

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, April 5, 2008

David Weiss Halivni – Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah

Every year during the High Holidays, at some point, I tell a certain story, a story that is actually about much more than the High Holidays. It is the story of a father and his son in the run up to Rosh Hashanah, when, in keeping with tradition, one attends shul extra early to recite *selichot*, penitential prayers. For the life of him, the father could not get his son out of bed to early minyan. He begged and pleaded and berated the boy day after day, until finally one morning the boy got up, walked to minyan with his father and just as they were about to go into shul, right there at the entrance, there was a gold coin sitting on the doorstep. The father picked it up, gave it to the boy with a beaming smile and said “Look how God has rewarded you. By coming to shul early, you have been rewarded with this wonderful gift.” At which point, the boy took the coin, put it in his pocket and said, “Yeah, but the person who lost this coin came to shul earlier than I did.”

I love this story, because it is really a story about God’s justice, reward and punishment, and humanity’s inability to ever fully understand the ways of God. And while I have told the story many times, what I have never shared is where I first heard it and from whom. I heard it while in rabbinical school at a community Friday night dinner in the upper west side of Manhattan, and the speaker, was David Weiss Halivni. Halivni, as some of you may know, retired a few years ago as professor of Talmud at Columbia University. His research into the composition of the Talmud has defined the field, a fact recognized earlier this year with him receiving the coveted Israel Prize. Both a traditional Jew and scholar of the first rank, Halivni exists in multiple worlds, sometimes not without controversy. Some of you may recall the publicity surrounding his name a

few decades ago, when, in 1983, he dramatically resigned from JTS after it decided to ordain women.

But the real story behind Halivni, or at least the story lurking behind his story of the boy and the gold coin, is that Halivni is a Holocaust survivor. Born in Sighet, a childhood friend of Elie Wiesel, Halivni's entire family was murdered at Auschwitz. The story of his survival, told in his memoir "The Book and The Sword," is a tormenting read, as he went from Auschwitz to Wolfsberg and Mathausen, to his arrival in an orphanage in America. Halivni's story of the boy and the coin may not be explicitly a holocaust story, but if you pause to consider it, then you know it goes to the theological crux of the conversation. Because when a Jew squarely faces the holocaust, the traditional calculus of Jewish theology falls painfully short. Facile answers are insufficient, God's justice a harrowing mystery, God's presence altogether in doubt. In post-Holocaust world, we are all, as it were, the boy holding the gold coin.

This morning, as some of you may know from the bulletin and emails, I would like to speak about Halivni's latest book on Post-Holocaust theology entitled "Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology after the Shoah." There are copies available and order forms with more information. On the eve of Yom HaShoah, Weds April 30th, from 6-7 pm all are invited for a book discussion. The April 30th evening is part of a bigger series in these next and last few months, to meet three times to discuss what I believe to be the three core elements of Jewish identity, God, Torah and Israel. On April 30th, with Halivni's book, we will talk God. On Tuesday, May 20th, in honor of Israel's 60th we will discuss Amos Oz's famous novel "A Tale of Love and Darkness." Our final discussion, on Monday June 2nd, as we approach Shavuot, the festival of the giving of

the Torah, we will turn to Milton Steinberg's "As A Driven Leaf." God, Torah and Israel, three books, three opportunities to discuss the essential building blocks of Jewish identity.

Halivni's book falls into what is referred to as post-holocaust theology, which, depending on who is talking, either encompasses all of Jewish theology since the Shoah, or a very narrow subsection in the world of Jewish thought. If you take the maximalist view, then the Holocaust isn't just a date in history, but the horrors of the Shoah ushered in an entirely new era of talking about God. As Arthur Cohen famously explained, the Shoah signaled an unnerving seachange in how Jews think about God. To call it a tragedy or horror, to call it anything at all, is to diminish the sheer evil of millions murdered, of a destruction of European Jewry, of a God who let evil go unchecked. So Cohen called it the Tremendum, a break or *Ceasura*, after which nothing is the same, the Holocaust demands new theological language. The minimalists, on the other hand, do not ignore the enormity of the Shoah, but simply understand it as a difference in degree, not in kind. Jews have always known tragedy, as has all of humanity. The problem of evil is the same problem of evil whether it is six million Jews or one child with a terminal illness. In this view, the Jewish view of the Holocaust is just another shelf in the Jewish library, BM645.H to be precise, H for holocaust, in between Jewish views on Ecology BM645. E, and Jewish views on Justice BM645.J. And, as you can guess, in between the minimalists and maximalists lies every possible expression. There is no one post-holocaust theology, just as there is no one way people mourn the death of a spouse. The human response to tragedy is as varied as the sea of humanity itself

Halivni's response is extraordinary because it draws on his personal biography, his ease with rabbinic literature and his lifetime work of critical studies in the Talmud. In brief, for Halivni, God's presence was Revealed at Sinai when the Torah was given. The Divine Will, made manifest in the Torah given at Sinai, was lost at the moment the tablets were broken (thus the book's name) by Moses at the base of the mountain. Israel's sin (*Chateu Israel*) resulted in a retraction of the divine presence, the pendulum swung from a profound intimacy with God's will to alienation, which, after exile to exile, pogrom to pogrom, reached its nadir in the Nazi death camps.

Thus, Halivni's first essay describes prayer in the death camps. He fiercely rejects any notion that the holocaust could be God's response to sin, that somehow European Jewry were responsible for their fate. He details the utter destruction wrought by the Shoah, its incommensurability, and how it could not possibly be God's will. Halivni adopts the kabbalistic language of *tsimtsum*, the contraction of the Divine will. The fervent prayer of the Jew in the concentration camp is for a restoration of God's sovereignty: "*Meloch al kol haolom kulo bekh'vodekha*" "Rule over all the world in your full glory." God, present at Sinai, was absent in Auschwitz. We pray after the holocaust for the pendulum to swing back towards realizing God's presence, that God should protect and defend and intervene.

In the middle two chapters Halivni traces the history of the Revelation at Sinai, first - the written law, and in the next chapter, the oral law. Regarding the written law, he explains the rabbinic view that while Moses received the Torah from God through a clear lens, over the ages, it was given over from one generation to the next through a "clouded lens," and in that transmission, its initial perfection was lost. The defects of the Torah,

like a tuxedo that has been rented one too many times, are the result of it being passed around too often for far too long. It is time, to engage in a process Halivni calls, *tikkun hamikra*, repairing our relationship to the text, to return to receiving the Torah from God and not merely, having it handed to us.

So too with the Oral Torah, the subject of chapter three. This essay, necessary reading on the history of rabbinic literature, explains that over the ages, as the Jewish people grew more distant from Sinai, paradoxically, rabbinic literature, the Oral Torah, was becoming more and more anchored to Sinai. For while early on, no Rabbis claimed their interpretations to come from heaven, as the condition of Jews worsened, as the distance from Sinai grew more distant, a defensive posture grew dogmatically more insistent that the Oral Law came from Sinai. Post-Auschwitz, Halivni seeks to reverse this trend, he wants to restore the Oral Torah to its human, not Divine status. Rabbinic literature is human interpretation of the Divine will, not the Divine will itself; an important step that serves to validate Halivni's life work on the transmission of the rabbinic literature.

Halivni's post-Holocaust theology is worthy of our attention because it meets the criteria that I would set for any contemporary Jewish theological discussion. Is he anchored in the tradition and invested in the future of the Jewish people? Yes. Are his claims carefully argued and critically reasoned? Yes. Does he seek to address the condition of the modern Jew in the face of a timeless God? Yes. Halivni's book is a masterpiece because it meets all these criteria. I personally love the idea that our search into the Oral and Written Torah, is an ongoing effort to find the divine voice that

necessarily eludes us. It is a quest that is inspiring and yet validates critical thinking and intellectual integrity.

And yet, like Scripture itself. Halivni's book is far from perfect. First and foremost I am not sure I can wrap my hands around his generational view of God's presence. I don't think there is a high point or low point, from Sinai, to exile, to the Golden Age, to the Emancipation, to pogroms to the Shoah, to the establishment of the State of Israel. There is no linear interpretation of Jewish history, no line from the sin of the golden calf to Auschwitz. Besides, isn't Halivni's whole point that there is no connection between sin and Auschwitz, if so, then why make the breaking of the tablets at Sinai the starting point to explain Jewish history? To link the eternal condition of our people, to an original sin, seems so very, very un-Jewish. Furthermore, who is to say that there is any connection between the condition of Jews and the condition of Judaism? Millions of God fearing Jews were murdered in the Shoah, and a whole lot of atheists witnessed the miraculous rebirth of the Jewish State. Which, incidentally is another fault of Halivni, what about Israel? A post holocaust theologian need not factor the establishment of Israel into his or her understanding of the Shoah. But if Halivni seeks a moment that the redemptive presence of God can be felt by the Jewish people, it strikes me as odd that he does not even consider the theological implications of the miracle that is the State of Israel.

But, and I will wrap up here, my real problem with Halivni is more basic. My worry about Halivni's theology isn't the contention that sometimes God is present and sometimes retreats. For Halivni, his native faith enables him to long and pray for, and wait for the day when God's sovereignty will be restored, through prayer, through ritual

observance, through text study. My problem as a religious leader, as a religious Jew, is that if God waits too long, God may be altogether too late. Who wants a God whose mood swings last millennia? I don't know about you, but I have a limited time on this earth, so any theology I have, whether it brings me closer or further from God, has only one time span that matters, the duration of my life. If contemporary Jewry keeps getting an "out of office email" from God, then I worry that they will take their business elsewhere.

For all these criticisms, Halivni deserves our attention as do all post-holocaust theologians. Because whether you agree or disagree with his conclusions, as a theologian, as a survivor seeking to restore faith after the Shoah, Halivni's efforts are worthy of our consideration. A Jewish generation that does not struggle to come to terms with faith after the Shoah is a community that has forgotten its past and recklessly mortgaged its future. We have written the histories, we have sought reparations, we have demanded accountability, we are building the museums and we are insisting that our own tragedy impel us to respond to the genocides of our own day. We take all the outward signs of coming face to face with the Shoah. But unless we stop to consider the nature of our Judaism in light of the gaping wound that is the Shoah's legacy, then all our words are empty, our museums - glorified headstones, our histories - just another shelf in the Jewish library and our work in Darfur - just another social action project. We need to ask these post-holocaust questions however difficult they may be, and Halivni has provided us with an exemplary model by which we can direct the conversation. I look forward to hearing what you think on April 30th.

Shabbat Shalom.