

Authentic *Tikkun* in the Writings of Emil Fackenheim¹

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Testimony of an Auschwitz Camp Guard

Witness: Women carrying children were always sent with them to the crematorium. The children were then torn from their parents outside the crematorium and sent to the gas chambers separately. When the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers was at its height, orders were issued that the children were to be thrown into the crematorium furnaces or into the pit near the crematorium without being gassed first.

Smirnov (Russian Prosecutor): How am I to understand this? Did they throw them into the fire alive, or did they kill them first?

Witness: They threw them in alive.²

This infinitesimal moment, among so many million moments, is enough to break my heart. As a human, as a Jew, and certainly as a rabbi, my heart breaks all the time—but never more so than when I dare confront the Holocaust. And yet I persist. I persist in wanting to know more about the horrors visited on my people. I persist in a congregational rabbinate where there is not only good news, but heartbreaking loss also. And perhaps most outrageously of all, I persist in celebrating—laughing and falling in love—even though I know of a million heartbreaking moments. The only way I can

justify this outrage, to explain this persistence, is by paying homage to an unfashionable Jewish philosopher and Holocaust survivor, Emil Fackenheim—who pioneered a new use of the term *tikkun*, quite different from the valence it had carried in earlier periods of Jewish history, and thus set the stage for other innovative uses of the term in modern Jewish discourse.

Fackenheim was born in Saxony in 1916.³ Arrested by the Nazis on Kristallnacht in November of 1938, he survived a three-month internment in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp before fleeing, first to Scotland and then to Canada, where he was imprisoned as an enemy alien. Eventually he received his Ph.D. and he joined the philosophy faculty at the University of Toronto in 1960. At the age of 68 he made *aliyah* to Jerusalem.

Fackenheim freed the word *tikkun* from its original rabbinic and Lurianic connotations, applying it instead to matters of contemporary importance. Sadly, the word has become so used and overused in recent years that its mooring to Fackenheim's novel and profoundly brave treatment has disappeared. That, as I hope to show, is a loss in ways more important than the mere academic desire to understand a key moment in the evolution of contemporary Jewish thought.⁴

Emil Fackenheim's First and Second Questions

Fackenheim was an ordained rabbi,⁵ but he was not concerned with the technical fixes—for example, to Jewish divorce law—that the rabbis of ancient times enacted in the name of *tikkun olam*.⁶

Fackenheim is often referred to as a theologian, but this is not a helpful term to hold in mind when considering his contribution to Jewish thought. Certainly he offers no justification of God's ultimate omnipotence or beneficence. (Confronted by burning babies, what goodness could one possibly find in the world?) Nor does he have much to say about a human etiology of evil; he takes as a given that

the great hope of the Enlightenment—the ever-improving lot of humanity—is, after the Holocaust, something best discarded. Nor, certainly, was Fackenheim a theosophist in the kabbalistic sense of the term. He seems uninterested in the inner workings of the Godhead, and the esoteric cosmogony of Isaac Luria seems to interest him only cursorily.⁷ Rather, Fackenheim was a man who encountered the Holocaust, and he continued throughout a long academic career to be nagged by the sense that the experience of this singular horror rendered all other achievement, all other possibility, somehow empty.

As a young academic, Fackenheim attempted to avoid dealing with the Holocaust; his early work focused on Kant and Hegel. But he found that he was unable to escape confronting this ultimate human horror.

Fackenheim's first foray into post-Holocaust thought began with this question: *In the face of the Holocaust, what should the authentic Jew do, and why?* This is the driving question of his *God's Presence in History*, published in 1970.⁸ And over the twenty years that followed, his interests shifted to the more inchoate and more universal problem: *Can there ever be an authentic response, in the face of the Holocaust?*—the driving question of *To Mend the World*, published in 1982.⁹ Fackenheim's famous (or, perhaps, infamous) answer to his first question—that refusing to grant Hitler a posthumous victory is, as of now, the 614th commandment—can hardly be considered under-discussed;¹⁰ but the answer to the second question needs rescuing from an even deeper spiral into cliché than history has afforded the notion of a 614th commandment.

In Search of an “Authentic” Response to the Holocaust

The Holocaust pricks our conscience; it is the ultimate test of the authenticity of any response to a world that appears, too often, nasty, brutish, and short. If we fail the test of the Holocaust, we are left

with nothing but foolish words. But if we can find a response to the question of life that passes the test of Auschwitz then, surely, we have discovered something important.

That Fackenheim sees history and the Holocaust as a test of the authenticity of thought and action can be seen from an extended attack on Heidegger that takes up thirty pages of his *To Mend the World*.¹¹ Fackenheim doesn't critique Heidegger's logic or reasoning; rather, he simply claims that Heidegger must be wrong (or "inauthentic," to use Fackenheim's term), since he failed to speak against the horrors of Auschwitz. The Nazi, so Fackenheim claimed, may not be judged on the technical merits of his own philosophizing, but must be held accountable for everything that happened because of his silence. Auschwitz, as a historical event, becomes the standard against which all theorizing about "good" and "evil" must be judged. But this high bar serves only to raise a more profound dilemma: does not *all* thought become unauthentic? Toward the end of the work, Fackenheim—still struggling with whether anything he has to offer can have meaning in a post-Auschwitz world—puts the problem of thinking about the Holocaust this way: "Perhaps *no* thought can be where the Holocaust is...perhaps all thought is 'paralyzed' vis-à-vis that event and...perhaps paralysis at this catastrophic point calls into question [all] thoughts everywhere."¹² His reticence about the possibility of post-Auschwitz thought can, perhaps, be sensed most clearly in an extraordinary passage where Fackenheim considers Adolf Eichmann, one of the foremost drivers of the "Final Solution," a "good" Kantian. Eichmann, deems Fackenheim, acted as a dutiful idealistic mass murderer, thus obeying the first of Kant's categorical imperatives: that one should act from a principled position. The Nazi also obeyed the second imperative of acting with the intention that his own actions could become a universal law. And, finally, Fackenheim feels forced to acknowledge that if one considers Jews as sub-human (as Eichmann did), then sending them to their extermination could be excused—from Kant's requirement that all "full" human beings are treated as ends in themselves. Fackenheim admits his own

“horror” at the findings he feels compelled to admit. One can feel his despairing of the value of the philosophic heroes whose work drove Fackenheim’s own early professional endeavor.

The point is not that philosophy is rendered unauthentic after the Holocaust. It is that everything becomes vacuous, at best, when tested against the horrors of Auschwitz. Fackenheim cites Kierkegaard’s assertion that a “single event of inexplicable horror ‘has the power to make *everything* inexplicable, including the most [otherwise] explicable events.”¹³ The challenge of the Holocaust was physical, but is now existential; we—even those of us who have physically survived—remain in danger of losing everything.

Learning from History: The “Q” and the “A”

The testimony of the Auschwitz camp guard found at the beginning of this essay is, in many ways, typical of *To Mend the World*. The work is full of historical excursions, but Fackenheim finds something truly precious in the rubble of European Jewry: the very building-blocks of a response. Auschwitz brings us all to a halt. But it is not the end of our tale; rather, it is its beginning. As Fackenheim says, “It is at this point that our going-to-school-with-life...begins in earnest... and only in [the] context of [engaging with the destruction of the Holocaust] can the ‘central question’ of our whole inquiry be *both asked and answered*.”¹⁴ History thus provides not only the “Q” (i.e., “Can anything be authentic after the Holocaust?”), but also the “A.”

Central to Fackenheim’s thought is his commitment to look to the dark places of history, until the darkness becomes its own source of meaningful engagement with something, somehow redemptive. It brings, if not a downright epiphany, then at least its own reward. We have a record of the moment Fackenheim himself came to this understanding:

[While studying the story of Pelagia Lewinska] I made what

to me was, and still is, a momentous discovery: that while religious thinkers were vainly struggling for a response to Auschwitz, Jews throughout the world had been responding all along...with an unexpected will to live—with, under the circumstances, an incredible commitment to Jewish group survival.¹⁵

Lewinska was a Holocaust survivor who in her memoir, *Twenty Months at Auschwitz*, depicts the horrors of “the ditches, the mud, the piles of excrement,” and comes to understand that the Nazis have committed themselves not only to the physical annihilation of Jews, but also to their systematic abasement: “They wished to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of [our] humanity...to fill us with horror and contempt.”¹⁶ However, Lewinska’s experience of being so utterly overpowered, instead of stripping her of her decency and humanity, becomes its own extraordinary motivation:

From the instant when I grasped [this Nazi] motivating principle...it was as if I had been awakened from a dream.... I *felt under orders to live*...And if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being, I would hold onto my dignity. I was not going to be the contemptible, disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be.¹⁷

The answer, claims Fackenheim, had been there all along; it was simply waiting for someone to come and find it.

The world itself is philosophically intelligible after Auschwitz in the exact sense in which it was already understood—in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, in Lublin and the Warsaw Ghetto—by the resisting victims themselves. No deeper or more ultimate grasp is possible for philosophical thought that comes...after the event. This grasp—their grasp—is epistemologically ultimate.¹⁸

Lewinska, who discovered in the face of Nazi dehumanization that she felt commanded never to surrender her humanity, becomes the model for the possibility of choosing a path of “faithfulness unto death.”¹⁹ The Buchenwald hasidim, who swapped four rations of bread for a pair of *t’fillin*, become the paradigm for the possibility of retaining categories of commandedness even in a post-Auschwitz world.²⁰ And even thought—philosophy—finds the possibility of an authentic post-Holocaust existence, because of a moment of authenticity forged in the crucible of Nazi Germany.

Kurt Huber (1893–1943) was a professor of philosophy in Munich when he came into contact with a collective of philosophy students known as The White Rose. The group’s members were arrested, and after a sham trial, killed—for distributing anti-Nazi pamphlets. Huber became their most eloquent spokesperson. In a “Final Statement of the Accused” placed before the court that found him guilty, Huber sought to justify the legality of the group’s acts of philosophical resistance, using philosophical discourse. Of course, the court had no truck with his claims. Huber was stripped of his position, his doctorate, and his life—but even in the face of this bastardized injustice, Huber retained his engagement with philosophy. Extraordinarily, while in prison awaiting his inevitable fate, Huber completed work on a biography of Gottfried Leibniz.

One has the impression that Fackenheim was not particularly impressed with the quality of Huber’s work; but just as Fackenheim accuses Heidegger of failing as a philosopher despite his intellectual brilliance, Huber succeeds regardless of his lack of academic genius: “What the greatest German philosopher of the age failed to achieve was accomplished, at least in principle, by an obscure German professor of philosophy in the midst of the *Ereignis* [Event] itself.”²¹ Huber and the White Rose’s engagement in philosophical thought in the midst of “the Event” justifies the possibility of philosophical thought after “the Event.”

These acts of resistance, philosophical and otherwise, are not the actions of those who looked away from the horrors of Auschwitz. Fackenheim claims that these resisting actors all engaged honestly with their surroundings. Lewinska understood Auschwitz. The prayers of the Buchenwald hasidim were a “rejection of all pious explanations of the purpose of prayer.”²² Huber and the members of the White Rose knew the futility of their actions and were aware of their all-but-certain-death; “they knew it, but they did it.”²³ This awareness, claims Fackenheim, made their actions holy, authentic, and meaningful. And whereas before this epiphany we may have feared that there could be no authentic response in the face of the rupture of such horror, once an archetypal reaction is discovered to be authentic, the path is then open for other possible responses. Or, as Fackenheim put it: “We do not mean that [these cases of heroic response are] the only one[s]; we do mean that even a *single* case, provided it was genuine, is a *novum* that alters everything.”²⁴ Notwithstanding the futility of life *and* the failure of piety *and* the certainty of death in our contemporary existence, we too are capable of achieving holiness and authenticity...and even meaning.

Authenticity and *Tikkun*

We have jumped too quickly, accepting without comment Fackenheim’s claim as to the holiness of the actions of these resisting heroes. For Fackenheim, the source of this possibility of holiness is the very term—*tikkun*—that is the focus of this volume’s efforts.

Tikkun is a term much used (and, arguably, even overused) in contemporary Jewish discourse. Nevertheless, at time of *To Mend the World’s* publication in 1982, its use must have been quite shocking. Not only was a very particularistic Hebrew term making an appearance in the work of a thinker known in the secular academy, but the term, prior to the publication of *To Mend The World*, had been the preserve of

talmudic sages and theosophistic kabbalists. Fackenheim professes no special fidelity to the term *tikkun* as understood in Lurianic writings. Many of the areas in which he uses the term—such as in discussing the possibility of rebuilding a broken church, or to vouchsafe the possibility of authentic philosophical discourse—are wholly foreign concerns to the Lurianic corpus. Moreover, the notion that the Godhead itself is broken—a central Lurianic axiom—figures only peripherally in *To Mend the World*. But in one vital sense, Fackenheim does base himself on a foundation of Lurianic cosmogony—and that is a foundation in danger of becoming forgotten in the contemporary focus given to the term. In Lurianic Kabbalah, *tikkun* is the third element of a cosmology that begins with a divine withdrawal from a previously unbordered infinite omnipresence of divine energy—*tzimtzum*. *Tzimtzum* prepares the way for the manifestation of a finite creation, but the limited divine energy that trickled into this emptiness was still too powerful to be contained—resulting in a destruction, known in Lurianic thought as *sh'virah*. It is only at this point—after and directly connected to cosmic destruction—that Lurianic discourse about *tikkun* has meaning.

Fackenheim's *tikkun*, as a contemporary philosophical construct, entails a direct encounter with a shattered existence. Time and time again, *To Mend the World* binds the notion of *tikkun* with a willingness to encounter rupture, the Lurianic *sh'virah*. To take one example:

A *tikkun* here and now is mandatory, for a *tikkun* then and there was actual. It is true that because a *tikkun* of that rupture is impossible we cannot live, after the Holocaust, as men and women have lived before. However, if the impossible *tikkun* were not also necessary and hence possible, we could not live at all.²⁵

The notion that this *tikkun* must be bound to *sh'virah* ought not to be such a radical claim; but in the thirty years since the publication of *To Mend the World*, the word *tikkun*—especially in the phrase *tikkun*

olam—has become so overused that it is in danger of becoming trite. Richard Hirsh, in a special edition of *The Reconstructionist* magazine entitled “*Tikkun Olam: Theory and Practice*,” acknowledges and seemingly accepts that “*tikkun olam* has gone the way of other traditional Jewish categories, notably *mitzvah* and *tzedakah*, and has become a generic term for social action policies.”²⁶

Of course social action is important, and indeed there is much work that needs to be done to better the lot of those dispossessed by contemporary society, but to use *tikkun* only in the context of “thou shalt not wrong a stranger”²⁷ seems to traduce the term. To strip *tikkun* of its relationship to rupture renders the term *pareve*. Perhaps a better analogy can be drawn from the world of antibiotic resistance. We are over-medicating, and in so doing we weaken our ability to fight that most terrifying of spiritual diseases: not the loss of our physical life (which remains inevitable), but the loss of the possibility of authentic living even while alive (a thought that is truly terrifying).

For Fackenheim, the special quality of *tikkun* is its reality. Traditional rabbinic categories that speak about suffering do not “presume to penetrate the divine nature but...rather [offer] a human metaphorical way of speaking...God only ‘as it were’ weeps or roars like a lion...[However] no such restraint is shown by kabbalistic Judaism.”²⁸

The Lurianic system makes an ontological claim: in the minds of the kabbalists, the *sh’virah* really happened;²⁹ therefore *tikkun*, as a type of authentic action, really was (and is) possible. Again, we see the importance of history in Fackenheim’s thought. What for Luria was religious and theological reality becomes, in Fackenheim’s hands, an eminently this-worldly focused existential foundation, on which a quest for holiness can be constructed. The authenticity of a category of the past has been established, and therefore the category may be carried into the future. It may continue to engender holiness, even after Auschwitz.

Fackenheim and Me

Fackenheim's conception of *tikkun* as authentic action, lived in the face of the rupture, is one I hold dear—even as I find the general use of the term often hackneyed. As a philosophical response to radical evil, it seems indestructible (if only because its foundation is already one of wreckage and destruction). As an existential approach, it echoes other articulations I hold dear. James Fowler, in his 1981 work *Stages of Faith*,³⁰ attempts to articulate the parallels between child development and theological sophistication. Fowler suggests that children, and childish theologians, are drawn to certainties and absolutes. Adolescents, and adolescent theologians, Fowler suggests, know such childish notions to be unutterably deceitful and reject them all. But eventually (for some), the thrill of destructive iconoclasm passes...and then what? The adult stage of faith (by Fowler's reckoning, the "Fifth Stage") entails re-appraising the value of conceptions known in youth and returning to them not for their scientific accuracy but in search of insight, inspiration, and the sort of truth that cannot be subject to laboratory protocols. I locate myself, and my relationship with God and revelation, in Fowler's "fifth stage of faith"—the place where, after the iconoclasm of adolescence fades, one is ready to resubmit to the power of religious tradition. Fackenheim's use of *tikkun* echoes, for me, this relationship with past modalities. I'm not looking for certainties. I am not looking to recreate worlds that have gone and are never to return. But I do look to the past in search of value and values. I do look to the past in search of authentic possibilities for living well today.

I also find Fackenheim's sense of *tikkun* enormously helpful in my work as a congregational rabbi. The weddings and such are fine, and even many of the sadder occasions provoke no existential threat. But there are also occasions, without wishing to suggest anything comparable to Auschwitz, that can empty out a person. There are occasions when, as a rabbi, I am called to stand with those who face

sh'virah—the loss of existential possibility—in their own lives, and it is a contagious threat. I believe empathy is the strongest gift I have to share with those suffering; but attempting to share pains that cause existential rupture is a dangerous business—even a rabbi (this rabbi) can be emptied out. It is when I stand with those suffering rupture (even if—and perhaps especially when—there is nothing “to do”), and also when I retreat home to lick my own existential wounds, that I cherish Fackenheim’s notion of *tikkun*: authentic possibility in the face of rupture, both in a generalized, humanist sense, and also in offering for those bereft and bereaved the specific religious ritualized responses of the Jewish tradition.

I find, in Fackenheim’s articulations, guidance in the search for ways to live authentically in the face of the nasty, the brutish and the short. For me—in my, life and especially as a rabbi confronted by the often heartbreaking experiences of both my congregants and my people—Fackenheim’s notion of *tikkun* after *sh'virah* works.

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in *Conservative Judaism* 66:1 (Winter 2014), pp. 59–69.

² Cited in Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 212. The author offers a fuller bibliographic citation for this testimony on p. 340, n. 15.

³ The following biographical information owes a debt to Lawrence Joffe's obituary published in *The Guardian* (October 10, 2003), available online at www.theguardian.com/news/2003/oct/10/guardianobituaries.

⁴ Leonard Fein, in his study of the development of the use of the motif, is, I think, the first to acknowledge Fackenheim's pre-eminent role in using the term as a response to the ills of society. See Leonard Fine, "Tikkun: A Lurianic Motif in Contemporary Jewish Thought," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, eds. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), vol. 4, pp. 35–53.

⁵ His ordination was granted by the bastion of Berlin Reform Jewry, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Staggeringly, he seems to have been awarded ordination in 1939—after Kristallnacht.

⁶ Other essays in this collection address the use of the term in historical perspective; see especially the essay by Gail Labovitz.

⁷ Other papers in this collection address the Lurianic sense of *tikkun*.

⁸ Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

⁹ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York: Schocken, 1982). This analysis is based on Michael L. Morgan's "The Central Problem of Fackenheim's *To Mend The World*," in *Journal of Jewish Thought* 5(1996), pp. 297–312, particularly p. 299.

¹⁰ Fackenheim was already citing his own "canonical" rendition of the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz—not to hand Hitler a posthumous victory—in 1968; see *God's Presence in History*, p. 84, and also p. 103 n. 44 and p. 100, nn. 10 and 11. Rabbinic discourse has long presumed a total of 613 commandments in the Torah; see B. Makkot 23b in the name of Rabbi Simlai.

¹¹ *To Mend the World*, pp. 151–181.

¹² *To Mend the World*, p. 249.

¹³ Cited in Kierkegaard's name, but with no citation, in *To Mend the World*, p. 191. Emphases here and throughout are my own.

¹⁴ *To Mend the World*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁵ Emil Fackenheim, *The Quest for Past and Future* (Bloomington, IN: Beacon, 1968), pp. 19–20.

¹⁶ *Twenty Months at Auschwitz* (London: Lyle Stuart Inc., 1968), p.41, cited in *To Mend the World*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50, and cited in *To Mend the World*, p.25; italics per Fackenheim's citation of the passage. Fackenheim is clearly drawn to the notion of the "commanding voice" that Lewinska "hears." There is in Lewinska's heroic refusal

to surrender her own humanity something of Victor Frankl's insistence that even the horror of Auschwitz cannot strip everything from a human; see *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959, under the title *From Death Camp to Existentialism*; rpt. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).

¹⁸ *To Mend the World*, p. 248.

¹⁹ *God's Presence in History*, p. 74, cf. the discussion of Lewinska in *To Mend the World*, pp. 25, 217, 219, 223, 229, 248, and 302.

²⁰ Though the notion of commandedness is clearly central for Fackenheim, he does not advocate the wholesale importation of pre-modern halakhic norms into a post-Holocaust world. It is a central tenet of Fackenheim's self-claimed canonical statement of the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz that the "religious Jew who has stayed with his God may be forced into new, possibly revolutionary relationships with Him" (*God's Presence in History*, p. 84). See his discussion of the Buchenwald hasidim in *To Mend the World*, pp. 218, 223, 229, 254, and 303.

²¹ *To Mend the World*, p. 266.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 266–267.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

²⁵ *To Mend the World*, p. 254.

²⁶ "From the Editor," in *The Reconstructionist* 68:1 (2003), p. 2. This is certainly the general approach to *tikkun* in the essays published in that volume. There is nothing, even in the supposedly more theoretical papers, that seeks to understand *tikkun* in the context of *sh'virah*.

²⁷ As Laurence Kushner suggests in *The Book of Words* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), p. 83.

²⁸ *To Mend the World*, p. 253. Fackenheim likewise rejects earlier biblical models of protest as not sufficiently concrete; see *God's Presence in History*, p. 76.

²⁹ I do not think that Fackenheim is making a scientific "God and the Big Bang" type of claim; rather, I believe he is acknowledging the claimed religious truth of the Lurianic cosmology as a faith construct.

³⁰ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).