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ATHEODICY AND THE impossibility of God

Auschwitz and Evil: My Experience Growing Up as the Son of a Survivor

Edward Tabash

The lifelong trauma my mother suffered from her Auschwitz experiences began to impact me at an early age. It was the initial impetus for my questioning the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing god. My father, an Orthodox rabbi from a major prewar seminary in Lithuania, met my mother in Los Angeles after the war. He gave up his pulpit to open a carpet store in 1950, when I was born. He remained active in Orthodox circles but later developed serious doubts about all religious claims.

I will describe some of my experiences growing up as the son of a deeply troubled Holocaust survivor before I begin any philosophical discussion. These events are wrenching enough to do much of the heavy lifting in making the argument that suffering such as that endured by my mother—and, of course, countless other people since the dawn of humanity—is inconsistent with what we can justifiably expect from an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent deity.

When I was four, my mother brought me into the kitchen and said in a matter-of-fact way, “Do you see the oven where I bake things? My daddy and brother, who were your grandfather and uncle, were burned in an oven by the Nazis, just a few years ago.” That same year, she came into my room one day, shouting in her native Hungarian, which I couldn’t understand. She hid me under my bed, telling me in English that German soldiers were coming and that she didn’t want them to find me. Later, when my father came home, he asked me what I did during the day. I told him that we had played a game about German soldiers and described what had happened. He turned pale and said “Son, that wasn’t a game.” I remember telling him that it was a game because there were no real soldiers. He then gave me a perfect answer for a four-year-old. He said, “When we sleep, we have dreams. Sometimes Mommy has dreams when she is awake.”

The next incident occurred on Halloween when I was six. I didn’t go trick-or-treating. Instead, my mother dressed me up in a costume to greet the kids who came to our door. And what a costume it was! To this day, I still don’t know where she got the outfit. She refused to ever tell me. Somehow she was able to obtain or cobble together a Gestapo costume replete with a toy German Luger, boots, and a swastika armband. I didn’t understand the full significance of what I was wearing. However, I was amused by the shocked reception I received from the kids and

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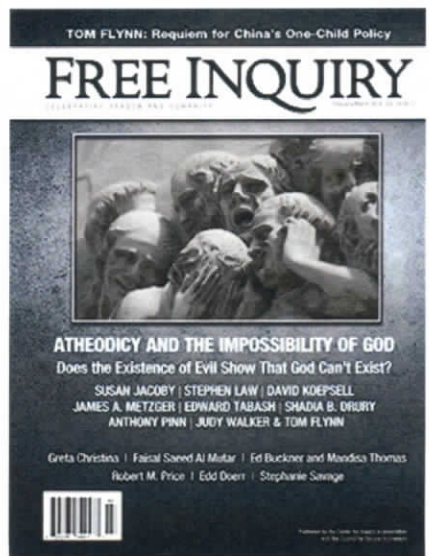
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particularly their parents when I opened the door.

My mother was suffering from what was later called the "Stockholm syndrome," in which captives begin to identify with their captors. When my father came home and saw me in this outfit, he screamed at her. She calmly responded that she was just planning for the future. She said that when the Nazis take over here in America, I will be able to pass for one of them and not be killed, unlike the fate that would befall both of them. My father whisked me into another room and tearfully apologized for leaving me in the care of such a "crazy mother."

In the late fifties, Mickey Cohen was more or less the generally accepted organized crime kingpin in Los Angeles. An associate of Cohen's had been released from prison. My father tried to help him start a small business. In 1959, when I was eight, my mother began insisting that we invite Cohen over for dinner, since we now had a chance to actually meet him. My friends thought this was really cool. I had to play the role of mature little old man. I said that organized crime figures may be fascinating on television and in movies but are deadly in real life. I was afraid Cohen might make a move on the family business.

Acting more like my mother's father than her son, I insisted that we avoid meeting him. My father agreed. She began to cry hysterically and scream, like a petulant child, that she had to meet Mickey Cohen. She finally explained, through her tears, that after Auschwitz, she wanted to finally meet "a fellow Jew who, for a change, holds the gun." My father and I made sure that we never met him.

My bar mitzvah was set for Saturday, December 28, 1963. On November 22, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Two days later, a Jewish nightclub owner killed the accused assassin on nationwide television. The day after that, someone called the synagogue where my bar mitzvah was scheduled and angrily said something about Jews always having to get mixed up in everything. This got back to my mother. A few weeks later, when I came home from school, she greeted me with a dazed look on her face. She told me not to say a word and to just accompany her. We got into a taxi and went to a local Jewish mortuary. She told the proprietor that she expected the synagogue to be blown up by this anonymous caller on the day of my bar mitzvah, since there would be many people there. She calmly said that she wanted to immediately purchase a coffin for me and make the funeral arrangements because she figured that she and my father would be too grief-stricken to do so if they survived the explosion and I didn't.

The proprietor knew my father and called him to pick us up. My father burst into the mortuary and began screaming at my mother. She gave him a very cold, steely look and told him that she was being the rational one. She said that they would both be so devastated if I got blown up during my bar mitzvah that neither of them would be able to function sufficiently to arrange my funeral. So, she was exercising foresight by making those arrangements now, in advance of that soon-to-be fateful day. I remember being quite bemused. I later asked her why, if she had been so convinced that the caller would bomb the synagogue, we didn't just hold the event somewhere else. She never answered me.

She did display self-control and marvelous humor in one incident. In 1961, when I was ten, the mother of one of my friends came over to talk to my mother and me. She told my mother that she was sorry about her Auschwitz experiences. She then said that she had decided that my mother was just too emotionally unstable and that she didn't want her son around her. So, she was no longer going to allow him to see me. I was afraid that my mother would become enraged and hysterical. To my great relief, she winked at me, leaned over, and whispered, "Watch this. I am having a particularly good day! Sorry I can't be like this all the time!" She then turned to this woman and said, "Excuse me, it's been at least three years since I last axed to death one of Eddie's little friends. They just released me from the insane asylum and have declared me completely cured! It's been three years, mind you, three years, since I last killed one of my son's friends! It's now completely safe for your son to be around me, especially after I have taken my pills!"

This woman shrieked with horror and ran away. My mother chased after her, yelling, "I'm cured, I tell you! I'm cured! What's wrong with you? I came to America after the war because I heard



this is where you get a second chance. Let me prove it to you! I won't even keep the old axe in the house when your son comes over!" That evening when I told my father what happened, we agreed that we would give anything if mom could always be so poised and so in control of such tremendous humor.

In 1976, I passed the California Bar Exam on my first attempt. My mother was panic-stricken. She said that she always knew I was a good student but also knew that I freeze up on exams. She was convinced that my father had bribed the bar examiners and now all three of us would go to prison. She went to the Beverly Hills Police Department to ask them whether, as an Auschwitz survivor, she could have her sleeping pills and tranquilizers in prison. They called my father to take her home.



The author visiting Auschwitz in 2005, commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of his mother's liberation.

Before she died in 1985, at the age of sixty-one, my mother finally told me some of what happened in Auschwitz that so severely traumatized her. She first told me about having to stand at attention for hours in the snow and rain and being beaten if she moved at all. She described the bare minimum amount of food she was given, which was only enough to avoid starvation. She talked about being constantly petrified that she would be the next one to be killed. She described the horrible fear that engulfed her when she was sick, because her life depended on hiding any illness or infirmity from her captors. She then told me about being put in charge of other young Hungarian women, as a translator, because of her German language skills. Every morning, she was to give a count of the number of these women to the guards. One morning she gave an inaccurate count. One of the guards pulled a young woman out of the line, a woman with whom my mother had become very close, and shot and killed her right in front of my mother. The guards then laughed and told her to remember to count one less the following morning. She told me that from that moment onward, she felt as if all sanity and all connection to humanity had left her and that, even after the passage of what was then a little under forty years, she had to exercise what she described as superhuman willpower in order to function.

One of the arguments against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful deity is known as the evidential argument from evil. This argument asserts that it is unlikely that an omnipotent being—that is also perfectly good—would allow the horrendous suffering a number of us experience. Such a being must be able to show that even with unlimited power, it could not have prevented even greater suffering from occurring without allowing such egregious horror. Or, this being must be able to show that even with unlimited power, it could not have brought about a great good without allowing such evil to occur. Additionally, that being must be able to show that this great good, that not even omnipotence could have actualized without allowing horrible suffering, is worth the agony that this god claims had to occur in order for this great good to happen. This is a very high hurdle for a deity that is supposedly omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.

What even-greater evil could an all-powerful being have been able to prevent only by allowing the suffering that countless human beings have experienced? What great good could even an omnipotent being only bring about by allowing such horrific events? What great good justifies such suffering when even an omnipotent being cannot implement it without the occurrence of such egregious anguish?

Theodicy is the attempt to reconcile God's supposed omnibenevolence and omnipotence with the existence of evil and suffering. Such arguments are ineffective speculation. They are just wild guesses about why a supreme being might allow such horrors to occur.

Theists also try to counter the argument from evil with the "free-will defense." They claim that God gave us free will and that the exercise of this faculty is of such overwhelming significance that God stands back and allows atrocities to be perpetrated by people against other people for the sole purpose of not interfering with anyone's free will. Why is free will of such supreme value that it supercedes all other considerations? If parents see one of their children about to shove the other in front of a bus, and they have the ability to stop it, they don't let it happen anyway just so that the child doing the shoving can experience an unfettered exercise of free will. Why should the cosmic parent behave any differently?

An omnipotent deity could have imbued us with a greater default to goodness without inhibiting our free will. Or, God could have given us unlimited free will but limited our choices when it comes to actually harming others. A world with fewer choices—but still *with* choices—would not seem to hamper the ability to freely choose. If free will entails the ability to make a choice to act, then the decision-making capacity central to free will does not also require that we be able to actualize each choice we make, particularly if such actualization would inflict horrible suffering on others.

Theists have tried to justify God's lack of being immediately apparent to us by claiming that if God were more directly perceptible, we could not exercise free will to accept or reject belief, because once provided with direct evidence of God's existence, we would have no choice but to believe. Thus, they argue, "divine hiddenness" is a necessary component of our being able to freely choose whether or not to believe. This is really a ridiculous argument. It's saying that the less evidence we have to make an informed decision, the more free our decision will be.

There is a powerful response to such attempts to reconcile God's supreme power and goodness with evil, suffering, and divine invisibility. This argument is put forth in its most developed form by philosopher J. L. Schellenberg in his book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.¹ The argument is that an all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing god who wants to be in a relationship with us humans would not be so hidden, in terms of withholding direct evidence that such a being does in fact exist. This also means that such a god would provide some direct explanation for why abominable evil exists. In the absence of direct evidence of the existence of this divine being, and in the absence of a direct explanation of why so many people suffer so much, those of us who cannot believe in such a supreme being are so reasonable in our nonbelief that we are inculpable in our atheism. We are therefore beyond moral reproach for not believing.

It is thus far more likely that there does not exist an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing deity that wants to be in relationship with us—let alone in a loving relationship—than it is that such a deity exists, but inexplicably withholds direct evidence of its existence and withholds any direct explanation about why such egregious suffering occurs.

When believers argue that we are not in a position to question the ways of a god so infinitely superior to us, we are justified in responding that a god who created us and knows our minds cannot fault us for our nonbelief, when this very god is intentionally withholding the direct evidence and direct explanations that would overcome the inability to believe that "afflicts" so many of us. A morally perfect god would permit suffering only if that god had a morally sufficient reason for doing so.² Such a being would then provide us with satisfactory explanations for suffering so as to remove such an enormous obstacle to our ability to believe.

A television producer once told me that he calls himself a Jew who takes God very seriously. I

responded that I am also a Jew who takes God very seriously and that's why I can't believe in such a being.

Being in Auschwitz provided no benefit to my mother. She did not emerge with greater courage, resilience, strength, or will power. If God wanted her to develop any of these qualities, she could have been placed in some kind of boot camp instead of a concentration camp. Here, I am focusing on my mother's suffering in Auschwitz and her subsequent devastated state of mind. However, the evidential argument from evil against the existence of God obviously does not require recourse to only the Holocaust. The widespread and unspeakable suffering so integral to human experience, whether in the past, present, or future, violates our reasonable expectations of what an all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing divine power would allow.

Notes

- 1. J. L. Schellenberg, Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason (Ithaca, N.Y.:Cornell University Press, 2006).
2. Paul Draper, "Evolution and the Problem of Evil," in Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1998), 225.

Edward Tabash is a constitutional lawyer in the Los Angeles area and chair of the board of directors of the Center for Inquiry. He is recognized for his legal expertise pertaining to the separation of church and state. He is also one of the more well-known atheist debaters in the United States.

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