

**EMIL LUDWIG FACKENHEIM 1916-2003:  
Philosopher, Professor, Rabbi, Friend  
– And survivor of Sachsenhausen  
by Victor Shepherd**

**I:** As soon as the gnome-like professor entered the lecture hall, the fourth-year philosophy class in 1965 fell silent. Other students had sat under his teaching in previous years. I had not. Plainly he was deemed formidable. At the same time he struck me as scrawny, wasted in some respects, but above all, haunted. The veneration that the class afforded him reflected the reputation he had gained in two decades: he was a luminary in the University of Toronto's department of philosophy, a department renowned the world over, slightly smaller only than Oxford's.

The course was devoted chiefly to the study of Hegel, a German Idealist over whom Emil Fackenheim had laboured for 20 years, the outcome of which would soon be his monumental *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*. (This book inscribed his name in the international "Who's Who" of the most erudite philosophers.) While the course focussed on Hegel, it also investigated thinkers in the German tradition who had preceded him, such as Fichte and Schelling, as well as post-Hegel or "left-wing" Hegelians such as Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche. It concluded with a brief examination of Heidegger and Sartre. Quickly I perceived that philosophy would be done in this course with unparalleled rigour, intensity and profundity.

In class, Fackenheim discussed philosophy only; theology was never mentioned, even though everyone was aware of his reputation as a Jewish thinker. Throughout the entire two-semester course, no theological pronouncement was heard, with one exception. Virtually as an aside, one day, Fackenheim amplified a philosophical point he deemed crucial by contrasting it almost casually with this: "*The characteristic of the living God is that God speaks.*" The comment embedded itself in me like shrapnel, and lurks in my psyche, where

it reminds me constantly that because the Lord God speaks *characteristically*, any deity that has to be concluded, or inferred, or deduced is, according to the logic of the Hebrew Bible, *ipso facto* an idol.

**II:** Months later, I tentatively called on Fackenheim in his office in order to discuss the essay I was to write in the course. There he appeared much less intimidating. With his feet on his desk, his chair tipped back and his glasses perched on his forehead, he scabbled in his shirt pocket for one of the cigars of assorted shapes and colours, fired it up and rendered the few feet between us near-opaque. We had talked about my essay for only a few minutes (he approved the topic) when he declaimed with unmistakable warmth yet also with an authoritative emphasis that closed the door on further philosophical conversation, “Shepherd, enough about philosophy. Let’s talk about *GOD*.” (Never having spoken with him before, I had no idea how he had learned of my interest in theology.) The instant he said “God”, the room filled with the *Shekinah*, the perceptible glory of the “Presence”. By now, his cigar smoke was nothing less than incense, akin to the incense in the temple that had engulfed Isaiah of old. And just as Isaiah was never going to forget the moment of divine visitation, I would never forget the man in front of me whose seemingly irreverent posture was no longer noticed on account of his transparency to the Holy One of Israel.

“Shepherd,” Fackenheim continued after another noxious exhalation, “modernity thinks God to be vague, abstract, ethereal, ‘iffy’. God, however, is concrete, solid, dense with a density beyond our imagining. There is nothing ‘iffy’ about God; but there is a great deal that is ‘iffy’ about you and me.” Dumbfounded at the spiritual assault (albeit benign) from a world-class philosopher, I was still reeling when he launched the next salvo. “Shepherd, in view of the horrific depredations of our century – crowned by the *Shoah* – there are huge question marks above humankind. But concerning God there is no question whatever. Never forget,” he

concluded, “we do not demythologize God; God demythologizes us as God exposes the groundless myths by which we are enthralled.” I staggered out of his office, the topic of my philosophy essay all but lost in the aura without, and the awe within, that have never evaporated and that continue to keep Fackenheim’s name fragrant.

**III:** Fackenheim was born in Halle, midway between Wittenberg and Berlin. Halle was the birthplace of Handel, immortalized by his oratorio, *The Messiah*. More significantly for the life and work of Fackenheim, Halle was also the birthplace of Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler’s assistant. (Himmler was head of the dreaded SS, the branch of the Nazi military machine charged with implementing Nazi ideology. The death camps were administered and policed by the SS.) When Czech partisans assassinated Heydrich, Hitler retaliated by liquidating every inhabitant of their town, then bulldozing and burying every building in sight, finally planting grass on the tree-less, human-less landscape, reminding everyone that the Fuehrer could not only kill but also blot out of living memory, leaving no trace that any human being had lived or worked or built in that place.

Such an incident was all the more jarring inasmuch as Germany had been “Mecca” for post-Enlightenment Jewry. Admittedly, the town church in Wittenberg (where Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther’s friend from Greifswald, preached every week), only a few kilometres away from Halle, still had on its outer wall a frieze depicting a sow nursing her piglets while a Jew sat at the pig’s rump with his head in its anus (one of the offensive mediaeval myths maintained that Jews ate pig excrement). The church had been erected in 1120. Fortunately, much had happened since then. In 1743 the fourteen-year-old Moses Mendelssohn had walked into Berlin through the *Rosenthaler Tor* – the sole gate, among the city’s several, that admitted cattle and Jews. In two decades, Mendelssohn had become a literary colossus, to be succeeded by German Jewish dramatists like Schiller and poets like Heine. The ghetto had

disappeared in Germany before it did anywhere else in Europe. When Fackenheim's grandfather died, the entire town – thousands of people – turned out to honour the memory of the local rabbi.

All the more shocking, therefore, was the accession of Hitler in 1933, an Austrian interloper who could not even claim to be German. The gains for which German Jews had struggled for 190 years were rescinded in a heartbeat. In the same year, Fackenheim's high school teacher of Greek, at grave personal risk, invited Fackenheim to his home. He gave the 17-year-old a signed copy of Martin Buber's *Kingship of God*, published one year earlier, and charged the adolescent: "If you don't leave now, I shall never forgive you, for your help will be needed in the reconstruction of Germany." Fackenheim thanked the man for the book even as he knew he had no interest in the reconstruction of the nation that had betrayed its Enlightenment heritage and now tormented his people.

Upon leaving high school, Fackenheim enrolled in the Academy for the Scholarly Study of Judaism. Subsequently he studied at Halle's Martin Luther University, the last Jewish student permitted to enrol. *Kristallnacht* cut short his studies. On November 9, 1938, synagogues, together with Jewish-owned stores and factories, were trashed and torched throughout Germany. The same night, Fackenheim was arrested and incarcerated in Sachsenhausen. It was not an extermination camp; Hitler had not yet implemented the "Final Solution". It was, however, a forced labour camp where inmates were worked to death. Fackenheim found friends in the camp, including Ernst Tillich, a Lutheran pastor and nephew of the renowned Paul Tillich. (The latter had been expelled from Germany and was now teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York.) Ernst, non-Jewish, had been arrested and imprisoned for his opposition to Naziism. By Christmas Eve, seven weeks later, he was manifestly depressed. Fackenheim asked him the reason, and Tillich replied, "Today is Christmas Eve. It's the biggest celebration in the Lutheran Church calendar. All day long I have been thinking of what I would preach to my congregation – if I had one. But I don't have one, and therefore I have no one to hear my sermon." "I can fix that," Fackenheim rejoined, and promptly

rounded up all the rabbinical students in the camp. “Whatever it is you would say to a Lutheran congregation on Christmas Eve,” he continued, “you tell us, in Sachsenhausen, concerning the One whose mercy endures forever.”

Several months later, Fackenheim was released. Hitler thought it less bothersome simply to have Jews out of Germany. While awaiting a country that would receive him (several had declined), Fackenheim was ordained rabbi in an underground seminary in Berlin. “It was,” he said years later with a twinkle in his eye, “like sitting on a powder keg while smoking a cigar.” Eventually Britain allowed him entry and he settled in Aberdeen. He immersed himself in philosophical studies, financing his academic work by preparing for Bar and Bat Mitzvah the children of the two-dozen Jewish families in the Reform synagogue. It was an auspicious undertaking, for subsequently he would teach the confirmation class at Toronto’s Holy Blossom Synagogue for 40 years.

In September, 1939, Britain, in response to Germany’s invasion of Poland, declared war. Fackenheim, ironically, was now an “enemy alien”. Next day, a police officer knocked at his door and informed him that he was to be deported. He placed a few personal effects in his suitcase, saving room for his precious books — tomes on Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, medieval philosophy (Christian, Jewish and Islamic), plus his Arabic dictionary – since he planned to write a thesis on Medieval Arabic philosophy.

Fackenheim landed in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Among the scores of German Jewish refugees there, besides himself there were two who would become widely known in Canada. One was Gregory Baum, a physicist who eventually embraced Roman Catholicism, who was ordained to the priesthood (and laicized decades later), and who taught at McGill University and the University of Toronto; Baum was awarded the Order of Canada in 1990. The other was Eric Koch, who liked to say he was deported to Canada because the British could not distinguish between a German refugee and a Nazi spy. He moved quickly to the highest echelons of CBC radio programming.

Sherbrooke's denizens did not know how to view the new arrivals. On the one hand they were Germans, and therefore were citizens of the nation with which Canada was at war. On the other hand, they were refugees from Hitler, the tyrant Canada was bent on defeating. A Canadian military officer lined up the inmates and barked, "Even if you are Jews you still have to wash every day." Next the detainees were told "There is to be no monkey business." Fackenheim, possessing high school English, knew what a monkey was and what business was; he had no grasp, however, of "monkey business". Finally, the inmates were told, "You play ball with us, and we play ball with you." "Play ball" was no less mystifying.

The experience of being a refugee from Hitler, yet having to live behind barbed wire in a compound guarded by machine-gun posts, was a terrible experience. Camp mates elected Fackenheim to speak to military officialdom about it all, hoping that a rabbi would prove least offensive and be able to gain a favourable hearing. Fackenheim relayed his friends' request to "Major Balls" (as they now spoke of the officer.) It availed nothing. Barbed wire and machine guns would remain daily reminders of the ambiguity of the refugees' situation and of the ambivalence with which the townspeople viewed them.

In December, 1941, Fackenheim was released. He boarded a train in Montreal, and by early afternoon of the same day was standing in the office of the University of Toronto's philosophy department chairperson, apologizing for the fact that he had only the rabbinic training his exposure in the Academy had given him. The interviewer quizzed him briefly, saw that while he was self-taught he was remarkably erudite, and brilliant. Without any remedial work being prescribed he was admitted to the PhD programme, and the residence requirement was cut in half. Fackenheim set to work right away, enrolling simultaneously in the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (St. Michael's College). By 1945 he had been awarded a doctorate, his thesis *Substance and Perseity in Mediaeval Arabic Philosophy with Introductory Chapters on Aristotle, Plotinus and Proclus*.

Meanwhile, he had become rabbi at Temple Anshe Shalom, a Reform congregation in Hamilton. He appeared to be more serious than the congregants; they and he were coming from different perspectives and were advancing different agendas for congregational life. He insisted on bringing to bear on the congregation the Word of the One who loomed before them and who was every bit as dense as the “thick darkness” that Moses knew and of which the Bible spoke repeatedly. He exuded the conviction that God’s presence was palpable. He exposed them to the Jewish theological giants who had been instrumental in his own spiritual formation: Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Leo Baeck. So, far from quieting the grumbling of the disgruntled, everything he was about appeared to magnify it. In light of a “discerning of spirits” that occurred in 1948, the congregation dismissed him. Immediately, Toronto’s department of philosophy hired him. His career as iconic philosopher and professor had been launched.

Preoccupied with the history of metaphysics, the philosophy department had long insisted that there be at least one professor possessing expertise in the work of each major thinker. No one had yet been found for German Idealism in general and Hegel in particular. Fackenheim volunteered, thinking it would be a way of rendering his teaching position secure.

He startled people from the start. Always a Jewish theologian, his first published work was an article on Kierkegaard, a Christian philosopher. He had already established his reputation concerning medieval philosophy. Soon he was publishing material and supervising doctoral students in Avicenna, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Husserl, Dilthey, Buber, Heidegger, Sartre and Arendt.

While his reputation swelled largely because of his work in the German Idealist tradition, his earlier work in medieval thought gave him a versatility that the university treasured. Throughout his working life, he supervised graduate students in medieval Jewish philosophy (Isaac Israeli, Judah Halevi, Abraham Ibn Daud, and

of course Moses Maimonides.) No less time was given to medieval Arabic philosophers (Al Kindi, Al Farabi, Avicenna, Avenpace, and Averroes.)

In 1955, Fackenheim married a former student. Rose was a Christian and a member of Bathurst Street United Church, Toronto. (The date is important, because it is still whispered that he was fired from the Hamilton synagogue on account of his having married a non-Jew. This is a myth that should be exposed and allowed to perish.) Together they had four children. The eldest, Michael, was born brain-damaged and now lives in the Ontario Provincial Hospital in Orillia. The youngest, Yossie, was born on Yom Kippur, when Emil was 63 and Rose 45. With yet another twinkle in his eye Fackenheim liked to say, "A male child born on Yom Kippur? According to Jewish legend, he could be the Messiah."

The Fackenheims moved to Israel in 1986. Rose embraced Judaism. The children were confirmed in their Yiddishkeit by an orthodox rabbi. When she was 55 Rose was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and died seven years later.

Fackenheim died September 19, 2003. I was at my computer when a colleague relayed to me the notice from the *Jerusalem Post*. I mourned the loss of someone whose stamp is on me everywhere, someone who exemplified the radical detachment required of scholarship and the radical commitment required of biblical faith. In the next instant I anticipated my eschatological reunion with the Abrahamic figure who convinced me 45 years ago that while there is much that is dubious about me and others, there is nothing that is dubious about the One whose glory leaves us prostrate, whose voice can crack rocks, and whose faithfulness to the people of God is never attenuated.

**IV:** Fackenheim was the acclaimed luminary in a philosophy department that was stellar even apart from him. The range of his philosophical competence was vast, as has been noted already. Had Hitler not arrived on the scene, he said, he would have been a professor of ancient philosophy in a German university. As it was,

his expertise included ancient, medieval and modern philosophy (especially German Idealism), as well as existentialism. Analytical philosophy, he maintained, was something would-be philosophers had to “have under their belts”. In other words, those who wanted credibility with the philosophically sophisticated had to have mastered it. At the same time, he was convinced that analytical philosophy could never be more than a tool in the service of a philosophical quest that was more substantive, more profound and, above all, life-altering. The question Fackenheim constantly posed, implicitly where not explicitly, at the conclusion of much philosophising, was simple yet searching: “What *difference* is it going to make?”

Yet his greatest contribution, according to many, was not simply the exposition, amplification and criticism of major thinkers in the history of metaphysics. Rather it was his juxtaposing of the logic of philosophy and the logic characteristic of Hebrew thought. In this endeavour, his *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* is priceless. The chapter headings indicate accurately what is going to be attempted – as reading the book confirms that faith in God, and the understanding inherent in faith, are vindicated. The first chapter, “Elijah and the Empiricists: The Possibility of Divine Presence” is followed by “Abraham and the Kantians: Moral Duties and Divine Commandments” and “Moses and the Hegelians: Jewish Existence in the Modern World”. In each case he exposes the strengths of a philosophical school, comments critically on its deficiencies, and non-triumphalistically establishes biblical conviction concerning truth – better, concerning reality, the reality of the living God, together with reality’s claim upon humankind. In every case, the God who is self-revealed at Sinai, and who is continually self-bestowed through prophet and seer; the God who looms over and leans upon “the apple of his eye”, seeming to burden them unendurably yet also sustaining them when they are abandoned in world-occurrence; *this* God is re-presented to the reader as Fackenheim draws on the vast treasury of Midrash to highlight the dialectical nature of Jewish thought.

A similar approach is found in the book that many regard as his greatest, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*. Once again, the chapter titles reflect the manner in which he exposes the most erudite philosophy to the most impassioned Jewish faith: “The Shibboleth of Revelation: From Spinoza beyond Hegel” or “Historicity, Rupture and *Tikkun Olam* (‘Mending the World’): From Rosenzweig beyond Heidegger.”

Fackenheim knew that argument is persuasive only if the parties to the discussion stand on the same ground, admit the same presuppositions, share the same universe of discourse. Where they do not, argument is unavailing; what is operative in such a situation is witness. His own undisguised testimony appears throughout his writings, yet seems to shine with unusual radiance in the concluding lines of his “Elijah and the Empiricists”. Having exposed the shallowness of empiricism as a philosophy (i.e., the illegitimate move from science to scientism), and having exposed the indefensibility of its principal exponent, A.J. Ayer, and his *Language, Truth and Logic*, Fackenheim declares:

The believer, all along aware of subjectivist reductionism, embraces that position not when he ceases to hear but when he turns away from listening. The unbeliever, too, may turn....For the author of *Language, Truth and Logic* to accept the voice heard at Sinai – or his urge to worship in the Messianic age – he would have to be converted. But conversion is both a turning and a being turned. (*Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, p. 29)

His book *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy* anticipates a major shift in Fackenheim’s orientation. The chapter on Leo Strauss relates a conversation he had with Strauss in New York, when Strauss had remarked, “We all know it is our duty to survive as Jews. Jewish philosophy will tell us why.” (p.105)

The shift occurred in 1967. Egypt’s Abdul Nasser was threatening the destruction of the state of Israel and the annihilation of every living Jew. The Holocaust was on the point of being re-enacted. The catastrophe was averted only as the Israeli air force devastated Egypt’s before the latter’s planes could take off. Neither a Zionist nor an anti-Zionist up to this point, Fackenheim announced

that someone else could investigate the subtleties of philosophy for their own sake; from now on he would give his attention to the study of the Holocaust and what it, as a *novum*, portended for Jewish thought, faith and life. In a word, while the Holocaust as radical evil cannot be understood (one aspect of radical evil's evilness is its sheer incomprehensibility), while it is blasphemous to speak of "meaning" with respect to the Holocaust, it is imperative that there be a *response*. The response is multi-faceted; and one facet, the maturer Fackenheim came to say, was the survival not only of the Jewish people but of the Jewish state. Not surprisingly he insisted, "Quite indefensible to me is the view that Judaism would be unaffected if the state of Israel were destroyed." (*What Is Judaism? An Interpretation For The Present Age*, p.10)

While no Jew regards the *Shoah* ("catastrophe") as insignificant or anything other than a challenge to faith, Fackenheim went farther. In his *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*, he distinguished between "root" events/experiences and "epoch-making" events/experiences. The latter were the Jewish response to occurrences that tested the faith; e.g., the destruction of the first Temple, the Maccabean Revolt, the destruction of the second Temple, the expulsion from Spain. Root events, on the other hand, are historical occurrences in which the faith originated; e.g., the deliverance at the Red Sea and the commanding presence at Sinai. Root experiences are normative for the formation and continuation of Jewish faith while epoch-making experiences can only test the faith so formed and normed.

Undeniably the Holocaust is an epoch-making experience. Fackenheim, however, frequently appeared to lean toward regarding it a root experience. As soon as he "leaned", the outcry reminded him that he had stepped outside normative Judaism. And of course if the Holocaust was a root experience, then it had to be revelatory. This notion, needless to say, was both absurd and offensive: absurd in that the content of revelation is a presence that guarantees a future, when the Holocaust appeared to attest an absence (a radical God-forsakenness that found Buber speaking of an "eclipse of God") that guaranteed non-existence; offensive not least because

the Nazis would then be said to be doing God's work. Yet if it was merely epoch-making, had it been denied that the Jewish people were singled out at Auschwitz (albeit for destruction) *no less* than they were singled out at Sinai (albeit for life)? Fackenheim refused to move away from his conviction, regardless of the disagreement he mobilized, that the Holocaust was unprecedented not only in Jewish history but in human history. (In fact, he maintained that not only was the Holocaust the greatest disaster to befall the Jewish people; it was – albeit for a different reason – the greatest disaster to befall the church.) For this reason he agonized over the reputation of the Jewish community in Lublin, Poland, for of them it was said that with their dying breath they gave the Torah back to God.

In light of the foregoing, Fackenheim maintained that while Jewish tradition has always maintained that 613 commandments were given to Moses at Sinai (this includes the oral Torah), there has latterly been added the 614th: Jews are forbidden to deliver to Hitler the conquest that he coveted but was denied. For this reason Fackenheim asserted,

Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man (*sic*) and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. A secularist Jew cannot make himself believe by a mere act of will, nor can he be commanded to do so. . . . And a religious Jew who has stayed with his God may be forced into new, possibly revolutionary relationships with Him. One possibility, however, is wholly unthinkable. A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work. (*German Philosophy and Jewish Thought*, p. 28)

Two days after *Kristallnacht*, one of the approximately twenty Jewish men in a jail cell meant for six railed at the 22-year old rabbinical student, "You tell us what Judaism has to say to us now." According to his own report, Fackenheim said nothing.

Ever since then, he has said much. He has even attempted to answer the question he declined to answer in the jail cell through several different vehicles directed towards differed readerships. His *What is Judaism? An Interpretation for the Present Age* is his love-letter to non-philosophers, *amcha*, ordinary Jewish folk. Ordinary people (so-called) were always dear to him. It was for them that he delighted in expounding the Midrash concerning the giving of the Torah at Sinai. There it was said that when the Israelites heard God say “I” (the first word of the Decalogue) their souls left them, as it says, “If we hear the Voice anymore...we shall die.” (Deut. 5:22) Yet Rabbi Shim’on bar Yochai taught, “The Torah which God gave to Israel restored their souls to them,” as it says (in Psalm 19), “The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul.” (p. 135)

### **Epilogue:**

In 1985, The United Church of Canada commissioned me to write the denomination’s annual Lenten devotional book. Since then, the second and third editions of *Ponder and Pray* have appeared. The dedication of the current (third) edition reads

In gratitude for  
Emil L. Fackenheim  
philosopher, professor, rabbi, friend  
-and survivor of Sachsenhausen-  
from whom I learned,  
“Prayer is the quintessential human act.”

In him I found intellectual brilliance combined with resilient faith  
in the Holy One of Israel.

My debt to him is unpayable.