
The View of a Maverick Pacifist and Universalist: Rabbi Abraham Cronbach's Plea for Clemency for Nazi War Criminals in 1945

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Early in 1945, having helplessly witnessed the slaughter of six million brethren in German-occupied Europe, Jews in the United States and other Allied nations impatiently watched the progress of General Dwight Eisenhower's forces and awaited the destruction of the Third Reich's murderous regime. A great many American Jews inwardly endorsed the proposals of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., for the partition, deindustrialization, and "pastoralization" of the defeated Nazi enemy in order to eliminate the German menace after two great wars in which the United States had fought against Germany.

There persisted, of course, the traditional differences between the more activist pro-Zionist mass organizations, the pro-socialist Jewish Labor Committee, and the influential moderates of the acculturated American Jewish establishment; and these would all subsequently reappear with regard to the Jewish position on postwar Germany. Yet in 1945 basically all Jewish groups were united in a quest for the rigorous punishment of Nazi criminals, the thorough denazification of German elites and party officials, the eradication of anti-Semitism and racism, as well as for collective restitution and individual compensation for the survivors. At least emotionally, the great majority of American Jewry endorsed the concept of the collective guilt of the German people.¹

One of the outstanding exceptions to this rather broad consensus was Rabbi Abraham Cronbach (1882–1965), a graduate of Hebrew Union College (HUC), who since 1922 had been serving as professor of social studies at HUC in Cincinnati. During World War I Cronbach had become an ardent pacifist, and throughout his career he contin-

ued to work for pacifist causes. In 1924 Cronbach tried unsuccessfully to establish a specifically Jewish pacifist organization, and he persisted in his efforts despite Hitler's ascent to power in 1933; in 1935 he called for a conference between Nazis and Jews in Philadelphia for the purpose of "reconciliation." Throughout World War II Cronbach supported conscientious objectors, and in 1942 he helped found the Jewish Peace Fellowship, which he described as a "religious organization of Jewish persons who believe war to be as futile as it is fiendish."²

Even before the war had come to its conclusion Cronbach addressed letters to the leaders of the major Jewish organizations—the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Conference, and the American Jewish Committee—asking that they refrain from seeking punishment of Nazi war criminals. Cronbach did not use his printed stationery for these letters because it contained the name of HUC and "neither at HUC nor anywhere else" did he find people who seconded his proposal. Cronbach does not seem to have placed great hopes in the impact of his plea. Still he found it necessary to appeal to Rabbi Stephen Wise, Henry Monsky, and Judge Joseph M. Proskauer in favor of clemency for the Nazi dignitaries:

My wish relates to those Nazi and Nazi dominated officials who are being brought to trial and who will be brought to trial for the cruelties perpetrated against the Jews.

This is my wish: That the Jews might beseech clemency for their tormentors and the slayers of their people. I can fancy organized Jewry represented at the trials by someone authorized to speak as follows:

"We Jews have suffered inordinately. Neither our own tragic history nor that of any other people contains any precedent to the afflictions which we have lately undergone.

All that we Jews ask is surcease of our sufferings. All that we crave is that Jews all the world over be guaranteed freedom, equality, and opportunity and that they be forever shielded against antisemitism.

We seek human rights not only for Jews. We seek them for all men everywhere. To seek them for the Jews alone would be self-defeating as well as ignoble.

The unspeakable miseries which have come upon the world follow a certain pattern with dismal uniformity, the pattern, namely, of retaliation—retaliation for grievances real or imaginary.

That vicious circle of retaliation and counterretaliation must be broken. Otherwise there is no hope for the world. We Jews hereby offer to break that vicious circle. Organized into associations officially represented here, we urge clemency for these defendants."³

Cronbach and Wise

During World War I, from 1915 to 1917, Cronbach had served as assistant rabbi for the downtown branch of Stephen Wise's Free Synagogue. But whereas Cronbach's pacifist convictions deepened due to the carnage in Europe, Wise's attitude changed after America entered the war in April 1917.⁴ There was no meeting of the minds between them in the thirties. No wonder that Wise could not stomach Cronbach's far-reaching forgiveness. He reminded Cronbach that the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress had refrained from asking that the "tormentors and slayers be not dealt with as they have dealt with our brothers and sisters, from the oldest to the youngest," yet

in order to seem or to be unvindictive . . . we dare not forget the millions—not tens or hundreds or thousands!—who have suffered unmeasured agony because of the assumption that crimes against Jews are an incurable habit of the non-Jewish world. . . .

It is true that we owe something to the good opinion of mankind, but we also owe something to our tortured brothers. Your use of the phrase, "retaliation for grievances, real or imaginary," indicates to me that your abhorrence of tales of bloodshed is such that you have not given yourself the opportunity to know the unbelievable facts—the incineration of the living, the burying alive of the half dead, the organized raping and befouling of women, the gathering of naked men and women in fields to be shot down in trenches dug by the victims.

The supremely important thing is not that we exhibit clemency, but that the world deal so sternly, withal justly, with the arch criminals that men shall never again be tempted to deal in this inhuman fashion with any group of human beings.⁵

Two days later Wise dispatched another letter to Cronbach. He told him of a cable he had just received from a Latvian Zionist leader, Rabbi Dr. Marcus (Mordecai) Nurock, who had survived in Tashkent, but whose family had been "murdered by Fascist cannibals." With a whiff of irony Wise suggested that Cronbach should write to Nurock in the terms of the letter he had addressed to him, and "get the response of a high-minded and noble Jew" to his proposal.⁶ Cronbach on his part did not hesitate to submit to Nurock a copy of his letter to Wise.⁷

Henry Monsky, the president of B'nai B'rith, who had been instru-

mental in convening the American Jewish Conference in 1943 and subsequently served as one of the three cochairmen of its Interim Committee, stated in his response to Cronbach's letter that the experience of the last decade called "for much more realism" than was implicit in Cronbach's suggestion.

There is serious question in my mind whether the unspeakable crimes against morality, decency, and the conscience of mankind can be condoned without violation of the requirements of good morals. I am not for and do not seek retaliation or revenge. I do believe, however, that the failure to bring to the bar of justice those who have been responsible for crimes of indecency and morality, unprecedented in the whole history of the human race, would in and of itself be unmoral and such attitude and procedure would hardly be conducive to the kind of postwar world to which you and I and all like minded persons aspire.⁸

Cronbach and Lipman

Rabbi Cronbach also espoused his opposition to punishing the Germans in an interesting exchange of letters with a student of his, Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, at that time a chaplain with the 4th Armored Division. Lipman later on was to be appointed rabbi of Washington's Temple Sinai congregation and became known as a leading opponent of the Vietnam War and a peace activist.

The then youngish chaplain reported to his revered teacher that because of his visits to the Dachau concentration camp and to other camps in the area, it was his feeling,

that there is no sense of remorse in the people we meet here, no realization that the 12 years of Nazi domination involved any inhumanity or activity contrary to the welfare of the human family. . . . It is also my feeling that Germans now expect to be treated as subject people—and they want it that way. There is no desire for friendship or love.

The basic question is this: how can we apply the principle of healing by love, or re-education by kindness, of future peace by being nice to people who don't want us to be nice to them, who scorn us when we are, who utilize every effort to show their contempt for every manifestation of what we call kindness?⁹

Cronbach was not convinced by Lipman's observations on the spot. He stressed in his reply that he could imagine

no more egregious psychological error than that of expecting people to be repentant. Why should people repent of doing that which they believe to be right? The inquisitors expected the Jews to repent of their adherence to Judaism. Slave-holders expected abolitionists to repent of their attitude on slavery. Saloon keepers expected prohibitionists to repent. Labor baitors expect labor leaders to repent. The Germans were doing exactly what we were doing, namely, striving to win the war. Why should they repent of that for which we ourselves see no reason to repent? . . . Dachau and Buchenwald and all the rest are, of course, ghastly beyond all description. What they prove, however, is not that the Germans are worse than we are; our bombers were hardly paragons of mercy. What they prove is something that we have known for a long time, namely, that war is hell. Those concentration infernos, like the bombing infernos, simply illustrate that war is war and that every war entails illimitable cruelty. The Germans, of course, erred in that they engaged in war. But we also engaged in war.¹⁰

The HUC professor of social studies reiterated his opposition “to all wars and to all persecutions and all inflictions of man by man.” But he did not convince the “young and innocent mind” of his student. In spite of their shared attitude that people should not suffer and their common support for peace, they differed functionally. In case either Germans or the liberated Jews must live on an insufficient diet, it made better sense to Lipman “to have Jews get the adequate diet while Germans eat less for a while.” Moreover, he was disappointed with German behavior since the end of the war: they had no intellectual integrity, no moral stamina, and “their women . . . are more companionable sexually than any group of whores in America.”

Lipman also disagreed basically with his teacher on the background of the Dachau and Buchenwald horrors:

They are in no way connected with the organized terror we called the war. Thousands of people died in those camps years before the war started, not to help win the war for Germany, but because part of the fascist philosophy is a complete disdain for the sacredness of life. We killed in war, to get the war over with. The Nazis killed before the war, to make their will absolute. Ours was less an irreligious or immoral act; relatively it was a long-range necessity. . . . I personally took sides in the conflict because Nazism as a way of life was relatively more evil to me than the taking of lives to return the political controls of the world to those who might possibly do away with it.

His conclusion was that the American “choice to go to war was relatively less evil than a decision to let fascism rule the world.”¹¹

American Jewish Archives
The American Council for Judaism

Not surprisingly, Cronbach, a pacifist and anti-national universalist, was among the members of the HUC faculty who in 1942 joined the American Council for Judaism, which was formed by anti-Zionist members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis who had been defeated on the Zionist issue in the organization. The Council, which appealed especially to well-established Reform Jews of German ethnic origin, saw as its main task the countering of Zionist pressure on the American government and Zionist influence in American society. But it was also held in high esteem by nationalist German emigrés in the United States. The fact that they opposed the Hitler regime did not necessarily make them pro-Jewish. Despite having fled from the Nazi Reich in the thirties, these temporary exiles preserved their loyalty to the German homeland, opposed President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policies, looked for allies in the Republican party and the conservative camp, and fought the Morgenthau clan as well as the collective-guilt concept.¹²

Leading spokesmen of the Council such as Lessing J. Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck & Co and Rabbi Morris S. Lazaron were approached by one of the top right-wing exiles, Prince Hubertus zu Loewenstein, who after returning to Germany served in the Bundestag first as a member of the Free Democrat party, later as a member of the nationalist German Party, and finally as a member of the Christian Democratic Union. Loewenstein suggested that a group of prominent Jewish leaders make "an appeal . . . for immediate relief for German people" and provide assistance "regardless of race and creed." At the same time he warned that

a very unwise policy, connected prominently with the names of Mr. Morgenthau, Mr. Baruch and others, and promoted by ill-advised minor but influential figures, is apt to re-create, or rather, to create a wave of antisemitism, more profound, and, I am sorry to say, more genuine, than ever before. Under nazism antisemitism was artificially imposed. Now it may, due to hopelessness and resentment, become a popular movement. And not just in Germany, but in many other European countries as well.¹³

Loewenstein was disappointed by Rabbi Lazaron's vague response and his refusal to take up commitments, although Lazaron empha-

sized that he was opposed to "any unnecessary suffering Germany." Yet right-wing German exiles continued to praise the moderate attitude of the American Council for Judaism.¹⁴ In a report to the Büro für Friedensfragen (Office of Peace Questions) in Stuttgart, an organization that preceded the Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany, Alexander Böker, soon to return permanently to his fatherland and to join the staff of Herbert Blankenhorn, Adenauer's closest adviser on foreign affairs in the first years of his chancellorship, praised the virtues of the Council as compared to the hostile "three quarters Nazi" Zionists and their pathological hatred of Germany.¹⁵

Fortunately, neither Böker nor other German officials maintained this false appraisal of the anti-Zionist Council's influence on American Jewry. A year later the same Böker, although not expecting any quick reconciliation with the American Jewish community, defined the issue of Germany's relationship to American Jewry as one of the most important tasks of German foreign policy and pointed to the fact that Bonn's relations with the new State of Israel as well as payment of restitution could positively affect the attitude of American Jews to Germany.¹⁶ That forecast was correct. It was neither Abraham Cronbach's readiness to forgive the Nazi criminals nor the "moderation" of his colleagues from the assimilationist American Council for Judaism that affected this most sensitive area of German-American relations. It was rather the Federal Republic's partial recognition of its historic responsibility, and its readiness to start compensating the survivors of the Holocaust and to help the State of Israel by restitution payments and other means, which paved the way for a slow improvement of the attitude of American Jews toward postwar Germany.

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Notes

1. The author is preparing a monograph regarding the attitude of the American Jewish community toward postwar Germany. He started work on that subject as a research fellow of the American Jewish Archives (hereafter AJA) in 1987-1988.

2. Among others, I relied upon the biographical sketch attached to the Abraham Cronbach Papers at the AJA, Cincinnati, Ohio.

3. Abraham Cronbach to Stephen S. Wise, March 18, 1945, Stephen S. Wise Papers, American Jewish Historical Society Archives (hereafter AJHSA), Waltham, Mass., Box 82.

4. Melvin I. Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 83, 152-153.

5. Wise to Cronbach, March 26, 1945, Wise Papers, AJHSA, Box 82.

6. Wise to Cronbach, March 28, 1945, *ibid.*

7. Cronbach to Wise, April 1, 1945, *ibid.*

8. Henry Monsky to Cronbach, March 28, 1945, Cronbach Papers, AJA, Box 3/3.

9. Eugene J. Lipman to Cronbach, June 14, 1945, *ibid.*, Box 3/2.

10. Cronbach to Lipman, June 24, 1945, *ibid.*

11. Lipman to Cronbach, October 31, 1945, *ibid.*

12. See, for instance, the wide-ranging correspondence of Hubertus Friedrich Prinz zu Loewenstein-Wertheim-Freudenberg. Loewenstein Papers at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, 29, 29a, 30 and 30a.

13. Loewenstein to Morris S. Lazaron and to Lessing J. Rosenwald, both November 2, 1945, Loewenstein Papers, 30 and 30a. Loewenstein also dispatched a similar letter to Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, who promised to discuss the matter with Clarence F. Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee. *Ibid.*, 30.

14. For Lazaron's response, see Loewenstein's letter to one of his exile correspondents, November 19, 1945, *ibid.*, 30a.

15. Alexander Böker, report to the Büro für Friedensfragen, February 1949, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Collection Büro für Friedensfragen, 457. Böker, a Rhodes scholar who had spent several years at Oxford and had returned to Germany, left his country for the United States. He completed his Ph.D at Harvard University in the early forties and was close to former Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who was teaching there.

16. Alexander Böker, report on the American position on Germany, January 15, 1950, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn, II 210-01/80. Böker pointed to the change of mind of Bernard Baruch, who in 1945 had supported the Morgenthau's ideas, and attributed the improved attitude toward Germany of Jewish conservatives to the anti-communist trend, this in addition to an objective and more sympathetic stand by trade union and labor-oriented Jewish groups. Despite some knowledge of the Jewish scene, Böker confused the American Jewish Committee and its monthly *Commentary* with the American Council for Judaism.