

A JEWISH RESPONSE TO BONHOEFFER

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During the most brutal of times, Dietrich Bonhoeffer maintained his commitment to discern divine will and to live according to the biblical values of peace, justice and compassion. An encounter with Bonhoeffer's story and teachings serves to renew one's faith in people, and in the human capacity for empathy, integrity and bravery. At the same time, the fact that Bonhoeffer's heroism is so exceptional forces us to acknowledge the human capacity – or proclivity – for hatred, violence and evil and to confront the unspeakable suffering that the Nazis perpetrated against the Jewish people and against humanity.

Bonhoeffer was a Christian leader and thinker and his heroic actions were rooted in theological principle, in his understanding of Christianity. While his theology does not resonate with Jews, his life story inspires us. The differences between Jewish teachings and Bonhoeffer's theology are instructive, but far more striking are the points of convergence between the two traditions.

A teaching from the Mishna, an ancient collection of Jewish law, emphasizes the utmost sanctity and preciousness of a single human life. The Bible relates that God created Adam, a single human being, as the ancestor of all humankind. This teaches us that to destroy a single life is to destroy a whole world; even as to save a single life is to save a whole world. (Sanhedrin 4:5)

Bonhoeffer's life exemplified this teaching. Risking his life by resisting Nazism, he and his fellow resisters rescued worlds. His life demonstrates the transformative impact a single person can make in the world. His example points to values shared by both Jewish and Christian traditions: the sanctity of human life, compassion and justice.

Even as I am inspired by Bonhoeffer's story, I am pained by the striking differences between the circumstances of his death, and those of the Jewish victims of Nazi genocide. Bonhoeffer died a martyr. A martyr is one who will sacrifice his or her life to uphold God's teachings or human ideals. Faced with the choice of betraying his ultimate beliefs or of dying, the martyr chooses death, and this choice renders his death purposeful, meaningful and exalting. In death, a martyr perpetuates teachings that he values more than life itself.

In contrast to Bonhoeffer, the vast majority of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were so brutally diminished by the Nazis that they were denied even the possibility of martyrdom. For the Jews who came under Nazi control in the later 1930s and through the end of World War II, there were no choices, and almost every desperate attempt to escape or resist the Nazi machinery of death was doomed. Flight was not possible, and not even conversion to Christianity – an unthinkable prospect for many Jews – could save one from destruction. Often we speak of the six million as “martyrs,” and this is one way we attempt to attach transcendent meaning to the meaningless destruction of so many lives. In actuality, however, the vast majority of Jewish victims of Nazism were not martyrs, but victims. Acknowledging this, we confront the utter banality of the Nazi regime.

Alongside this striking difference between the Jewish and Christian experiences of Nazi brutality, there is a difference in how the two traditions regard martyrdom as well. Within a Christian context, the inspiring story of Bonhoeffer's life, teaching and death no doubt resonates with the story of Jesus. Within Jewish tradition, attitudes toward martyrdom are mixed. Even as we revere those Jews who chose to die rather than betray God and Judaism, our reverence for life keeps many Jews from embracing martyrdom as a religious ideal. From a Jewish perspective, the suffering of the Holocaust is not redemptive. Even as Bonhoeffer's story inspires us, it cannot mitigate the evil of the Holocaust.

For me, Bonhoeffer's story resonates most powerfully within the biblical tradition of prophecy. Like the ancient prophets who risked all to rail against corrupt kings and priests, Bonhoeffer recognized that God calls us not only to care for the poor, oppressed and vulnerable, but to challenge any religious or secular power that perpetrates injustice. His life exemplifies the prophetic call to action that Jews read each Yom Kippur. The reading addresses the question: What does God ask of us?

Loosen all bonds that bind unfairly, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn from your fellow human beings. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author calls Bonhoeffer's heroism exceptional. What opportunities have you had to "speak truth to power"? What opportunities have you missed to do so?
2. Teaching from the Mishna emphasizes the preciousness of a single human life. Bonhoeffer's friend Eberhard Bethge said that Bonhoeffer knew it was morally wrong to plot Hitler's death, but he was willing to take on the guilt of killing him, under the circumstances. Do you think there was guilt in that?
3. This same reverence for life keeps many Jews from embracing martyrdom as a religious ideal. Do you accept martyrdom as a religious ideal?
4. The author notes Bonhoeffer's role as prophet. Where do you find the prophets today? What are they telling us?
5. Toward the end of his life, Bonhoeffer said "The will of God may lie deeply concealed beneath a great number of possibilities." Have you ever felt that way?

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