Only in this midnight of dark despair does post-Holocaust thought come upon a shining light. The Nazi logic of destruction was irresistible: it was, nevertheless, being resisted. This logic is a novum in human history, the source of an unprecedented, abiding horror: but resistance to it on the part of the most radically exposed, too, is a novum in history, and it is the source of an unprecedented, abiding wonder. To hear and obey the commanding Voice of Auschwitz is an “ontological” possibility, here and now, because the hearing and obeying was already an “ontic” reality, then and there. (Emil Fackenheim, To Mend the World, 25)

I began chapter 2 with an explanation of how I came to the work of James Cone and, more importantly, why I believe he provides a vital contribution to any contemporary discussion of suffering and moral evil, as well as of God and human freedom and ethics. So, the question here is, why put any Jewish theologian into an encounter with Cone, and why Emil Fackenheim in particular?

My personal journey toward Fackenheim began when I was an undergraduate. As mentioned in chapter 1, I had a Jewish professor and mentor, Harold Kasimow, who emphasized the importance and possibilities of interreligious dialogue. I was won over by Kasimow’s erudite and compelling perspective that one’s view of religion, really one’s own religiosity, is deeply enriched by putting differing religious traditions into conversation with one another. So, the notion of
drawing from a Christian and a Jew as the primary figures in this study has always seemed natural and necessary for me. Further, in my junior year I spent a semester abroad at Tel Aviv University. With European and other North American students, I took classes dealing with Judaism, Jewish Philosophy, and Politics of the Middle East. More than the classes though, my broader experience in Israel gave me a better sense of a Jewish culture and worldview. By this I mean that I began to see the great diversity among Israelis and among Jews, but I also got a sense of commonalities evident among many Jews in Israel. In the shadow of the Holocaust, there was the overwhelming assertion that such an atrocity must never happen again. I witnessed great pride in the existence and vitality of the Jewish nation-state, as both a homeland serving to prevent a second Holocaust, and also as a community of artists, athletes, and political and religious figures who make vital contributions to our world today. Manifesting key aspects of the Jewish tradition, many Israelis bore witness to the imperative for human activities of building equitable and compassionate communities, social justice, and concern for the least of society. I was intrigued by my encounter with the paradoxical theological concept of doubting and questioning God while simultaneously remaining faithful to God.

Between my time in Israel and my years in graduate school, I began reading Elie Wiesel, the modern-day Job. In his works I found a beautiful and haunting expression of the aspects of Jewish life after the Holocaust. Wiesel’s writings bear powerful witness to the demand that the Holocaust never happen again and, given the ambiguity of divine power, goodness, and presence during such an event assert the necessity however impossible it may seem that we as humans must be the ones who prevent it. Wiesel captures and poetically articulates the theological tension that one encounters when one faces the perennial dilemma of why bad things happen to good people. He asserts that we must face moral evil directly and yet he still allows for the impossible possibility of fervent, stubborn faith in both God and humanity. Nevertheless, I decided not to put Wiesel into encounter with Cone primarily because he makes no claims to being a theologian and is not a systematic thinker or writer.

However, it was through my awareness of Wiesel that I came to Emil Fackenheim. In Fackenheim I found a more systematic theologian and philosopher who dealt with the very themes raised by Wiesel. Though his earlier writings were less focused on the Holocaust per se, Fackenheim’s works from around 1967 to 1982 represent a sustained