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Jewish philosophy and political theory to the Shoah, some aspects

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SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Żydzi, Shoah, filozofia, historia, totalitaryzm

The great historical disasters of the twentieth century, being the aftermath of the functioning of European totalitarian regimes, including World War II and the Shoah, highlighted the need for involvement of researchers of various fields in the realm of ethics. The political elites of the Old Continent, historians, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers wanted to answer the question, how in the middle of Europe, of which cultural identity were: Greek philosophy, Roman law and the Judeo-Christian tradition, such inhuman and irrational crimes could happen.

Extermination camp – figure Shoah

Political theorist Hannah Arend is the author of a very thorough theory of totalitarianism. We will use here her analysis of the concentration camps and extermination camps from the most famous work entitled *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. First of all, the camps are the laboratories for totalitarian regimes in which they verify the basic premise of totalitarianism about the fact that everything is possible. What is the purpose of the camps? Arend notes that in any case it is not the desire to reap the benefits of the labor force. Camps at best financed only their supervisory staff, and therefore they existed for themselves. The fact of apparent inexpediency of camps heightens the atmosphere of madness and unreality that made the elites of the West disbelieve in their existence.

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The experiment with camps was to attempt to transform the very nature of man, to dominate totally. It could be achieved by such a drastic conversion of distinctiveness and uniqueness of all human beings to become one man. They tried to achieve that by reducing each person to repetitive unchanging reactions, which could be programmed to him or her and if necessary exchanged for others. Arendt writes that „the camps are meant not only exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior...”¹.

In Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, we also find an important warning for contemporary societies. She warns against commonsense assertions that the totalitarian aspirations are utopian and unrealizable. If you honestly look into the problems of the death camps, you can see that, „the society of the dying established in the camps is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely”². We can at this point reach the authorized claims that the extermination camp, as we know it e.g. from Auschwitz, is a figure of realized totalitarianism.

Hannah Arendt draws more attention to the significance of camps for the stability of the totalitarian system. She believes that they are more important for the preservation of the power of the regime than all the other institutions. Without the fear, they excite and without any training offered in the field of totalitarian rule, the totalitarian state could not „inspire its nuclear troops with fanaticism, or maintain whole people in complete apathy”³.

Back to the roots

Communism and Nazism revealed a crisis which covered many areas of modern times. Political philosopher Leo Strauss was convinced that we lived in a time of serious theological and political crisis. On the one hand, the crisis of Judaism, including the belief in the freedom of its prosperity, on the other hand, the crisis undermining the idea of human rationality, the Enlightenment faith in the triumph of progress in history, and liberalism⁴. In short, the foundation of modern Judaism collapsed. This landscape evokes associations with the views proclaimed by Nietzsche and Heidegger: priority of the will before reason in human beings; radical doubt as to the constancy

¹ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1973, p. 438.

² *Ibidem*, p. 456.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ K. H. Green, *Leo Strauss*, [in:] *Historia filozofii żydowskiej*, D.H. Frank, O. Leaman (edit.), Kraków 2009, p. 851.

of human nature; history that is true, but it is not rational; atheism and fundamental abyss; eternal true as non-existent or even as a pious fraud.

Strauss precisely in this kind of beliefs saw the causes of this crisis. They had a serious impact on the humanities of the twentieth century and we can still hear the echo of them. Strauss rejected Nietzsche and Heidegger. He returned to medieval sources, the Jewish theologian Maimonides, because he hoped to find in his works a philosophy capable of teaching the truth and to solve the contemporary crisis. Why did he reach for pre-modern ideas? He combined the beginnings of modernity with Machiavelli, so he considered the roots of this trend as immoral philosophical thought. Strauss's thought could serve the modern Jews as a foothold. It went in that direction so that they did not reject the reason as a result of trauma and despair after disasters and atrocities which they had experienced during the war. He warned against rejection of everything that was western and modern: philosophy, science, liberal democracy, individualism. For Strauss the cure for the crisis was primarily the Hebrew Bible as the original Jewish source of wisdom that could enlighten a man and direct towards the truth many more times⁵.

Naturalism

Modern Jewish thought confronted with an event of the Shoah contains various trends and concepts. There is not one theological-philosophical answer to the Jewish Holocaust. Each thinker differently dealt with the issues of the essence of evil and presence of God in the midst of the horrors of the smoking crematoria. Still living a Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein proclaimed that God is dead⁶. His logic behind this thesis may be synthesized by means of such syllogism: 1. God, as Jewish tradition comprehended Him, could not allow that the Holocaust took place. 2. The Holocaust took place. Hence – 3. God, as Jewish tradition comprehended Him, does not exist. The revolution, which Rubenstein proposed, was therefore to rely on the abandonment of the Jewish linear and historical categories, including God as the Lord of history, leading Israel through the history of salvation, and the adoption of the naturalistic categories⁷. In his opinion, nature defeated history. Natural life and getting pleasure from your own body comes in place of *the sacred* and replaces the notions that previously occupied this place.

⁵ L. Strauss, *Jerozolima i Ateny: Oraz inne eseje z filozofii politycznej*, Kęty 2012, pp. 25-57.

⁶ R. L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, theology, and contemporary Judaism*, Baltimore 1992, pp. 293-307.

⁷ S. T. Katz, *Zagłada*, [in:] *Historia filozofii żydowskiej*, D.H. Frank, O. Leaman (edit.), Kraków 2009, p. 886.

Rubenstein suggested, in fact, pagan naturalism and omission of references to transcendence. Steven Katz carried out a comprehensive critique of these views. He wrote, „His writings contain no real program, based on which one could build a life of an individual or the national community”⁸. He decided that Rubenstein found no answer to the crisis and evil, and his views were blind idolatrously, because nature is morally neutral, and can not form the basis of a new brotherhood between people. Nazi ideology drew anyway from mystical pagan naturalism. Rubenstein’s concepts seem to move in the vicious circle.

New cycle

A historical approach to Judaism is significant for the Jewish position; it is to treat it as a religion of history, in which the central place is occupied by the events of the salvation history. Irving Yitz Greenberg, a neo-orthodox rabbi advocated a revolutionary, but respecting the Jewish tradition and history, idea. In his work *The Third Great Cycle in Jewish History* he states that the Shoah is a sign of a new era in Jewish history, which is the title third cycle. It is the reason why Sinai covenant was ruined, and God should repent of this covenant, because He ordered the Jews a suicidal mission of being His witnesses in the world.

Greenberg distinguishes three periods in the history of the nation: the biblical – in which the man was an inferior party of the signed with the God covenant, the rabbinic period – when he is his equal partner, and the third after Auschwitz – when he becomes a partner superior in action⁹. In the new cycle, the one that is expected to bring rescue, stop the evil and ensure that the Shoah will never happen again, it is the man himself. However, God must accompany him in all. It can be concluded that the Shoah is the moment in human history, from which the full initiative in the process of history is passed to the man for the first time. Greenberg sees the consequences of the greatest Jewish tragedy as a triumph of willpower of the man: „The Holocaust might prove an irresistible argument against hope, justification of despair. Instead, thanks to the alchemy of love and faith of the man, this paradigm of cruelty has been transformed into a living force, the incentive to love and restore human dignity”¹⁰.

The concept of Greenberg’s crushed covenant of Sinai went through the criticism of part of the Jewish community. Katz engaged in the polemic: „From the point of view of logic and theology the key question referring to Greenberg’s scheme reads as follows: if ever has there been a binding covenant, that is, if there is a God, who came into the

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 894.

⁹ I. Greenberg, *The third great cycle of Jewish history*, New York 1988, pp. 4-9.

¹⁰ I. Greenberg, *Historia, Holocaust i Przymierze*, „Znak” 4-5/XLII (1990), p. 105.

relationship of the covenant with Israel, can such an alliance be „shattered” by a Hitler? Alternatively, if you can say about Hitler, that he „shattered” the covenant, has such an alliance, despite the assurances of traditional Jews, ever existed?¹¹”

Greenberg, in another publication, explains that he wants to put an open question: „If there can not be a covenant without the people carrying it, therefore, was it not annihilated by this event?”¹². Greenberg’s analysis about the Shoah emphasizes here such theological-historical changes: from a partner covenant to the covenant superior in action, the action of God in the history to the action of man, from cruelty and death to the power of life and human dignity, from powerlessness to power. This last was most strongly manifested in the creation of the state of Israel.

Zionism

Jews in Greenberg’s considerations, as a result of the Shoah, go to the new form of the covenant, which was constituted with the rise of the State of Israel. The nation state arises, therefore, as an attempt of Jews to overcome their current conditions and tragic experiences. The Jewish people „Therefore, they reached for the power to prevent the next Holocaust with all the power, for which they are capable”¹³.

A great number of Jews, religious and non-religious, built the state. They recreated together „the greatest symbol of the Bible”, which in the post-war conditions was to authenticate the new covenant. In the evocative words, Greenberg writes about collective the exceeding the terrible barriers: „The rise from Auschwitz or Sobibor abysses of slavery and genocide to the tops of the resurrected Jerusalem means more than climbing Mount Sinai with the atrocities of slavery in Egypt and the murder of the Hebrew children”¹⁴. The presented political theology was not an isolated case. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Eliezer Berkovits wrote in a similar vein: „Survivors of Auschwitz and Treblinka regained strength in Zion and in Jerusalem. From the darkest depths of hell created by man they walked into the light of Jewish sovereignty of the State of Israel, but did not find peace there”¹⁵.

The rebirth of the Jewish homeland after almost two thousand years is a historical event. This was to some extent the answer to the vulnerability of human beings annihilated by totalitarian regimes. Tomasz Majewski, a historian and culture expert, draws attention to the distinctive Zionist perspective of this fact: „the creation of Israel was

¹¹ S. T. Katz, *Zagłada...*, p. 896.

¹² I. Greenberg, *Historia, Holocaust i Przymierze*, „Znak” 4-5/XLII (1990), p. 104.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 107.

¹⁵ E. Berkovits, *Historyczny kontekst Holocaustu*, [in:] *Teologia i filozofia żydowska wobec Holocaustu*, P. Śpiewak (edit.), Gdańsk 2012, p. 308.

understood earlier as breaking with the tradition of the Diaspora, understood as the vulnerability of the Jews during the persecution, of which the Holocaust was to be the last act¹⁶. The dominant view among the Zionists was the perception of anti-Semitism as a centuries-long historical process, with its culmination during World War II. These theories were used to cement the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine.

The Jewish philosopher and Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik was of the opinion that the creation of the state of Israel was partly supernatural, which would indicate the then international relations, especially the unusual support of the idea by both Western countries and the Eastern bloc. The miracle of the state came too late: „If the State of Israel had been established before the Nazi Holocaust, perhaps hundreds of thousands of Jews could have been saved from the gas chambers and crematoria¹⁷.”

In modern studies, it is noted that the Holocaust did not immediately appear to function as the myth of the foundation of the Jewish state¹⁸. Only Eichmann trial was to make a fundamental transformation in the collective memory. As Arendt recalls, who was present there, and reported on it for „The New Yorker”, a political objective of this whole project was a struggle to convince the younger generation of Israelis: „The process was to show them what it meant to live among non-Jews, and convince them that only an Israeli Jew can live safely and with dignity¹⁹.”

Escape to the future

If the Holocaust could not crush the Covenant, as Katz convinces, it raises questions about the silence of God, His presence in the hell of the death camps, the lack of divine intervention in the form of freeing from captivity. Arthur Cohen can be an example of another way of thinking. He proclaimed that God is not a strategist of specific details of our lives or historical conditions in which we live, but is the mystery of the future²⁰. Katz criticizes such a attitude to God and asks, „Is God still God, since He is no longer a providential factor in the history? Is God still God, since He lacks the power to enter into the history vertically and make the miracle happen?”²¹. Katz proposes to extract Cohen’s deity from the God of the Bible, the covenant, the prophets, because they have

¹⁶ T. Majewski, *Dyskurs publiczny po Shoah*, [in:] *Pamięć Shoah: Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia*, T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, M. Wójcik (edit.), Łódź 2011, p. 253.

¹⁷ J. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek – to mój miły puka*, [in:] *Teologia i filozofia...*, p. 216.

¹⁸ T. Majewski, *Dyskurs publiczny po Shoah*,

¹⁹ H. Arendt, *Eichmann w Jerozolimie: Rzecz o banalności zła*, Kraków 2010, p. 14.

²⁰ A. A. Cohen, *The tremendum: A theological interpretation of the Holocaust*, New York 1981, p. 97.

²¹ S. T. Katz, *Zagłada...*, p. 898.

nothing in common. It would have more similarities with Plato's Demiurge, or deistic non-involving and unnecessary for anyone deity.

Jewish thinking about the Shoah

Steven Katz's important contribution to the study of the Holocaust philosophical discourse signaled above is created by him a catalog of fundamental and unavoidable questions of thinkers on the Holocaust: „(1) Status of history in Jewish thought: is Judaism a historical religion? Can historical events „refute” the fundamental theological thesis of Judaism? (2) How to judge good and evil as historical phenomena regarding the theological judgments? (3) How to divide Jewish history, and how to assess its significance? (4) Is Jewish history in any way unique? (5) Is the Holocaust something unique? And if so, is it important for philosophy and theology? (6) What is the status of empirical debunking of the procedures in Jewish thought? (7) What do the words of providence and God's intervention in human affairs mean? (8) What is „revelation”? What is a „covenant”? [...] (9) What is the mutual relationship between the anthropological and theological judgments? (10) Acknowledging the existence of a long tradition of reflection on this issue – what are the limits (if any) of interpretation of God's attributes? (11) What traditions and contemporary sources (if any) have the status of authority in this discussion? [...] (12) Finally, the conversation that we take part in creates a whole lot of conceptual questions about the philosophical and theological meaning of the land of Israel, Zionism and the Jewish state, and for some of the issues related to messianism”²².

We used the views of Leo Strauss, Richard Rubenstein, Irving Greenberg, Arthur Cohen and Steven Katz to demarcate the scope of the major questions with which successive generations of Jewish thinkers struggled in relation to radical evil, Auschwitz, which can be a figure of realized totalitarianism, including an attempt to transform the very nature of debased and incapacitated man.

Is there an answer?

The philosophical tradition is missing constantly the issue of „radical evil” as well as the suffering of the innocents people. It is interesting to recall some conclusions for the future that have emerged in the post-war discourse. First of all, the famous categorical imperative formulated by Theodor Adorno: „think and act so as not to repeat

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 902–903.

Oświęcim, so as nothing similar will happen”²³. In humanities, these words were the starting point for rethinking the methodology and scientific paradigms. Thinkers recognized the need to create such a research model that reconstructing the Holocaust „would ensure that the obligatory open character of the study of the event, prompting continuous retry of reflection, will cause that the memory of the Holocaust will remain still alive”²⁴.

Paul Ricour, one of the most famous French philosophers, in his Summa hermeneutic entitled *Memory, history, oblivion*, stressed the role of justice as that which giving value of example to traumatic memories, transforms the memory into the project. We are dealing, therefore, with concern for the memory, but not only through respect to the scale of the sufferings associated with the trauma of past events but to impart the memory the form of the future tense and imperative²⁵.

Finally, I would like to refer to concepts of another contemporary French philosopher Rémi Brague, who in his work dedicated to the identity of our continent, entitled *Europe, The Roman way*, presented a very interesting thesis about culture and civilization. I think that it can be very helpful in the context of questions about how in the middle of Europe, whose cultural identity were: Greek philosophy, Roman law and the Judeo-Christian tradition, such inhuman and irrational crimes of totalitarian regimes could happen. Brague states, „Europe is a culture. And culture is work on yourself, forming yourself by yourself, effort of assimilation of that thing which transcends the individual. Therefore, it can not be inherited. On the contrary, everyone has to get it alone. You can not be born a European, but you can work on it to become one”²⁶.

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²³ T. W. Adorno, *Dialektyka negatywna*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 512–513.

²⁴ J. Muchowski, *Historyka Shoah: Problematyka przedstawiania katastrof historycznych*, Warszawa 2006, p. 1.

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Pamięć, historia, zapomnienie*, Kraków 2012, pp. 116–117.

²⁶ R. Brague, *Europa, droga rzymska*, Warszawa 2012, p. 17.

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ABSTRACT

For many researchers, the new categorical imperative by philosopher Theodor Adorno about thinking and acting in the way so that Auschwitz is never repeated, has become the new starting point for rethinking the rules of practicing the humanities. In the article, I present the postwar history of Jewish thought that has been manifested in the discourse about the Shoah.

Żydowska filozofia i teoria polityki wobec Szoa, wybrane aspekty

STRESZCZENIE

Dla wielu badaczy nowy imperatyw kategoryczny filozofa Theodora Adorno o myśleniu i działaniu w taki sposób, by Auschwitz się nigdy nie powtórzyło, stało się nowym punktem wyjścia do przemyślenia zasad uprawiania humanistyki. W artykule przedstawiam powojenną historię myśli żydowskiej, która objawia się w dyskursie o Shoah.