

Responses to Rabbi A. James Rudin

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The synagogue in Montreux, Switzerland, is in an apartment building on the main street. It is three flights down from street level and has a large skylight. Two decades ago, I was present for Passover services. There were a fair number of people crowded into the small synagogue, among whom were many children including my own. Men and women were separated, the men were praying with their prayershaws over their heads, as is the custom and I, a rabbi and professor of Judaic Studies, was among them. Suddenly, something crashed through the skylight. Panic spread. I remember vividly my first thoughts: "Oh, my God. This is Montreux, the place where Jews were burned as the 'cause' of the Black Death in 1348-49. This is also the place where Jews were burned when Calvin preached and the region became Protestant. This is Europe, and it is Holy Week! Where are my boys and where is my wife?" It turned out I was wrong. This was not the start of another pogrom on the shores of Lake Geneva; one of the Jewish children had thrown some object which had broken the skylight. No need for panic; no need to invoke the Jewish history of Holy Week. But Rabbi Rudin is right: there is, indeed, a Jewish history of Good Friday and, for those of us lucky enough to have a Jewish education, that history surfaces when appropriate. Rabbi Rudin is also right: there is a vast puzzlement which blends into headshaking about the contradiction between Christianity as preached and as practiced, between the religion of love and the religion of revenge for "deicide." Part of being Jewish in the Christian world is knowing these matters, and being wary.

Rabbi Rudin's attempt to broaden the reading of Psalm 22 is intriguing in two ways. First, he is, of course, right that Jesus, as a Jew, would have known large parts of the Book of Psalms by heart and, in a moment of deep trouble, would have quoted from Psalms. I was present at a meeting of the New York Board of Rabbis when the late chief rabbi of the USSR spoke. It was a time of deep repression of Jewish life there. He was asked in public how conditions were for Jews in the Soviet Union and replied that everything was fine. There were plenty of rabbinical students, Jewish schools, kosher food, etc. We all knew it was false; what could he say in the presence of the press and the KGB! He was then asked to lead a concluding prayer and began, "From the straits have I called out to Thee" (Ps. 118:5)! A clear message from the Psalms. I, too, have been in situations where a quotation from Psalms was the best I could do to help myself and others. Rabbi Rudin, and I, and Jews throughout the ages understand Jesus.

Second, Rabbi Rudin's understanding of verse 2 ("My God, my God, why have You deserted me"), not as a pious invocation or expression of despair, but as a prayer of protest is certainly correct and very Jewish. The psalmist invokes God's response to the ancestors (vv. 4-6), reviews his terrible state (vv. 7-19), prays for God to intervene (vv. 20-24), reasserts God's help to the oppressed (v. 25), and concludes with a vision of what life would be like under the rule of God (vv. 26-32). This is a psalm which calls God to account. Yes, a Jew who is being crucified — in whatever century and by whatever enemy — has a right, even an obligation, to invoke the covenant and to protest.¹

This, however, is not the meaning of the crucifixion to most Christians. As I

understand it, Christians see the crucifixion as a *positive* moment in religious history. It is the moment where God (or the Son of God, or the Messiah) accepts death into Godself. It is the moment where the Infinite receives finitude, where the perfect One absorbs sin and imperfection. It is the moment where the Omnipotent accepts vulnerability — even unto suffering and even unto death. This is a profound paradox in our understanding of God. Furthermore, since God did not *have* to die such a death, the act of crucifixion constitutes a substantial sacrifice of Godness. On Good Friday, the incarnation reaches its climax, if I have understood Christian teaching correctly.²

Jewish philosophy, like Christian and Islamic philosophy, rejects the language of anthropomorphism (having human form) and anthropopathism (having human feelings). However, the Bible, the midrash (pre-philosophical rabbinic thought), and the liturgy do use anthropopathic language to describe God and the covenant between us and God. God's change of mind in the matter of Noah's flood and our appeals to God's mercy are but two examples of the anthropopathic language of the tradition concerning God.³ The idea, therefore, that the Omnipotent is vulnerable, that God is "passible," is not strange to me. I can even stretch my Jewish theological imagination to encompass the idea that God knows something about death (nothing escapes God knowledge; how else could God know about ultimate salvation; etc.) though, contrary to Christian teaching, according to most streams of Jewish tradition, God does not have any personal experience of death.

However, I have a lot of trouble, theologically and politically, with the idea that suffering and death are *positive*. Theologically, in Jewish tradition, suffering is an abomination. It is to be avoided, except in the most unusual of cases (martyrdom). And, where present, suffering is to be alleviated by prompt social action. There is nothing redemptive in suffering. Death, too, is an abomination for, though it may be a release from personal suffering, it is not positive theologically. Death is not a goal or a redemptive moment in any part of reality. Indeed, in the end of days, God will abolish suffering and death, precisely because they are abominations. Politically, the result of glorifying suffering and death is a disaster, for it is almost always the poor and the oppressed who become the objects of suffering and death. It is the privileged establishment that has preached the virtue of suffering and death to Jews, slaves, blacks, women, children, and strangers. The very first sermon by a Jew in a church on Good Friday was perhaps not the place to say it but the common Christian understanding of the event of Good Friday — together with its political consequences — presents a serious problem.⁴

Several years ago I found myself the Jewish chairperson of the Department of Religion at Emory University, a southern Methodist institution. As part of my work, I looked at my calendar, which is a Jewish calendar replete with Jewish holidays and Sabbath sunset times, and scheduled a faculty meeting for mid-Friday afternoon. Upon receiving the notice, several colleagues came to me saying, "You can't schedule a midafternoon meeting for Good Friday!" They were correct for, while there are no university regulations about meetings on Good Friday, one should not do such a thing. Furthermore, my Jewish calendar did not have Good Friday marked as a holiday and since, unlike Christmas, the date of Good Friday varies from year to year, I had no way of knowing. Naturally, I moved the meeting. Since then, I have pondered the question, why did my colleagues not want to meet during the very hours of the crucifixion? There are no rules in (Protestant) Christianity about not working during those hours; there

are, to the best of my knowledge, no “blue laws” for Good Friday. True, the faculty meeting would have been less than inspiring, but that is not the reason for not “working” during the late afternoon of Good Friday. The reason is religious.

There is a silence that settles over Christendom on Good Friday. It settles over all Christian societies, even over secularists but especially over serious Christians. In many churches, this is reflected in the vestments and liturgy of the day. It is impressive to observe this hush in the midst of our ever-moving society.⁵ As I see it, the silence of Good Friday falls upon Christians as they ponder the meaning of suffering unto death for themselves and as they mull over the meaning of having a God who was so open to humanness that God chose suffering and death. In the face of these issues, silence is a fitting response; in the presence of these spiritual and human realities, silence is a proper attitude. There are many ways to grapple with the spiritual and theological reality of a God who suffers and dies and, in so doing, sets the example for humanity. There are, in a word, many theologies of the crucifixion. Some are more sensitive, more subtle; others seemingly pitiless. There are also many profound questions that serious Christians must, in full faith, ask of this moment. Silent pondering is a good place to begin, and the quiet that descends on Christendom on Good Friday evokes, and reflects, that pondering.

It is not my place as an outsider to choose a theology of crucifixion. Yet, the spirit of interfaith-ful respect which motivated the invitations to Rabbi Rudin to preach and then to me to write this response, moves me to say the following: As an external but sympathetic observer from a history that knows suffering and death, there are two options which make most sense to me. First, there is the option that decenters the crucifixion in favor of the child Jesus or of the resurrection. In this theology, it is the gentle, innocent, loving Child or the wise, resurrected One who is the center of Christian life, not the crucified and abused One.⁶ Second, there is the option which retains the centrality of the crucifixion but understands it, not as a redemptive moment but as a moment of witness to God’s horror of violence, not as a positive religious goal but as a testimony precisely to God’s rejection of violence. In this theology, the crucifixion is the moment when God receives suffering into Godself precisely because it is *un-*redeemed; it is the moment when the Creator accepts death precisely because death is a denial of creation / life.⁷ Seen in either of these perspectives, I would say that the crucifixion is more compatible with God’s justice which must always be loving and with God’s love which can never be blind to God’s justice. Seen in either of these perspectives, the crucifixion is more consonant with God’s covenant with humanity.⁸ In a word, in both of these theologies, the crucifixion is more Jewish. But, then again, any reading a Jew might do of the crucifixion could only be Jewish — and maybe that was the point of the invitations.

NOTES

¹ For more on this, see D. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY, Westminster / John Knox: 1993). Cf. also W. Brueggemann, *The Message of Psalms*, (Minneapolis, MN, Augsburg Publishing House: 1984), 51-121.

² If this is so, there are two very interesting questions: Would Christianity make sense if Jesus had not been crucified but had died of old age? And, would Christianity make sense if Jesus had been crucified but not resurrected?

³ For more on this, see *Facing the Abusing God*, 252, 301.

⁴ I would feel more uncomfortable saying this were it not for the fact that our courageous women Christian colleagues have said it more clearly and more bluntly than I, including the issue of whether the God Who crucifies His Son is an abusing God. See, for example, J. C. Brown and C. Bohn, ed., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* (Cleveland, OH, Pilgrim Press: 1989).

⁵ A similar silence settles over even the most secular parts of Israel on Yom Kippur.

⁶ Rita Brock's constructive essay centering the child Jesus and the resurrection for Christian theology and decentering the violent (crucifixional) element is an excellent example of this (Brown and Bohn, 50-59). Cf. also James Leehan, *Pastoral Care for Survivors of Family Abuse* (Louisville, KY, Westminster / John Knox Press: 1989) and idem, *Defiant Hope: Spirituality for Survivors of Family Abuse* (Louisville, KY, Westminster / John Knox Press: 1993).

⁷ Marie Fortune (Brown and Bohn, 145-46) and idem, *Sexual Violence, The Unmentionable Sin: An Ethical and Pastoral Perspective* (Cleveland, OH, Pilgrim Press: 1983).

⁸ There are, to be sure, problems with both theologies. As to the first, I admit to being not completely comfortable with Christian theologies that decenter the crucifixion precisely because of its theological and cultural centrality. The second interpretation, on the other hand, seems to stretch the meaning of the primary texts.

Second Response

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The preaching of this sermon was both an astonishing and a revealing event. It was astonishing for the historic character that the preacher mentioned as he began. Yet in spite of the centuries of misunderstanding and antipathy of Christians toward Jews, this sermon stands as a bridge, a connection between the two communities.

Rabbi Rudin is right that these words from Psalm 22 are of great significance to Christians. But what also needs to be said is that these words are very problematic for us. The quotation occurs in Matthew and Mark's Gospels as the only words from the cross. It is not mentioned in Luke or John, where six other "words" occur—three in each Gospel—all much more easily comprehended. The fact that the church compresses these into one liturgy—"The Seven Last Words"—places the more difficult text from the psalm in the softer context of the other six words. Often, Christians hasten past the cry from the psalm, on to something more explicable.

What is the difficulty for Christians? The Christian asks: How can the one who is fully human but also God experience an absence of God? How could one who was so close to God have been cast from God? Surely if that experience had occurred, it was momentary. Putting in the other, more comfortable words makes it appear that this was indeed the case. For Jesus to offer forgiveness, deal with the plea from the penitent thief, be concerned about his mother's well-being, place his life and his death in the hands of God—those words bring us back from the cry of Psalm 22. But Matthew and Mark offer no such comfort. The words stand alone, followed only by the cry of death.

For many Christians, the line from Psalm 22 is not seen as a cry of faith, but close to an expression of a lack of faith. Obviously, then, it is troubling. Some solve the problem easily by assuming Jesus was quoting the whole psalm. In that case, the rest of the verses which portray much of the drama of the cross and end with a clearly articulated faith are part of what he meant, even though he could not speak them all.¹ But to reduce the cry of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" to a reference

note is not satisfying to most Christians.

By far the most common understanding has to do with what it means that Jesus bears the sins of the world on the cross; that he suffers for all humanity the punishment for sin that is separation from God. In this context, the cry of desolation is seen as the actual suffering of that condemnation. For Christians who hold to this understanding of the work of atonement, these words from the cross do make sense, and they can be understood without adding the other six “words from the cross,” for the whole suffering and death of Jesus is this time of bearing the condemnation of the world, of being the suffering servant.

There is great truth in this view that ought not to be denied.

At the same time, this interpretation leaves the question of how the words could have significance in the mouth of anyone else, since the atoning role of Jesus is unique. What did the words mean to the original psalmist? What would they mean to a disciple of Christ today? It is possible to say that we also are suffering the condemnation of the world in a more limited sense, or as the Letter to the Colossians puts it: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (1:24). But this is a difficult way of thinking and may not always be appropriate.

Rabbi Rudin’s sermon is revealing in two particular ways. First of all, he makes clear that the opening words of Psalm 22 are in themselves a cry of faith. We need not go to the end of the psalm to find faith expressed. The psalm is of a piece, and it is a psalm of faith. In fact, the boldness of such faith is a characteristic that Christians would do well to cultivate for themselves. It is an expression of the covenant that we do not usually employ. Our very “politeness” with God may come from a fragility of our relationship with God, rather than from great faith. The difference may have to do with a different understanding of covenant. For a Jew, born into the covenant, that relationship has a strength that will not be broken by such an “impolite” utterance. Christians, on the other hand, often have too weak an understanding of covenant, as if it actually depended on us and the state of our faith, or as if God would break it simply on the basis of an utterance of despair such as Jesus’ on the cross. Perhaps the current recovery of the meaning of baptism as the sure covenant sign that we claim even when faith is faint will help us gain the *hutzpah* of which the rabbi speaks.

Second, Rabbi Rudin points to the faithfulness of these words for all who are God’s people. The desolation felt by the followers of Christ need not be interpreted either as their own faithlessness or as a form of atonement for others, though that remains a significant element that has its place in some contexts. The sense of abandonment occurs in the life of the faithful. It can be an impetus for such a cry to God. As Rabbi Rudin says, it can be an act of faith.

The sermon makes one wish for more such exchanges. To speak from faith to faith, especially across lines that so often have been lines of division and suspicion, is an astonishing and revealing occasion.

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¹ See, for example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 460 n.2. He writes: “It has given me much pleasure to read that the late J. J. Hess, too, could not bring himself to regard the passage Matt. 27:46 as a description by Christ of His own state of misery, but only as the first words of the psalm, quoted with reference to what follows.”