

Note: This sermon is written with great admiration for and gratitude to Dennis Prager, whose thinking on this issue has had a powerful impact on my own.

Tomorrow night our Selichot program will feature a powerful movie, *The Quarrel*. It is set in post-Holocaust Montreal, and tells the story of a chance—or maybe not chance—meeting of two men who were yeshiva students together before the Shoah. One rejected religion; the other became an Orthodox rabbi. Their conversation is the essence of the movie. Join us for this tomorrow night. The evening begins at 8:30.

Without giving anything about the movie away, tonight my theme is believing in God after the Shoah. Shameless plug: follow CSTRabbi on Twitter<sup>1</sup> and on the vast majority of Friday nights, you'll know the sermon topic in advance.

I expected this question might have been asked at the debate in which I took part. It did not, but it is a question that is frequently raised. How do you continue to believe in God after the Holocaust? If the questioner is asked why the Holocaust is an obstacle to believing in God, the response is almost always

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<sup>1</sup> [twitter.com/CSTRabbi](https://twitter.com/CSTRabbi)

something like this: Because the Nazis murdered six million Jews. Tonight, I'll respond to that answer.

Before I begin, a disclaimer: the closer one is to the Holocaust, the less anyone can say about one's response to it. A Holocaust survivor is entitled to any response he or she wishes. Their children are closer to the Holocaust than anyone who was not actually there. Their lives were affected more by the Holocaust than was mine. Members of my grandparents' families who were still in Europe in the forties were killed. It had a minimal effect on my life. People like me have to understand that we have no standing to preach about how to respond to the Holocaust to those who were touched more closely by it. It's essential that I acknowledge that before I proceed.

Having done so, let us now unpack the response that the Shoah is an obstacle to people like me believing in God because six million Jews were murdered. Let's begin with the word "Jews."

Is it hard to believe in God because six million Jews were killed, but the murders of the other five million victims of the Nazis

presents no challenge to believing in God? I doubt any of us would take that position.

Would it be easier to believe in God if the six million were not Jewish? Does the murder of two million Cambodians by Pol Pot present no obstacle to belief? What about the at least twenty million victims of Stalin? Dare we say the massacred of at least 22,000,000 million Russians and Cambodians presents no theological difficulties, but the murder of six million Jews does. Keeping in mind my disclaimer, for most of us being challenged by the murders only of Jews but not non-Jews is simply not an authentic Jewish response.

Let's go now to the number six million. If five million had been the count, would it present a problem believing in God? What about four million? One million? One hundred thousand? Two? What is the number of murder victims that does not present an obstacle to belief in God, but that number plus one does? Here, my friends, is where we must remember the classic Jewish teaching that murdering one person is murdering an entire universe. If we believe what Judaism teaches, that human life is

of infinite value, then even one murder presents the same theological challenge as two million, six million, or twenty million.

And so, my friends, the question of how can one believe in God after the Shoah is not a difficult question for me. I'll conclude by giving you a much tougher question to ponder: after Pol Pot, after Stalin, after the Shoah, how does one continue to believe in humanity?