

Beyond the Holocaust

by Sumana Ramanan

MY book is not a call to forget what happened to Jews or forget our suffering," explains Professor Marc Ellis, who is eager that no one misinterpret its title, *Ending Auschwitz*. "I am merely urging Jews to stop using their suffering in Auschwitz as a club to beat the Palestinians with. We trivialize the memory of those who died at Auschwitz by using their suffering to abuse power.

This hard-hitting and uncompromising analysis of his own people comes out of Ellis's search for a 'Jewish Theology of Liberation', a philosophy he outlines in a book of the same name published in 1982.

"Our people experienced Christians in the West as oppressors at the same time that other Christians in South America and elsewhere made common cause with the poor and oppressed," says Ellis, who acknowledges being inspired by the ideas and work of Tomas Gutierrez, the Brazilian Catholic priest who first spoke of a theology of liberation. "Today, Israel and the Jewish people have power and are causing suffering to other people. It is possible to identify with these people, the Palestinians, and still retain one's Jewish identity."

Ellis put his theology of liberation into practice on a recent one-week lecture tour of the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem, when he expressed solidarity with largely Palestinian audiences. In his talks and in a personal interview with *TJT*, the philosopher and sociologist spoke about his life, religion and politics.

The heart of Ellis's critique of contemporary Israeli society is that Jews cannot be healed of the trauma of the Holocaust when they themselves are inflicting suffering on others.

"We are a deeply wounded people. But now we have power and have wounded another people. This has made it more difficult for our wounds to heal," he explains. "For how can we continue to talk about our suffering even as we displace Palestinians and cause them suffering?" asks Ellis. Ellis asserts that Jewish society, instead of facing up to this contradiction, has endeavored to heal itself through empowerment, which he believes provides only temporary relief.

"I met an Israeli fighter pilot once and asked him if he'd ever had a close shave with death," recalls Ellis. "He told me about a time when his plane barely missed colliding with another one coming in the opposite direction. I asked him how he had managed to keep his cool and maneuver his plane out of danger. He said he had been able to maintain his composure when he was actually in danger, but began shaking with fear when the danger had passed. Israelis and Jews will eventually also have to face up to what they have done

Denial is another way Jewish and Israeli society has been able to come to terms with this contradiction, he says.

"When I spoke about Palestinian trauma and suffering at public fora, most Jews were not willing to believe me," says Ellis. "In Glasgow once, I spoke about Palestinians being tortured and displaced by Israelis. A Rabbi in the audience called me a liar and said, 'Jews cannot be doing this.' His logic was, Jews are not capable of doing such things, and hence such things were not being done."

"Many Jewish thinkers and rabbis talk today as though we are still innocent, and are there to defend Jews from any fact that says we are no longer innocent. There is a massive amount of denial. Religious and political leaders are abusing the covenant as if there won't be Jews after them who say what have we done?"

MARC Ellis was born into an ordinary Jewish family in North Miami Beach trying to make it in America, but also trying to keep a balance of ethics. "In Hebrew School, I was told we were a good people striving for justice," he says. "But Israel was not such a big issue for American Jews in the 1950s. My upbringing was neither pro nor anti Israel."

Then, when he was 15-years-old, Israel won the Six Day War.

"This victory caused a revolution in Jewish identity. We moved from the realm of being a moral and ethical people to the realm of power and the slow abuse of it," Ellis says.

Ellis only got hints of what this shift really meant as he struggled to be Jewish in America. But soon after the war, Ellis's Hebrew School teacher

came to Israel to experience its victory. He came back and told Ellis how the desert was blooming and the country blossoming.

At about the same time Ellis read an article in a magazine about another people called Palestinians, who lived in the same area. "I read about their displacement and their further exile," says Ellis. "So I asked my teacher, have you seen these people, the Palestinians? Have you spoken to them?" After just a moment's silence, my teacher shouted back, 'You don't know anything!'"

Ellis was completely taken aback at this anger. It was the total unexpectedness of his teacher's reply that made Ellis even more determined to visit Israel and see what was happening there for himself. Soon after this, Ellis came to Israel for six months.

"I didn't really know anyone there, and knew very little about its history," says Ellis. "But I could recognize two peoples, one in a dominant position - people who looked a lot like me but didn't quite fit in with the place, and the other on the underside, but indigenous."

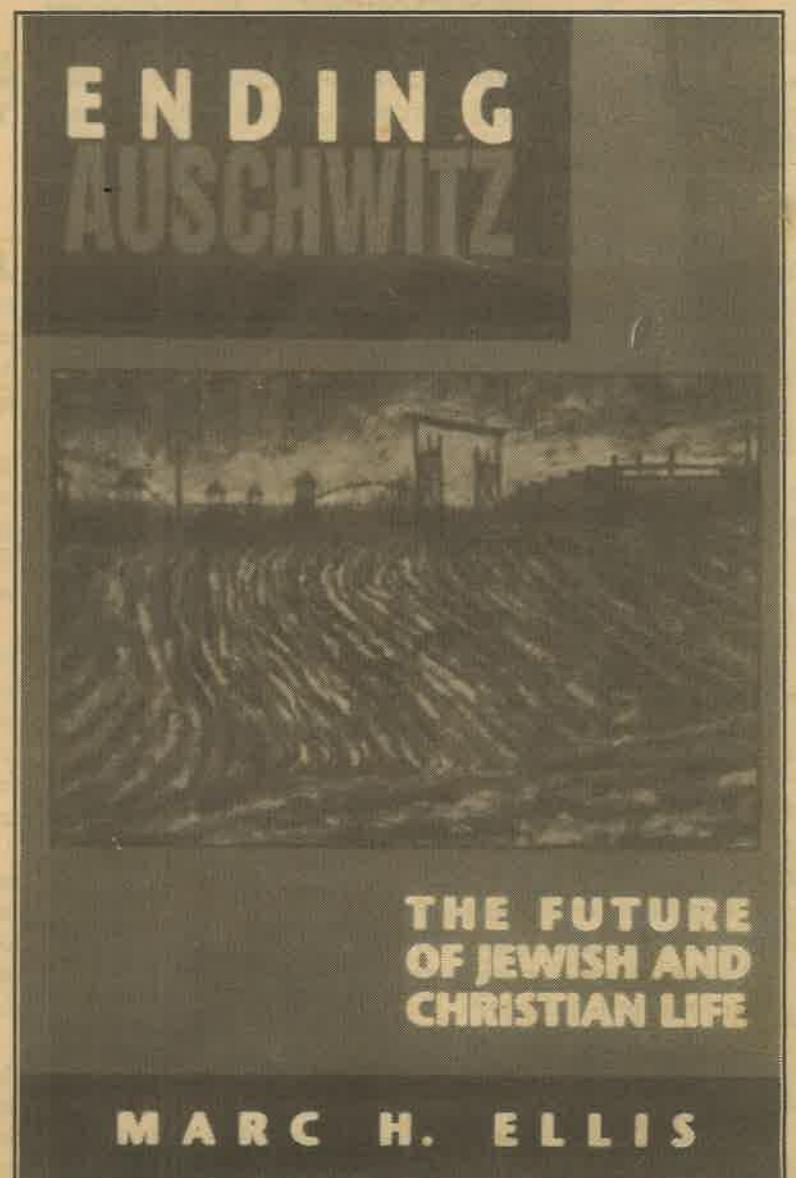
This was the beginning of Ellis's education. He asked himself, "Why is there this disparity?", "Why are people from Europe in command?"

This led Ellis to a lifelong quest for answers to difficult questions. After studying sociology, religion, and finally taking a Phd in history, Ellis became a professor at Maryknoll College in New York city, where he taught and wrote books.

Even in the early years of his search for an alternative theology of Judaism, Ellis concluded that a central question posed by his friend, the Holocaust historian, Richard Rubenstein, had to be modified. Rubenstein had asked: How can Jews believe in God after what they suffered? For Ellis, after his experiences in Israel, the question was, 'What is our relationship to God after the Holocaust and Israel?'

This illustrates one of the hallmarks of Ellis's theology: the understanding that a religion encompasses not only the principles laid out in its holy books but also the events and actions in history and contemporary life that have stemmed from its traditions. Ellis explores this idea in a forthcoming book, *Unholy Alliance - Religion and Atrocity in Our Time*.

"We have to let go of freezing religions in their books," says Ellis. "I believe that Christians today have to refer not just to the Gospel according to John, Luke, Mark and Mathew, but also the Gospel of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, Colo-



nialism and the Holocaust," says Ellis. "Just as Jews today have to learn their lessons not just from the Book of Ezekiel and Jeremiah but also the Book of the Palestinians."

History, says Ellis, always critiques faith.

MARC Ellis met the Palestinian Liberation theologian, Canon Naim Ateek, at the Shalom Hartman Institute in 1987. Both were among the 150 Jews and 3 Palestinians at a seminar. During one of the discussions, Ellis suggested that Israel pay reparations to Palestinians. "All hell broke loose," recalls Ellis. "But after the seminar, Naim came up to me and told me he appreciated what I had said. That was the start of our friendship."

Today both Ellis and Ateek talk of 'breaking out of the circle' of current discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Explains Ellis, "Jewish liberals now represent the moderate voice, especially compared to the settlers, but they were in fact the original settlers. Liberal narrative - the dominant narrative of Europe and the US - in many ways is far more culpable for what has happened because they represent the limit of what can be thought about the issue. We have to break out of this cycle. We have to move beyond Rabin vs Netanyahu."

Another book by Ellis that will publish shortly, *Jerusalem and the Broken Middle - Embracing the Covenant in the*

time of Netanyahu is a reflection on what it means to embrace the Jewish covenant in contemporary times.

"As I was finishing *Ending Auschwitz*, the Oslo accords were signed. I had to decide where I stood. It was clear to me that the disparities between the Israelis and the Palestinians had only increased after Oslo because there still is no fundamental understanding of true equality for both sides. Oslo was a victory for Israel and a surrender for Palestinians. And at that stage, I felt that solidarity with Palestinians no longer meant just supporting a two-state solution, but actually crossing over to their side," says Ellis.

And so Ellis has moved from believing in a two-state solution to one bi-national state. This way, he believes Palestinians will have the right to historic Palestine, and Jews can also live in Hebron or Jerusalem if they wish. "But one community cannot take over," he cautions. "There has to be equal rights and equal access for everyone."

Although Ellis is sharply critical of Oslo, he is not entirely pessimistic. "My hope for this region is the Palestinian people, because Israel cannot build an apartheid state forever," he says.

"But at the same time I ask myself how much longer and how much more do the Palestinians have to suffer? And as a Jew I also ask myself: How much further will we sink?"