

Ending the era of Auschwitz

by [Marc Ellis](#) in the [October 6, 1999](#) issue

*The Holocaust in American Life*, by Peter Novick

As part of a delegation meeting in 1992 to discuss the future of Auschwitz, I walked the camp's terrible terrain with such notable Holocaust scholars as Richard Rubenstein, David Roskies and Alvin Rosenfeld. There I heard the most radical thought about Holocaust remembrance that I had encountered in many years. A conservative rabbi in our group proposed that, instead of preserving and augmenting the Auschwitz site and revising the museum's materials to emphasize the particularity of Jewish suffering, Jewish leaders should invoke a statute of limitations on the memory of the Holocaust.

I was immediately struck by his proposal, which he whispered to me out of earshot of the other delegates. When I asked for further clarification, he responded that a limitation on mourning was in strict accordance with Jewish law and custom. When a loved one has been lost, commemoration is essential but time-bound. Life goes on despite tragedy and, over time, life must be given priority. That death should not overwhelm life is a theme embodied in the traditional Jewish prayer over the dead, which never mentions death. In the case of a collective tragedy, remembrance also must be limited. Once the period of mourning is past, such a tragedy is commemorated in the religious calendar as part of the larger cycle of Jewish history.

About Auschwitz, the rabbi was clear: Let the elements of nature and time sweep the camp away. And let Jewish liturgy, memory and culture place the Holocaust in perspective. Do not force the remembrance or the forgetting of Auschwitz. Let it remain and, in time, become distant.

I recalled this incident as I taught a course on the Holocaust last spring and reread Emil Fackenheim's *To Mend the World*—all of which colored my reading of Peter Novick's much-anticipated book. Reading Fackenheim and Novick in succession is like encountering two boxers at opposite ends of the ring.

Fackenheim interprets the Holocaust as an event that interrupts and permanently alters world history. Its horror is impossible to bypass or transcend. Jewish identity

will forever be centered on this event. The only way to address the ontological rupture that the Holocaust represents is through remembering it and acting in its light.

More than Jewish history is at stake here, Fackenheim argues. Christian history and indeed world history has experienced this rupture as well. Mending can take place only through the support and solidarity of Jews and non-Jews for the empowerment of the Jewish people—especially through the formation and sustenance of the state of Israel. Anyone who disagrees with Fackenheim on this deepens the abyss that the Holocaust represents, and even diminishes the possibility of speaking about God in the post-Holocaust world. Fackenheim's overwhelming concern is that the Holocaust not be forgotten or evaded, twisted or trivialized. He stresses the urgency of Jewish empowerment and wishes to silence dissent, Jewish and non-Jewish, on the very issues that Novick finds most central to the debate.

Novick, an American-born Jew, analyzes the way the Holocaust has been appropriated by the heirs of the victims. He sees the representation of the Holocaust not as an ontological issue, but as a way of mobilizing ideas and politics on behalf of Jewish interests, among them the support of the state of Israel.

Because Fackenheim and Novick are on different terrain—philosophy and theology for Fackenheim, history for Novick—differences in their viewpoints are to be expected. Yet there is a fundamental symmetry in their approach. Each asks, "After Auschwitz, what does it mean to be Jewish?" Fackenheim's answer is stark: Support Israel and trust only in empowerment. Only then will the singular aspect of Jewish existence become clear. Trust only those who support Jewish empowerment and Israel.

Novick is concerned that the Jewishness to which he was born, or at least with which he identifies—a Jewishness that is both self-aware and seeks to be for others—has been eclipsed by Holocaust consciousness and a professional class that has the Holocaust as its *raison d'être*. His tracing of the rise of Holocaust consciousness conforms to this understanding. For many reasons, including the tendency to see World War II as a shared tragedy and the desire to assimilate into a forward-looking America, Jews after the war downplayed the idea that they had suffered in a special way. In the 1960s the Eichmann trial in Israel, Israel's lightning victory in the 1967 war, and the rise of identity politics in the U.S. prompted Jews to emphasize the particularity of Jewish suffering. A new set of Jewish institutions was formed to

promote this new sensibility, institutions that have helped establish Holocaust consciousness as central to Jewish identity and, in a surprising way, to American identity as well.

For Novick this development is suspect. He contends that Holocaust consciousness focuses deeply held feelings among Jews and gives Jewish leaders a way to win support on other issues. Holocaust consciousness is pragmatic rather than philosophical or theological. It reinforces Jewish identity at a time when that identity is waning; it aims to prevent an assimilation that threatens Jewish survival. Holocaust consciousness also demands uncritical support for an Israeli state that is hardly endangered and has become increasingly controversial. Novick is taken aback by Jewish leaders' attempt to impose on the diverse Jewish community a regimented sense of what it means to be Jewish.

While the community presents a united front to the non-Jewish world, internal Jewish politics are rife with dissenting opinions about Jewish identity. There are those who want to analyze the Holocaust historically and in context and also those who protest against Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. Instead of feeling increasingly isolated and threatened, many Jews feel accepted by the larger American community and seek to enjoy the fruits of American affluence unencumbered by a memory laden with political manipulations. In such a context, diversity and dissent within the community can be affirmed.

For Fackenheim the lessons of the Holocaust are clear and rise to the level of a commandment—his famous 614th commandment: One must never, through weakness or a false sense of security, let Hitler ultimately triumph. For Novick, even the lessons of the Holocaust—such as never to be silent in the face of injustice, or always to intervene to stop genocide—are less obvious. He notes that the very thinkers who fault those who did not speak or act against injustice during the Nazi era often fail to act against injustice today. Interventionist politics continues to be selective and tied to national and communal interest rather than to altruism and sacrifice. America decisively intervened against Iraq in the '90s, but took no action in Cambodia in the '70s or Rwanda in the '90s. Novick sees the million Jewish children killed in the Holocaust as a warning against silence in the face of catastrophe, but he is also aware that millions of children die of hunger each year, children whose deaths could be prevented.

The often-cited lessons that the non-Jewish world should learn from the Holocaust turn out to be lessons of realpolitik rather than lessons in a wider morality. Novick asks provocatively whether Holocaust consciousness has, by emphasizing the enormity and particularity of the Holocaust, diminished sensitivity to the suffering that can be addressed without an appeal to apocalyptic sensibilities. He concludes his book with a warning to his own community: "There is a sense in which Emil Fackenheim was right to say that for Jews to forget Hitler's victims would be to grant him a 'posthumous victory.' But it would be an even greater posthumous victory were we to tacitly endorse his definition of ourselves as despised pariahs by making the Holocaust the emblematic Jewish experience."

One ends Novick's book with a sense of gratitude that he has been willing to undertake this work and enter this arena. Though he is an established scholar at a venerable university, the emotional outbursts that have greeted his book cannot help but cause him pain. In some ways, the critical and acerbic tone of Novick's book typifies the struggle that has enveloped Jewish life during the past 50 years. Novick enters this struggle as a partisan, well equipped, to be sure, but no less a target.

Novick's analysis will leave many with a series of haunting and unresolved questions—questions that remain large ones for me, though I have spent my entire adult life pondering the meaning of the Holocaust and the future of the Jewish people. Is there a way to look at the Holocaust without being influenced by its subsequent institutionalization and manipulation? Can one think through the philosophical, theological and historical meaning of the Holocaust and retain both a fidelity to the dead and a critical spirit of inquiry and affirmation? Is it possible to speak of the Jewish dead as a bridge of solidarity to others who died during that tragic era and to those who suffer today—including and especially the Palestinian people?

Novick encourages us to let go of the memory of the Holocaust as an exclusive and all-defining aspect of Jewish existence. He also encourages a deeper probing of Jewish anger and finger-pointing. As individuals and as a people, can we be so sure that we would sacrifice our very lives—and our families' lives—to save others, as we so vehemently demand that Christians should have done in the Nazi period? Have we not stood silently by while others have been displaced and cleansed from vast areas of the land that is now Israel? If we expect others to have defended the rights of Jews in 20th-century Europe, do we now defend the Palestinians' right to share Jerusalem and to be fully integrated into Israel/Palestine? Novick calls for an

intelligent understanding of the Holocaust and for humility in our accusations. Could that humility, forged in suffering and complicity, lend a new vibrancy to Jewish witness?

Jews seem caught between the particularity of Fackenheim and the universality of Novick, between the religious vision of rupture and mending and the secular unmasking of ideology parading as morality. Christians are caught in the same terrain. They have attempted to unmask the ideology that allowed witness to Jesus to help lay the groundwork for coercion and mass murder. Now they are faced with Jewish leaders, especially in ecumenical dialogues, who replicate this masking, albeit on a smaller scale and over a shorter period of time. As many Christians, in light of the Holocaust, have critiqued and abandoned Constantinian Christianity, a Christianity aligned with the state, Jewish leaders have adopted a version of Constantinianism under the rubric of Holocaust consciousness. Though Novick nowhere uses this term, his book is a critical exploration of the rise of Constantinian Judaism in the latter half of the 20th century.

As part of the first generation born after the Holocaust, I have lived through this emerging Constantinianism. Jews have traveled amazingly far in little more than half a century, and the pace has exploded almost exponentially during the past two decades. Who would have thought at the end of World War II that Jewish empowerment would emerge as a global force? And who could have foreseen the alliances between Jews in America and Israel, or the consequences of those alliances for the moral fate of Jews and the physical fate of populations that interact with the Jewish world? The futures charted by Fackenheim and Novick both seem, in different ways, bleak. This perhaps is the ultimate irony of our post-Holocaust journey. In a time of security and affluence we have in some significant ways lost our moral compass.

There is still time to right our course. Welcoming Palestinians to full partnership in Israel/Palestine and sharing Jerusalem as the joint capital of this evolving state could change the dynamic of Holocaust consciousness. Building bridges of solidarity can attract Jews and non-Jews alike to a religious and secular path that has given so much to the world. A renewed Judaism and Jewishness, one that is critical of its life in the world and that places mourning in its proper perspective, can become a home again for many Jews who have left or been forcibly exiled from the Jewish community by its embrace of Constantinianism. Christians can then resume their reckoning with their history of anti-Jewishness and of complicity in the suffering of

others, accompanied by Jewish partners who are similarly self-critical. The ecumenical dialogue which has been blighted by denial and evasion may blossom once again, becoming a common witness to human possibility and a joint exploration of humanity's relationship with God.

Perhaps Novick's secular language, couched almost as a plea, points to a deep religious need among Jews—the need to end the era in which Auschwitz defines Jewish life. Ending this era could have many consequences, not the least of them the possibility of an inner emptiness, even the loss of the viability of Jewish belief and life. As I walked the grounds of Auschwitz and listened to the rabbi who called for the end of Holocaust consciousness, I felt a void. The suffering at Auschwitz has left an emptiness that can only be uncovered and explored with a brutal honesty and with a willingness to risk the consequences of removing the mask of empowerment and bravado. Novick tells us that Holocaust consciousness is part of this mask, and he points the way beyond it. But he does not define our destination.

That destination cannot be either Israel or America, two nation-states with their own agendas and self-interests. Yet, for the majority of Jews, the destination cannot be found outside of these nation-states either, since we cannot live outside of history. Both the Holocaust and the illusory promises of Israel and America are part of our history. We cannot find our way alone, but must do so with others who realize that the promises they have been handed are equally illusory.