Introduction

In 1963, the great Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas published a collection of his essays on Jewish life. In his fascinating and provocative essays, Levinas sought to counter the drift in Jewish life toward an uncritical assimilation to the culture and violence of the modern world. After the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel, Levinas felt that a new chapter of Jewish history was opening.

Levinas was born in Lithuania and became a French citizen in 1930; he was one of the few Jews to survive the Holocaust and continue to live in post-Holocaust Europe. As such, Levinas was an eyewitness to both the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel. In those dark times, Levinas wondered if the surviving Jewish world was ready—and able—to persevere. Age-old questions confronted Jews anew, but, once again, these questions presented profound challenges. Jews were deeply wounded and scarred. Now they had reemerged on the world scene. If Jews were to take control of their destiny, Levinas thought they had to return to the traditions of Judaism and the essence of what it means to be Jewish.

But were Judaism and Jewishness the same as they had always been, without change and eternal? Though Levinas thought this to be the case in general, he also realized that different contexts present challenges for these ancient principles and understandings. Through the confluence of the ancient and the

modern, Levinas sought to articulate a way for Jews to return and renew their identity in a changing world.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Levinas held out the Jewish ethical tradition as the medium for modern Jews to re-embrace their vocation in the world. Levinas hoped that the formative challenges would not suppress this ethical tradition. The contemporary challenges for Jews revolved around the systematic murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust and the Jewish assumption of power in the state of Israel. In light of this trauma and hope, Levinas believed ethics to be were even more defining of Jewish identity and a renewed Jewish commitment.

Levinas was ambivalent about this prospect, as were the other Jewish thinkers I explore in these pages: Elie Wiesel, Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Hannah Arendt. Each articulated their ambivalence with differing points of view. Their strength is that they dealt with two formative events in Jewish history. The Holocaust exposed the intense vulnerability of European Jewry. The state of Israel proposed the physical and military empowerment of the survivors of the Holocaust and Jews around the world.

In exploring these Jewish thinkers, the scope of their interest and expertise is so wide as to defy categorization. Their thought moves within and beyond what we know today as academic disciplines. They are philosophers and theologians, biblical exegetes and interpreters, political scientists and sociologists, mystics and realists. They are Jewish "thinkers" who are also "committed."

First and foremost, Wiesel, Buber, Heschel, Arendt and Levinas explored the difficult, almost impossible questions facing the Jewish people after the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. Their first priority was their Jewishness and how that Jewishness interacted with the broader world: they were committed Jewish thinkers.

Though we might group them together, emphasizing their many similarities, each also displayed a variegated self. Although some aspects of each of these thinkers are well known, because of their complexities, there are aspects that neither the thinker nor the world recognize, and aspects that it would be difficult for each to affirm. A variegated self is insistent and yet open to interpretation. Profound thinkers, Jewish or otherwise, should be mined for what they thought in their time, as well as unearthed for another time. These twentieth century Jewish thinkers spoke to their time. They speak also to ours.

Personalities are complex and thinkers no less so in the persona that emerges within and from their work. When the stakes are high, thought takes on an urgency that may lack the self-reflection we presume as normative in ourselves and in others. Although Jewish thinkers are known for their precision and incisiveness, like all thinkers, they are limited.

Sometimes limitations come from the urgency of the moment or from a thinker's context. Jewish thought provides an incredibly vibrant and open

window onto the world, but sometimes this can block other windows that provide other important vistas. The depth of Jewish thought comes from the preoccupation with what it means to be Jewish. The limitations of Jewish thought come from that same preoccupation.

I frame my exploration around the encounters I had with these Jewish thinkers. Sometimes, as with Abraham Joshua Heschel, these were personal encounters. Other encounters came through the meeting ground provided by my teacher, Richard Rubenstein, whose voice is the thread that weaves through my other encounters. Like these other Jewish thinkers, Rubenstein thinks with a fierce urgency which yields much fruit and few friends.

In one way or another, each of our thinkers met and engaged each other, if not personally then in the interaction of the Jewish world on issues central to its existence. Though global in its reach, the Jewish world is small and personal. Intellectual encounters are often personal encounters. For example, Wiesel met Buber, Arendt and Heschel; Buber and Heschel were more than acquaintances. Sometimes they held their peers in high esteem. Other times, there were intellectual disagreements that included personal animosity.

Each of our Jewish thinkers was speaking for themselves, and on behalf of the Jewish people. Our thinkers were judged by other thinkers and those Jews who were not engaged in the intellectual life. Like Jewish thinkers, ordinary Jews can be incisive and judgmental. Yet as a small minority community with a tremendously high visibility as well as a history of suffering, Jews have a tremendous stake in what their fellow Jews say about them. Not unsurprising, the followers of our Jewish thinkers are often equaled by those who vehemently disagree with them.

The encounters I recount in this book—highly intellectual, deeply personal, often direct, tangible, and in person—are fraught with historical and personal significance. Some are mutually reinforcing, as when one understanding builds upon another. Others result in clashes which lead to deep fissures that never heal. With so much at stake, how can we expect otherwise?

Encounters are like conversations; they begin and continue in different forms and venues. Genuine encounters mark us for life. Each of our thinkers left an indelible and monumental mark on my life, on Jewish life, and on the world. I have benefited from all of these encounters when they initially occurred and continue to do so over time, and now again in this writing.

Today Jewish life stands on the shoulders of intellectual and spiritual giants. In these encounters I witness a past greatness, a willingness to grapple with profound and difficult issues, as well as a way which opens up beyond the encounters themselves. Yet I would not be showing these thinkers the respect they are due by remaining silent about their limitations. In the end I conclude that the future of Jewish life faces still greater peril than even they understood.

What they saw as the potential or possible future, we now encounter as our present, our *now*. It may be, as Levinas understood it, that fidelity as a Jew today is our "difficult freedom." For me that has transposed itself into an increasingly "difficult future." It is in that difficult future that the Jewish encounter takes place today.

This book began in an encounter that might, at first glance, seem unusual. During the 1980s, I taught at the Maryknoll School of Theology in New York. It was a curious teaching assignment for someone who has been Jewish from birth and is a practicing Jew as well. Even so the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America invited me to teach at its school of theology and develop a Masters of Arts program in Justice and Peace Studies. Founded in the early twentieth century as the American counterpart of the world-wide Christian mission to convert "pagans" to Christianity, in the 1960s, Maryknoll underwent its own conversion to the poor and the oppressed. During that conversion, it shifted its primary vocation from one of converting others to Christianity to working with indigenous peoples around the world for their own liberation from poverty and oppression. Maryknoll discovered the liberation theology which was then emerging in Latin America. Through its publishing arm, Orbis Books, Maryknoll began to publish liberation theology in English, which made it possible for African theologians to read Latin American theologians and Asian theologians to read and be read by people around the world. Soon liberation theology spread to other parts of the globe.

My program in Justice and Peace Studies had this liberation perspective, and soon students from around the world came to study with me. Most of the students were already pursuing justice and peace in difficult, often violent situations. As a young twenty-six year old, my students from Africa, Latin America and Asia had much to teach me. My world expanded.

What I experienced in travelling to my students' native lands was eye opening. I found grinding poverty and engaged struggle, cultural renaissance and elite powerbrokers. I found that a dominating Christianity was alive and well. I also found resisting Christians seeking economic and political revolution.

Even then, I heard the tired refrains of an interfaith dialogue in which Jews and Christians had finally made their peace with each other in America. But in my classroom at Maryknoll a different engagement was taking place. Here students from around the world encountered me developing as a Jewish theology of liberation. At the same time, I encountered their theologies of liberation. The interaction was intense. None of us knew where it would go.

I learned that the environments from which my students came and returned to was dangerous and their work among the poor made their lives precarious. As a Jew, I would soon be venturing into dangerous intellectual and religious territory. Our common danger augured a new interfaith dialogue or,

more importantly, a new solidarity among Jews and Christians in the struggle for liberation.

Many of my students had become Christian in their life time. Since they lived in parts of the world where there were few Jews, I was the first Jew they encountered. Because of the missionaries' stories about the demise of Judaism in the coming of Jesus the Christ, many of my students were surprised to know that Jews and Judaism still existed. Our first encounters were sometimes awkward, other times amusing. They were also invigorating. On their side, no one they knew had ever met a Jew. On my side, Jews were becoming more and more isolated in America and Israel.

One such student was Mun Kyun Hun, whom I knew at Maryknoll as "Father Mun." Despite his limited English, I realized that there was something different about him. His face brightened as we discussed the Jewish God of liberation. I felt a force emanating from him. Since he said little during the course, I was surprised when he asked me to be his thesis advisor.

Father Mun asked to write on the reunification of the Koreas from a theological perspective, a topic that resonates today. With Korea having been racked for centuries by wars and imperialisms, he thought that a theological justification for a political unification of the Koreas was important.

One day, after his thesis was complete, Father Mun asked to see me. Seated in a chair in my office, Father Mun asked a question that was a decision for action. He was seeking my approval. I thought of Martin Buber's understanding of "meeting"—a time when two persons come together for a decision essential to a person's destiny. The listener needs to focus and discern what is at stake. I listened intently. What was Father Mun saying to me? What was being left unsaid?

Father Mun proposed placing his thesis into action. Having argued for a unified Korea, it was time to enact his thesis by traveling to North Korea and crossing the border into the south. He asked what I thought of his plan. I asked him what the consequences might be if he carried it out. He told me he would be arrested and jailed, probably for years. He awaited my thoughts, even though I knew he had already decided upon his course of action. As a Christian, Father Mun was taking on suffering for the sake of his nation. Should I try to dissuade him?

After Father Mun accomplished his mission, he was arrested, tried and convicted. His trial gained national and international attention. The publicity surrounding the trial spread the word that many in Korea wanted a reunified country. Father Mun was jailed for more than three years. After being released, Father Mun again crossed into North Korea, and again was jailed.

During his time in prison, Father Mun expanded his thesis into a history of the Catholic Church in Korea. It is a devastating account of the collusion

of his own church with powers outside of Korea. Yet it is also a work of great hope. Here a Catholic priest acted on his principles and was jailed for his commitment. In prison he wrote of his own tradition's complicity in the hardship of the Korean people. Father Mun's life is a clarion call to his faith community for introspection and a renewed commitment to repentance and sacrifice on behalf of justice.

After his release from prison, I visited Father Mun in Korea. I also met with many of my former students, also Korean. Seeing my students in their own setting made me understand their quest for knowledge as part of their commitment to a more just society. It made my teaching come alive in another dimension. It deepened my learning of what I was teaching. How much more learning takes place when the students who come to you are also teachers in their own right.

Then Father Mun and I lost track of each other. Years later I found him again through a Korean professor, Dr. Choong-Koo Park (CK), when we were both teaching at Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines. In the Philippines there was an ongoing insurgency where government sponsored death squads sought to quell unrest among the civilian population. Peasants were being displaced from the land. Unions were being constrained.

CK and I traveled the countryside. During our travels we met a Protestant minister who had been shot in the legs as a warning. The powers that be weren't pleased with his work among the peasants and the unemployed. We also met with a union president who was on the run, threatened by a multi-national corporation. Fearing for his life, he slept in a different house every night. His three predecessors had been assassinated.

During our late night discussions, I mentioned my lost connection with Father Mun, who CK helped me find. The following year I reconnected with Father Mun in Korea. I left this emotional "meeting" with him as when I first encountered him at Maryknoll. Was I Father Mun's teacher or his student?

Before leaving Korea, I was asked to return to participate in the celebration of the 600th issue of the Korean journal, *Christian Thought,* as their keynote lecturer. When wondering what subject would be relevant to a Korean audience, the journal editor responded immediately, "Abraham Joshua Heschel." They asked if there might be other Jewish thinkers that I could lecture on. Much to my surprise, they had read Jewish thinkers that I felt close to, and who were relevant to them as Christians and as Koreans. They admired Jewish thinkers for articulating deep spiritual realities in a complex and difficult world.

When I returned home I began writing about Jews and Judaism through the lenses of the Jews I explore in this book. What unfolds is a story of Jewish life in the twentieth and now twenty-first century. Yet in the background of these encounters is the question of the Jewish future. What will the Jewish

future look like decades from now? Or has the Jewish future already arrived? What is that Jewish future? Is the Jewish future in continuity or discontinuity with the past? Or both?

In many ways I had been working on the question of the Jewish future for years, although not necessarily in those terms. I have read many studies on the Jewish future that focus on intermarriage and Jewish birth rates, essentially asking about the future of Jewish identity by noting how many Jews there are or will be in the coming years. After the Holocaust and living in open societies, the concern is obvious. If Jews have a chance to be whoever they want to be, will they choose to be Jewish? Other studies focus on the relation between Diaspora Jews and Israel (for example, how many American Jews visit Israel or what Israelis think of American Jews). Still other studies survey the American population and their views of Jews and Israel. What do Americans think of Jews? What do they think of Israel? Do Americans support the state of Israel and do they think that American foreign policy should tilt toward or away from Israel?

Since September 11, Islam has become firmly entrenched on the American and Jewish radar screen. How do non-Jews view Islam and how in their eyes do Jews fare when compared with Muslims? Has September 11 strengthened America's relationship with Israel or has it raised questions about that support. Since increasing parts of the world question America's special relationship with Israel, what do Americans think about that?

My focus has been different, as have the Jews I encounter here. For me, the question has always been the ethics of Judaism and Jewishness and how Jewish ethics can be brought to bear on Jews and the world. In my view, the issues of intermarriage and the Jewish birthrate pale in significance to these questions, as does polling on what others thinks of Jews and Israel. Perhaps it is naïve. I feel that the Jewish future has to do with the Jewish prophetic and how that prophetic comes alive in the world.

I believe that without the prophetic there is little reason to be Jewish. Perhaps this applies to Christianity and Islam as well. Nonetheless, ancient Israel bequeathed the prophetic to the world. The prophetic is indigenous to the Jewish people, our foundational principle. I believe that each Jewish generation faces the daunting task of renewing the prophetic.

I also know as a teacher, writer and public speaker, that Jews can be hard on those who carry the prophetic message in our time. Long ago I realized that although Jews hold the prophetic as our founding principle, we also are the great strugglers against the prophetic. Depending on one's perspective, it is either paradoxical or ironic that Jews embody the prophetic and attempt to limit or destroy it. Perhaps it is both.

All of the Jewish thinkers I encounter were framed by the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel survived Auschwitz and lost his family in the Holocaust. Abraham

Joshua Heschel fled Poland and lost his immediate family as well. Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt had to flee Germany. Emmanuel Levinas, born in Lithuania but already in France, was imprisoned during World War II. Though born in America, Richard Rubenstein wrote one of the first and most provocative books on the Holocaust and its meaning for contemporary Jews.

All of the Jewish thinkers I encounter were framed by the birth of the state of Israel. Though differing in some respects, all were Zionists. When Martin Buber fled Germany in the late 1930s, he went to Jerusalem where he lived until his death in 1965. Hannah Arendt, like Buber, as a homeland Zionist, wrote extensively about the possibility of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Elie Wiesel lived briefly in Israel after its birth in 1948 and has been a supporter ever since. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a lyrical and analytical book about Israel after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Like Richard Rubenstein, Emmanuel Levinas supported Israel throughout his life, though unlike Rubenstein, he worried about the challenges Israel brought to Jews and Judaism.

All of our Jewish thinkers were haunted by the prophetic. Especially Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Emmanuel Levinas wrote innovatively and beautifully about the prophetic tradition. If the prophetic Jewish tradition was alive in the twentieth century, these men defined it. Yet, as was the case with the Holocaust and Israel, they also worried about its survival. If it did survive, they worried what shape the prophetic might take in the future.

Though each of our Jewish thinkers primarily wrote on Jewish themes, they were also extraordinarily important to Christian thinkers, and indeed helped shape the future of Christian theology and life. Many were read and perhaps taken even more seriously by Christians than Jews. In the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel featured prominently in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Often they were written about by Christian theologians who attempted to chart a new path for Christianity after the Holocaust. In the 1980s and 1990s, Elie Wiesel took Buber's and Heschel's place in importance and soon was joined by Emmanuel Levinas. In the twenty-first century, Levinas has become an avatar for Christians searching out a relevant spirituality for our time.

Have I left out God? This may be the most dramatic part of our encounter. All except Hannah Arendt, who was secular, though in a delightfully Jewish way, wrote extensively about God and specifically the Jewish God of history. What Jews can say about God after the Holocaust is the driving question and an intense one as well. No one of our Jewish thinkers pretends to solve the God question yet their assertions are strong. Perhaps God and the prophetic can only be seen by Jewish thinkers in relation to the Holocaust and birth of the state of Israel. Still, they leave a legacy for the Jewish future. What will we say about God as the Jewish future dawns?

In encountering these Jewish thinkers, I re-encountered my own Jewishness. Although I have lived with these thinkers my entire adult life, they have come to me at distinct times and places and have impacted my life in different ways. All are perennials; they have something to say to us at different times. They are inspirational and more. Indeed, encountering them is often like entering a storm you did not envision, cannot control, and must somehow ride out. In the meantime, you are turned upside down and around. Over the years, I have been turned upside down and around by the men and women I write about in these pages. In writing this book, I have been turned upside down and around again.

I cannot relate my encounters without engaging aspects of my own life. I was born in the 1950s to a lower middle-class Jewish family in North Miami Beach, Florida. While attending public school during the day, I also attended Hebrew School in the afternoons and weekends. Since the area in which I lived was newly developed, there was only one Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood, which I attended until a Conservative synagogue was built. I received most of my Jewish education there, and in 1965, I became a Bar Mitzvah. Thus, my Jewish education took place before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

It was in the aftermath of that war that the state of Israel and the Holocaust became formative for Jewish identity. I grew up in a Jewish community that knew of the Holocaust and Israel, but where Rabbinic Judaism was still the guiding force in our training and worship. After the 1967 war, the foundations of Jewish identity changed precipitously. No one quite knew where that change would lead us. Entering Florida State University in 1970, I encountered Richard Rubenstein who had recently arrived there to teach in the religious studies. It was through him that I began to understand the centrality of the Holocaust to Jewish life and the tumult that followed.

It may feel like a time-warp to imagine that naming Jewish suffering in Europe as the "Holocaust" was controversial, yet this certainly was the case. Rubenstein was exiled to Tallahassee, Florida, because his views were so controversial. Through Rubenstein, I entered the controversy that surrounded him, not knowing then that this would be an omen for my own future. Years later I was forced into exile when I questioned Israel's policies toward Palestinians.

Instead of immediately going on for graduate studies, I travelled to New York City where I lived at the Catholic Worker house for a year. The Catholic Worker movement was founded in the 1930s, as an effort to stand by the unemployed of the Great Depression and to witness to a more Christian social order. The movement was thriving when I arrived at their house of hospitality in New York City in 1974. I lived at there, serving soup and bread to the homeless. My life among the poor was so difficult for me that I could only make sense of it by writing diaries and poetry. Later my writing was published as a book.

Unbeknownst to me a Maryknoll missionary priest bought the book in a New York bookstore to read as he travelled to Yemen for dialogue with Muslims. While completing my doctorate degree at Marquette University, I received an aerogram from this priest, which he wrote it in an airport in Saudi Arabia as he waited for his flight to Yemen. The priest recalled his experiences among the poor in Bolivia and how similar he found my experiences among the poor in New York City. I was ambivalent about how to respond. I wanted to teach others but was wary of a traditional academic environment. I wanted to teach people who were committed to those who were suffering in the world but I was suspicious of missionaries. I found out that Maryknoll was a place where commitment to the poor was emphasized. I asked him if the Maryknollers might have such a position for me. They did and I spent the next fifteen years there. My time at Maryknoll significantly expanded my view of the global community. It is unusual for anyone, let alone a Jew, to have the experiences I had.

Looking back, as a post-Holocaust Jew, I encountered suffering in the contemporary world. I also experienced the commitment that accompanied that suffering. During the years at the Catholic Worker and Maryknoll, I met and spent time with Dorothy Day and the many of the luminaries of the world of liberation theology. I think especially of my encounters with the Catholic feminist, Rosemary Radford Ruether, the Black liberation theologian, James Cone, and the Peruvian father of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez.

While at Maryknoll, two Maryknoll sisters and a lay worker who had trained at Maryknoll were brutally raped and murdered in El Salvador. Commitment is a serious business and many of the students I taught were in harm's way. My encounter at the Catholic Worker and Maryknoll challenged my own commitments as a Jew. What were the challenges ahead for us as Jews?

The Holocaust loomed large in my life and in my community. So did the state of Israel. Yet during the time I was at Maryknoll, Israel became increasingly entangled in building and maintaining settlements in the Palestinian territories it conquered in the 1967 war. During the early 1980s, Israel invaded Lebanon and bombed civilian areas of Beirut. As the decade came to a close, Israel crushed the Palestinian uprising that sought the creation of a Palestinian state. I found it difficult to witness the commitment of Christians to justice and peace without asking myself if I were willing to risk making my own commitment on behalf of the Jewish and, yes, Palestinian people.

For financial reasons, Maryknoll closed the doors of its theological school in 1995. I spent time at Harvard as a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions and then as a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. In 1998, I was approached by Baylor University to become University Professor of Jewish Studies.

Like Maryknoll, Baylor is also intentionally Christian in its identity. Yet there are significant differences in their Christian background and outlook. Maryknoll is Catholic and quite progressive in its outlook. Baylor is Baptist and moderate, even conservative. Whereas Maryknoll attracted students primarily interested in social justice work and how faith guided the practice of justice, Baylor is more evangelical in its orientation. For many of my Baylor students, practicing Christianity is seeking the conversion of others to Jesus Christ as Lord. Whereas at Maryknoll, wealth and power were analyzed critically within the context of the international political and economic world order, at Baylor such wealth and power is often seen as a deserved blessing bestowed by God. Furthermore, the Catholic tradition has undergone a severe revision in light of its history of anti-Semitism, and there is now a recognized and positive status for Jews in Catholic faith and life. In parts of the conservative Protestant tradition, especially in the Bible Belt, much less work has been done in this regard.

When I arrived at Baylor in 1998, I was the first Jew the university had hired in such a prestigious position. Soon I founded a Center for Jewish Studies which flourishes today. I teach courses on the Holocaust, Jewish Philosophy, Modern Judaism and Liberation Theology, as well as writing and lecturing around the world.

Meanwhile, the ethical behavior of the state of Israel continues to deteriorate. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Jewish future is hotly contested. After this long history of suffering and struggle are Jews destined to become conquerors and oppressors? Or, with our history in mind, can we change direction?

The Jewish future will be determined by our response to these questions. Encountering those in the recent past who have dealt with these questions as they came into being is enlightening. It forces us to think through our own presuppositions, our own point of arrival. Only then can we begin again.