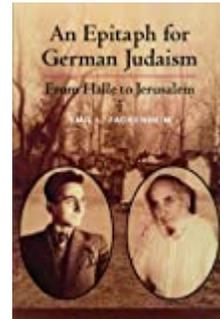


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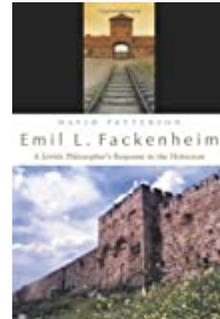
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Emil L. Fackenheim. *An Epitaph for German Judaism: From Halle to Jerusalem.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007. xxxiv + 327 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-17590-0.



David Patterson. *Emil L. Fackenheim: A Jewish Philosopher's Response to the Holocaust.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008. xxi + 211 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3156-9; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-3183-5.



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Jewish Metaphysics after Auschwitz

Theodor Adorno famously stated that “Auschwitz paralyses the metaphysical capacity.”[1] This sense of Auschwitz as an irreparable rupture in western culture and philosophy was the root impulse behind the “post-Holocaust Jewish thought” of the late Emil L. Fackenheim (1917-2003). Like Adorno, Fackenheim was a German-born philosopher of Jewish descent and a Third Reich émigré, yet very different in his Jewish outlook and emphases. A gap of more than a quarter century sep-

arates the beginning of Fackenheim’s intense engagement with the Holocaust as an event of “world historical significance” (using his favorite Hegelian phrase) and his own experience of Nazi Germany. In early 1967, nearly thirty years after he had left National Socialist Germany in May 1939, the former rabbinical candidate of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, by then an established university of Toronto professor for philosophy and a popular reform rabbi, was invited

to participate in a New York symposium on Jewish values after the Holocaust. In the framework of a lecture prepared on that occasion, he first formulated the oft-quoted “614th Commandment,” stating that, in addition to the 613 traditional commandments enjoined by traditional Judaism, Jews after the Holocaust “are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories.”[2] The outbreak of the Six Day War shortly thereafter—and especially the tense preceding weeks of anxious waiting, when a second Holocaust loomed imminently—appeared to lend a special relevance to the new mitzvah, making its author popular with the ordinary Jewish folk (*amcha*, to use his own favorite phrase) in the North American diaspora. Interpreted in and out of context, the extra-canonical mitzvah soon came to acquire a whole spectrum of meanings, from principled moral commitment to the survival of Jews and Judaism through material and political support for the embattled Jewish state to identifying with the political Right in Israel. For Fackenheim personally, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—overlapping as it did with his belated discovery of the Shoah as a watershed event in Jewish and world history—constituted a critical turning point in his life and professional career. The results of his philosophical rethinking are embedded in his magnum opus, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (1982). In 1983, he capped the ideological change by deciding to make aliyah. He stayed in Israel until his death in 2003. It is only fair to add, however, that his impact on the Israeli scene has been minimal: he remains virtually unknown to the wider Hebrew speaking public.

An Epitaph for German Judaism, Fackenheim’s posthumously published memoirs, painstakingly and lovingly edited by his one-time student and friend of many years, Michael L. Morgan, constitute a fascinating and at the same time problematic addition to the substantial corpus of one of the towering figures of twentieth-century Jewish philosophy. Set in Fackenheim’s three homes of Germany, Canada, and Israel, the memoirs often appear to lack a coherent focus and orderly chronological sequence, shifting uneasily between personal reminiscences and general historical-philosophical reflections. Among the themes touched upon, whether in depth or in passing, are not only Fackenheim’s personal life and professional career, but also such matters as G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of history, F. W. J. Schelling and the problem of evil, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Heidegger, the problem of resistance to Nazism, Christian-Jewish dialogue after the Holocaust, and many others as well.

One explanation of the diffuse structure and jerky style—quite untypical of Fackenheim’s earlier philosoph-

ical work—is that the author’s original intention of composing “an epitaph for German Judaism” as exemplified in his own personal story as a German Jew, becomes stultified in the course of the telling. In fact, the more one progresses in the reading, the more one realizes that the initially stated aim of commemorating the German-Jewish legacy is subsidiary to the memoirs’ larger philosophical and theological preoccupation: the recognition of the Nazi assault as an unredeemable rupture in Judeo-Christian Western civilization. This is why the chronological flow of the narrative becomes broken early on, succumbing to the narrator’s overriding need of interpolating reflective passages on the Nazi destruction and its import. “Unless we recognize the Holocaust not only as radically evil but also as philosophically, theologically unredeemable,” he insists in the preface, which was written shortly before his death in March 2003, “neither philosophy nor theology has a chance” (Fackenheim, p. xxix). Interweaving such an overpowering theme into the chronological framework of one’s personal life is problematic indeed; at times, especially in the later chapters, the memoirs simply cannot carry the burden put upon them. The narrative becomes diffuse and unfocused.

The part of the book that fulfills most closely the original purpose of commemorating the German-Jewish past are the first six chapters, covering Fackenheim’s childhood and youth in the east German university town of Halle, the impact of the Nazi rise to power on local life there, Fackenheim’s three-year study at the Berlin Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, and his internment at Sachsenhausen following his arrest by the Gestapo after *Kristallnacht*. In this material, the individual story of Fackenheim’s life is most persuasively linked to the larger historical picture. The uniqueness of the fate of the German Jews during the Holocaust, he reflects, is that the humiliation, torture, and death suffered by them did not happen “at the hands of enemies but of men and women with whom, so to speak, they had sat on the same bench at school” (Fackenheim, p. 7). Born into a typical German-Jewish middle-class family, Fackenheim grew up in Halle, the home town of both the composer Friedrich Handel and the musically gifted Nazi arch-murderer, Reinhard Heydrich. Halle’s Jews differed greatly in the intensity of their Judaism and its observance, but none of them opted to leave Judaism by conversion. Little in the dynamics of their pre-1933 relations with their Christian neighbors could suggest to the local Jews that they were living on the edge of a volcano. Fackenheim’s father was a World War I veteran; his uncle,

Adolf, had lost a leg in the war. Like their father before them, the three Fackenheim brethren attended the *Stadt-gymnasium*, where they had non-Jewish friends. Though the atmosphere in Halle changed radically after 1933, the political constellation of the teachers, except for one, remained non-Nazi. Adolf LÄ¶rcher, the teacher of Greek and religion, was a staunch anti-Nazi and an admirer of Martin Buber. Adverting to Daniel Goldhagen’s characterization of “ordinary Germans” as “Jew eliminators,” Fackenheim asserts: “it is not my story nor can it be of any Jew of German origin” (Fackenheim, p. 293). This statement only enhances the contradiction inherent in the “same bench at school” effect noted earlier.

Following his matriculation in 1935, Fackenheim moved to Berlin to study with Leo Baeck at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Paradoxically, it was Adolf Hitler’s rise to power that drove him to study Jewish theology rather than the classics or general philosophy. Had he been born ten years earlier, he speculates, he “might have gone to Marburg or Freiburg, wherever Martin Heidegger was, to study philosophy with him” (Fackenheim, p. xxxii). To go to Berlin to study Judaism, at the very time it was defamed and traduced, seemed to Fackenheim and fellow students an authentic response to the unprecedented Nazi assault, but the decision was also premised on the assumption that there was still time enough. This was encapsulated in the motto: “Finish studies first, emigrate later.” The assumption proved a tragic miscalculation. In November 1938, Fackenheim was arrested by the Gestapo and incarcerated for three months at Sachsenhausen. Released in February 1939 and ordered to report to the Gestapo at Halle, he stopped first to warn his fellow students that they must leave at once. Unfortunately, this gesture was of no avail. “I do not know,” he remarks cryptically, “whether I failed to convince them or whether they tried and did not succeed” (Fackenheim, p. 71).[3] Fackenheim himself succeeded in getting out in May 1939, on the strength of a student visa to the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

The later part of the memoirs, covering the author’s wartime deportation from Scotland to Canada; his short and unhappy experience as a rabbi of the small congregation of Hamilton, Ontario; his “two hats” career as a committed Jew and a professional philosopher at the University of Toronto; and finally, immigration to Israel and life in Jerusalem, is of lesser relevance to the student of history. On the one hand, the biographical account loses its paradigmatic resonance and interest. On the other, Fackenheim’s “theo-political” pronouncements on issues confronting the Jewish people and Israel—like his criticism of

the Oslo Accords or the statement that the second Palestinian Intifadah “escalates the sense of the Holocaust” (Fackenheim, p. 235) may strike some readers as less than perceptive. (In the caption attached to one of the pictures, Hitler’s broken promises after Munich are compared to those of Yasser Arafat.) These and other polemical judgments may perhaps be linked to Fackenheim’s obsessive need to view “features of Israeli political and cultural life” as tests or “emblems of authentic response to Auschwitz.”[4]

Such difficulties notwithstanding, *An Epitaph for German Judaism* is not only important for the insight it provides into the life and thought of one of the seminal Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, but is also richly rewarding for its illuminating insights into German philosophy, the historiography of the Holocaust, and Jewish theology.

In contrast, David Patterson’s erudite study, *Emil L. Fackenheim: A Jewish Philosopher’s Response to the Holocaust*, is a theological exploration of leading themes in Fackenheim’s post-Holocaust Jewish thought. As such, his interpretation is predicated on the assumption of the inherent superiority of revealed religion and its divine commandments—specifically Jewish revealed religion and the Torah—to any secular mode of thought and discourse. This may be a classic case where the Augustinian maxim, *nisi credideritis non intelligetis*, applies. A secular historian cannot engage meaningfully with such an interpretation, which is frankly theological in its frame of reference. Even the discussion of such a theme as Primo Levi’s definition of *MusulmÄnner* as men who “have the same story, or more exactly no story” turns into a mini-theological disquisition: “when God breathes the divine spark into the human being, He breathes His story, which is His Torah, into the human being. Thus the human being inherits the tale and tradition that make every human being’s story meaningful” (Patterson, p. 100).[5] In my opinion, however, such an approach undercuts a central feature of Fackenheim’s thinking on the Holocaust: the attempt to articulate a response that would be both philosophically viable in its claim to universal validity and specifically Jewish in its commitments. A one-sided theological interpretation appears to make nonsense of his definition of a Jewish philosopher as “one who exposes his Jewish commitments to general philosophy and the latter to his Jewish commitments” (Patterson, p. xiii).

The thesis that Patterson seeks to advance in the present study has far reaching implications. One can

chart a direct road, he claims, leading from Enlightenment philosophy, with its glorification of reason and the autonomy of the will of the individual over the divine commandments of inherited religion, to the spiritual and philosophical abyss of the Holocaust. At times, he would appear to extend the lineage even further back, to Greek philosophy: “if the difference between Athens and Jerusalem lies in free inquiry over against obedient love,” he surmises, “it lies in autonomous self-legislation over against divine commandment. And if that is the case, then one may trace a *path leading from Athens to Auschwitz*, where no one was ever more autonomous, more self-legislating, than the Nazis” (Patterson, p. 123; italics mine). The inescapable conclusion is that post-Holocaust Judaism should turn its back on the whole tradition of modern western thought: “for in the post-Shoah era the link between Jewish modes of thought and ontological modes of speculation is tenuous indeed” (Patterson, p. 157). A detailed discussion of how the author arrives at these sweeping generalizations, which would make such philosophers as Immanuel Kant and Hegel accomplices to the Nazi genocide, would take us too far afield. His typical mode of thinking and arguing is theological rather than logical. More to the point in the present context, however, such a thesis cannot be sustained by an objective reading of the sources. What Fackenheim himself says is that modern philosophy suffers a total collapse in the face of the universe of evil that was spawned by Auschwitz. One can surmise that he would have regarded as preposterous the notion that Kant or Hegel were complicit in the Holocaust.

To sum up then, Patterson’s eloquent study of Fackenheim belongs in the realm of theology rather than in that of historiography or philosophy. The reader who

wants to get a sense of the true drift and subtlety of the thinking of one of the giants of modern Jewish thought is urged to get back to the master himself, to such an acknowledged classic as *To Mend the World*.

Notes

[1]. Cited in Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 132.

[2]. The 614th Commandment may be viewed as Fackenheim’s Jewish answer to the “new categorical imperative” formulated by Adorno: “a new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.” See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge 1990), 365.

[3]. One of those left behind was future historian Herbert A. Strauss, who escaped to Switzerland in June 1943. His moving eyewitness account of Leo Baeck and the last days of the *Hochschule* (which continued into 1942) may be read in his *In the Eye of the Storm: Growing up Jewish in Germany 1918-1943* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999).

[4]. Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 175.

[5]. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), 90. A secular frame of reference that suggests itself is Leo Löwenthal’s concept of “The Breakdown of the Continuum of Experience” under the impact of terror. See Leo Löwenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” *Commentary* 1 (January 1946):1-8.

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