

Remembering Richard L. Rubenstein, the radical theologian

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum

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By Michael Berenbaum, May 16, 2021

The 1966 publication of the first edition of “After Auschwitz” assured Richard L. Rubenstein’s place in Jewish theology.

Written 21 years after the liberation of the camps and 18 years after Israel’s creation, the issues raised in “After Auschwitz” were so remarkably simple, his points so basic, that they could not be ignored.

Rubenstein, who died in Bridgeport, Connecticut on May 16 at age 97, argued that Jewish theology would have to respond to the twin revolutions of modern Jewish history: The Holocaust and the rise of the state of Israel. These two events had transformed the Jewish people demographically, physically, geographically, and psychologically.

To the post-World War II generation, the synagogue was an acceptable way for post-immigrant professional Jews to remain Jews within America, for them to remain acceptable to their neighbors, and still congregate and socialize among themselves.

Yet Rubenstein had argued that the teachings of the Synagogue, the God of history, God’s omnipotence and omniscience were simply not credible in a post-Holocaust world. The liberal synagogue had an important function to play, just not the one it was preaching.

He argued that after Auschwitz the belief in a redeeming God who is active in history and who will redeem mankind from its vicissitudes is no longer possible. Belief in such a God and an allegiance to the rabbinic theodicy that attempted to justify Him would imply that Hitler was part of a divine plan and that Israel was being punished for her sins.

“The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept,” he wrote.

While few theologians agreed with his radical conclusions, rejecting the God of history, all addressed them, denouncing him, criticizing him, celebrating him, engaging him, respecting

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him. The works of Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Irving Greenberg and Eliezer Schweid were inconceivable without Rubenstein. So too, Abraham Joshua Heschel's response to the Holocaust and Eugene Borowitz, to write only of his age peers.

The reception in academic and Christian theological circles that "After Auschwitz" received virtually guaranteed that the Jewish community would have to grapple with Rubenstein's challenge. Rubenstein was featured in Time magazine and other prestigious general journals. He even had an interview in Playboy, an odd forum for a theologian, even more unusual for a rabbi, especially one who had taught the conservative virtues of marriage and monogamy.

Yet unlike his Christian counterparts Rubenstein could not celebrate the "functional death of God." If God is dead, then everything is permissible, everything including Auschwitz, which he regarded as a unique and catastrophic manifestation of modernity.

The late Jacob Neusner, a man who also faced controversy, called Rubenstein's work "searching and courageous," saying, "The abuse to which he has been subjected seems to me the highest possible tribute on the part of his enemies to the compelling importance of his contribution."

Rubenstein was reared in an assimilated home with only the most marginal of Jewish affiliation. His mother, a college graduate in the 1920's, named her son Richard Lowell and never imagined that he would turn toward the rabbinate. His family's assimilation was so complete that Rubenstein was not to have a bar mitzvah.

Rubenstein turned toward the Reform movement with its progressive sense of modernity and rationality precisely as the world was exploding. He turned toward Judaism in response to his own innate religiosity; he had once sought to become a Unitarian minister but was told he would have to change his name and would not permit himself that self-falsification.

He met his first wife Ellen Vanderwin in Cincinnati. She had escaped from the Netherlands with her family just as the German invaded. Her father Max left everything behind, survival was all important. It was a lesson Rubenstein conveyed to his family and his students. The mother of his four children, the marriage ended in divorce in the 1960s.

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He turned toward tradition in response to the Holocaust in a seemingly deliberate, perhaps desperate attempt to counteract the destruction of the Jewish people in Europe.

So he moved with Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1945 from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to the conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in New York; and then while at the Seminary he studied at the Orthodox Yeshiva Chaim Berlin. A quarter century later, he was to recall with reverence his Orthodox experience, which he regarded as an authentic path of integrity for the men he met; not so for him as the outsider.

His depiction of the Seminary faculty, in his memoir “Power Struggle” was biting, often satirical. He found his teachers conflicted men who bridged the world of the Yeshiva and the Academy only with difficulty and whose own alienation was alienating.

Rubenstein’s quest for a Jewish authenticity, denied him as a natural part of his own upbringing, led him toward greater observance as if by more intense religious praxis he could recapture his roots and feel at home in the tradition of his ancestors, which had been rejected by his parents. One can also speculate that Rubenstein’s contribution to Jewish thought is directly related to his status as outsider, precisely in the way that Theodore Herzl’s estrangement from Judaism allowed him to launch a political movement that directly reflected his outsider feelings in Vienna and Paris.

From the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rubenstein went into the pulpit rabbinate in Massachusetts, where two other developments were to shape his personal and professional future: He studied at Harvard for a Ph.D., while serving as its Associate Hillel director, for a Ph.D. and he undertook psychoanalysis.

These experiences proved decisive. Both were essential to Rubenstein’s theological writings. A convert to psychoanalysis, Rubenstein’s early work was an attempt to understand Judaism from the perspective of psychoanalysis, to see how and why Judaism functioned — or was dysfunctional — and the hold that it had on its followers.

His thesis at Harvard, which was later published as “The Religious Imagination,” probed the

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psychoanalytic meaning of Midrash, rabbinic legends and stories, and thus got at the latent issues in Jewish theology, in the Jewish experience. His later work on Paul also dealt with the origins of Rabbinic Judaism. He argued that Saul who was to become Paul was a Jewish religious rebel, who could not find in the Law a path to salvation.

From 1958-1970 he was the Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and chaplain to the Jewish students at the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie-Mellon University and Duquesne University. After these jobs, Rubenstein remained in academic positions.

I was privileged to study with him for my doctorate, As I began my studies, it was only one of two places where a doctorate in the Holocaust and religious thought could be pursued and I found in Rubenstein a wonderful, teacher and mentor. He has remained a life-long friend.

Upon retirement at the age 70, Rubenstein assumed the presidency of the University of Bridgeport, in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1995. He stepped down in 1999 and became the director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, as well as remaining a faculty member. He brought the University much needed credibility after its near bankruptcy and its rescue by Rev. Moon.

He wrote "Jihad and Genocide" in 2011 and was revising his autobiography "Power Struggle" to reflect his happy marriage of 46 years of Betty Rogers Rubenstein who died in 2013, and his many achievements. With age, his anger and his rebellion had mellowed him, once he internalized the success he achieved.

His influence was widespread and often unexpected. William Styron credited his work with transforming Sophie's Choice.

"It was his original perception of the world of the camps as being part of an historical continuum of slavery that allowed me to view the story of Sophie, and her ordeal at Auschwitz, through a necessary prism, one which I believe gave my work greater verisimilitude and strength," Styron wrote.

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Rubenstein was the father of four children, Aaron and Nathan, who predeceased him and Hannah Rubenstein of Simsbury, Connecticut and Jeremy Rubenstein of Los Angeles, CA. He was the step-father of three children John H, Altschuler of Sag Harbor, New York, Jean Reed of Knowesville, NB, Canada and Liora Alschuler of East Thetford, Vt. He was the grandfather of five. He will be buried at Beth El Cemetery in Fairfield, a congregation whose services he attended quite regularly, perhaps to the surprise of many of his critics, by the Rabbi Marcelo Kormis whom he deeply respected.