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ON THE FRONTIERS OF FAITH: EDITH STEIN ENCOUNTERS HERSELF AS A BURNT OFFERING

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This article explores the difference between Edith Stein's self-definition as a Catholic Jew and the normative Jewish position that precludes conversion to another religion. Zev Garber's description of the distinction between "guf" and "neshema" shows one way of partially bridging the gap between Stein's self-definition and normative Jewish understandings—Stein saw her *guf* as Jewish and her *neshema* as Catholic. Stein's interior life reveals that she had hoped that the Jews would accept Jesus as one of their own. According to Garber, Stein's self-understanding would preclude her from the Jewish community; in fact, they would view her as an apostate.

Edith Stein is a controversial figure in the Jewish community; volumes have been written about her dual claims of faith identity. She was born and raised a Jew, but converted to Catholicism in 1922 and became a Carmelite nun in 1933. She died in Auschwitz in 1942. The Church canonized her in 1998 as Saint Sister Benedicta Teresa of the Cross, co-patron Saint of Europe. Was she a Jew, a Catholic, or both? And was Stein murdered because she was a Jew, even though she was a fully cloaked Carmelite nun? These are but a few of the many questions surrounding her complex faith identity.

One key to finding answers amidst this ambiguity is to use some terms and concepts of Zev Garber, a contemporary scholar of Jewish history, philosophy, theology, and the Holocaust. He articulates different conceptions of the relation of *guf* (body), or the Jewish people, to *neshema* (soul), or religion. Garber uses these terms to differentiate between those who are a part of the Jewish people and those who are not. Garber asserts that Stein was not a Jew, but an apostate:

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" in place to the thrice fold marriage espousal said daily in Jewish worship, a symbol of the devotion and affection between God and Israel.¹

¹ Z. Garber, "Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein Martyrdom," in *The Unnecessary Problem of Edith Stein* (ed. H. J. Cargas; New York: University Press of America, 1994), p. 69.

Stein's conversion to Catholicism and her Carmelite practice, in Garber's view, removes her from both the Jewish community and the Jewish faith. Garber argues:

To identify with the Jewish people (guf = body) and not practice the Jewish religion (neshema = soul) is not grounds for 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.²

The normative position is for the terms to be conjoined: one's faith practice as a Jew does not bear on one's belonging to the Jewish community, so long as one does not convert. The problem is that Stein converted. Stein saw herself as a part of the Jewish people ethnically, but her faith, or *neshema*, was that of a Catholic. Stein told her young niece Suzanne Batzdorff,

What I am doing does not mean that I want to leave my people and my family.... I will always be close to you, the family and the Jewish people. And don't think what is happening in a convent is going to keep me immune from what is happening in the world.³

Stein's interior life, however, lead her on a different path.

In 1930, Stein wrote of her foreboding sense of divine mission. "After every encounter in which I am made aware how powerless we are to exercise direct influence, *I have a deeper sense of the urgency of my own Holocaustum.*"⁴ Stein's use of the word Holocaustum in 1930 was radical. What did she imagine was the urgency of her "own Holocaustum"? She literally saw herself as offering her life as a sacrifice, but a sacrifice to what, and why? Was she a mystic who saw the end of German Jews?

Stein first wrote about the meaning of her future death in her last will and testament, composed on June 9, 1939:

I pray to the Lord that he may accept my living and dying ... as an atonement for the Jewish people's unbelief and so that the Lord may be accepted by his own and that his reign may come in glory, that Germany may be saved and that there be peace in the world.⁵

² Z. Garber, "Jewish Perspectives," p. 69, emphasis added.

³ S. Batzdorff, "Witnessing My Aunt's Beatification," in *The Unnecessary Problem of Edith Stein* (ed. H. J. Cargas; New York: University Press of America, 1994), p. 31, emphasis added.

⁴ E. Stein, *Self Portrait in Letters 1916-1942* (trans. J. Koepfel; Washington D. C.: ICS Publications, 1993), Letter 52 to Sr. Adelgundis Jaegerschmind, OSB, Freiburg-Gunterstal, ST Magdalena Speyer, February 16, 1930; p. 60.

⁵ Cited by D. Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (trans. B. Rumscheidt and M. Rumscheidt; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 148, emphasis added.

This was the last will and testament of a contemplative. Her practice as a Carmelite included meditating daily on a cross in her cell, being in constant dialogue with the Lord, and offering her prayers. Her interior life was a way for her to atone for her Jewish people, because they did not accept the savior. Her daily practice was to save her people using the interior work of her soul. In this way she essentially carried their cross.

In 1941, Stein wrote a dialogue, “Conversations at Night,” which shows how Stein’s *neshema* was a Catholic approach to Jewish redemption. In the dialogue, Queen Esther comes to the Mother Antonia, the prioress at the Carmel, to tell her how the Jewish people will be redeemed. Queen Esther explains to the Mother:

I saw the church grow out of my people.... The unblemished pure shoot of David.... I saw flowing down from Jesus’ heart, the fullness of grace into the Virgin’s heart. From there it flows to the members as a stream of life.... *But now I know that I was bound to her. From eternity in accordance with God’s direction—forever. My life was only a beam of hers.*⁶

The church grows out of her, the Jewish people, and from these people Jesus was born. Jesus’ heart radiates into the holy Mother and then flows into the hearts of its members who are cleaving to her. Those who were bound to her were able to offer prayers to the Redeemer, so that the Jewish people would be saved. Queen Esther stated that once Jews found the Lord, he could return to earth for the second coming, and all suffering would end. The reason Queen Esther has appeared to the Mother prioress at this moment was to ask for help and to pray for the redemption of Jews from annihilation by the Nazis. The hearts of those in a contemplative order offered the best chance for the prayers of Queen Esther to be heard.

The Mother responds to Queen Esther:

Where else was she [Holy Mother Mary] to find hearts prepared if not in her quiet sanctuary? Her people [the Jewish people], who are yours, your Israel, I take up into the lodgings of my heart. Praying secretly and sacrificing secretly, I will take it home to my Savior’s heart.⁷

This was Stein’s way of asking for help—to ask the spiritually strong to pray for redemption. Stein showed that the task at hand was to pray for the Jews to come to accept Jesus the Savior. As Queen Esther, she conveyed the

⁶ E. Stein, “Conversation in the Night,” in *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Text* (ed. L. Gelber and M. Linssen; Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1992), p. 132.

⁷ E. Stein, “Conversations in the Night,” p. 133.

message that this work was to be done contemplatively and secretly within ones' heart, through prayer and sacrifice. It was truly a way for Stein to show mystical resistance.

Garber is indeed correct about Stein's soul. She was not a Jew in a way that Garber and the Jewish community recognize. From Stein's last will and testament and her dialogue, we see that she truly had a *neshema* of a Catholic. Stein's Holocaustum was to offer herself up on the burning cross. Stein tried in the interior realm to transmute their sins of unbelief into one of belief in her Savior, the Christian savior, who had Jewish blood like her. In her mind, she was saving her fellow Jews, but to Jews she betrayed them as a people.

Stein died on the burning altar, in a Holocaust. The Jewish community died in the Shoah,⁸ in an abyss, not as a holy flaming sacrifice that would be redeemed by a savior Jesus Christ. Stein's view of her faith offends the Jewish community, because she was working to save them at the cost of their conversion to Christianity.

As a scholar, I respect that Stein saw herself in a different way than contemplatives of her time. She was a Jew like Jesus; the Jewish community was her *guf*. As a Jew, however, I strongly agree with Garber. Stein's contemplative acts were supercessionist. She hoped her people would embrace Jesus the Jew, and see the light that one of their own had already saved them, and their suffering would end.

⁸ D. Patterson, "Holocaust or Shoah," in *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2009), p. 338. Patterson discusses the difference between the words Holocaust and Shoah and makes a strong point that the Jews died not as a holy sacrifice or burnt offering but in an abyss. To completely annihilate the Jews was the Nazi's point. This is the opposite of Stein's view of her own death.