Jew and Christians on Forgiveness: Response to The Sunflower

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JEWS AND CHRISTIANS ON FORGIVENESS:
RESPONSE TO THE SUNFLOWER

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Six million Jews dead. Not from a natural disaster. Not the result of fighting for their freedom. But because they existed, because they were someone to blame, because they were different, because they were “the other,” the impure, the less than human. Who is to blame? Hitler and the Nazis. But is that answer enough? As Daniel Goldhagen states, “It has been generally believed by scholars (at least until very recently and non-scholars alike that the perpetrators were primarily, overwhelmingly SS men, the most devoted and brutal Nazis.”¹ These “most devoted and brutal Nazis” were only able to do what they did because of the advanced technology that enabled the creation of gas chambers, modern means of transportation, and efficient bureaucracies. The Nazis were brainwashed, were threatened with death themselves, were simply obeying authorities, were unaware that their individual actions were part of such a horrific event.² Individual responsibility of each person who abused and murdered or stood by without taking any sort of action is pushed under the rug. We forget “and the Nazis” and don’t even consider the guilt of the bystanders who watched with silent passivity. And then we ask the Jews to forgive.

Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, was asked to forgive. His situation represents one of the most perplexing cases. While Simon was being forced to labor in a Nazi hospital as a concentration camp inmate, a dying Nazi officer, Karl, confessed what he had done to Jews whom Simon didn’t know and asked Simon to forgive him so that he could die in peace. Simon walks away without a word, but is haunted by the memory of Karl. He goes back and forth on whether he made the right decision to not forgive him, to leave silently. Simon records his experience in his book, The Sunflower, ending his account by directly addressing the

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² Ibid.
reader: “You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the curial question, ‘What would I have done?’”

What would you do if you had seen loved ones killed in front of your eyes? Countless tortured simply for you they were? Men, women, and children forced into a building that was then lit on fire and, when they risked jumping out of the window of the flaming building, shot before they hit the ground? And then a man who had participated in this destruction of human beings asked you to forgive him? Many people have tried to answer this question. While acknowledging their inability to fully understand Simon’s position as they were never in it, they examine the place and requirements of forgiveness. A key determining factor in an individual’s response to Simon, their definition and requirements of forgiveness, and their understanding and responsibility to forgive is their religious faith. Simon Wiesenthal’s account in The Sunflower and the conversations it evokes reveals not only the complexity of forgiveness but also the different conclusions Jews and Christians reach when approaching the issue through the lens of faith. For Jews, forgiveness demands restitution by the perpetrator to the victim; for Christians, forgiveness is granted by God’s mercy alone.

**Jews and Christians**

As L. Gregory Jones sates, “some of the most vigorous published disagreements between Jews and Christians have been over the nature and scope of forgiveness.” For both Jews and Christians, forgiveness is central in the story of salvation. In the accounts in the Torah, Jews find God to be continually forgiving. He rescues his people out of Egypt, making a covenant with his

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people, the Israelites, and the Israelites break the covenant again and again. But each time, God renews the covenant by his mercy: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”⁵ In his forgiveness, the guilty are still to be held responsible and the sins are not to be forgotten. Christians turn mainly towards the teachings of the New Testament in search for understanding of forgiveness:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁶

As sin came into the world with the sin of Adam and Eve, through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection brought forgiveness. In God’s perfect love, grace overcomes all sin. As followers of Christ, Christians are called to forgive. As will be discussed later, this does not mean that forgiveness is unconditional or that sins are forgotten. However, while most Jews argue that Simon Wiesenthal was right in not forgiving the Nazi officer, most Christians conclude that it would have been better to forgive.

**Sin: Perpetrators and Victims**

While recounting his story, Simon asks, “Were we truly all made of the same stuff? If so, why were some murderers and other victims? Was there in fact any personal relationship between us, between the murderers and their victims, between our camp commandant, Wilhaus,

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⁵ Ex 34:6-7.
⁶ Rom. 5:18-21.
and a tortured Jew?” In the context of the extreme, unimaginable, violence, evil, and sin that Simon (and other Jews) encountered during the Holocaust, Simon’s question is a logical one. Some are so evil for no reason; others suffer so much for no reason. How are these two groups the same? The Germans did not view themselves and the Jews as the same. To them, Germans were, of course, superior to Jews. When seeing the evil that came out of this belief in superiority, it is easy to flip the Germans’ belief: The Nazis were really the group that was less than their victims. However, as Miroslav Volf notes, “From a distance, the world may appear neatly divided into guilty perpetrators and innocent victims. The closer we get, however, the more the line between the guilty and the innocent blurs and we see an intractable maze of small and large hatreds, dishonesties, manipulations, and brutalities, each reinforcing the other.” This is not to say that all sin, all evil, is equal. The guilt of a murderer is not equal to the guilt of a petty theft. But, when examining forgiveness, each individual must remember his/her own guilt and complicity in sin. Even Simon recognized that this Nazi officer asking for his forgiveness had become trapped in the evil of this world that was larger than his individual sin: “Here was a dying man – a murderer who did not want to be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers.” This individual Nazi had been caught up in the larger evil of the world and become someone he did not want to be. But he was still fully responsible and fully guilty for the crimes he did commit. As Simon says to the Nazi officer’s mother years later,

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The question of Germany’s guilt may never be settled. But one thing is certain: no German can shrug off the responsibility. Even if he has no personal guilt, he must share the shame of it. As a member of a guilty nation he cannot simply walk away like a passenger leaving a tramcar, whenever he chooses. It is the duty of Germans to find out who was guilty.  

There is a larger body and cycle of evil in this world that every individual becomes complicit in. Because of this, we all share the guilt of the brokenness of this world, but also are held independently responsible. Consider the bystander. In Simon’s account, the Jewish prisoners were forced to march past normal German citizens working in their fields. These individuals silently watched as the dehumanized Jews marched by: “Was it not just as wicked for people to look on quietly and without protest at human beings enduring such shocking humiliation? But in their eyes were we human beings at all?” These people who did not respond become complicit in the dehumanization of the Jews that the Nazis were directly carrying out. This is why Simon says that all Germans bear the weight of what happened, and why this guilt can also extend to those in the rest of the world who did not respond when they came to know about the destruction that was happening.

In some cases, especially the case of the Holocaust, who is the perpetrator and who is the victim is much clearer than others. While the fact that all people are guilty of sin must be acknowledged and remembered, the victims of the act of evil being addressed must be at the center of the process of healing and recovery. As Marie Fortune states, “Justice, forgiveness, and healing for the victim cannot be dependent on the offender.” Fortune goes on to outline four steps that the wider community must take on in support of the victims: (1) truth-

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11. Ibid., 57.
telling/acknowledgement of the harm done to the victim, (2) deprivatization/breaking the silence, (3) deminimization/hearing the whole story, and (4) protection of the vulnerable. If the community takes on the responsibility of acknowledging the wrong done, by sharing the truth without trying to protect the perpetrators, by hearing and accepting as truth the full story of the victim, and by protecting the vulnerable from further harm, justice, forgiveness, and healing can take place. As will be addressed later, without these different pieces of justice occurring, forgiveness cannot happen in full and reconciliation is not possible. As Simon’s particular situation is examined further, it is important to keep in mind that he does not have the support of a larger community when he is asked to forgive. In fact, his community is being actively destroyed.

Responses from Simon’s Friends and Fellow Inmates

Before diving more directly into the responses of Jews and Christians to the question of whether or not they would have forgiven the Nazi officer who asked, Simon’s response and the response of his friends and fellow inmates in the concentration camp must be considered. Simon walks away from the Nazi’s request in silence, refusing to forgive him. However, he not only is conflicted by his decision but has also already shown a level of compassion. Simon listened to the Nazi’s horrific tales even though he only wanted to get out of the room where the dying Nazi was. He received the Nazi’s confession even though he did not grant him the forgiveness he sought. He wondered about the Nazi, his life, his family, his current situation. After swatting a fly away from the helpless Nazi, Simon realized that he, “a defenseless subhuman, had contrived to lighten the lot of an equally defenseless superman, without thinking, simply as a matter of

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course.”\textsuperscript{14} He acknowledged this man’s humanity even while his own humanity was being denied. Simon did not outwardly forgive the Nazi, but his actions display an acknowledgement of fellow humanness, of being the same even in the midst of evil that one was perpetrating and the other victim to.

Simon’s best friend, Arthur, as well as another fellow victim had a very different response when he heard about the interaction between the dying Nazi officer and Simon:

It was Arthur who first broke the silence: “One less!” he exclaimed. The two words expressed exactly what we all felt in those days but Arthur’s reaction somehow disturbed me. One of the men, Adam – he seldom wasted words – said thoughtfully: “So you saw a murderer dying … I would like to do that ten times a day. I couldn’t have enough such hospital visits.”\textsuperscript{15}

Arthur saw the Nazi’s death as an opportunity for celebration, as much celebration as one could hope for in a concentration camp. These men who were mercilessly murdering innocent people deserved to die, and the fewer of them there were, the better. The other prisoner, Adam, sees the justice in this and wants a part in it. The Nazis certainly don’t deserve anything more than death. They had tortured and abused so many, it only seemed just that they too suffer.

Josek, another one of Simon’s best friends in the camp, whose “faith could be hurt by the environment of the camp and by the jeers or insinuations of others, but it could never be shaken,”\textsuperscript{16} responded more directly to Simon’s question of whether or not he should forgive: “You would have had no right to do this [forgive the Nazi officer] in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so. What people have done to you yourself, you can, if you like, forgive and forget. That is your own affair. but it would have been a terrible sin to burden your

\textsuperscript{14} Wiesenthal, \textit{The Sunflower}, 37.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 5.
conscience with other people’s sufferings.” As will be seen later, Josek’s response align with the response of most Jews. Simon had not right to forgive the Nazi because he had not directly sinned against Simon. The Nazi was asking Simon to forgive him for crimes he had committed against others and Simon had not been given the authority to grant forgiveness for crimes done to others.

Later in his story, after both Arthur and Josek have died in the holds of Nazi Germany, Simon asks Bolek whether he had done right in walking silently away. Bolek, a Messianic Jew who had been studying to become a Catholic priest, told Simon that, although not directly granting forgiveness to the dying Nazi, his listening had enabled the Nazi to be freed through his confession. He said, “Through his confession, as you surely know – though it was not a formal confession – his conscience was liberated and he died in peace because you had listened to him. He had regained his faith. He had become once again the boy who, as you said, was in close relation with his church.” In the concentration camp, Bosek chose not to focus directly on what the dying Nazi had asked for – forgiveness – but instead focused on the power of confession. Through confession and repentance, the Nazi had turned away from his sin and participation in evil and back towards the hope of restoration through his faith. Bosek’s response reflects the importance of repentance in the process of forgiveness identified by both Jews and Christians.

**Jewish Responses**

As mentioned earlier, Jews believe in and rely upon a God who forgives. As L. Gregory Jones writes, “the people of Israel knew that God had created the world and had called them to be God’s people in covenental love. Further, they had repeatedly experienced God’s forgiveness

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18 Ibid., 82.
as a people, albeit a forgiveness accompanied by divine judgement. In the Torah, God renews the covenant with Israel even after Israel has broken it immediately after the exodus.”19 Jews also recognize that God’s forgiveness is open to all who return to Him. This forgiveness “would require repentance” and “restitution for wrongs committed against other human beings… Individuals must go to the person they have wronged and seek forgiveness; such forgiveness ought to involve a willingness to rectify the wrong.”20 Jones points two key components of forgiveness in Jewish tradition: repentance and restitution.

Under the law of the Jews, a person who breaks God’s law, who sins, is guilty and must bear the punishment of death. However, because of God’s love and mercy, any person can receive God’s forgiveness as long as they return to Him:

“When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”21

This turning away from sin and turning toward God is seen through repentance and restitution. Jews believe that these go hand in hand. As Alan L. Berger explains, “Repentance in Hebrew comes from the word teshuva, meaning a turning away from evil, a turning toward Torah. It is a process rather than a single act.”22 True repentance is not merely verbally confessing wrongdoing but is also coupled by deeds of restitution: “When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it

19 Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 106.
21 Ez. 18:26-28.
and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.” Forgiveness coupled with justice requires not simply repenting and repaying, or giving back, what was taken, but requires giving even more than was taken away.

This restitution must take place between the perpetrator and the victim; therefore, only the direct victim can forgive the perpetrator for his wrong action. In response to The Sunflower, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, similarly to Josek, declares: “No one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished. According to Jewish tradition, even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself.” In the words of Dennis Prager, a religious Jew, “the relevant Jewish view of forgiveness is that a person who hurts another person must ask forgiveness from his victim and that only the victim can forgive him.” According to these two Jews, Simon did right by not forgiving the dying Nazi because he had no authority to do so since this Nazi had not directly sinned against him. In fact, no one could forgive him for murder because “people can never forgive murder, since the one person who can forgive is gone, forever.” For those who hold this belief, there is no mercy for a murderer, at least not in their world. God may choose to forgive the murderer if his repentance rings true, but, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes, “there are limits to my presumptuousness; I know not God’s will.”

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23 Num. 5:6-7.
26 Ibid., 226.
Although Jewish teaching leads to the conclusion that forgiveness should not, indeed could not, be granted by Simon to the dying Nazi, Jews are not left with no hope of healing. For them, restoration of their lives and their faith is not reliant on the perpetrator. Rabbi Arthur Waskow argues that trying to heal in union with the Germans would be impossible:

There is no way for you [the Nazi] to repair the physical damage to the Jews you yourself murdered, let alone those whose murder and torture you helped organize and celebrate. There is no way for you to repair the rips and tears in relationship that have left the Jewish people still struggling to be able to trust, connect, make peace, to govern itself responsibility with its newfound power in the world. And, in terms of Spirit, there is no way for you to repair our sense of God in hiding. I may be able to make these repairs for myself (at least the ones in Relationship and Spirit); we Jews may be able together to do these for ourselves; but not with you. You can take no part in these three repairs. So I cannot “forgive” you.28

From the vantage point of the Jewish faith, Simon must find healing apart from the dying Nazi, apart from forgiving. The dying Nazi, along with all the other individuals involved in the Nazi regime or aware and yet inactive, cannot provide restitution without giving their own lives and should not even ask for forgiveness from one who they have not directly wronged. As forgiveness of the Germans is not possible, healing must take place apart from them.

**Christian Responses**

Just as Jews, Christians rely on a God that forgives. His forgiveness is ultimately found through Jesus Christ life, death, and resurrection: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”29 Christians believe that as they have been forgiven much, they are to also forgive. With this simple view in mind, Theodore M. Hesburgh answers Simon’s question over forgiveness with confidence: “If asked to forgive, by anyone for anything, I would forgive

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29 Col. 1:13-14.
because God would forgive.\textsuperscript{30} In the New Testament scriptures, Jesus is asked about how often one should forgive; he answers, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”\textsuperscript{31} But, even with this emphasis on forgiveness, forgiveness is not unconditional.

As L. Gregory Jones writes, “At the center of Christian forgiveness is the proclamation of God’s Kingdom and the call to repentance so that we can live as forgiven and reconciled people with God and with one another.”\textsuperscript{32} Through Jesus, Christians are brought into the Kingdom of God that is not merely something to look forward to but also to actively pursue now. Central to God’s Kingdom is reconciliation between God and humanity as well as among all of humanity. It is a place of healing and restoration, peace and grace, love and truth. But true healing and reconciliation cannot take place without repentance and justice.

If repentance and justice were not required as part of the process of forgiveness and reconciliation, forgiveness would be “cheap grace.” As Marie Fortune notes, “Forgiveness before justice is “cheap grace” and cannot contribute to authentic healing and restoration to wholeness for the victim or for the offender. It cuts the healing process short and may well perpetuate the cycle of abuse. It also undercuts the redemption of abusers by preventing them from being accountable for their abusive behavior.”\textsuperscript{33} Many Christian scholars argue that Christian forgiveness has become unconditional and, therefore, has lost its weight and its potential for healing not only of the victim but of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Jones writes that,

God’s forgiveness became principally an individual transaction between God and a particular person, largely devoid of its eschatological context and with virtually no

\textsuperscript{31} Matt. 18:22.
\textsuperscript{32} Jones, \textit{Embodying Forgiveness}, 47.
\textsuperscript{33} Fortune, “Forgiveness,” 202.
consequences for either Christian community or social and political life. Hence in contemporary Christian theology and life, while the rhetoric of forgiveness remains a part of our worship, the conceptions and practices of forgiveness have been radically transmuted.34

Christian faith is at risk of becoming too focused merely on an individual’s relationship with God and hardly about that person’s relationship with other human beings. This results in a forgiveness that has little impact on the relationship between victim and perpetrator.

This forgiveness does not align with the forgiveness that Jesus calls Christians to practice: “‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”35 Jesus gives the authority to forgive to those who are in a restored relationship with God, who have the Holy Spirit within them. Therefore, unlike Jews, Christians believe that they may grant forgiveness in God’s name. As Maria Mayo declares, “the risen Jesus commissions the disciples, standing in for the entire community, to do exactly this: use their own judgment in deciding whom and what sins to forgive… I hold that Jesus means to grant this authority – along with the guiding wisdom of the Holy Spirit – to all members of the community for all time.”36 Granting forgiveness is not merely an individual choice, but a responsibility of the community. As Hans Habe declares in his response to Simon’s story, “To judge crimes against humanity is the affair of humanity.”37 Forgiveness is also not an unconditional action that is required no matter what.

34 Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 38.
35 John 20:21-23.
Christian forgiving knows no limits but still require repentance and judgement. As Cardinal Franz Konig declares, “For Christians, the binding answer is in the Gospels. The question of whether there is a limit to forgiveness has been emphatically answered by Christ in the negative.”

A Christian has the ability to always forgive because “Jesus’ pardon is all-powerful precisely because it calls us – as those who have been forgiven – to seek forgiveness from those we have sinned against and to offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us.”

Along with the opportunity Christians have to forgive as they were forgiven, “the power of the Holy Spirit that enables the healing process to take place. This spiritual power gives the victim the strength to forgive, to let go. It gives the victimizer the strength to repent, to change. It gives the church the strength to help both persons in the justice-making process.”

The key to the boundlessness of Christian forgiveness is in the power of the Holy Spirit that works within the lives of human beings here on earth, “But the power of the Holy Spirit is released only when justice is made manifest for the victim and offender.”

The Holy Spirit is at work building the Kingdom of God here on earth. As mentioned above, this Kingdom is one of true healing that can only come from full justice.

As Miroslav Volf declares, “We seriously misconstrue forgiveness, however, if we understand it as acting ‘as if the sin was not there.’” When examining the Christian’s ability to forgive because of the forgiveness granted to him/her through Christ, the foundation is not free of judgement but is rooted in the judgment of Christ: “Christ’s judgment is real. Human sin is

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40 Fortune, “Forgiveness,” 206.
41 Ibid.
forgiven only because it is confronted and judged. But that judgment is wholly in the service of mercy, reconciliation, and new life.” 43 Christians believe that Christ was able to endure the judgement of every persons’ sin because of his own sinlessness. The weight of this judgement, even before it took place, led Jesus to sweat drops of blood and plead with God the Father that he be spared if there were any other way. 44 Forgiveness for the sin of the world did not come without judgment; therefore, neither does forgiveness between human beings within this world. Jesus himself tells his followers to confront sin: “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” 45 First, the sin must be brought to light and condemned as wrong, if the perpetrator responds with repentance, he must then be forgiven. For Christians, the responsibility of the victim to forgive depends upon the repentance of the perpetrator. Because of this centrality of repentance, many Christians’ responses to Simon’s dilemma come down to whether or not the dying Nazi’s repentance was sincere. As Edward H. Flannery states in his response to Simon, “forgiveness must always be granted to the sincerely repentant.” 46 But was the dying Nazi truly repentant? Or was his confession simply the result of fear of death? If he had continued to live, would he have actively turned away from the sin of his past, sought to end the continuing crimes of his fellow Germans, and willingly born the judgement for his crimes? This is something no one can know for sure, but the most reliable source we have on the Nazi’s repentance is Simon Wiesenthal himself. In The Sunflower, Simon declares his repentance to be genuine: “In his confession there was true
repentance, even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way he spoke and the fact that he spoke to me was a proof of his repentance.” If this was the case, then most Christians must arrive at the conclusion that Simon should have forgiven the dying Nazi.

Finally, in the Christian faith the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation. As Volf writes, “After all, the cross is not forgiveness pure and simple, but God’s setting aright the world of injustice and deception.” Expanding more on this same belief, Jones declares that “the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness. Neither should forgiveness be confined to a word to be spoken, a feeling to be felt, or an isolated action to be done; rather, it involves a way of life to be lived in fidelity to God’s Kingdom.” In responding to Simon’s question, John T. Pawlikowski, a Servite priest, defines reconciliation as “the public form of forgiveness.” So, the cross, as a public declaration of forgiveness, is also a proclamation of reconciliation. Christians believed that they are called to live out their lives as Christ lived his, to be holy as God is holy. This requires that they embody God’s forgiveness as seen as reconciliation through the cross. Forgiveness is to become a way of life, and a life of forgiveness must also be a life of reconciliation. Because forgiveness that requires cooperation of both parties – repentance of the perpetrator and the active choice of the victim to accept this repentance as genuine – Martin E. Marty concludes that “more value would grow out of

47 Wiesenthal, The Sunflower, 53.
48 Volf, Exclusion & Embrace, 298.
49 Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 5.
51 Mayo, The Limits of Forgiveness, 20.
forgiveness than out of its withholding.”

Forgiveness necessitates reconciliation, although it is not instant. As Fortune writes, “Forgiving does not necessarily mean automatically trusting or returning to the offender,” but it does involve the victim and the perpetrator turning towards each other and accepting each other as human and, therefore, deserving of love because each is made in the image of God.

**Conclusion: The Essentiality of Remembering**

Jews and Christians reach different conclusions in answer to Simon’s question, “What would you have done?” Under Jewish law, restitution must be made to the victim in order for forgiveness to be granted. Because the Nazi cannot provide restitution to and seek forgiveness from those he murdered, he cannot be forgiven. From the lens of Christian faith, Simon should have forgiven the Nazi because he believed his repentance to be genuine. Although Jews and Christians come to different conclusions to Simon’s direct question, they come to the same conclusion on one critical point: remembering. The central symbol of Wiesenthal’s book is that of the sunflowers that mark the graves of the Nazis: “I envied the dead soldiers. Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world, and butterflies to visit his grave. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be piled on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance above my dreadful tomb.”

The sunflowers were a symbol of remembrance, of a tie to life in this world. The Nazis were seeking to eradicate all signs of the Jews; they did not want them to be remembered. As part of the human system of evil that resulted in the evil of the Holocaust, all

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53 Fortune, “Forgiveness,” 204.
54 Wiesenthal, 14-15.
human beings are called to actively remember the terrible evils committed. As Volf writes,

“Erase memory and you wash away the blood from the perpetrator’s hands, you undo the done deed, make it disappear from history. Erase memories of the atrocities and you tempt future perpetrators with immunity… Forgetfulness is damnation; memory is redemption.”55 If humanity forgets, humanity does not follow through in the judgment of the wrongs done and, therefore, becomes complicit in the crime: “While the evil was going on, to turn aside from it, to avoid noticing it, became complicity. And in the same way… to turn aside from it – to forget – again becomes complicity.”56 Forgetting the crimes committed “devalues the humanity that perished in these atrocities.”57 If healing is to come in this world, the brokenness of the past cannot be forgotten or ignored. It must be carried from generation to generation, not to breed desire for revenge, but to serve as a constant reminder of the power and destruction of the evil of this world that so easily entangles each individual member of humanity. As Robert Cole concludes in his response to Simon Wiesenthal’s story, we must not forget.

*Let us, who are lucky to have been given by fate the safety to read and ponder The Sunflower, to pose its haunting, provocative, thoroughly challenging moral questions to ourselves, not only struggle for (and with) our various responses, answers, but take to heart what may be, finally the author’s real intent for us: that we never, ever forget what happened to him and millions of others.*58

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