Franz Rosenzweig, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, Abraham Heschel, Emil Fackenheim and Richard Rubinstein have attempted to rescue us from the conundrum of the simply “absurd” God who does not in fact necessarily rescue the good, the brave, the worthy, the honest. Nothingness and Space-Time and the absurd, unpredictable incoherence of our lives erode our attempt at reaching a provable divine being despite our religious piety and moral behaviour. The most we can do as would-be *authentic* human beings, is to act in the spirit of Sartre and Heidegger’s authentic committed Human Being (*Pour-soi/En-soi, or Dasein*) who creates God and good objects rather than being created by God. We can *nationalize* our idea of a God who allowed Hitler and the Nazis to have the free-will to create the Holocaust which in turn gave Zionists the will to create the State of Israel. But what God could allow this to be at the expense of the Palestinians? Do they have the free will to come to terms with a one-state solution? Can the State of Israel grant equal rights to the Palestinians living under military rule in the West Bank and will the Palestinians ever accept the loss of the old Palestine?

On the face of it, after Auschwitz, Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Deir Yassin, Sharpeville, a good God ruling the world seems unlikely, unless he allows free-will. Perhaps these atrocities are there to test us. This verges on the outrageous. Why should innocent children be made to suffer unspeakable horrors? For them and even for the culpable adults faith surely cannot legitimately be based on a purely dangerous leap in the dark across the gap between a reason-seeking life-story and one’s submission to hopelessness looking for a positive outcome in the darkness of the often irrational world.

In some instances the reasons for monstrous evil are irrational, but explicable. “The masses” and the leaderships in Germany, Austria, fascist Spain and Italy and authoritarian Japan had evil intentions which were widely shared by fascist and ultra-conservative parties throughout the world and not properly understood in the British and American ruling class until Dunkirk and Pearl Harbour in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The Nazi Party winning the biggest share of the vote for the Reichstag in 1933 led to Hitler being given the chancellorship of Germany. This was a foreseeable disaster but

explicable following the chaos of the Weimar Republic and the post-Great War reparation demands of the Allies at Versailles. Germany and the world knew from *Mein Kampf* published widely in the 1920s, that part of Hitler's plan was the destruction of the Jews, the Romanies, the communists, the social-democrats, the trade unions, homosexuals, the very disabled, a genocide justified by the scientifically and morally false theory of the *Herrenvolk*, the Master Race. German genocide had already been practiced in the German West Africa against the Herero and the Nama of what is today Namibia before the Great War – a rehearsal for the Holocaust of World War 2.

The fact is faith may be devoid of reason, may be irrational - without a full and proper understanding of right and wrong. We know what is wrong when our ordinary right to life, normally guaranteed by the rule of law *can* be undermined even in a parliamentary democracy, indeed violated. That is why there is a separation of powers between the judiciary, the legislature and the executive in a parliamentary democracy.

Some groups are more vulnerable to the *evil of the other*: Jews, Africans, the traditionally persecuted "others" are always under threat from the "othering them", the hostile Othering Other. As Sartre said with good cause of the 20th century: "Hell is other people".

Surely, we have had enough experience of totalitarian and fundamentalist ideologies which use pseudo-reasoning to justify the most terrible crimes. Faith in Nazism or Stalinism or persecutory forms of the Abrahamic or Eastern religions which tyrannise and kill the innocent and which have no basis in a rational and compassionate ethics, *can* inculcate a leap of faith into what Arthur Koestler called "the God that failed" (referring to Stalinist Marxism) let alone a God of any kind of religion of tolerance and love.

Where does God, a God of truth and reason and liberal Judaism come into all this?

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The ontological proof that God exists goes something like this: (1) the idea of perfection exists. (2) Surely, then, the most perfect perfection would have to be the existence of an actual God who is perfect. (3) Therefore on *logical* grounds, *a priori* (from before, in the nature of things) God has to exist to *perfect* the idea of perfection. Then faith must derive from a belief in the Him, Her or It if an actualisation of the *idea* of perfection is to be actually perfect. This is from St. Anselm.

But who is to say that an *idea* of perfection *has* to pre-suppose an actualisation of perfection or that *any* idea has to be actualised?

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Theory (A) Is the big bang. The explosion of the singularity. It is logical and awaits full empirical justification. Hubble's observations and Einstein's theories of the universe justify it empirically.

Theory (B) is Darwin's theory of evolution. It is justified on *logical* grounds? So far there are no scientific grounds for disputing it. The survival of the fittest, however is a theory in natural science. *Social Darwinism* is a perverse, fascistic theory used to justify Western Europeans as *inherently* more advanced intellectually than, say, Africans.

Thus (A and B) *are scientific observations* of the *astrophysics* of the *expanding* universe and *evolutionary biology* arguing back to

(I) the veracity of a theories of creation on *empirical* grounds: Hubble's micro-echoes of the big bang at the beginning of *this* universe shows the creation of matter and its expansion from a beginning about 13.75 billion years ago. Evolution of life-forms began to happen with the formation of what becomes planet earth about 4 billion years ago.

(II) The relation between the strong nuclear force, the weak nuclear force, electro-magnetism, and gravity suggest that these are part of the dynamic working of the universe according to contemporary astrophysics.

(III) Darwin's empirical work on sexual selection in animals on the Galapagos Islands and Wallace's similar observations in Indonesia established the veracity of evolution theory.

(IV) Einstein's theories of (1) $E=Mass \times the\ speed\ of\ light\ [squared]$, and (2) the curved nature of space-time and (3) Schrodinger's and others quantum mechanics are actualised (4) as nuclear fission and fusion because they are necessary corollaries to (5) Newton's theory of gravity.

Empirically, we can see a star which, if space-time was not curved, *should* be hidden behind the sun during an eclipse by the earth's shadow, but the light from such a star *bends* through space time and

appears within our line of vision away from where it actually is obscured by the eclipsed sun (See Stephen Hawking *The Universe in a Nutshell* pp 4-27)

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The idea of absolute evil exists because ethics and unethical behaviour can be crooked in the form of vicious ideology and certainly we know from history that absolute evil *is* incarnated in societal demons like Hitler, Himmler, Goering, Goebbels, Mussolini, Franco, at least the most fanatical followers of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito. But that is not a logical conclusion; it is a moral, empirical or *a posteriori* argument. There may well be a society where there is evil, understood as such, which does not have to be *logically* incarnated because the nature of evil like the nature of perfection is merely postulated as a negative and positive example: *don't* be like a Hitler because evil does not require any kind of perfect evil of itself as evil, in the way the idea of perfection only *seems* ontologically to call forth the perfectly good as a standard by which to judge being-in-the-world as full of care in Heidegger, and full of authenticity in Sartre and full of God in medieval ontology (the study of religious being). St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), is the originator of the ontological argument, which he describes in the *Proslogium*, (Anselm: Ontological Argument for God's Existence in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy accessed 26/2/20) Even the ontological proof of God as the necessary demonstration of perfection is at bottom only a cultural issue- a debating point but of great interest to theology.

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If there is the idea of a perfect God He is far from perfect in the Hebrew Bible. He can be vengeful, nationalistic and even strange.

He even takes on a bet with his Adversary, *Satan*, that his favourite, Job, however tested, will never curse God and therefore, given Biblical culture, will never die in catastrophic circumstances *because he cursed God*.

He is heroically faithful to God and never curses God and he finally prospers again *in a real life* situation.

Here anthropology suggests this is intended as an allegory or parable and that the Book of Job entered the canon of the Hebrew bible as wisdom literature, part of the *Ketuvim* - the Writings -

such as Ecclesiastes, and coincides with what Karl Jaspers calls the axial age of Buddha, Confucius and Plato.

The doctrine of “just deserts” is highlighted existentially but is part of folklore in a Jewish existentialism. In effect many Nazis in their behaviour cursed God and created an Aryan god in their own image and lived in Nazi-friendly havens and died in their beds safe from any retribution. Sartre’s doctrine of “bad faith” establishes an ethical basis for acting in good faith. It convinces a priori. Human beings appear to want to live “the good life” whether in “good faith” or by means of deceptive, lying, evil, “bad faith”.

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“Jews” (*Yehudim*) are literally descended or labelled as from the tribe of Yehuda, which cannot be true since all Jews are not brown-skinned Judeans or brown-skinned Israelites. Conversion and intermarriage with Europeans created the Ashkenazi or European Jews. But some Ashkenazi Jews are brown and Semitic looking and are indistinguishable from Mizrachi or oriental Jews. Presumably this is because lines of genetic continuity do connect back to “typical” Semitic inheritance in *some* Ashkenazi Jewish inheritance. The oriental or Mizrachi Jews may very well be brown because they descend more directly from the original Israelites and Judeans or other Semitic groups including Arabs who may have converted to Judaism. The Sephardi or Spanish and Portuguese Jews may be brown Semites directly descended from the Israelites or the Judeans or look like white Europeans or Spaniards. So Jewish ethnicity does not correlate with colour as a sign or signifier. And the Falashas, the *Beit Yisrael*, the Ethiopian Jews, are Africans who converted to Judaism.

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But what of essential or existential Jewish belief? The central myth of Jacob-becoming-Israel after the struggle with the angel (becoming a Yis-ra-el – a defender of God or he whom God defends) is one of the defining legends, of Jewish identity.

Another is the *Akedah* (the abortive sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham).

The third is the Exodus from Egypt. And the fourth may be Job’s faith under colossal, heart-breaking setbacks. *They may just be stories, legends or myths and yet they express the power of ethical truths*

which show the rationale of reasons to want us to join in the leap of faith. They make ethical sense so they *inspire* the leap of faith, not logically cause it.

Ultimately the Ten Commandments have to be confronted as even more central to Jewish identity.

But before that the very *ontological* basis of Jewish belief may be: EHEYE ASHER EHEYE uttered by the *source* of our existence either heard by what Heidegger calls *Dasein* present alongside the average world or the ready at hand world or in the present to hand world. In Sartre's terms this is the *for itself (pour-soi)* and the *in-itself (en-soi)*, the transcendent in the immanent and the immanent expressing itself in the transcendent. Moses sees the transcendent God in the burning bush which is still a bush, an immanent reality, which, we can suppose if we were there we could identify as a scientifically analysable botanical reality in other non-burning bushes of the same sort because perhaps it was a mirage.

In Lacan's terms Moses sees a Symbolic and an Imaginary Real.

But this mystery is a mystery, a problem to be solved by science in *Yesh*: empirical or ontological being.

So in conclusion:

- (1) existential Judaism requires (a) faith *per se* which reconciles itself to an Imaginary and a Symbolic God, not (b) belief in a supernatural God.
- (2) If God-in-the-burning-bush is a mirage it still *symbolises imaginatively* Moses' and our Real: it *becomes* indispensably Real if it is bridging the gap between ethics and faith over the abyss of atheism; it becomes indispensably Real only if we have a hunger for God, whom we revere as *HaShem*, the Name. A Symbolic, Imaginary God has to speak to us as our Mother (*Malkut/Shekhina*) and our Father (*Keter*) whom we need in Kabbalistic terms as *Yesod*, our foundation, and through the other Imaginary *sefirot* which in Kabbalistic Yoga we project onto our bodies and exercise not only our physical being, but the Biblical characters associated with these *sefirot*.
- (3) But only if we choose to believe in the symbolic significance of the Burning Bush and that God's naming of Himself as *Eheye Asher Eheye* is imaginatively the truth about *Being-In-The-World*, can *HaShem* become an indispensable reality. "Normally" we live by scientific and everyday realistic norms of symbolic action. And where has this got us? We have so intruded on nature so as to create a world-wide pandemic and have used natural resources such as fossil fuels so toxic that the planet Earth may become uninhabitable.

(4) Jewish mysticism integrated into Yogic *asanas* should conscientize us to save our souls and our bodies.

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READING:

BOWIE, Malcolm (1997) *Lacan* London: Fontana Modern Masters. index references to the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

HEIDEGGER, Martin, (2000) *Being and Time* translated by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. Index references to “being”, “*Dasein*”, “conscience” and “consciousness”.

MATT, Daniel (2009) *The Essential Kabbalah* San Francisco: Harper/Collins especially notes pp 165-218 referring to original sources in the text which is an anthology ranging from the author of the *Zohar* Rabbi Moshe De Leon, Avraham Abulafia, Moshe Cordevero (especially the last paragraph of p. 49 linking the *sefirot* to biblical characters), Isaac Luria, and including Rabbi Kook a recent chief rabbi of Israel /Palestine.