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Why Should Jews Survive?

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Modern Judaism

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Michael Goldberg, *Why Should the Jews Survive?* (Oxford and New York, 1995). 191 pp.

When Pharaoh restored the chief butler to his position as foretold by Joseph in his interpretation of the butler's dream, he forgot Joseph. "Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him" (Gen. 40:33). Why does the Bible use this repetitive language? It is obvious that if the butler forgot Joseph, he did not remember him. Yet, both verbs are used, *remembering* and *forgetting*. "The Bible in using this language, is teaching us a very important lesson," said the rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, to his Hasidim. "There are events of such overbearing magnitude that one ought not to remember them all the time, but one must not forget them either. Such an event is the Holocaust." ¹

In his recent book, "Why Should the Jews Survive?" Michael Goldberg adds his name to the growing list of rabbis and Jewish philosophers who have described the problem of Holocaust-centered Judaism. Americans have become obsessed with the ritual repetition and cultic commemoration of the story of the death of European Judaism at the hands of the Nazis and the silence and inactivity of humanity and of God. This Holocaust meta-story enshrines a view of Jews as passive victims of a cruel anti-Semitic world closed to divine salvific hope and redemptive possibility. It is a world in which Jews increasingly find little reason to remain Jews and to commit themselves to Jewish ritual life and practice. The cult of the Holocaust has rendered us preoccupied with our victimhood and defense, with our mourning and loss, with an absent God to whom it seems absurd to pray. As Goldberg puts it, "Within the context of the Holocaust-framed story there are no positive reasons Jews can give for remaining Jewish." Thus, "the challenge to Jews today is not outliving Hitler and the Nazis but overcoming the life-threatening story created in their aftermath!" (p. 5).

Thus, some thirty years after Elie Wiesel declared in the English version of *Night* that he would "never forget the flames which consumed" ² his faith, American Jews find themselves still ritually repeating and teaching the phrase, "Never forget" without knowing precisely why. Having

succeeded in putting Holocaust museums in most major American cities, American Jews now find themselves caught in these museums like labyrinths with no exits. Goldberg suggests that the way to survive the death-trap of the bitter Holocaust story is to juxtapose it with the alternative Jewish master-story provided by the Exodus redemption story. **[End Page 95]** Just as we were slaves to Pharaoh, we were slaves to Hitler, but in both cases God brought us out to freedom. The Exodus story, Goldberg argues, has all the resources we need to understand and to cope with the Holocaust.

I think it safe to say that of all the descriptions and indictments of Holocaust-centered Judaism that we find in the writings of such figures as Eugene Borowitz, Norbert Samuelson, Michael Wyszogrod, Robert Alter, Harold Shulweis, and Leonard Fein, Goldberg's is the most cogent and far reaching. Reading Goldberg's book, one gets the frightening sense that American Jews have become so fascinated by the Holocaust's horror and destruction that, like Lot's wife, we risk being turned into stone, by staring into the abyss. Goldberg's book is clearly a radical and polemical attempt to break American Jews out of their frozen stare into the abyss and to prophetically call them back to a life-affirming Judaism.

Yet if Goldberg's description of the sickness of Holocaust Judaism is accurate, his solution to the malady appears to me to be decidedly lacking. One cannot, I think, argue with his ultimate goal: to win a commitment to the God of Israel and to work for the redemption of the world. But I question the wisdom of attempting to win this commitment by placing the Holocaust into the context of the biblical Exodus tale as an alternative master-story. What I believe would offer far richer possibilities for coping with the challenges presented by the...



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