

From Theology to Morality: Post-Auschwitz Tikkun Olam in the Stories of Serge Liberman*

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Serge Liberman, the Australian writer and physician, bears witness to the Holocaust from the vantage point of "the child of survivors of war-battered sorely-depleted driftwood generation" (Liberman 1986:11). Born in Russia in 1942, he arrived in Australia aged eight. A knowledgeable but non-observant Jew, Liberman is active in the cultural and intellectual life of the Australian Jewish community, having served as editor of the *Melbourne Chronicle*, literary editor of the *Australian Jewish News*, and compiler of *A Bibliography of Australian Judaica*. Liberman has written four collections of short stories: *On Firmer Shores* (1981), *A Universe of Clowns* (1983), *The Life that I Have Led* (1986) and *The Battered and the Redeemed* (1990). He is a three-time recipient of the Alan Marshall Award and has also won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award. His writings incorporate many identities: Jewish, Australian, migrant, son of Holocaust refugees, doctor and citizen. Although personally resistant to being categorized as solely a writer on the Holocaust,¹ much of his work is concerned with the *Shoah's* indelible imprint on its survivors and their offspring exemplifying a type of second generation witness literature about the Holocaust.²

Liberman's short stories are subtle explorations of the issues of post-Auschwitz Jewish identity, the credibility of classical theological claims, and the role of the second generation in seeking its own response to Auschwitz in a multicultural Australian society.

Unable to bear the dissonance between classical theological claims of an interventionist and omnipotent deity and the catastrophe of the Holocaust, Liberman's survivors seek to formulate an appropriate legacy to bestow on their offspring, and, through them, on future generations. His survivors model a type of *tikkun olam*—mending or repair of the world. This mending simultaneously recasts traditional notions of faith at the same time that it attests that Jewish continuity requires both bearing witness and concern for human compassion. Liberman's characters embrace a post-Auschwitz Judaism which rejects the traditional notion of deity yet emphasizes a neo-Hasidic approach in focusing on the Buberian notion of I-Thou relationships which stress the importance of morality and memory after Auschwitz.

In what follows I discuss the concept of post-*Shoah tikkun olam* as it relates to writings by second generation authors collectively. In particular, I trace three of its expressions in Liberman's short stories. Concern for family, Jewish-Christian relations, and emphasis on bearing witness are Liberman's contemporary expressions of *tikkun*. I conclude by reflecting on Liberman's narratives as affirmations of second generation Jewish identity based on grappling with the true meaning of post-Auschwitz faith.

Post-Auschwitz *Tikkun Olam*

Tikkun olam is a phrase of Talmudic origin where, Eugene Borowitz writes, it refers to "something like good social policy" (Borowitz 1991:50). In the *Aleinu* prayer, recited daily, the concept carries utopian overtones: a time "when the world shall be perfected under the reign of the Almighty" (*l'takeen olam b'malkut Shaddai*). At the other end of the continuum, the sixteenth century kabbalah of Isaac Luria assigned humans the decisive role in repairing the world. Man's mystical task is to

eliminate evil and end Jewish exile by performing all deeds with the proper *kavvanah* (intention), i.e. the reunification of God and the *Shekinah*. Consequently, for the Lurianic kabbalah, Jews were responsible for the redemption of the world.

Post-Auschwitz expressions of world-mending are seen most powerfully in the writings of Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, Emil Fackenheim, and Elie Wiesel. I have discussed elsewhere both Greenberg's notion of "voluntary covenant" and Wiesel's "additional covenant" as examples of mending the world through bearing witness while embracing a view of Jewish continuity that acknowledges both the ontic wounding of Judaism during the Holocaust, and the increased measure of human covenantal responsibility after Auschwitz.³ Briefly by way of summary, Greenberg's is a "practical theology" which emphasizes the futility of maintaining pre-Holocaust distinctions between the sacred and the profane. The voluntary covenant is expressed through behavior rather than explicit theological formulations.

Wiesel for his part contends that the covenant was broken during the Holocaust. Reflecting his own immersion in Jewish mystical sources, Wiesel attests that God, no less than humanity, requires salvation. Further, this diminished deity exists only as long as the Jewish people continue to bear witness. Wiesel's additional covenant focuses on the relationship between Israel and its memories of pain and death, God and meaning (Berenbaum 1976:127). For both Greenberg and Wiesel, post-Auschwitz theological assertions are only credible to the extent that they reflect the altered state of the covenantal partners; God is increasingly hidden or unable to respond while humanity assumes increasing responsibility for maintaining the moral universe. Post-Holocaust *tikkun* means bearing witness to the continuity of Jewish identity even while acknowledging this shifting balance of moral-theological power. Indeed, this shift informs the meaning of *tikkun*, making a human being—in Greenberg's phrase—a "partner in creation" (Greenberg 1988:161). If God is enfeebled after Auschwitz, the human partner must assume even greater covenantal responsibility.

Emil Fackenheim offers a systematic investigation of the post-Auschwitz *tikkun olam*, suggesting that it forms the foundation of future Jewish thought.⁴ His philosophical analysis of the *Shoah* leads inexorably to the conclusion that the event has caused a rupture in Jewish thought, in the world, and in Jewish-Christian relations. Consequently, all post-Auschwitz attempts at *tikkun* are intended to help mend or repair the rupture. Fackenheim specifically relates contemporary efforts at achieving *tikkun* to acts of resistance, both Jewish and Christian, during the Holocaust. For example, the Buchenwald Hasidim who bought teffilin instead of bread acted in a manner which demonstrated the possibility of moral action in the face of evil (Fackenheim 1982:218-219). In fact, after reviewing the historical record, Fackenheim discerns at least four types of mending. In addition to the Buchenwald Hasidim, he cites the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters whose actions represent "a unique affirmation...of Jewish self-respect" (Fackenheim 1982:222). On the Christian side, Fackenheim discusses the *tikkun* of the Idea of man and the *tikkun* of the Christian word. The first example was displayed by the philosopher Kurt Huber, and the second by Domprobst Bernhard Lichtenberg, both of whom were martyred for their defence of Jews and their resistance to Nazism (Fackenheim 1982:289-291, 307)). Fackenheim also distinguishes what he terms the *tikkun* of "ordinary decency" by which he refers to the life-saving acts of the precious few righteous gentiles (Fackenheim 1982:307). These various acts of mending which occurred amidst the depths of the kingdom of night are exemplary. "A *tikkun* here and now," writes Fackenheim, "is mandatory for a *tikkun*, then and there, was actual" (Fackenheim 1982:300).

Second Generation Writings as *Tikkun Olam*

Implicitly extending Fackenheim's usage, second generation literary responses to the *Shoah* comprise a literature of testimony whereby "witnesses of the witnesses," to use Ellen Fine's felicitous term, reflect on the meaning of their parents' continued survival, the content of their own Jewish identity, and the lessons of the Holocaust for Jews and Christians (Fine, 1982:9). Yet, second generation authors bear a heavy

responsibility. They must, attests Fine, “imagine an event they have not lived through, and reconstitute and integrate it into their writing—create a story out of history” (Fine 1988:41). Collectively, these second generation stories attempt morally to improve the world while urging both tolerance of the other, and struggle against antisemitism and racial hatred. Consequently, second generation works exemplify both dimensions of Eliezer ben Yehuda's definition of *tikkun olam*. In his *Dictionary and Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language*, ben Yehuda defines *tikkun olam* as “Something for the good of the world,” or “Some ordinance for the good of the many” (ben Yehuda 1959:7870). Secularized, the notion of *tikkun* in second generation writings assumes both Jewishly particular and universalist dimensions.

Beyond the Biblical Deity

Liberman's survivors are disenchanted with the god of History, yet seek a post-Auschwitz Jewish identity grounded in family, witness-bearing, and the importance of what Fackenheim terms the *tikkun* of ordinary decency. Before turning to these three types of *Tikkun Olam* I look briefly at Liberman's story “The Philosopher” as it illustrates both a rejection of the Biblical deity and an espousal of a neo-Hasidic compassion for one's fellow human beings.

“The Philosopher” is narrated by a physician, a frequent occurrence in Liberman's tales. Pinchus Altshul, the protagonist, is a survivor who lost his first family in Auschwitz. Formerly a believer—“I could be nothing else”—he confides to his doctor that “Zyklon proved mightier than God. It suffocated Him before my eyes while the ovens reduced His bones to ashes. And ashes, my friend, I could not worship. — I lost all belief then” (Liberman 1981:94). As he lay dying in a Melbourne hospital, the survivor takes account of his life, arriving at two conclusions. He equates surviving with loss of faith. “To be a survivor is to kill one's faith” (Liberman 1981:94).

Yet Altshul does not abandon all hope. Quite the contrary is the case. He clings both to human compassion and the freedom to choose

his own death. Concerning the first issue, Altshul observes that a person's sole duty is "to be human to his neighbor. All else is commentary" (Lieberman 1981:93). Sighing the survivor contends that "...in this world we really only have each other" (Lieberman 1981:94). For Altshul ("old shul"), who nearly became a rabbi—but did not have "the gall" to be false to himself—moral and ethical behavior assume the role played by theology prior to the Holocaust. Altshul's suicide also reflects the death camp imprint where the only "choice" was to select when one died. The survivor's suicide note observes that the only true freedom one has is to choose the time of one's death.

Altshul represents one pole of survivor experience. Losing both his first and second families—his Australian wife dies of cancer—the survivor is stalked by tragedy yet articulates the necessity of caring for one's fellow human beings. This attitude exemplifies a type of *mentschlekayyt* (moral concern) which reflects elements of both the voluntary and additional covenants.

Lieberman explores other dimensions of post-Auschwitz life for both survivors and the second generation. His Holocaust short stories directly engage the issues of post-Auschwitz *tikkun olam*, while fusing an inherited memory and morality. He skillfully interweaves the demands of traditional ritual and *mitzvot* (commandments) with the imperatives of post-Shoah Jewish life. The complexity of this life is revealed primarily through intergenerational conflicts concerning marrying out of the tradition ("Drifting"), the unwillingness of the second generation to remember the Holocaust ("Words"), and a son who burns the poems of his deceased survivor father ("Envy's Fire"). Moreover, Lieberman illuminates these conflicts through various relationships: Father-Son, Mother-Son, Father-Daughter, Grandmother-Grandson, and Jew-Gentile. Among his many Holocaust stories, I will focus on three: "A Marriage," "The First Lesson," and "The Storyteller." Each of these tales reveals a dimension of mending the world while viewing Jewish existence through the prism of Auschwitz.

The *Tikkun* of Family

"A Marriage," which Liberman writes from the perspective of a daughter of survivors, emphasizes the *Shoah*'s impact on the traditional commandment to "be fruitful and multiply." Memory in this story serves as both a source of sorrow and the linchpin of familial virtue. Esther, the protagonist, is the daughter of Czechoslovakian-born survivor parents, each of whom chooses different modes of transmitting Holocaust memory. Her father is silent, but constantly gathers notes for his memoirs. Ideally, this book will have a universal audience. However, he tells his wife, "if not for the world, then for our children." The survivor's mission is to transmit the Holocaust legacy to the second generation. But the book is never written, thereby attesting the ineffable nature of the *Shoah*. Esther can only guess at the nature of the "abyss of anguish" reflected in her father's "intense silences and changing moods" (Liberman 1981).⁵ The mother, for her part, speaks frequently of the family's post-liberation experience, including the discovery that everyone and everything had been destroyed. Esther terms these stories "the butter I ate with my bread" (Liberman 1981:106).

Liberman then skilfully juxtaposes the need to bear witness and the need to bear children. Esther's marriage to Max, an ambitious and self-centered playwright, founders on the question of children. Esther wants them, while Max views children as an impediment to his writing. But this disagreement masks a far more substantive issue. Although Esther's mother already has two grandchildren, she understands that after Auschwitz, family and children take precedence over everything: "ambition, personal comfort, even security." Reflecting the positions of Fackenheim, Greenberg, and Wiesel, she views bearing children as a holy duty after Auschwitz.⁶ Children are vital to continuity and to memory. They represent what Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson term "biosocial immortality" (Porter 1979:215). Such immortality implies more than simply the continuity of one's own family. "Biosocial immortality" bears both particular and universal significance. For example, as

"experienced emotionally and symbolically," it "transcends one's own biological family to include one's tribe, organization, people, nation, and even species" (Porter 1979:215). In terms of Holocaust survivors, children represent a victory not only for an individual family, but for the "House of Israel" (*K'lal Israel*) over Hitler and Nazism. As such, Jewish children, attests Wiesel, are "in a way a response to the death of a million Jewish children" (Wiesel 1985:320).

The story also links the first and second generation through the issue of suffering. The survivor generation confronted with unprecedented starkness the irresolvable mystery of theodicy. Esther, for her part, experiences the mystery of evil and suffering. She separates from her unfaithful husband, witnesses her mother's deteriorating health, and is aghast that her father wants to destroy all his notes, willing to "let the ghost of his past settle, however convulsively, in the unmarked unrecorded grave of mere private memory which, when his own time came, would perish too into eternal silence" (Liberman 1981:121). Shortly thereafter Esther's mother dies.

"A Marriage" reveals several significant points concerning the second generation's attempt to achieve *tikkun olam*. This generation wants to bear witness, but must do so in its own idiom. Their desire to testify on behalf of their parents indicates a determination both to preserve the past, incorporating the *Shoah* into communal memory, and improve the world at large. Max's return to Esther after critics panned his play underscores the validity of her mother's position. Children, rather than literary inventions, are the appropriate response to the Holocaust. The post-Auschwitz *tikkun* of family emerges as a paradigmatic response to catastrophe.

The *Tikkun* of Ordinary Decency

"The First Lesson" (Liberman 1984) directly engages the transition from classical theology to post-Auschwitz *tikkun olam* by advocating the *tikkun* of ordinary decency. Liberman's story addresses the Shoah's covenantal impact by asking three crucial post-Holocaust questions:

What is the nature of God's relationship to Auschwitz? Is belief still possible? and How can God be understood after the catastrophe? Framed around a dialogue between a dying survivor grandmother and her twelve year old grandson, the story assesses the *Shoah's* effect on the third generation, especially in the realm of Jewish-Christian relations. The youth's mother, also a survivor, has renounced Judaism while his father rediscovers the tradition. Rabbi Segal, who visits the grandmother, advocates adherence to traditional ritual in the face of adversity. The story simultaneously asserts the inadequacy of all pre-*Shoah* theological positions while advancing the case for mending the world through interfaith understanding.

The grandmother, who does not live to see the boy become a Bar Mitzvah, instructs him about the changed image of deity after Auschwitz. following her request, the boy opens a window for the bedridden woman. asked where God can be seen, the boy responds that God is invisible. Following Isaac Altshul's position in "The Philosopher," the grandmother then underscores the moral bankruptcy of pre-Holocaust theology by juxtaposing the idea of an intervening covenantal deity and the family's Holocaust losses. "Where," she asks the boy, "are all your uncles, aunts, the children who would have been your cousins, you Grandfather Tuvi, and your other grandfather and grandmother, mm?" (Lieberman 1984:119).

Lieberman next introduces a central ritual of Holocaust remembrance. The third generation, no less than the second, lights a *Yahrzeit* candle for family members who died in the *Shoah*. The young boy could scarcely not have known the fate of his relatives. In his home candles are lit twice a year, on the Day of Atonement and on *Yom haShoah* (Holocaust memorial day). Greenberg remarks of candle lighting as a post-Auschwitz ritual of remembrance, that it is the "single most widespread ritual of observance" (Greenberg 1988:341). The boy then reflects that the meaning of this second candle, far more than the first, he has "imbibed with the drops of Mother's milk." Lieberman metaphorically suggests that Holocaust memory is primal in survivor

households and that it is ineluctably transmitted to the second and succeeding generations.

The grandmother conducts a *din Torah* (Trial of God) in order to instruct her grandson and, through him, the third generation. The trial is framed by the timeless question of theodicy: Why do the innocent suffer? Specifically, the grandmother asks, "Where was the rabbi's God then to look after His people? Or your father's God?" Answering her own query, the survivor says, "He wasn't there... Just as He isn't here... in this room...outside the window...above the clouds...in the trees" (Lieberman 1984:119). But the grandmother then makes a surprising pronouncement. Those who believe and those who do not believe are equally wrong. Both positions err in assuming that the Holocaust either conclusively exonerates or unconditionally indicts God. Consequently, those who hold these views fail to address the dialectical notion of post-*Shoah* theology whose very nature is fragmentary rather than systematic and whose conclusions are provisional. Greenberg perceptively comments on the dialectical nature of post-Auschwitz faith. He writes: "To let Auschwitz overwhelm Jerusalem is to lie (i.e., to speak a truth out of its appropriate moment); and to let Jerusalem deny Auschwitz is to lie for the same reason" (Greenberg 1977:33).

The survivor proposes a different post-Auschwitz image of God and, in the process, teaches her grandson details of Holocaust history. She reminds the boy that she and his mother had been saved by the actions of several Righteous Gentiles (*Hasidei Ummot ha'Olam*). Hidden first by a Polish farmer and his wife, the two women were then hidden in a convent where they "shared the nuns' crosses, Ave Marias, and bread." Unfortunately, there were very few *Hasidei Ummot ha'Olam* during the time of testing. Nevertheless, their acts lead the grandmother to draw a neo-Hasidic theological conclusion that God is in people's hearts. "God," she tells the youth, "is the goodness that is in men and there are those who by their love preserve Him and those who by their evil kill Him in their hearts" (Lieberman 1984:121). Interrupted by a knock on her door, the old woman can only gasp out to her grandson that God is in him, his mother, and his father and "in every person who is good and cares for

others and..." Her legacy completed, the grandmother blends a traditional commandment with her post-Auschwitz image, admonishing her grandson that he must "Remember, my precious. Remember always. Remember" (Liberman 1984:122).

"The First Lesson" teaches the grandson and other members of his generation that the Holocaust is the litmus test for all theological assertions. As such, the story is a literary embodiment of Greenberg's observation that "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children" (Greenberg 1977:23). But there is more to be said. After Auschwitz the only credible theology is one which eventuates in re-creating the divine image in humanity. In a world where the deity is increasingly hidden, observes Greenberg, "the most credible statement about God is the creation of an image of god which, silently but powerfully, points to the God whose image it is" (Greenberg 1988:321). Restoring human dignity is thus an act of immense theological significance and becomes part of the *Shoah's* universal legacy to future generations. The story does not abandon covenantal Judaism. Rather, the tale emphasizes that the terms of the covenant are now ineluctably different. Holiness must be redefined. "The road to God," as Wiesel observes, "now leads through man" (Wiesel 1993:151). At his grandmother's funeral, only the young boy understands that, much in the manner described by Martin Buber, God is the feeling of holiness with which one is suffused when reaching out to one's fellow human being. "The First Lesson" for Jews to learn is that the post-Auschwitz god is very different from His Biblical and Rabbinic precursor.

The *Tikkun* of Bearing Witness

"The Storyteller" is Liberman's richest offering on the issue of bearing witness to an inherited memory. Comprised of five sections, the story is simultaneously a biography and a destiny of the son of Holocaust survivors, who confronts a crucial choice between "the curse of treason through either silence of old time quaintness... or a sustained defiant wrathful howl of protest" (Liberman 1990:21). In the process of telling

his story, Liberman provides different models of Holocaust education which correspond to the age of the narrator. Each successive level of awareness provides the second generation youth with a different dimension of memory and brings with it an increasing obligation to engage in the *tikkun* of bearing witness. Following Biblical and Hasidic paradigms, the young man's writing includes a *din Torah*.

Liberman deftly portrays the impact of Holocaust memory on traditional narrative. For example, as an infant and child in the first section, the protagonist first sucks his mother's milk, then hears her song and, *at the age of understanding* listens to her stories. Each of these acts, *suckling*, *hearing* and *listening* are aspects of the child's education. But the mother's stories are from a pre-Holocaust age; humorous tales of Helm and drama taken from midrashic sources. Stories about his dead Zaidas and Bubas (grandparents) emphasize their piety, their goodness, and their innocence. In the next section, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of his grandparents' absence. Responding to the youth's question about where they are, his mother gives three replies: "They are in the heart," "In the memory—are they," and "They have been turned into *dybbuks*" (souls of the dead which inhabit successive generations of new bodies). The notion of *dybbuks* links generations past with those present and those to come. Consequently, Jewish memory is itself an act of *tikkun* which reinforces identity. Further, the notion of his grandparents as *dybbuks* makes the souls of Holocaust victims present to the current generation.⁷

Section three marks a decisive turning point in the protagonist's life. Like the youth in "The First Lesson," he is nearing his Bar Mitzvah. Now his mother begins speaking more frankly about the Holocaust. The boy learns of "furnaces and of starvation, of typhus and of gas and of an inhuman beast called Hitler, as well as places named Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen, and Treblinka where, in *kiddush ha'Shem* (sanctification of the divine Name—martyrdom) his grandparents, uncles and aunts "went up in smoke." The news is stunning. The protagonist begins to realize his own connection to the Holocaust and to Jewish memory. Musing that his murdered relatives are not only within him as *dybbuks*, he realizes

that they also accompany him. The youth then utters a secular form of the injunction commanded in teaching the *Sh'ma*, Judaism's basic confession of God's oneness, which is written in the *mezzuzah* affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes. "Yes," he says, "at all times accompanying me, whether in my going forth, or in my lying down, or in my rising up" (Lieberman 1984:7). The ritual cadence and historical memory associated with the injunction to "teach them diligently to thy children," subtly but unmistakably links bearing witness to the Holocaust with recitation of the *Sh'ma*.⁸ Unlike the universalists thrust of "The First Lesson," this tale advocates a particularist *tikkun*.

Lieberman's protagonist begins to write. Initially, his stories are imagined vignettes of his grandparents pre-Holocaust lives. The youth's Yiddish teacher, himself a survivor, echoes Wiesel's contention that to be a true writer one must confront the *Shoah*.⁹ The boy begins to fuse survivor memory and his own imagination when standing at the Martyrs' Monument in Carlton cemetery. He also imagines night images of "strutting forms of steel-helmeted soldiers" whose clamor he hears and from which he has rehearsed a hundred ways of escape and retaliation. In a reflection that highlights the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust effects on the identity formation of children of survivors, the protagonist contends that even ordinary objects such as shrubs, and sounds such as a crackle of leaves, become perilous omens of evil, serving as a metaphor around which personal identity is organised.¹⁰

A *Yom ha Shoah* ceremony at Carlton Cemetery clarifies the protagonist's relationship to his inherited memory and his own identity. A rabbi recounts that while leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses personally carried the bones of Joseph and his brothers during the forty year sojourn to the promised land. These bones gave Moses the strength to build an army and to enter Canaan. "The bones on his back," attests the rabbi, "made him cry, *Kadimah* Forward. Only forward, for behind his, if ever they were to turn back, were the bones of the dead" (Lieberman 1984:14). The rabbi makes a midrash relating this biblical tale to the post-Auschwitz generation. The Jewish community must go forward. Yet it must also carry the bones of the Holocaust

dead “wherever we are, lest we forget the six million who died” (Lieberman 1984:14). Although this means that the dead may not rest in peace, the rabbi understands that memory links the generations. He warns the Jews that unless they seek a *tikkun* of bearing witness, the world will forget the *Shoah*. Demonstrating that memory is a weapon as well as a device for healing, those assembled sing the Partisan song “We are Here.” Leaving the cemetery, the narrator’s mother touches her son’s head, shoulders and arms thereby symbolically transmitting the mantle of remembrance to the second generation.

The tale’s final section details the narrator’s transformation into a second generation witness. Again writing vignettes of his murdered family, this time his stories focus specifically on Jewish fate during the Holocaust. These tales also reveal fury at a world which passively allowed the murder of the Jewish people. Lieberman’s narrator also feels anger at his mother for not telling him the Holocaust truth sooner. Both the need for stories and the urge to tell them remain. But after the *Shoah*, one should not be diverted by fantasies and folk tales. The narrator provides examples of the kinds of tales his mother should have told, stories which speak of gas chambers and human skulls. With Wiesel, Lieberman believes that after the Holocaust the task of the storyteller is not to entertain, but to disturb (Berger 1993:378).

The narrator’s metamorphosis is complete. He is transformed from a *passive* recipient of tales to their *active* transmitter, thereby achieving a personal experience of *tikkun*. The young man describes the stories which he will write and tell both to the world and to his own children—the third generation—as “the bones I should have to carry, through them I would give my *dybbuks* voice (Lieberman 1984:18). This task will not be easy: he correctly foresees that authentic writing about the Holocaust must involve a *din Torah* and he wonders if he has the “sustaining vision and the strength” to accomplish his mission. Yet the image of God in this story is far more traditional than that presented in either “A Marriage” or “The First Lesson.” The narrator notes both Biblical (Job) and Hasidic (Levi Yitchak of Berdichev) parallels for arguing with God. Although God may be found guilty, the narrator realizes that man must how. Adopting

a Wieselian position, Liberman's protagonist views writing as a protest against both divine and human injustice. Obsessed with a memory he has incrementally inherited, the second generation witness transmits this inheritance and in the process contributes to the process of *tikkun olam*.

Conclusion

Serge Liberman's writings are an expression of a second generation witness's attempt to repair the world by reminding his readers of the Holocaust and its continuing reverberations in the lives of its survivors and their offspring. His works suggest the outlines of a post-Auschwitz secular Jewish identity in Australia. This identity is clearly bound to the *Shoah* and seeks to derive lessons which are both Jewishly particular and universal. For example, bearing Jewish witness, Liberman explores the tension between Jewish affirmation and alienation, family relationships, Jewish continuity, images of deity, identity after Auschwitz, and Jewish refugee feelings about Australia. His Holocaust stories also pose universal questions such as the authentic meaning of faith, the nature of human responsibility, the role of chance, and Jewish-Christian relations.

As a physician, Liberman is a healer. His tales, in turn, are attempts to heal or at least explore the psychic and theological wounds inflicted on Judaism and the Jewish people by the Holocaust. Liberman assigns himself a type of mission: "in this world to do and contribute my bit—as doctor, writer, migrant, citizen, human being, Jew"; these words resonate with the task of *tikkun olam*.¹¹ Sokushin Ezawa, a Japanese critic, observes the close relationship between Liberman's professional and existential selves. Ezawa writes:

[Liberman] can understand human agony, life and death, all the more because he is a doctor, and the stronger is his anger with all which oppresses humanity and tramples on human dignity, such as the death camps and gas-chambers (Esawa 1989:128).

Liberman's tales advocate a post-Auschwitz *Tikkun Olam* which is comprised both of "ordinary decency" and the need for secular affirmation of Jewish identity. His survivors are battered but seek redemption. As they struggle with issues of faith and doubt, they are united in the need for seeking a *tikkun* through the act of bearing witness. Liberman himself well understands the continuing impact of holocaustal loss. He told an interviewer that being "brought up in a home where the holocaust loomed large, I imbibed my mother's sorrow and negativity."¹² His second generation witnesses are unable to believe in the God of History, they frequently intermarry, and often rebel against the wishes of their survivor parents. Nevertheless, his survivors' offspring assume the mantle of witnessing the witnesses' continued survival and testifying on their behalf in order to improve the world. The impetus for this task is not the Biblical covenant however. Meaning stems from humanity itself. In Liberman's words, "[we derive] meaning from ourselves; ourselves above all; creating our own purposes and establishing our own meanings."¹³ Yet Liberman's second generation characters eschew both nihilism and libertinism. Their healing efforts stem from a deeply held moral position which is informed by the legacy of the *Shoah*. Throughout his Holocaust stories, Liberman's protagonists—in conscious opposition to the systematic dehumanization of the Holocaust—seek the *tikkun* of human affirmation, thereby hoping to mend a broken world.

Endnotes

¹Serge Liberman in a letter to the author, 19 September, 1993.

²The phenomenon of second generation writing is international. Important studies include Fine (1988), Sicher (1990-1991), Berger (1991). Fine's study deals with the second generation in France. Sicher treats the phenomenon from a variety of perspectives: the issue of reparations, guilty survivors, and the return of the dybbuk in British and Israeli fiction. He includes work that is written by refugees as well as children of non-witnesses. Berger's study focuses on the second generation in America.

³See my articles (Berger 1995a; 1995b; 1993a).

⁴See Fackenheim's crucial work *To Mend the World* (1982). Further adumbration of this theme is found in *The Jewish Bible After the Holocaust* (Fackenheim 1990). I am indebted to Ms Susan Nowak, my PhD student in Religion, for fruitful discussion on the matter of *tikkun olam*.

⁵On the complex relationship between survivors and children in Liberman's stories see Berger's discussion of "Drifting" and "Words" (Berger 1988). Liberman's story "Envy's Fire," in which a deceased survivor's son burns his father's poetry—work far superior to his own literary efforts—is an exception to the author's portrayal of second generation members as accepting the mission to bear Holocaust witness.

⁶Each of these thinkers views Jewish children after Auschwitz as symbolizing an act of *kiddush ha-hayyim* (sanctification of life). Wiesel speaks for the group when he writes:

It was a covenant equal to the one Abraham concluded with God for a survivor to get married in 1945. It took courage and vision and a tremendous amount of belief in Jewish history, if not in human history, for a couple to have children after the war (Wiesel 1985: 163-164).

⁷On the theme of the *dybbuk* and Holocaust memory, see Sicher (1990-1991).

⁸See Primo Levi's gripping poem "Shema," which equates bearing witness to the Holocaust with the task of being fully human. Conversely, those who fail to bear witness shall be visited with grave afflictions (Levi 1989:9).

⁹Elie Wiesel insists on this point. See his remarks in Cargas 1979:87.

¹⁰Robert Prince observes that the Holocaust is "a psychological event" providing "themes and metaphors around which personal identity is organised" (Prince 1980:44).

¹¹Liberman 1986:29. The relationship between physical and psychic healing as embodied in the combined roles of physician and writer is surely not accidental. For example, the works of Ron Elisha—himself an Australian physician and son of survivors—also explore the *Shoah*'s continuing impact on Jewish identity. Concerning his second generation writings see especially Elisha 1984.

¹²Serge Liberman, in an unpublished interview with Annette R. Corkhill (n.d. 6).

¹³Liberman, unpublished interview (n.d. 7-8). In this sense, Liberman echoes the position of the Jewish-American novelist Hugh Nissenson who contends that "[w]e made the covenant with ourselves and there is nothing else but that" (Kurzweil 1978-1979:19). On Nissenson's work see Berger 1990-1991:6-25.

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