The Failed Education of Jewish Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors

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Religious mis-education engendered an egregious handicap for second-generation survivors. Theological implications of the Holocaust were typically ignored in yeshiva curricula and teacher-student discussions. Religious instruction consistently disregarded, and even censored, aspects of scripture that could have been utilized to reconcile some negative Holocaust experiences with religious doctrine. Instead, second-generation survivors were subjected to an idealistic religious perspective where God is consistently a just, kind, merciful micromanager, where human suffering is attributed to transgression and guilt. Whereas such an educational stance may be functional for children growing up in a relatively just world, it is definitely inadequate for youngsters from families who had just rebounded from the Holocaust and who confront its traumatic reverberations daily. Coupled with the negativity that permeated their home environments, this lapse in education resulted in disturbing—and often insurmountable—dissonance in many second-generation survivors. Utilizing developmental theory to inform the quality of relationship one has with God, the dissonance of second-generation survivors coming of age is annotated by

discordant religious, moral, and psychological worldviews that were not ameliorated by proper education

A Jewish Modern Orthodox second-generation survivor who is a research clinician in trauma, the author highlights clinical insights from the perspective of the psychopathology of trauma and abuse. Paralleling this effort, he charts his own trials and tribulations as a student—juggling a heritage of despair with disparate teachings at home and yeshiva as he trekked through the ruins of his people in search of a kind God.

Introduction

Philosophy is not a central topic in formal education. Viewed as somewhat esoteric and less relevant than other disciplines in modern society, it is rarely offered in secondary schools (even as an elective) and is not in the core curriculum of higher education. Religious colleges and seminaries, of course, do feature philosophy as a required course.

However, religion and philosophy are less central to Judaism than conduct and behavior. Scholars across the Jewish denominations concur that Judaism is primarily a religion of deed, not of creed (Bleich, 1992; Borowitz, 2014). As such, theology and deliberations about the nature of God are not part of the typical discourse among Jews, even in synagogues and institutions of higher learning. Jewish religious instruction is primarily task- or behavior-oriented. Thus, the topics that are seen as “relevant” in religious schools usually relate to daily behavior and religious practices. Theology and religious philosophy are hardly of interest to elementary and high school students. It is therefore not surprising that typical yeshiva curricula paid little attention to theology or philosophy, other than frequent references to a kind, merciful God.

For the post-Holocaust generation, however, The Question of God was a burningly relevant issue. God’s nature was at the crux of the junction of its history and its religion. Religious education magnified The Question to the level of an enigma, since this generation of yeshiva students was exposed to scriptures featuring a host of references to a hostile and vengeful God, all the while being taught that God was merciful.

This educational conundrum left the instruction about God to parents, to the community, and to the media. Since second-generation survivors had parents who were survivors—by definition, a good amount of their theological “home education” was informed by the open sores of recent Holocaust experiences. The “street education” they received from the community at large—typically consisting of Holocaust survivors—echoed and reinforced the discordant perspective they absorbed at home about an unjust world managed by an

unreliable God. Rounding out the circle, Yiddish-language media they were exposed to—newspapers, radio, contemporary lyrical music recordings, and library books—cemented the very same unhelpful understanding of God's role in the world. Absent contravening corrective education in school, this orientation is what second-generation survivors internalized and took with them into adulthood. This internalization was a constant counterpoint to the merciful God icon championed by the religious education establishment.

Yeshiva students were also exposed to scripture references to God as Father. This complicated the internalization of God in this cohort. For many survivors and their families, their understanding of God's role did not coincide with the imagery of a kind caring father. In another vein, second-generation survivors often had a non-idealized "father image" because of the perceived weakness of their parents during the Holocaust. Developmental theory posits that the God concept that children internalize is very much linked to their formative experience with parental figures. As such, the God-father contextualization negatively affected the ability of their children to establish a secure relationship with God. God as Father is an effective religious educational parallel only when Father is an idealized icon. It is not a functional parallel for those with a weak father image.

In the following sections, each of the above noted factors are detailed and discussed, from social, religious, and educational perspectives. Scriptural inconsistencies, variations in perspectives about God, providence (especially divine micromanagement), and trauma are elaborated, elucidating the plight of second-generation Holocaust survivors as they contended with religious inconsistencies within the context of their education. The cognitive and psychological coping modes of this cohort are elaborated and evaluated. Their challenges in establishing an adaptive relationship with God are explored, in light of an educational system that failed to address—and even exacerbated—the dilemmas and contradictions they faced.

The Environmental Influence

Yeshiva education was particularly crucial to second-generation survivors who immigrated to major American urban centers. In the characteristic absence of discussions with parents about theological/religious significance of the Holocaust, the pervasive input these children were exposed to came from Yiddish media. In a sense, these media became primary transmitters of the Holocaust legacy to our generation.

A number of Yiddish newspapers thrived in the post-war era, and they featured a continuous diet of pieces saturated with interpretations of Holocaust experiences. Needless to say, the content of these pieces, which were usually reactive rather

than educational or reflective, shaped the orientation of its young readers in a manner that was not conducive to developing an adaptive perspective.

The public library was an important resource for the immigrant family. With traditional values for the “written word” and minimal expendable income, families took full advantage of the library. My childhood family of four usually checked out seven or eight books each Friday.

The libraries in Jewish neighborhoods offered a large number of Yiddish-language books. In our local branch, the stacks for the Yiddish collection numbered well over a thousand, and the collection was second in size only to English-language fiction. By the time I was in ninth grade, I had to search each Friday for books I had not read yet. I estimate that more than 75 percent of these books were depictions of Holocaust experiences.

As early as I can recall, our radio was always on during waking hours, and it was tuned to WEVD, the Yiddish-language radio station. A good percentage of the programming consisted of songs and lyrics that found resonance among Holocaust survivors. Late evenings, when WEVD stopped broadcasting, the air was filled with the sound of phonograph recordings of contemporary Yiddish music. In retrospect, it seems that radio and records gave voice to the feelings that our parents could not verbalize to us. Indeed, many of my generation were given to humming the tunes of these compositions habitually, perhaps as a confirmation of the message conveyed by the lyrics.

With the limited venue of contemporary Jewish music, it is not surprising that the children soon knew all of the songs and lyrics by heart. One gets a poignant feeling of the mentality of the era in the song Eyli, Eyli (My God, My God; Heskes, 1992, No., 1194; Nulman, 1972, No. 74), written at the turn of the twentieth century, and popularized in the Warsaw Ghetto. The lyrics were disseminated widely when they were recorded by major cantors, especially Yossele Rosenblatt, and played regularly on New York Yiddish radio, rendering it the anthem of suffering of the contemporary Jew. I surely knew all the words of this piece and hummed its tune frequently as a child:

My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
In fire and flames we have been burnt
Everywhere they shamed and mocked us
But no one could turn us away from You, my God
And from Your Holy Torah
From Your commandments, My God.
Day and night, I only think of You, my God.
I keep Your Torah and Your commandments with awe.

Save me, oh save me from danger
Like You once saved our fathers from an angry czar
Only You can help.
Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The tune left us all with in an atmosphere of confusion: If God helped in the past, why did he not help during the Holocaust? Why did God abandon his people?

Exposure to Confusing Scriptures

Seeking to inculcate us with compassion and kindness toward others, our teachers extolled us to emulate God (Deuteronomy 28:9: “You shall walk in His ways") using two general guidelines:
• You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy (Leviticus 19:2).
• For the Lord your God ... loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing; and you too must love the stranger… (Deuteronomy 10:17–19).

These guidelines are elaborated by the Talmud into specifics:

Just as God is gracious and compassionate, you also should be gracious and compassionate (Talmud Shabbat 133b). Just as He is called “righteous,” so should you be righteous ... Just as He is called “pious,” so should you be pious (Sifri, Deuteronomy 11:22). Just as He clothes the naked ... visits the sick ... comforts the mourners ... and buries the dead ... so should you (Talmud, Sota 14a). [1]

But, the elaborations ignored verses that pull in the other direction, exemplified by the following:

• The Lord is a man of war (Exodus 15:3).
• The Lord is a jealous and avenging God (Nahum 2:6).
• The Lord is a God who avenges (Psalms 94:1).
• He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 34:6–7).
• Thou hast slain, and thou hast not pitied (Lamentations 3:43).

There are many other biblical passages that feature harsh attributions to a vengeful God (who metes out punishment), passages that hardly coincide with the idealization of a loving God. A straightforward reading of the Bible may well instill within a child a hostile image of God. Indeed, some contemporary authors who take an unfettered look at scriptures have concluded that God, as he is represented in the Bible, is savage and sadistic (Armstrong, 1972). Moreover,

there is a distinct Jewish liturgical theme accusing God of atrocities in Jewish liturgy dating back to the Book of Lamentations. While one might expect these discrepancies to be addressed directly in Bible classes, the fact is that students are often put into an untenable position that implicitly coaxes them to ignore any biblical passages that do not coincide with the selective portrayal of God as just and merciful.

It is fairly commonplace for a child in the traditional yeshiva system to be familiar with the entire Pentatuchal text at an early age. Contradiction and implausibility in biblical text are often "explained away" by commentators homiletically by interpreting some texts as being figurative. However, children are not used to allegories, making it likely that children, with their concrete tendencies, will have a hard time disregarding the literal meaning of scripture.

As the Bible was our main focus of study and reading, we were generally raised with the notion of a divine system with rules of fair play. Punishment for misdeed was part of this system, of course. Hence, the dictum we learned in Deuteronomy 24:16, "Fathers shall not be put to death for children, neither shall the children be put to death for fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin" made perfect sense. However, we were also taught about God's reactions that did not conform to such standards. Take, for example, Exodus 20:5: "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." Sadly, such discrepancies were never acknowledged, far less addressed, by our teachers.

Familiar with the Pentateuch in grade school, I remember being particularly struck by Moses' admonition to the Jews of Egypt, to visibly mark their doors in anticipation of the plague of the slaying of the Egyptian first-borns, so that their children not get caught up in the destruction aimed at the Egyptians. This was explained to us using constructs that imply God's loss of control over the fury he unleashes: "Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer, he does not distinguish between the righteous and wicked" (Talmud Baba Kama 60a).

The Talmud tells us that when Moses asked God, "Teach me your ways" (Exodus 33:13), he was actually formulating the age-old question: "Why do the righteous suffer?" Various talmudic narratives (e.g., Sanhedrin 27b, Kiddushin 39b) suggest alternate explanations. These include suggestions that wicked parents cause suffering of their righteous offspring, that suffering purifies the soul, and that suffering serves to remove the slightest of sin residues to enable increased rewards in the afterlife.

Another approach in the scared literature is to see God as functioning in two alternative modes: Judgment and Mercy. Rashi, the primary biblical commentator, applies this dichotomy to a dual approach in conceptualizing God's management

of the world: Elohim stands for the God of judgment who judges and punishes the evil of the world, while Jehovah symbolizes kindness and is the chief attribute that was extant at creation (Yitzhaki, 1090, Exodus 20:1). However, these explanations did not clarify my understanding of God nor his role during the Holocaust.

The Enigma of Providence: God as a Micromanager

There are divergent views within the Jewish literature about the degree of God's involvement in the details of nature (Flavius Josephus, 75, 94). The scope of divine providence (hashgaha peratit in Hebrew; literally, "individual oversight") ranges from a Personal God, who has detailed oversight of all human events (Talmud Hullin 7b), to the variable oversight of humans based on their level of righteousness (Maimonides, 1180), to the notion that there is oversight of the species but not of the individual (Nahmanides, 1230), to the disavowal of any divine control of human conduct, since it would negate free will (Ben Joseph, 925). The orientation accepted by contemporary mainstream Orthodoxy, however, favors the perspective of God's detailed control of all human activity. Its essence is encapsulated in the following aphorism:

Know what is above you: an eye that sees and an ear that hears. All of your activities are written in the book, and there is a reckoning for everything you do (Avot 2:1).

This is the view favored by the yeshiva system, and this is what was taught to the children of Holocaust survivors.
In his interpretation of providence during the Holocaust, Rabbi Soloveitchik views the Holocaust as a period when God actually removed himself from managing world events (Besdin, 1993). Labeled Hester Panim (literally, "Hiding the Face"), this theological maneuver does "explain" horrors of mass extermination, if one can accommodate a God who is absent from world events. [2]
Paralleling God's judging role and merciful role, there is yet another persona of God in the hearts of Holocaust survivors that seems startling: one of capricious hostility. Analyzing the internal religious icons of survivors, we sometimes encounter a volatile figure with a bad temper—a mercurial God who can get "carried away" in his vengeance. This is a God who regrets his mistakes at times (Lawliss, 1994). Yet, during times of harsh judgment, He seems unapproachable. Consider the yearly liturgy recited by Jews for centuries during the Ashkenazic High Holiday service, depicting the torture and murder of Israel's sages some 2,000 years ago. Addressing the complaints of Israeli leaders about His actions, God responds:

If I hear another sound, I will transform the universe to water, I will turn the earth to astonishing emptiness—this is a decree from My Presence! (Yom Kippur Prayer Book, p. 643).

The Holocaust, in particular, is easily construed by some survivors—as it surely was perceived by many of my cohort—as an instance where the destructive forces unleashed by God "simply got out of control." As children, the notion that the Jews needed to protect themselves from God's wrath which was directed at their Egyptian oppressors seemed ungodly, leaving us with the unspoken understanding that our benevolent God sometimes gets "carried away" and overreacts in an unfair fashion—hardly a God one would be inclined to trust.
As one means of reconciling perceived divine harshness with the image of the benevolent God, I have been stunned to hear survivors (when they let their guard down) referring to God as "crazy" for instigating horrors. I am reminded of the adaptive attribution I see in the family members of Alzheimer's patients who become uncharacteristically violent toward loved ones. "This is not the husband I know," I often hear. "He has changed into another person. It's as if he were possessed!" The tenor of this "explanation" resonates starkly with the various "excuses" by family members of a molesting parent: "It wasn't his fault;" "He was under horrible pressure;" "He was not himself;" "It's the drugs that made him do it."
It has been suggested that an inconsistent God may be easier for people to relate to than a God with strict standards. Interpreting Cain's understanding that God favored his brother Abel inappropriately, Goldin (2007) elaborates:

The reality of a thinking God, who demands compliance to His will, is too frightening to [Cain]. It is easier to believe in a Deity Who chooses favorites by whim than to deal with the burden of God's true demands. (p. 20)

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that children growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, given no rationalization of the horrors while being exposed to inconsistent depictions of God in the daily biblical studies, might revert to viewing God as willful, capricious, or apt to lose control.
There is a poignant finale to the Selihot (forgiveness prayers) of Ne'ilah (the concluding Yom Kippur service):

May it be your will, You who hears the sound of weeping,
That you place our tears, in your vial permanently.

As a person for whom the Holocaust is alive and current in my conscience, I have—at times—felt that this prayer adds insult to injury, so to speak. In my

mind, it evokes the following excerpt from the analytic protocol of a patient with a history of childhood emotional neglect:

I cried, and my Mother did not come to help. I thought it was because she was an evil mother. Then I found out it was because she could not hear me. That felt better….I always explained away the fact that my father failed to protect me or rescue me when it all happened. I thought to myself: He probably does not know, he does not realize what is really going on. It's like he was deaf, maybe even dead. But when I finally realize that he was there all along, hearing me cry, and he did nothing—that really hurts!

Coping with Divine Dissonance

Left with a subjectively palpable presence of a dissonant God, the child is forced to grapple with a perceived discrepant duality. The viable options are to try to reconcile them or to take the perspective that they are inherently irreconcilable and resign oneself to an unsettled stance.

De-synthesizing is common in early childhood (when the child has not yet learned to reconcile behaviors that seem incompatible). However, it is also utilized by older children and adults as a regressive defense mechanism when faced by betrayal or extreme interpersonal disappointment. Referred to clinically as splitting, it can engender a pathological condition when it manifests in adulthood and results in two different inconsistent relationship styles toward the same person, with no attempt to reconcile them.

Viewed logistically, splitting is the most expedient approach to deal with incompatible representations of God. Consider the similar circumstance in which a child finds himself at the mercy of an all-powerful parent who behaves inconsistently toward the child—at times kind and understanding, and at other times vicious and harsh. In cases where the child has not had an opportunity to experience this parent previously in a consistent manner, splitting will be invoked by the ego. The child essentially learns to relate to the parent as if there actually were two parent figures here—a good parent and a bad parent. This orientation frees the child from dealing with contradictions. The parent is thus experienced as "wholly" benevolent when he or she is behaving in a kind manner, and "wholly" terrible when behaving poorly. I propose that this is exactly how the Orthodox Jewish child of Holocaust survivors—and survivors themselves—first related to God.

Survivors split God into two antithetical motifs. The split, engendered by the introduction to God in their early Bible studies as two different personas, was originally synthesized by positing that God is vengeful toward those who violate

his commands and merciful to those who heed his rules. Yet, various scriptures and prayer texts contradicted this simplistic explanation.

Children, especially those who recognize inconsistency despite apologetics, manage to relate to God by splitting Him into two entities. Especially from the perspective of Holocaust survivors and their families, the God who perpetrated the Holocaust is not the merciful God they have known since childhood (and still cling to as damaged adults). [4]

Along with others in my cohort of second-generation survivors, I interpreted these "god variants" in a literal sense—with a distinct polytheistic flavor. Our "working model" of theology resembled Greek mythology. God existed as a good force competing with negative God-forces, based on our literal readings of biblical citations in the Prayer Book, which describe God as being "above all gods" (Psalms 135:5) or as punishing other gods (Jeremiah 46:25). As I saw it, the god of horrors actually had a different persona—and even a different name—than my God. Our God needed to be distanced from the divine aberration that brought indiscriminate destruction upon our families.[5]

It is noteworthy that de-synthesis actually has been posited as an intrinsic Jewish solution to eternal suffering. Some scholars elaborate a dialectic perspective, suggesting that the splitting mode adopted by children to deal with parental discrepancies is the preferred Jewish response to cope with the chronic societal oppression. From an adaptive perspective, the oppressive conditions of Jews in various European communities gave rise to distinct brand of humor, which was predicated on the promotion of illogic as a means of dealing with circumstances that were objectively insurmountable. In their brand of adaptive humor, Jews "defend" their future and their hope of survival by renouncing logic; as such, they refuse to be over-powered by the implications of a harsh reality (Juni & Katz, 1988; Juni, Katz, & Hamburger, 1996; Juni, & Katz, 2001). And that is no joke!

Our God, Our Father: Parallels and Repercussions

God was a constant part of the daily life of the Orthodox European Jew for many centuries. Yiddish vocabulary is permeated by direct references to God as a familiar player in all events, from the mundane to the colossal. In the Yiddish of Orthodox Jews, statements about the future are always qualified by the phrase "If God wills it." When responding to a question about one's welfare, the usual response is an unelaborated "Thank God," with an occasional variation of "Thank God, well." [6]

Developmentally, young children have a difficult time dealing with a parent who must, by definition, assume supportive and disciplinary roles at different times. Lacking the sophistication of adult reasoning and contextualizing, the child

sometimes deals with this perceived contradiction by utilizing the aforementioned defense mechanism of splitting (Klein, 1935); this entails the effective de-synthesizing the parent as having two irreconcilable personas: one supportive, the other hostile. Klein posits that unless (and until) the child learns to synthesize different aspects of a parent into a meaningful whole, his or her internal world literally contains two separate representations of the same individual—a good Mother and the bad Mother, for example. Though they are, in truth, part objects (i.e., different aspects of the same object), these “mothers” are seen as distinct entities. [7]

Only if the child is fortunate enough to have a secure and supportive childhood, can he or she learn to synthesize these part objects and come to relate to a parent as a single entity whose characteristics vary based on situational contexts. This process and its challenges form the crux of the child’s assimilation of a healthy and positive ability to relate to others. [8]

If we recognize the relationship to God as a developmental process, it is reasonable to assume that the template of child-parent relations is relevant here as well. [9] For the child who is raised with God as a real feature of daily life, notions of a compassionate God must seem inherently incompatible with those of a vengeful and destructive God. Clearly, the God the child idealizes is the omnipotent benevolent God. The vengeful and punishing God is the one who deals with evil-doers and sinners. But, can the child deal with these intuitive incompatibilities any better than he or she can deal with the incompatibilities of the good mother and bad mother?

Fostering the notion of God as a kind father may seem disingenuous at the rudimentary level. At the very least, it deserves elaboration and qualification. I wish my High School administrators and staff, who included eminent masters of Jewish philosophy, had been forthright enough to discuss this imagery with us at a basic and honest level. While the image of kind father might be reconciled with harsh punishment, it certainly is incompatible with vindictiveness.[10] The intent of vengeance is not to help the one who is being punished; instead it is designed for the motive of the punisher. Mercy implies that punishment is withheld precisely in instances where it would be warranted. Not punishing, when punishment is unwarranted is not kindness—it is fairness. From a Western perspective, punishing children is not a means for a father to vent his rage; rather it is intended “for the good of the child” (i.e., educating, a lesson for the future.) Although the Western orientation may not be totally applicable to traditional Jewish culture, it seems that we, as children of the Holocaust, certainly deserved an honest discussion of the incongruity that this imagery engendered within us. Furthermore, coupled with a weak father image who was unable to help his

family, and was himself brutalized during the Holocaust, this image of God resulted in an unwholesome conceptualization of God as well.

The Educational Failure

What are the cognitive options for an individual who is faced by a seemingly unkind God? The most salient option is disbelief:

> It seems obvious that an omnipotent, omniscient, moral God would not allow injustice. Upon witnessing inequity, it is therefore perfectly natural to doubt God's existence. (Kelemen, 1990, p. 91)

I wish to take issue with Kelemen's conceptual formulation of the predicament of dealing with an apparently unjust God. For the child who was raised with God as a virtual feature of his formative environment, doubting God's existence is not an option.

One might suggest that, unlike parents who constitute an undeniable concrete feature of the child's world, and unlike the blatant anti-Semitism that Jews slammed into repeatedly—God's relevance to the world of the child is unobservable and therefore dispensable, particularly when the role of God becomes so problematic to the child. How much simpler would it be to simply negate the entire god construct, and be rid of philosophical quandaries and emotional misgivings? Alas, the child who has been raised in a household where religion is part of daily life has no freedom of religion—at the functional level. Belief in God is part of his or her developmental paradigm. For one who was raised in the social crucible of Orthodox Judaism who is faced by this dilemma, the belief in God is imprinted indelibly on his or her soul.

In families identifying as Orthodox Jews, the icon of God is fixed in early childhood. It is part of the emotional structure that is socialized into the child by his parents as agents of the Orthodox Jewish culture. Children raised in this environment can no more easily disbelieve in God than they can disbelieve in Mother. It certainly becomes a major portion of his relationship repertoire with significant others, as the child is taught that his actions always entail a virtual interaction with an ever-present God. While a child may isolate from others when necessary, one can never escape the presence of God.

Although the child will certainly have the option of deciding whether to follow the dictates of religion at the behavioral level, he or she can no easier excise his beliefs in God than he or she can excise other basic tenets of reality that were inculcated in his formative years. Belief in God is essentially an emotionally implanted construct. To posit a cognitive rationale that can be utilized in choosing not to believe in a God who has been part of one's life in early childhood is an

oxymoron. Religious belief is not exclusively a logical operation. Rather, it is an orientation toward the world that is closer to emotion than it is to cognition. As a rational human being, one can certainly liberate oneself from the behavioral repercussions or dictates of childhood religious beliefs. However, emancipation from behavioral dictates does not incur freedom from an ingrained religious mindset that features an omniscient deity. [11]

It is interesting to note, in this context, the cultural connotations of the apostate, as the construct is formulated in the traditional orthodox Jewish literature. The Talmud (e.g., Avoda Zara 6b) divides apostasy into two categories: Those who violate Jewish law because they are tempted (by greed or desire), and those who do so for spite (where the spite is directed against religious authority figures—and perhaps even at God!). A blatant omission here is the option of one who rejects the very belief in God.
This omission, we argue, entails a cultural testimony that such rejection was not at all a viable option for children who are raised with the God construct as a household reality.
For those who are unwilling (or unable) to react to perceived divine injustice by relinquishing their belief in God, Keleman (1990) encourages them to consider the likelihood that there exists an explanation that we cannot comprehend:

Any rational person will admit that, in theory, the ways of God could be so complex that they defy human understanding. Man might simply be incapable of comprehending and morally evaluating the behavior of an omniscient, omnipotent Being. Just as appropriate actions taken by a parent can sometimes seem unjustified to young children, God’s actions might sometimes strike us as indefensible, despite their absolute righteousness. Our occasional inability to discern God’s goodness is not a repudiation of His existence as much as a confession of our own intellectual finitude. (p. 95)

As plausible as this option may be, it is a fact that it generally gets a poor reception among survivor families whose hurt is scarcely ameliorated by such a non-specific formulation. The same can be said of the approach to interpret biblical text non-literally, as is often seen in theological justifications of divine wrath.
The yeshiva curriculum has traditionally focused on Hebrew language skills,[12] transitioning toward the mastery of biblical texts after grade 2 or 3, shifting toward talmudic text mastery as students progress from elementary school to high school. As a rule, mastery of Talmud was the ultimate purpose of the traditional yeshiva.[13] While some schools also incorporated character

development into the curriculum during high school (and this has endured through current practices), theology is noticeably absent.[14] This was the rule, rather than the exception, and was definitely the norm until the late 1960s, which was the period when second-generation survivors were educated.[15] At the least, this absence yielded students unequipped to deal with religious challenges they might encounter. However, for students who faced profound questions and theological contradictions in their own lives, this lack was resounding and profound.

As second-generation survivors, we experienced acute dissonance in the ethics classes we endured in high school. Although theology was not addressed directly, a “proper” concept of God was clearly intended to be internalized in the course of our education.[16] Values were taught as a form of Godliness, in accordance with the principle of imitatio dei (the imitation of God), by citing verses that exemplified the positive characteristics of God. For years, it baffled me that none of my classmates ever challenged the selectivity of these characteristics. We were all well versed in the scriptures cited in the Standard Prayer Book, and could enumerate alternate divine attributes that surely would not be idealized as models for our behaviors and traits. Furthermore, as a second-generation survivor, my immediate associations veered toward the horrific abuse my family had suffered (as we were taught—it was by the ever-present hand of God), and a host of biblical citations in the Prayer Book that championed another side of God’s path.

Unfortunately, the standard of accepted theology in yeshiva tends toward a micromanaging God. While only a few philosophically minded students inevitably become troubled reconciling divine control with the postulate of free will, this radical interpretation of Providence induces acute distress in those who come from a heritage of horrors—Holocaust survivors and their families. If God is posited to micromanage all human history and events, then the Holocaust is clearly not only condoned—but actually perpetrated by God. One can question whether the educational decision of yeshivas to adopt this version of providence made sense when second-generation Holocaust survivor students were cornered into seeing God as actually having perpetrated the Holocaust. [17]

Summary

The yeshiva education system failed second-generation Holocaust survivors by failing to address the theological implications of the Holocaust and by its selective teaching of concepts that preempted religious understanding of the Holocaust by the students. An inadequacy of commission featured the unequivocal presentation of God’s providence manifesting total causality for all human

actions, which inevitably engendered negativity toward God by some of these students. Remarkable was the consistent inattention to textual descriptions of God as vengeful and angry, which may have been useful to the students in their coming to grips with a Jewish perspective of the heritage of suffering and injustice they were born into. To a child who was raised in the shadow of the death camps, God's role during the Holocaust resonated with the censored "unkind" references to God in the scriptures. Many second-generation Holocaust survivors thus emerged from their educational experience with de-synthesized views of God, which yielded unwholesome religious functioning.

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Notes

[1] There are numerous similar references to God’s benevolence throughout Psalms; e.g., “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalms 34:18);
“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you (Psalms 50: 15). When I recited these Psalms in the past, I sometimes sensed an inner voice that forced its way into my consciousness with a sardonic rejoinder: Why not tell it to the folks crying out for help in the crammed cattle cars on the way to Auschwitz?
[2] A crucial requisite to developing a trusting relationship with the caregiving parent is to realize that the parent continues to care for the child, and that the parent-child relationship can continue, even when the parent is absent. This reflects the principle of object permanence (Piaget & Inhendler, 1966) as it is accommodated within the general rubric of Attachment Theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The construct of Hester Panim (Besdin, 1993), represented by “I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be…, Deuteronomy 32:20), disrupts the sense of object permanence and mitigates the development of secure attachment with God.
[3] It should be noted that splitting is adaptive in early childhood but becomes more problematic if it is not gradually abandoned in favor of a synthetic understanding of others. I offer the following familial illustration of de-synthesis in

normal development: My wife and I were exploring with our boys (a third and fifth grader, respectively) how they felt when we used to leave them in earlier years in the care of au pairs while we were off at work. When I asked specifically about Jeanine (a young woman who had worked with us for a number of years), both children spoke up simultaneously, asking “Which one?” It emerged that this imaginative young lady apparently had an effective method of dealing with child discipline. When the children misbehaved, she would announce that she was leaving, and that Mean Jeanine would be coming instead; she would then say Goodbye and leave the house. Moments later, the bell would ring, and Mean Jeanine—wearing her cap backwards and speaking in a high pitched voice—would appear. The children remembered Mean Jeanine as a no-nonsense woman who was a strict disciplinarian. In fact, Jeanine (the kinder version) would often warn the children not to push limits, because she would only take “so much” before she would get Mean Jeanine to take over. It was fascinating to watch the amazement of these two, rather intelligent and usually insightful youngsters, as reality dawned upon them. “You mean to say that there was only one Jeanine?!” the eleven-year-old exclaimed? “Wow, she really had us fooled,” was the reaction of the nine-year-old.”

It is posited that in situations where the children were actively encouraged to view a caregiver as consisting of two different caregivers, de-synthesis would remain a feature of object relations for some time. If, for example, a mother would inadvisably “explain” to the child that there are actually two mothers—a good mother and a bad mother—and that their personalities are separate and distinct from each other, that the child would have a hard time synthesizing the two significantly beyond the age (where part objects are typically united into realistic object representations). Similarly, in terms of Theistic Object Relations, it is suggested that the “theological diet,” where two distinct God personas (a kind God vs. a vindictive God) are used differentially in daily lessons, prayer, and liturgy, militates against their synthesis into a unified object representation of God.

[4] Those of us who have a considerable patient population of Holocaust survivors have been referring informally to the stance of coming to terms with irreconcilable God aspects as Theological Schizophrenia.

[5] Splitting of God into kind and vicious entities was reinforced, for us, by the references

in scripture and prayers to Satan as a separate force. For example: the first two chapters of Job, for example, quote interchanges between God and Satan; in the quintessential prayer of the cantor on Yom Kippur (Hineni), there is a direct plea to God to banish Satan from impeding with the prayers.

[6] While the dynamic relationship with God is also emphasized in Fundamental

Christianity, the author has found in his work with patients that the construct is far more entrenched in the formative psyche of individuals raised in the Orthodox Jewish milieu.

[7] This view of development is the basis of modern day conceptualization of interpersonal relationships. It conceptualization represents the confluence of Attachment Theory and Object Relations Theory (Bell, 1991; Bowlby, 1969; Fairbairn; 1954; Kernberg, 1976; Mahler, 1963; Modell, 1975).

[8] This reflects the general understanding of the development of interpersonal relations as formulated in Object Relations Theory.

[9] Developmental theorists have argued that—for religious people—an entire facet of the developing ego becomes devoted to a template of man-God relationship which is an intrinsic to personality structure as interpersonal (Hall and Edwards, 2002). In our work with religious patients who are conflicted about their relationships with God, we coined the term Theistic Object Relations to elaborate the contradictory valences of trust and fear that typify the developmental process of religious identity formation, as it parallels the development of secure interpersonal attachments in general Object Relations Theory.

[10] E.g., “God is jealous, and the Lord revenges; the Lord revenges, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserves wrath for his enemies (Nahum 1:2).

[11] I have met many survivors who became non-observant due to their Holocaust
experiences, but still showed strong beliefs in, and relationships with, God.

[12] See http://chinuchathome.info/index.php/Homeschool/Curriculum/Limudei-Kodesh- Curriculum.html.

[13] See
http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/yeshiva/The_yeshiva_before_1800

[14] See, for example, the high school curriculum of a current American yeshiva high school that champions talmudic proficiency and personal ethics (http://ftiyeshiva.org/education/judiac-studies-curriculum/).

[15] Particularly egregious for second-generation survivors was the explicit sanction we often heard about some questions which may not be asked, where children’s requests for explanation were viewed as heretical and subversive in nature. Subsequently, however, some schools did begin to include opportunities for students to have discussions with staff about Hashkafah (a construct that can encompass theological ideas), as exemplified in
http://www.ohryisrael.com/curriculum/.

[16] The crucial need for theological input in the religious education of second-generation survivors is particularly crucial from the perspective of Developmental

Theory. Using this lens, children gradually transfer (with understandable modifications) aspects of their naive image of reliable all-powerful parents (or father, in traditional cultures) to a developing image of a reliable all-powerful God (Freud, 1910). Many children of survivors, however, attribute weakness and frailty—and often incompetence—to their parents, and certainly do not see them as supports to be relied upon under duress. The assimilation or internalization of God as a source of strength and stability in second-generation survivors is therefore totally dependent on the educational institution.

[17] It is suggested that dissonance may have been minimized had we been indoctrinated with the idea that God's ways are mysterious and unfathomable. I would argue that such a position would have little traction for young adults who are intent on clear formulations of God's role in negative world events rather than a seemingly vague deflection of God's accountability (or even culpability).