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Chapter 1

The Problem of Edith Stein: Jewess and Catholic Saint

Zev Garber

Edith Stein was born in 1891 to a wealthy Jewish family in Breslau (now part of Poland and known as Wroclaw).¹ She studied philosophy at the University of Gottingen and earned a doctorate in 1916. She became an atheist, but in 1922, inspired by a biography of St. Teresa of Avila, she was baptized as a Catholic and, eleven years later, she joined the Cologne Carmelite convent as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In the same year, she started her autobiography entitled *Life in a Jewish Family*.

In 1938, she wrote to the Pope and urged him to condemn the Nazis for the attacks on Jewish synagogues and Jewish businesses in an event known as Kristallnacht, "Night of the Broken Glass" (November 9 and 10, 1938). Not long afterward, her order sent her to Echt, in the Netherlands, where it was thought she would be safer than in Germany.

In the early morning of May 10, 1940, the Germans marched into Holland and ushered in the period of occupation. Two years later, the Dutch Catholic bishops protested the Nazi authorities' transportation of Jews to concentration camps in Eastern Europe. In reprisal, the Germans ruled that Jewish converts to Catholicism were to be seized and sent to the camps.

On August 2, 1942, Sister Teresa was arrested at the Carmelite convent at Echt, along with her sister Rosa. A week later, they were both

dead, gassed at Auschwitz.

Catholic authorities say that Edith Stein, "died as a daughter of Israel, 'for the glorification of the most holy name (of God)' and at the same time as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross."² There is no doubt that she died as a Christian; but can a "baptized Jew" qualify as a Jew? Eugene J. Fisher, Executive Secretary of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (Catholic-Jewish Relations) of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), believes so and he points out that, "there does exist Orthodox *halachic* opinion that one who is born Jewish does not cease to be a Jew, albeit an apostate Jew, simply by conversion to another faith, even Christianity."³

However, a careful reading of the *halachah* in the name of R. Avda bar Zavda (Sanh. 44a) says otherwise. For it is said (Josh 7:11), "Israel has sinned," meaning that even though *one has sinned* [italics added] one is still an Israelite. This applies in the case of all these forced converts who at heart are still loyal to God and Torah. Forced converts to Christianity during the days of the First Crusade (1096-1105) and during the period of persecutions in Spain qualify. Their historic experience, sooner or later, permitted them, some secretly and some openly, to renounce the vows imposed upon them by persecutions and by the Inquisition. When they returned to Judaism, they were accepted as Jews *who have sinned* in the past.

The decision of Edith Stein to leave Judaism cannot be considered as an act of forced abandonment from her ancestral faith. She voluntarily chose, "a change of name and street where she lives."⁴ Her apostasy is one of essence; it is not accidental. And the Church does not deny this: The entire course of Edith's life is formed by an unremitting search for truth, elucidated by the benediction of the cross. The message was first revealed to her in the person of a fellow-student's widow, who, deeply religious, didn't despair when confronted with the loss of her husband, but obtained strength and confidence out of the cross. Later Edith will write conferring to this experience, "that was my first meeting with the cross, with the strength of God, which is communicated to the ones who carry it ... In this moment, my disbelief was destroyed and Jesus Christ appeared in his glory, Jesus Christ in the secret of the cross."⁵

However, the responsibility of resolving the age-old question, "Who is a Jew?" lies with Jewish decision and not Christian opinion.⁶ The fundamental assertion of Jewish self-definition may be seen in Exod 24:7, where Moses read before the people from the book of the covenant (*berith*) and they responded, "all that the Lord has spoken we shall do and obey (*na'aseh ve-nishma*')." ⁷

The mixture of religion and nationality is particularly noteworthy in Judaism's basic creed of monotheism, "Hear O' Israel, the Lord our

God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4), where "Israel" refers to nation and "one" to God. Also, the Decalogue is introduced by an historical note, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). Thus, the Torah's designation of Israel as '*am* (people) suggests '*im* (together), and '*am Yisrael* is the people Israel held together by religion and nationality.

Irrespective of intra-Jewish interpretation, the *Halachah* understanding of Jewishness is hereditary or *halachic* conversion (individuality), historic experience (group memory), and Torah acceptance (divine legislation). If one lives by the latter alone (e.g., an ethical monotheist who follows the covenant of Noah), s/he is not a Jew; but if one is of the former, s/he is considered a Jew, albeit not an ideal *halachicly* defined Jew.

To identify with the Jewish People (*guf* = body) and not practice the Jewish religion (*neshama* = soul) is not grounds for group or self-excommunication. However, to proclaim Jewish ethnicity and to practice voluntarily another religious sancta (e.g., Christianity) is grounds for self and group removal from Jewish identity. Paradoxically, according to *Halachah*, Edith Stein in her state of disbelief (from the tenets of Judaism) is considered a Jew, but in her decision to convert to Catholicism and later join the Carmelite order at Cologne, she has removed herself from the Jewish fold. She has substituted one bridal garland for another, "marriage to the Lord under the symbol of the Cross" (Church expression on becoming a nun) in place of the threefold marriage espousal recited daily in Jewish worship, a symbol of the devotion and affection between God and Israel (see Hos 2:21-22).⁷

Stein's biographers and defenders claim that she remained loyal to her Jewish roots and publicly proclaimed her Jewish identity, as a form of protest against virulent German antisemitism.⁸ In this regard, her case is similar to Oswald Rufeisin (b. 1920), who became a Christian in 1942 and entered the Carmelite order as Brother Daniel in 1945.⁹ His appeal to become a citizen of Israel under the Law of Return, and based on Jewish birth, Zionist activity, and active resistance against the Nazis was denied on the ordinary secular usage of the term "Jew" as understood by Israel's Supreme Court. The comments of Judge Silberg, speaking for the Court, are instructive:

I have reached the conclusion that what Brother Daniel is asking us to do is to erase the historical and sanctified significance of the term "Jew" and to deny all spiritual values for which our people were killed during various periods in our long dispersion. For us to comply with his request would mean to dim the luster and darken the glory of the martyrs who sanctified the Holy Name (*Kiddush ha-Shem*) in the Middle Ages to the extent of making them quite unrecognizable; it would make our history

lose its unbroken continuity and our people counting its days from emancipation which followed the French Revolution. A sacrifice such as this no one is entitled to ask of us, even one so meritorious as the petitioner before this court.¹⁰

The signal from the highest judicial body in the Jewish state is decisive: a modern definition of a Jew encompasses both religious and national dimensions. The decision affects Brother Daniel, Sister Teresa and any Jew by birth who has become a Christian. Yet Eugene J. Fisher suggested that Edith Stein was, "simply one more Jew to be murdered by bureaucratic efficiency."¹¹ Thus, may her sin of apostasy be considered as null and void in light of her victimization and martyrdom, let alone her declared Jewish (*guf*) identity?

Judaism's regard for human life (*pikuah nefesh*) permits under circumstances of pain and death violations of most commandments. Under no circumstances, however, may the three cardinal sins be willingly entertained: idolatry (apostasy), unchastity (incest, adultery) and murder (Sanh. 74a). The dispensation of sins brought about by acts of Jewish martyrdom embrace "normal" transgressions (Sabbath ordinances, dietary laws, rites of passage, etc.) and do not contain the serious offenses against man and God. Some authorities permit forced apostasy in private, i.e., less than ten Jews (male and/or female), in order to save one's life.¹² But Edith Stein's choice of Christianity was not coerced nor did she celebrate her conversion privately. In a prayer, she confesses to her savior, "that it is his cross, which now be imposed on the Jewish People."¹³ By the most lenient stretch of Jewish compassion, Edith Stein, an individual, is a martyred Jewish victim; ironically, however, the Church's beatification and now sainthood makes her a blessed symbol of the Cross thereby declaring she *was* a Jew.

The words and actions of Edith Stein bear testimony to her Christian advocacy: expiatory sacrificial offering, imitating his *Heilig Blut* ("Holy Blood"), for the atonement of the Jewish People. No wonder the Church has seen fit to beatify her as the quintessential Shoah martyr: she was of Jewish birth and loyal to the Jewish People; a confessor of human sins, which, according to the teachings of the Church, helped crucify Jesus; and a participant in the "theology of suffering," who was redeemed by the self-sacrifice inherent in Christ-like creeds and deeds.

Consequently, knowingly or unknowingly, Pope Paul John II inserted the controversial concept of *Veritas Israel* in his homily during the beatification ceremony on May 1, 1987, when he made reference to the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at a place tradition calls Jacob's well:

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father

neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know, we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.¹⁴

By representing Edith Stein as a great daughter of the Jewish People who was among the tortured millions, and by insisting upon the word *Shoah* and not Holocaust as the term of record for the Judeocide during World War II, the Church is confirming the inextricable connection between Israel and the Great Catastrophe. But it is in the gestures and words of Edith Stein and the Church's understanding of her martyrdom that major obstacles bordering on a supersessionist Christology continue to exist:

- ♦ Edith Stein has devoted her life to the honor and glorification of Christ, especially for the preservation and fulfillment of her order, namely the Cologne and Echt Carmelites, and for the sins of the, "unbelieving Jewish people."

- ♦ In a number of personal prayers, she likened herself to Queen Esther, "I am only a helpless poor little Esther, but the king, I was chosen by, he is infinitely great and merciful."¹⁵ Relief and deliverance for Edith's biblical namesake comes from an unnamed "another place" (Esth 4:14). But Edith has, "confidence in the act that the Lord has taken my life in exchange for all (the Jews)."¹⁶

- ♦ Edith died with the people of her birth and she is reported to have said to her sister, also a convert to Catholicism, "Let us go, we will go (die) for our people."¹⁷

- ♦ In her last will, written some years before her death, she wrote, "With joy I will accept now the death which God already intended for me, being entirely subject to his most holy will."¹⁸

We suggest, with all deference, that the Church and the Jewish People can agree that the courage and passion of Edith Stein should help Christians learn the lessons of *Shoah* though their theology of redemption differ. For the Church, it is the Easter faith, spirit over matter, that enables victory to be proclaimed over Golgotha and Auschwitz. For the Synagogue, it is the covenant at Sinai, uniting spirit and matter and resulting in everyday acts of holiness, that permits Zion to triumph over Auschwitz. Recognition of this difference may lessen the Jewish objection to Pope John Paul II's homily in his advocacy for the canonization of a "Jewish" nun. Indeed, Eugene J. Fisher has communicated to Dr. Erlinda Bragado, of De La Salle University (Manila, Philippines) that there is now a body of educational material on Edith Stein that, "do not go in the direction either of conversionism or of triumphalism vis-a-vis

Judaism. Nor do they seek to absorb the Shoah and transform it into a Catholic event. Rather they become a point of entry for discussing the evil that baptized gentiles perpetrated against Jews.¹⁹

We maintain that the Church and Synagogue are paths to the reign of God, but not identical – a sound position recommended to all who take seriously the doctrine of religious diversity in speaking of *Shoah* today.²⁰

Respect (Jewish People) and veneration (Church) for the life of Edith Stein is a start²¹; we must now move beyond the icon.

Notes

1. A longer version of this essay appears as Chapter Five in Zev Garber, *Shoah, The Paradigmatic Genocide* (Lanham: UPA, 1994).

2. John Paul II, *On the Holocaust*, selected and introduced by Eugene J. Fisher (NCCB, Washington, D.C., 1988), p. 8.

3. *Ecumenical Trends*, February 1988, p. 25.

4. Title description of “forced ones” (Marranos) in the Responsa of R. Isaac b. Moses Arama (1420-1494).

5. *NC News Service*, May 4, 1987, p. 23. These words are from the 3,100 word homily in German given by Pope Paul John II at the mass for the beatification of Edith Stein in Cologne, May 1, 1987.

6. Eugene J. Fisher’s e-mail to the author, 26 October 1997, conceded this point.

7. “And I (God) will betroth thee (Israel) for ever; Yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving kindness, and in mercy; I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: And thou shall know the Lord.” (Hos 2:21-22)

8. See Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust* (Penn State University Press, 1997) for a selection of books on Edith Stein and commentary.

9. On the life of Oswald Rufeisin, see Nechama Tec, *In the Lion’s Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

10. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 3, p. 209.

11. *Ecumenical Trends*, February 1988, p. 25.

12. Major *poskim* (rabbinic authorities) differ as to when *Kiddush ha-Shem* is more praiseworthy (Tos. Av. Zar. 27b) than preserving life (*pikkuah nefesh*; “he shall live by them [commandments],” Lev 18:5). Maimonides ruled that in times of religious persecution of the entire community, one must choose for the Sanctification of the God’s Name and one must not violate any commandment (Maim., *Yad, Yesodei ha-Torah*, 5:3). The talmudic principle of logic, *kal va-homer* (“inference from minor to major or from major to minor”), clearly rules against voluntary apostasy in times of persecution and (how much more so) in “normal” times.

13. *NC News Service*, May 4, 1987, p. 23.

14. John 4:22-24. *Ibid.*, p. 26

15. *NC News Service*, May 4, 1987, p. 23.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

19. Communication, 4 February 1998, by e-mail.

20. “Religious diversity,” the Nuremberg Laws and Nazi diplomacy may well explain why Rachel Feldhay Brenner and Nechamah Tec have no problem in seeing Edith Stein and Brother Daniel as Jews. In light of my discussion of *halachah*, I do.

21. In May of 1997, ten years after her beatification, the last hurdle for the canonization of Edith Stein cleared when Pope John Paul II on the recommendation of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints recognized that a miracle had occurred as a result of her intercession. The miracle involved the remarkable healing of young Theresa Benedicta McCarthy in a Massachusetts Jewish hospital. Further, Edith Stein is, “the first Blessed in the history of the Church to pass both the ‘heroic virtue’ and martyrdom tests” (Eugene J. Fisher communication, 4 February 1998, by e-mail). The formal canonization ceremonies are scheduled for October 11, 1998, corresponding with the seventh day of Succot (“Tabernacles”) in the “Season of Our Joy” 5759.