



YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

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Yossi Klein Halevi is a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He co-directs the Institute's Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), which teaches emerging young Muslim American leaders about Judaism, Jewish identity, and Israel. Over 150 Muslim leaders have participated in this unique program.

He is co-host, with Donniel Hartman and Elana Stein Hain, of the Hartman Institute's podcast, "For Heaven's Sake."

Halevi's 2013 book, *Like Dreamers*, won the Jewish Book Council's Everett Book of the Year Award. His latest book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, is a New York Times bestseller and has appeared in a dozen languages.

He has written for leading op-ed pages in North America and is a former contributing editor to the "New Republic." He is frequently quoted on Israeli, Middle Eastern, and Jewish affairs in media around the world, and is one of the best-known lecturers on Israeli issues in the American Jewish community and on North American campuses.

He is the recipient of the 2019 "Figure of Reconciliation" Award of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews.

Born in Brooklyn, he received his BA in Jewish Studies from Brooklyn College, and his MS in Journalism from Northwestern University.

He moved to Israel in 1982, and lives in Jerusalem with wife, Sarah, who helps to direct a center for Jewish meditation. They have three children.

The Holocaust and Faith

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However counter-intuitive, my faith in God began with the Holocaust.

I grew up in Borough Park, a Brooklyn neighborhood of Holocaust survivors who were rebuilding, in microcosm, the destroyed world of European Orthodoxy. Their motive wasn't so much faith as loyalty to the Jewish people, to their martyred parents, and to future generations. Yet in reconstructing a world of faith, they were ensuring that God remained part of the Jewish story.

After the war, my father, a survivor from Hungary, abandoned Jewish observance for a time. "God didn't deserve our prayers," he exclaimed. Older, I realized that his rebellion was in fact a peculiarly Jewish affirmation of faith. My father wasn't doubting God's existence; his refusal to pray was an act of protest. Precisely because God was all-powerful, God could have prevented the Holocaust.

My galvanizing moment of faith happened sometime around my bar mitzvah, when I first saw the now-famous photograph of a Jew, wearing prayer shawl and tefillin, surrounded by laughing SS men who are presumably about to shoot him. I understood that photograph as a theological disputation between two opposing worldviews: The German soldiers were insisting on an empty universe, without moral accountability, while the Jew was affirming an intentionally created world. I trusted the Jew as the more dependable witness on the nature of reality.

The very persistence of faith was its own vindication. The Nazis had taken up the pagan taunt against the Jews: Where is your invisible God? The answer of the survivors among whom I grew up was: Here God is, in our stubborn loyalty.

Most of all, the religious survivors believed in the existence and endurance of the soul. Their families and friends had been taken from them only temporarily; the reach of evil was limited to this world. Growing up, I wasn't clear about what we meant by "God," but I knew that my existence wasn't limited to a body.

The Holocaust simultaneously kept me grounded in this world – as a Jew, I needed to be constantly alert to threat, preoccupied with survival – while reminding me of its inherent absurdity. The Holocaust was an event so strange, so irrational, that it upended my faith in reason and taught me to mistrust the world as experienced by the senses alone. I suspected – intuitively knew – that there must be more.

Both the nihilist and the mystic share the same starting point: This world of suffering and death is absurd. But where the nihilist surrenders to the madness, the mystic seeks an alternative reality. Studying the mystical teachings of Judaism as well as of other religions, confirmed by insights from physics about the deceptive solidity of the physical world, I was led to contemplative meditation.

The spiritual path insists that faith alone is no substitute for experience. Meditation offered me a glimpse into an expanded reality, a fluid world of energy and light, in which what replaces fragmented consciousness is the experience of oneness that we call God. Beyond that point is silence.