

Can the Holocaust Be Forgiven?

Last week, the president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, created a firestorm of controversy when he said to a group of evangelical leaders that the Holocaust could be forgiven but not forgotten. But in response to an uproar from the Jewish community in Israel, he claimed “that his remarks had been misinterpreted.”

As he explained, “Forgiveness is something personal, my speech was never meant to be used in a historical context, especially one where millions of innocent people were murdered in a cruel genocide.”

Is there a difference, then, between forgiving and forgetting? And is there a difference of opinion between Judaism and Christianity when it comes to these important (and difficult) subjects?

This past Thursday, in a meeting with evangelical pastors, Bolsonaro said (with reference to the Holocaust), “We can forgive, but we cannot forget. Those who forget their past are sentenced not to have a future.”

So, it would seem that he felt it important to emphasize the importance of keeping the horrific memory of the Holocaust alive while at the same time allowing for the possibility of forgiveness.

In response, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin tweeted (but without specifically referencing Bolsonaro), “We will never extend our hand to those who deny the truth or attempt to erase it. Not individuals or organizations, not heads of parties and not heads of states. We will never forgive and never forget. No one will order the Jewish people’s forgiveness and no interest will buy it.”

And Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Israel, said in a statement that, "We disagree with the Brazilian president's statement that the Holocaust can be forgiven. It is not in anyone's position to determine who and if Holocaust crimes can be forgiven."

What should we make of these statements?

Do they reflect Jewish thought regarding the possibility of repentance? And do they mirror Christian thought?

I can certainly understand the swift response from Israel, as if the Gentile, Christian president of Brazil can decide to pronounce forgiveness for the Nazis and their partners in crime.

To say this is to trivialize, to speak for the victims and their families, to minimize the enormity of the guilt.

"Yes, it was very bad, but we can forgive and move on. Let's just be sure it doesn't happen again."

But is that what Bolsonaro was saying? And, if there is true repentance, is there still no possibility of forgiveness?

First, I understand that the Brazilian president's point was this: "We do not hold this against Germany for all time. We are willing to forgive when we see contrition and repentance. But we must never forget this horrific evil, lest something like it happen again in our day."

Second, I don't believe Bolsonaro was claiming to speak for God in terms of the fate of Hitler and his henchmen. He was not saying, "We pronounce those evil men forgiven." Certainly not.

Third, Israel has forgiven Germany as a nation for its crimes, establishing excellent relations with their former tormentors.

As noted on the Israel Project website (dated January 25,

2012), "The German-Israeli relationship has been shaped by the memory of the Holocaust and the strong desire on the part of the German people to help ensure that the suffering endured by the Jewish people between 1933 and 1945 will never recur.

"Germany and Israel established diplomatic relations in 1965. Since then, these ties have been characterized by overall friendship between the two nations but also by frequent crises that bring to light the delicate nature of the relations and their emotional fragility."

Isn't this what Bolsonaro was saying?

Fourth, the Bible records that God accepted the repentance of two of the most wicked leaders in the history of Israel and Judah, Ahab and Manasseh, delaying the judgment they were due (see 1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Chronicles 33:10-17). They were responsible for many deaths, yet God postponed their punishment.

In God's own words, as recorded by the prophet Ezekiel, "Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live" (Ezekiel 18:23).

This would mean that, if a Nazi murderer who had escaped justice for many years came forward, confessed his crimes, and demonstrated true repentance, he should be forgiven. (If God, who is infinitely holy and perfectly righteous can forgive, shouldn't we follow His example?) He would still need to pay for his crimes, including lifelong imprisonment or even death, but he would die a forgiven man.

And this, of course, leads to the message of the gospel, namely, that through Jesus, God can forgive and redeem the worst of sinners. This would include Saul of Tarsus (better known as Paul the apostle), who once killed Jews who believed in Jesus, only to receive grace and mercy from God (see 1 Timothy 1:12-16).

That's how Corrie Ten-Boom could forgive the cruel prison guard who tormented her and her sister when they were imprisoned during the Holocaust for protecting Jews. (If you've never read the account, take a moment and read it now. It's worth it! Corrie's sister died while imprisoned.)

To be sure, the Holocaust itself cannot be forgiven, nor do any of us have the power to pronounce forgiveness on a past generation. In that sense, I concur with the statements from Israel. But we can recognize true repentance when we see it, we can forgive as the Lord forgave us (for followers of Jesus, this is especially relevant), and we can leave vengeance and final judgment to God.

Certainly, I understand why the reaction from Israel was so swift and strong, especially in light of the never-ending attempts to deny the Holocaust (or, at the least, to minimize it).

But there is truth to Bolsonaro's words, and as a friend of Israel, he should not be misunderstood.