



On Eichmann

ON EICHMANN

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said and that he deserved to die a thousand deaths each day. I come to plead on our own behalf, that is to say on behalf of Eichmann's potential (if not actual) victims.

The laws of human society are at a loss as to adequate punishment for Eichmann's crimes. On this point there is general agreement. There can be no possible proportion between this crime and its punishment. Neither could his execution serve to teach a lesson to other murderers of our people. The application of the death penalty for the murder of millions is not a "deterrent" and will not deter any potential murderer likely to arise against us in the days to come. It is not the deterrent power of the hanging of one inhuman wretch that will prevent catastrophes of this kind in the future. A different education of men and nations, a new human awareness—these will prevent it. To achieve such a human awareness was the purpose of the Eichmann trial.

Eichmann was an excellent example of the systematic destruction of the image of God in man, the "dehumanization" the Nazi movement preached by all possible means and practiced as far as possible. The significance of this trial consisted of revealing to the whole world the meaning of such dehumanization; its effects and the price paid by a whole nation which falls victim to this process. For one can very well say that in the strict sense two nations, not one, were the victims: the Jewish people, whose millions were murdered, and the German people, who became a nation of murderers when it allowed the Nazi doctrine to gain power over it. If we are "to do justice," to deter or avenge the bloodshed of our people, then it must be done to tens and hundreds of thousands whose hands are soiled with blood.

Which brings me to the main point: the application of the death penalty to Eichmann constituted *an inappropriate ending*. It falsified the historical significance of the trial by creating the illusion that it is possible to conclude something of this affair by the hanging of one human or inhuman creature. Such an illusion is most dangerous because it may engender the feeling that something has been done to atone for the unatonable. One man, who is only the corrupt product of the corrupt system which made his existence and activity possible, is to be hanged, and many millions, especially in Germany, will see it as an end to the

Eichmann has been executed. In its public and historical aspects the Eichmann case is at an end. All the lessons that might possibly be learned from the great trial which terminated in Eichmann's death sentence can already be studied in full. Now the time has come to embark on the soul-searching the affair demands, and there is no end to thoughts and questions, most of which are without answer.

Those who approved of Eichmann's being put before the bar of justice, those who upheld the trial itself as well as the form chosen for it by the authorities, those who saw in the trial a tremendous moral achievement in educating the nation toward a major historical reckoning—a task as necessary to undertake as it must necessarily fail—in short, all those who are primarily concerned with the public, moral, and historical aspects of the trial rather than with its legal side—they are the ones who are bound to ask themselves whether the execution of Eichmann was indeed the appropriate finish to this enormous issue. I am certain that many thousands and hundreds of thousands of the people of this land are still preoccupied with this question, and I propose to answer it as best I can.

There is no question but that Eichmann deserved the death penalty. I have no doubt he did. I have not come forth to find any merit in him, or, indeed, to discuss any aspect of his deeds and responsibility that pertains to the legal aspects of the trial. I assume that from the legal point of view nothing remains to be

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whole business of the murder of our people. It will be said that the Israelis have captured the chief organizer of the murder; let them hang him and be done with it.

As Jews and as human beings we have no interest in such a phony "fnis." It was an easy, slight ending in two senses: it was slight both as to significance and judgment. This hanging was an anticlimax, the satyr play after a tragedy such as had not been seen before. One fears that instead of opening up a reckoning and leaving it open for the next generation, we have foreclosed it. What superficially seems severity of judgment is in reality its mitigation, a mitigation in no way to our interest. It is to our interest that the great historical and moral question, the question probing the depths which this trial has forced all to face—How could this happen?—that this question should retain all its weight, all its stark nakedness, all its horror. The hangman who had to execute Eichmann's sentence added nothing to the situation, but he took away a great deal. As I have said before, he introduced the misplaced suggestion that this marked "the end of the story." It would have been better if we did not have the hangman stand between us and our great question, between us and the soul-searching account we have to settle with the world. Having gone through this trial we should ask ourselves: where do we stand now with this accounting? What do we really want to prove to the world? If we wanted to prove that justice is being done and that a great historical reckoning is being effected, then a living Eichmann—whether imprisoned by us or put into the hands of the Germans (who had good reasons for not wanting him)—was not likely to stand in the way of such a reckoning. But it is to be feared that an Eichmann who has been hanged will indeed stand in the way—very much in the way.

On Jews and Judaism in Crisis

S E L E C T E D E S S A Y S

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