
THE HOLOCAUST AND JEWISH FAITH I

WHERE WAS GOD?

The question of faith in God after the Holocaust has challenged thinking people for decades. The search for theological meaning for the destruction that descended upon the Jews of Europe is not a simple matter. Even if one intellectually grasps the reasons for the existence of suffering in this world, a sensitive heart still finds it hard to confront the Holocaust. Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, reflecting on the terrible fate of the nation, could offer nothing but silent mourning:

Each one of us weeps inwardly, and we are gathered here to give expression to this pain and to give voice, through the joining of hearts, to the terrible, common sorrow. Yet concerning this it is written, "The wise will be silent at that time" (Amos 5:13), for the tears have not yet been created, nor the expression come into being, that would be appropriate to the great catastrophe, the horror of the tragedy that is the slaughter of the greater part of the nation, the best of the people's forces, the extraordinary Torah scholars and tzaddikim of Israel, with the yeshivot and their students. In such a situation, the only appropriate response is that of Iyov's friends: "They sat with him...for seven days and seven nights, and no one said a word, for the pain was great" (Iyov/Job 2:13). And in Yechezkel/Ezekiel (24:15-24), when God tells the prophet, "Behold - I shall take the delight of your eyes..." and that they should not mourn, Rashi explains - because there are no comforters, since everyone is mourning. All of this has come to pass for us...we should not mourn - because there is no mourning that is appropriate and fitting for such a terrible destruction.

Two Morasha shiurim address the difficult issue of Jewish Faith and the Holocaust. (We recommend first reading the Morasha class on suffering before studying these shiurim).

This first class discusses basic questions of faith in God, Torah sources about national devastation, Jewish explanations for such suffering, and how the Holocaust was a preparation for a burgeoning of Jewish life. The second shiur looks at the Jews who were unswerving in their faith in God and Judaism, transcending the inhumanness of the Nazis, as well as those who died *al Kiddush HaShem*, sanctifying God's name. This shiur addresses the following questions:

- ❧ Can a Jew continue to believe in God after the Holocaust?
- ❧ What does the Torah say about national destruction?
- ❧ Is there a Jewish response to such suffering?
- ❧ What was the Divine purpose of the Holocaust? If God runs the world, why would He allow such events to happen?

CLASS OUTLINE:

- Section I: Where was God?
- Section II: The Context of Questioning - The Holocaust as Described in the Torah
- Section III: The Basic Jewish Response: Silence
- Section IV: Punishment: Repairing the Effects of Transgression
- Section V: *Hester Panim* - God in Hiding
- Section VI: Preparation for the Future

SECTION I: THE QUESTION: WHERE WAS GOD?

Even during the years of Holocaust, while preoccupied with the issue of physical survival, Jews continually examined questions of faith and religious existence. The basic problem was obvious: Amid the horrors of the Holocaust, where is God? A person who believes in God's righteousness, His beneficence and His omnipotence, asks where He is when reality manifests wickedness and evil, and God does not prevent it. Understandably many lost their faith in G-d.

1. Sara Yoheved Rigler, *Holy Woman*, p. 128 – The Question

In the wake of the Holocaust, both Chaim and Shlomo had lost their faith. The devout brothers whom Yaakov Moshe had known in Transylvania were not the same men who alighted from the ships in Haifa...

Almost six decades after the Holocaust, while being interviewed for this book, the taciturn Shlomo declared: "Movies and documentaries don't begin to describe the horror of Auschwitz. The Germans threw children alive into the fire. They said to us, 'Where is your God now?'"

This was a question Shlomo couldn't answer. Is it possible that he was describing the murder of his own children?

After the unspeakable horrors he witnessed, Shlomo, unable to bear his loss, left Auschwitz stripped of his piety as surely as others were stripped of their valuables and eyeglasses.

[It should be mentioned about this particular case that "Shlomo eventually returned to full observance; Chaim made some movement towards observance, but while the post-Holocaust Chaim could not give his heart to Hashem, he did encourage his daughter. When his oldest daughter Pnina chose a very observant lifestyle and married a chassid, Chaim supported her choice." (Ibid., p. 130)]

But it is also true that many others – whether they had theological answers or not – left the camps with their faith intact, if not strengthened. One such was Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, the Rebbe of Tzanz-Klausenberg, who survived the Nazi camps and the murders of his wife and eleven children.

2. Aharon Surasky, *Lapid ha-Esh (Bnei Brak 5757)*, p. 184; based on Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, *Minchat Yehuda vi-Yerushalayim*, p. 252 – The Chosen People.

During the horrors, I was sent to the Warsaw ghetto to perform forced labor with mortar and bricks...One day, as we stood at the top of one of the houses, a strong, driving rain suddenly hit us. The wicked ones pressed us on: "Finish your work; don't stop." It was almost beyond human ability...Then one of the oppressed ones, who knew

me, turned to me and screamed: “Are you still going to recite ‘You have chosen us’ (a blessing recited every morning, thanking God for choosing the Jewish nation from amongst all the nations) and rejoice as a member of the chosen nation?”

I replied that until that day I had not recited it with the proper intention, but that from then onwards, when I said “You have chosen us from all the nations,” I would concentrate more and more deeply, and rejoice in my heart with no bounds..When I saw that he was astounded and bemused at my words, I explained further: “It must certainly be so, for if it were not that ‘You have chosen us from all the nations,’ then I too would become an oppressor. Better that I remain in my present state than become like one of them, Heaven forbid, and happy is my lot.”

Rather than shaking his belief in God, the Holocaust presented Rabbi Halberstam with an opportunity for strengthening his faith.

3. **Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Haberstam, Shefa Chayim, Divrei Torah, Chanukah – Faith despite everything.**

I can testify to this from my own experience. When we reached the extermination camps...we stood there, naked and with nothing, without clothing and without coverings for our heads, and with the wicked ones beating incessantly with the batons in their hands; the situation was terrible. I turned to those standing around me and I shouted, “Fellow Jews – know that the holy God is waiting for us there, inside the camp...and let us not forget that God is with us.” Throughout that entire year I worked on this – strengthening myself and not forgetting that God was with us, and that the entire world is filled with His glory – even in Auschwitz and Dachau, and that no place is devoid of Him...

Nor was it only famous spiritual giants like the Klausenberger Rebbe, who emerged from the horrors of the Holocaust with their faith intact, whether they had an answer or not.

4. **Mishpacha Magazine, April 11, 2006, p. 56, from a description of the Passover Seder of Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky – Faith despite pain.**

One of the highlights of the Seder is the singing of the piyut *Adir B’Mlucha* [the hymn, “Mighty In Majesty”], for which the *Rosh Yeshiva* [Yeshiva Dean] uses an exuberant, heartening tune. The *nigun* [tune] is especially meaningful to him, as he learned it from an elderly, broken Stoliner chassid, a Holocaust survivor who had lost his family in the camps. Each year, he would spend the Seder with the *Rosh Yeshiva*’s father, Rav Yaakov, and sing this *nigun*. As he sang the glorious words proclaiming the Kingship of the Almighty, those present could sense that he was reaffirming his own belief in the message, even in face of all that had transpired. The *Rosh Yeshiva* recalls the joy that the *nigun* brought to that elderly Yid (Jew), and the same joyous notes inspire those at the *Rosh Yeshiva*’s table each year.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ∞ The greater our emotional distance from the Holocaust, the more it may present a merely intellectual challenge to our faith. For many who actually lived through the Holocaust, how they would relate to God after the Holocaust was central to their very existence. After all the content of this class has been said, we must never judge those people who lost their faith in the Holocaust, for their experience is totally beyond our most terrible imagination. At the same time, we should regard those who kept their faiths through the Holocaust, and even emerged strengthened, with utmost admiration.
- ∞ In this connection, it is said of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (the *Chazon Ish*) that he used to stand up in respect for Holocaust survivors. Likewise, when the Satmar Rebbe was preparing to move from Israel to America, he was asked, “Rebbe, to whom will we go for blessings?” He replied, “Go to any shul (synagogue) where you see someone wrapping *tefillin* over the numbers he got in the concentration camps. He has the power to bless.” Those whose faith survived, are truly heroes of the Holocaust.

SECTION II: THE CONTEXT OF QUESTIONING – THE HOLOCAUST AS DESCRIBED IN THE TORAH

As we approach the question of “Where was God during the Holocaust?”, we should be aware that there are very different questions underlying the same words and the tone of our response must vary in accordance.

1. **Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky, Da Ma Shetashiv 001 at Torahdownloads.com – Different tones in the questions deserve different answers.**

There are actually two very different questions that are asked. When a clever 18 year old smugly asks, “Where was God during the Holocaust?” because he doesn’t want to wake up for *Shacharit* (morning prayer service), it is very different from when a survivor of the Holocaust asks, “Where was God during the Holocaust?” The 18 year old can be dealt with on an intellectual level. The survivor is asking from an emotional depth that you do not have the ability to answer.

Answering those who are just using the Holocaust as a means to construct arguments for debate is very different from responding to a sensitive person who is truly bothered. This *shiur* is written more for those who are sensitive to the overwhelming nature of the Holocaust. But for those who think that the Holocaust is a quick and easy refutation of the Torah and are not searching for a deeper explanation, it might be of interest that the Torah itself discusses holocaustic episodes.

2. **Ibid. (pp. 177 - 8) – The Holocaust in the Torah**

The Torah describes situations of national disaster in sections of the *tochacha*, or rebuke, at the end of Leviticus, in the Torah reading of *Bechukotai*, and towards the end of Deuteronomy, in the Torah reading of *Ki Tavo*. Both sections begin with a glorious description of a redeemed world in which the Jewish people fulfills all its obligations to God. We will enjoy health and wealth; we will be spiritually uplifted; the land will be fruitful and blessed. That vision is then supplanted by one of a world in which we have turned our backs on God. God's wrath, we are warned, will express itself in horrific national suffering...

A Holocaust survivor once told me that when they read these sections of rebuke during the Holocaust, they would nod to each other in recognition that they were experiencing each of the afflictions foretold.

When we approach the subject of the Holocaust, we must remember that such national tragedies have long been part of our history, and that the destruction visited upon us was clearly predicted in the Torah.

(Note - a negative prophecy in the Torah will not necessarily come about, and its fulfillment depends on the merits of the Jewish people. See Rambam, *Morasha shiur on Prophecy I*, end of Section III.)

We have to be aware that for generations preceding the Holocaust many Jews had been abandoning the Torah and the lifestyle it entails. Because of the disruption in communal life (especially education) that occurred during World War I, this process was accelerated. It was not only individuals who were leaving. There were Jewish organizations actively trying to remove Jews from their tradition and were creating a new vision of what a Jew should be. "Even in Poland, the most Torah-observant country in Europe, by 1940, over 40 percent of the Jewish population no longer observed Shabbat (*Holy Woman*, p. 51)."

After the Holocaust, one of the leading thinkers of the post-war Orthodox community, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, put the Holocaust in this historical context.

3. **Rabbi E. E. Dessler, *Michtav me-Eliyahu*, Vol. IV, p. 124 – The failure of the generation before the Holocaust.**

We are struck dumb at the terrible destruction that has been visited upon us in our generation, and we ask ourselves: For what reason has God done this to us...What is this great wrath? Let us examine this.

The entire period that preceded the destruction was a time when the burden of the exile was lightened upon the shoulders of the Jewish people...

Clearly, the period of the Emancipation was ordained by God to serve as a preparation for us for the coming of the Messiah, and it was for this purpose that the burden of exile was lightened upon us...Since we have turned the purpose upside down, and instead

of understanding the hint from Above to prepare ourselves for redemption out of joy and expanding our consciousness, we used the new situation to assimilate. Therefore there awaited us the well-known danger of preparation for holiness that is not realized – as explained above. (And the fact that the destruction came only now, even though the process of assimilation was one that had developed gradually for a long time, is because God is long-suffering and does not bring punishment until the measure of sin is full, and there is no longer any hope of [a positive] influence bringing about a repair.

4. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, Making Sense of Suffering, p. 189 – Historical context of the Holocaust.**

The Holocaust was the culmination of a long period where God suspended His judgment. He permitted a world from which He had been excluded, as it were, and to taste the fruits of the Enlightenment's confidence in unfettered human reason. Jews embraced secular liberalism as a ticket out of the ghetto...

The truth is that the situation in Germany was only the most extreme example of a problem that had crept into Jewish life everywhere. A survivor from Warsaw once told me that the decline in religious observance between the two world wars was so precipitous that we seemed destined for a national tragedy...God's response was to show the world, and the Jewish people in particular, that the culture viewed as the epitome of sophisticated humanism could turn into a ravenous beast...

As Rabbi Motti Berger once put it, given a) what was happening in the Jewish world before the Holocaust and b) what the Torah writes about what happens when the Jews as a people leave the Torah, it actually would have been *more* of a disproof of God and His Torah had the Holocaust not happened than that the fact that it did.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

☞ That events like the Holocaust seem to be predicted by the Torah and have occurred at other times in Jewish history does not fully explain why the Holocaust happened. But, as we have seen, it did give at least some of those going through the Holocaust a framework in which to place it. For them the events of their time did not uproot the relevance of the Torah; rather, they felt they were living through those difficult sections of the Torah. For us also, even if the Holocaust remains emotionally difficult to grapple with, that it might actually be predicted in the Torah should give at least some pause to those who think that the Holocaust easily disproves the Torah.

SECTION III: THE BASIC JEWISH RESPONSE – SILENCE

Even with the above cerebral explanation, our heart may still ask the basic question: How could the Holocaust happen? The Torah guides us to a proper response. The Rabbis learn the first, basic and proper response from Job, the book of the Torah that directly deals with the issue of pain. That response is silence.

1. **Moed Katan 28b – Silence is obligatory in a context of mourning.**

Rebbe Yochanan said, “The comforters are not allowed to speak until the mourner begins to speak, as it says (Iyov/Job 2) ‘and afterwards Job opened his mouth’ and [only] then ‘Elifaz the Yemenite answered.’”

אמר רבי יוחנן אין מנחמין רשאים לומר דבר עד שיפתח אבל שנאמר אחרי כן פתח איוב את פיהו והדר ויען אליפז התימני.

This Gemara in Moed Katan is codified as law in the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 376:1). The Gemara contains similar statements in other places.

2. **Berachot 6b – Silence is obligatory in a context of mourning.**

Rav Papa said, “The reward for visiting someone in mourning is allotted according to keeping silent during the visit.”

אמר רב פפא אגרא דבי טמיה שתיקותא.

As only those who have experienced it can know, a mourner is in a completely different space. Trying to understand the ways of God must come from those who have mourned for a loved one. Such understanding cannot be imposed from the outside. All unasked-for words will usually sound like hollow and insensitive prattling. Those of us who did not experience the Holocaust, especially if we don't have the emotional sensitivity to really feel its horror, must always try to remember this lesson. This essay will therefore try to use primarily the words of those who lived through those events – the mourners themselves.

It is not just human sensitivity and good interpersonal relationships that demand us to learn silence. Silence is theologically the truest approach when grappling with death and loss.

3. **Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky (Parshat Shemini 5768 and other shiurim on the website of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington) – Silence and Humility**

Aharon's silence in response to the death of his sons (Vayikra/Leviticus 9:3) was very different than the silence the rabbis praise when they speak of the greatness of one who keeps quiet during an argument. The latter is one who restrains himself despite having the words to respond. Aharon's silence was an acknowledgment that some

things come from a realm far beyond a man's ability to grasp in words. Like Avraham at the *Akeida* (binding of Isaac), Aharon had entered a space which the intellect cannot reach. At the end of the book of Job, God quiets Job's friends and their arguments for Divine justice and brings Job to the true answer; in God's world there are things beyond man's grasp.

As we grope to understand the Holocaust, our discussions must ultimately begin in humility and silence and end in humility and silence.

This was the conclusion of many of the survivors themselves.

4. **Londner, Ha-Hayyim ha-Datiyim be-Belzen (Quoted in Hidden in Thunder by Esther Farbstein, p. 535) – The answer given in the camps: humility.**

Gradually, the spiritual awakening came...And then age-old questions popped up, Job's questions to the Master of the world: Why? What was our sin that the punishment is so severe? We debated this question more than once in Belsen. Philosophizing Jews attempted to delve deeply into the truth and grasp the course of events. All the debates ended with an ancient conclusion: God's ways in running the world are inestimably beyond anything a mortal can understand.

When discussing Judaism with non-Observant Jews, one can try to show them how the Torah makes sense in their present framework; it guides us towards a more meaningful life, a happy marriage, etc. However, there is simply no way to discuss the Holocaust without the concept that there is a deeper dimension to reality, a bigger framework beyond our present grasp. The key to the discussion must be one of intellectual humility. But this is in no way a contradiction to faith.

5. **Rabbi Yaakov Neiman, Darchei Mussar, p. 247 – Belief even contrary to one's perception.**

To believe that God created the heavens and earth does not require great wisdom since one's basic intellect directs one to have such a belief.

However, the highest level of faith is to believe in God when one sees things that defy one's intelligence and cause one to ask difficult questions on the ways of God. When one, nevertheless, dismisses these questions and has faith in the God of the Jewish people and understands that it is impossible to comprehend the Creator – this is the highest level of belief.

להאמין שהקב"ה ברא שמים וארץ לא צריך לזה חכמה יתירה כי השכל הפשוט מחייב להאמין בזה...

אבל המדרגה הכי גדולה באמונה להאמין בהקב"ה כשרואים דברים שזה נגד השכל ויש להקשות קושיות חמורות על הנהגת ד' ובכל זאת הוא מבטל כל הקושיות ומאמין אמונה פשוטה בד' אלוקי ישראל ומבין כי א"א לנברא שיבין את בוראו, זוהי מדרגה הכי גדולה באמונה.

To believe that there is “no injustice” (Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:4) even though according to one’s perception one sees staggering injustice, as we have seen in our recent history with the murder of six million Jews – those who were righteous, luminaries, pure; boys, girls, men, women, entire cities and families were decimated without a remembrance.

Regarding this, one must believe there is no injustice, for everything the Merciful One does is for the good, and there is a Heavenly calculation for everything.

להאמין כי “אין עול” אעפ”י שלמראה עיניו הוא רואה עול עד אין שיעור, כמו שראינו בזמן האחרון שנהרגו ששת מיליונים יהודים, צדיקים, גאונים, תמימים, תינוק ותינוקת אנשים ונשים, עיירות שלמות ומשפחות שלמות נעקרו מן העולם ולא נשאר זכר מהם.

וע”ז צריך להאמין כי אין עול, כי כל מה דעביד רחמנא לטב הוא עביד ועל כל יש חשבון למעלה.

6. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, Making Sense of Suffering, ArtScroll, p. 5, 7 – Trust extends beyond intellectual endeavor.**

God in His essence is unknowable, but that does not mean He does not exist. The totality of His ways is unfathomable, but that does not mean He has no ways. Intellectual endeavor remains crucial, but it must be coupled with another element: trust. Trust is what we are left with when we have gone as far as we can towards intellectual understanding and have still not obtained satisfactory answers. Trust is the certainty that there is sense to God’s ways even when we are denied access to those ways...

God could have created us with the intellectual capacity to understand every mitzvah (including the *chukim* [inexplicable mitzvot]). Or He could have limited the Torah to only those mitzvot that we are capable of comprehending (*eyduyot* and *mishpatim*). But He did neither. Rather He gave us the *chukim* to introduce the element of trust into our relationship with him. We do not understand them. We observe them because we trust Him.

KEY THEMES FOR SECTION III

- ∞ The basic response to pain and all the more so to events like those of the Holocaust should be silence. God’s ways are deep, and we should not presume to grasp them easily. Everything God does is for the good, and there is a Heavenly calculation for everything. Intellectual endeavor remains crucial, but it must be coupled with another element: trust.

SECTION IV: PUNISHMENT: REPAIRING THE EFFECTS OF TRANSGRESSION

Though we cannot hope to give a final answer to the Holocaust, let us try to probe some ideas that can make it easier to deal with. As we have already written, the simplest understanding of the events of the Holocaust is the concept of Divine punishment, as is described in the Torah's prophecies of rebuke. It is also an understanding that is very hard to accept. Without any explanation, approaching the Holocaust as punishment might make God seem like a celestial monster. We are, after all, discussing the murders of the millions of Europe, including over a million innocent children. Many points should be made for such an approach to be more understandable and emotionally acceptable.

First, we must be aware that punishment in Judaism is not viewed as an angry God taking vengeance – He is beyond such petty human emotions as anger. Rather, the purpose of all punishment is to wipe away the spiritual results of our failings. All that God does is ultimately for our good and this is true for all suffering, whether it is in response to our transgressions or for some other reason that we cannot know, such as rectifying shortcomings from a previous lifetime or improving us in other ways. (Again, the Ner LeElef Morasha class on suffering is highly recommended.)

This point is clear from a deeper reading of the *tochacha* (rebuke) itself.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, Making Sense of Suffering (pp. 178-9) – For our good.**

There is a strange verse at the end of the *tochacha* in Leviticus: “But despite all [the punishments which I am foretelling] while they will be in the land of their enemies, I will not have been revolted by them nor will I have rejected them to obliterate them, to annul my covenant with them – for I am the Lord, their God” (Leviticus 26: 44). Coming as it does on the heels of an extended prophecy of woe, this verse is puzzling. After all the Divine wrath and devastating punishments, how can God say He will not destroy us?

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk, one of the great scholars of the last 150 years, points out in his famous commentary *Meshech Chochma*, that there is a vast difference between suffering, pain and death that result in complete annihilation, and destruction that leaves behind something to survive and grow. That latter type of destruction is designed to produce a remnant that has been purified and strengthened. God never promised that He would not bring any destruction on the Jews; He promised He will never wipe us out entirely. Whatever destruction we suffer is not to obliterate us but to burn away a decaying shell and reveal a healthy inner body.

At least one survivor felt such a result in his own experience.

2. **Aronson, Alei Merorot, 300 (Quoted in Farbstein, p. 525) – Purified in fire.**

Of all of my relatives and dear ones and of my entire extended family, I alone remained through G-d's mercy on me. I emerged from the valley of deepest darkness with no part of my flesh uninjured, my entire body wounded and bruised, broken and shattered, but whole, pure, and clean in my soul. More than once I thought: I am like a newborn child; it is good for me to be reincarnated, to build a new life and to withstand the tests and temptations of the world after being refined in the iron furnace of fiery flames in the death camps and the agonies of hell, which purified us and distanced all flaws of the soul from us. The terrible torments and dreadful humiliations cleansed the garments of our souls from any filth that had stuck to them.

The element that makes approaching the Holocaust through the lenses of punishment especially difficult for many is that it was disproportionately the innocent who were killed, such as the children, as we mentioned. For the religious there is another aspect of this basic question which is portrayed by Rabbi Bernard Maza as having been asked in the camps.

3. **Rabbi Bernard Maza, With Fury Poured Out, p. 4 – Why the good?**

God destroys His people from off the face of the earth because of their sins. Isn't it foolish to believe that? If this were a punishment from heaven because of our sins, why did all the Rabbis, the pure and holy Tzaddikim who were full of Torah and good deeds; why did they die?

On this topic we must point out that the topic of the *tochacha* is one of a national punishment, in which even the innocent are included, as part of the Jewish people as a united entity. No one claims that innocent children or the greatest *tzaddikim* (the righteous) of the Jewish people died for their individual sins. Rav Elchonon Wasserman's last speech, right before he was shot, shows his understanding that for the nation's sins to be expunged, it was precisely the death of tzaddikim that could best do the job.

4. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, Making Sense Of Suffering, p. 193 – The Jews are all connected.**

“Apparently they consider us tzaddikim in Heaven,” Reb Elchonon began, “for we were chosen to atone for *Klal Yisroel* (the Jewish nation) with our lives. If so, we must repent completely here and now...We must realize that our sacrifices will be more pleasing if accompanied by repentance and we thereby save the lives of our brothers and sisters in America.”

The observant did not only focus on the sins of those multitudes leaving the Torah. As the entire Jewish tradition teaches, we must always begin with examining ourselves and not point a finger outwards. (Even if the most obvious sins were those of the Torah abandoners, the Jewish people are an entity whose actions are bound together on many levels. We cannot explore

this topic here beyond quoting Rav Yisroel Salanter's statement in an earlier generation. "If a *yeshiva bachur* (student) lifts his head from his Gemara in Vilna, a Jew intermarries in Paris.")

Sara Yoheved Rigler noted such an approach in her mentor, an Auschwitz survivor who had lost her entire family.

5. **Sara Yoheved Rigler, Holy Woman, p. 51.**

Rebbetzin Chaya Sara (Kramer) shook her head. I was asking the wrong questions. "We have to ask *ourselves* why the trouble comes."

...What is noteworthy about Chaya Sara's approach is that she spoke not in the third person, but in the first person. She did not point the finger for her suffering at *them*, the Reform Jews, the Communist Jews, the secular Yiddishists and Zionists, the Bundists who purposely held their annual banquets on Yom Kippur. "It came because of our sins."

Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, the son-in-law and heir of the *Minchas Eliezer*, the Rebbe of Munkacz, one of the great Chassidic leaders of wartime Hungarian Jewry, took a fascinating approach to precisely what sin the Holocaust came to rectify and how. He connected the Holocaust with the condition of discord and disunity of the Jewish people – the transgression that the rabbis blame as the root of our entire present exile. Because different factions among Israel had reached a state of constant dispute and even hatred, the Holocaust came to demonstrate, in the most painful manner possible, that all Jews have a single, communal fate.

6. **Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, Binat Nevonim (quoted by Rabbi Tamir Granot, Holocaust Class no. 15) – The sin of divisiveness.**

But as for the Second Temple, where the people were engaged in Torah, and the commandments, and acts of loving kindness – why was it destroyed? Because there was senseless hatred. This teaches us that senseless hatred may be compared to the three cardinal sins: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder (Yoma 9b)..

The divisiveness includes also the sort that prevails between one rabbi and another, even where their intention is to bring glory to God. Concerning them it is written, "*lo titgodedu*" (Deut. 14:1) – you shall not form separate, closed groups, but rather you shall all be a single group; thus it is written, "He has founded His company upon the earth" (Amos 9:6; Sifri Re'eh, piska 96).

Therefore, for as long as they fail to repent for this transgression, the redemption is postponed. It makes no difference that they are engaged in Torah and observance of the commandments, or even in acts of loving kindness, since they were likewise engaged at that time, as well, as the Gemara tells us – they were engaged in Torah and the commandments and acts of loving kindness, but since they did not repent, the Temple was destroyed...

In the eyes of Rabbi Rabinowitz, the greatest transgression, the sin that led to the destruction of the Temple (Yoma 9b) and which had never been healed, was the sin of internal divisiveness. Only the correction of this transgression can bring about the Redemption. It is noteworthy that, like Rebbetzin Kramer, Rabbi Rabinowitz does not attribute the internal state of dispute just to the streams that had parted ways with traditional Orthodox Judaism. Rather, he chooses to look inward; he asserts that dispute is no less characteristic of the internal relations between different rabbis and Chassidic rebbes. He saw the martyrdom of millions at the hands of the Nazis as a *tikkun* (repair) for this ancient evil.

But, again, this general approach of the Holocaust coming as punishment for, and rectification of, Klal Yisroel's transgressions in all of its variants should only be given in a spirit of humility. "It would be the height of arrogance to offer an explanation for the Holocaust; only one blessed with prophetic insight could do that (Making Sense Of Suffering, p. 175)." At the same time, any sense of humility would also seem to suggest considering punishment as at least part of the explanation. As Rabbi Yoel Schwartz writes, in his book *Ha-Shoah* (pp. 68-88), we cannot grasp the Divine measure of sin, Divine measure of punishment, or Divine concept of judgment. Just because the idea of Divine retribution may be uncomfortable and incomprehensible does not dismiss its validity.

It should be noted that many observant Jews simply do not accept that the Holocaust fits the standard framework of Jewish history. One of the most renowned spiritual leaders of the Holocaust years was Rabbi Kalman Kalonymus Shapira, the legendary rebbe of Piaseczno and of the Warsaw Ghetto. After the war, written copies of the sermons that he gave during the war years were discovered in the rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto and published under the title *Aish Kodesh* or Holy Fire. Mrs. Esther Farbstein, in her magnificent work on the Holocaust, *Hidden in Thunder*, notes a shift over time in the sermons he delivered.

7. [Esther Farbstein, Hidden in Thunder \(pp. 507 - 8\) - The Piaseczner Rebbe, a leader grappling with the Holocaust.](#)

At first he described the hardships of his generations as a link in the chain of the Jews' tribulations...He did not regard them as out of the ordinary in Jewish history... In 1942 there was another gradual change. The Rebbe stopped seeing the events as merely another chapter in the saga of suffering, but as something comparable to the worst catastrophe of Jewish history: the destruction of the Temple...In November 1942, however, witnessing the brutal deportations and the emptying ghetto, he added a note stating unequivocally that what his generation was experiencing was unprecedented...

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV

∞ **The concept of reward and punishment is the first idea that occurs to an observant Jew who connects the Holocaust with the Torah's descriptions of national disaster. Many saw the Holocaust as a natural result of a period of precipitous spiritual decline. Some compared the Holocaust to the destruction of the Second Temple, attributed to *sinat chinam*, causeless hatred among Jews. Others, however, simply cannot accept that the Holocaust came primarily as a national punishment.**

SECTION V: *HESTER PANIM* - GOD IN HIDING

Yet another point must be emphasized. Even if the Holocaust came as a response to our transgressions, God did not directly carry out the horrors of the Holocaust. He allowed them to occur. Our Sages tell us that “evil does not descend from Heaven.” Rather God created systems within the world such as nature, spiritual reward and punishment and human choice and often lets them run by themselves. God does not do evil; He at times refrains from protecting us from evil.

For many who lived through the Holocaust, the precise theological definition of the time of the Holocaust was that it was a time of *hester panim*, a time when the Divine Countenance was hidden. This means God’s activity was not clearly revealed, not that it was clearly revealed through punishment.

1. **Devarim 31:18 – Hiding the Divine Countenance**

I will surely hide My countenance on that day.

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא . . .

The verse informs us that a time may come in which the Divine countenance is concealed. This description certainly matches the years of the Holocaust.

The concept of *hester panim* softens our questions in two ways. It weakens the difficulty of how the fully innocent could suffer, and it eradicates the notion that God’ direct action caused the evil.

2. **Neusner, Faith Renewed, article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “The Holocaust In The Context Of Judaism,” p.45 – God has given Man freedom**

When the people Israel is faithful to the Divine word, it lives securely in this land and experiences the providence of God. At such times one can speak of Divine reward and punishment. But when it abandons God, it is sent into exile, which is not punishment as such but something worse, the *withdrawal* of providence. God “hides His face.” The moral distinction between these two states of affairs was spelled out by the medieval Jewish philosophers. When God punishes, He punishes only the guilty. But when He withdraws His providence, He “leaves man to chance,” in Maimonides’s phrase. At such times even the innocent may suffer, for tragedy is then the result not of Divine but of human action.

Some, such as Rabbi Eliezer Berkowitz, a student of Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (the author of the *Seredei Aish*), take the idea of human responsibility to an extreme as the entire solution to the Holocaust.

3. **Ibid. (p. 45) – Where was man?**

Eliezer Berkowitz chose this line of approach to the Holocaust. Seen in the religious context of freedom and responsibility, it tells us not about God but about man. For Berkowitz, Auschwitz represented the moral disintegration of Western civilization. It was the culmination of centuries of theologically-inspired hatred of Jews as the bearers of God's word. It disclosed what had always been present as a possibility: that men might choose ultimate evil.

The Passover Haggadah states that in every generation there are those who stand upon us to destroy us. That the Holocaust was performed by people and shows human evil is clearly true and part of the story. But it undoubtedly cannot be the whole answer. Even if it is true that God did not directly kill, we are still left with the question of why He allowed it to go forward then and to such an extent. Nevertheless, while human evil is not a full explanation for the sweeping destruction of World War II, it is clearly some part of the truth that helps us deal with the Holocaust.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

∞ **If ever there was one, the period of the Holocaust was a time of *hester panim*. The Divine countenance, God's love for and His constant providence over His nation, was concealed. According to some thinkers, this state of Divine concealment is all that we may say about the years of the Holocaust; we do not have the right to interpret the silence of God beyond pointing out the actual phenomenon.**

SECTION VI. PREPARATION FOR THE FUTURE

Many Jewish thinkers, whether they want to completely remove the events of the Holocaust from the principles of retribution or not, still take other approaches to try to explain their terrible force, which they feel are beyond any proportion to the transgressions of the specific generation.

In general there are always two basic approaches to the subject of suffering: as a consequence of past events, or as preparation for the present and future. So far we have focused more on the Holocaust as a result of past choices. Now we will mention some of the ways that have been suggested that it could have come as part of a preparation for the future.

Rav Elchonon Wasserman's last words pointed clearly to the future.

1. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, Making Sense of Suffering, p. 193 – Sacrifices not in vain.**

Then Reb Elchonon addressed God directly, "With fire You send destruction in our midst and with fire You will rebuild the Jewish people." His last words to his students were, "The fire is about to engulf our bodies: that very fire will return and build the House of Israel."

Rav Elchonon clearly understood that the spiritual merits of those dying to sanctify God's name would help bring a future good for the Jewish people. Rabbi Bernard Maza has written an entire book, *With Fury Poured Out*, expanding on this idea. He writes that a historical perspective can help us approach the Holocaust. According to Rabbi Maza, while Judaism in Eastern Europe – the center of those still dedicated to strict observance of Jewish law – was plummeting after World War I, there was almost no sign that anything could come of the Judaism that remained anywhere else. The millions in Russia were crushed by the Communists' fierce war against religion. In America Jews were fleeing from the old ways. The land of Israel was far from secure and what existed there was dominated by anti-religious forces. Whether from the spiritual merits of the martyrs or from the practical effects of the refugees from Europe who were pushed by the Holocaust to the United States and to the land of Israel, for Rabbi Maza the flourishing of Torah in those two places seems like the clear result of Divine Providence in the events of this century including the Holocaust.

2. **Rabbi Bernard Maza, *With Fury Poured Out*, pp. 225-226 – The Holocaust brought renewed life to Judaism.**

The history of the twentieth century gives us an insight into the answer. Decades have passed since the Holocaust, and the effects of the Holocaust have come into view. We have seen the resurgence of Torah in the east and in the west since the Holocaust. We know that by sacrificing their lives they made it come true.

An intelligent observer in 1929 or 1950 would never have predicted the resurgence of Torah living that has taken place. The revival of strict Torah observance – the multitudes not just doing the mitzvot as national customs but from a profound connection to Judaism and the widening devotion to Torah study – seems clearly miraculous. So too does the return to an observant Jewish life by Jews with the barest connection to their tradition.

But again we are not prophets. The Jewish world remains overwhelmingly non-religious and signs of decay have already appeared even in the post-war resurgence of Torah life. Can we really claim that we understand the Holocaust in all its terrible scope?

Rav Meir Simcha, writing years before the Holocaust, discussed another way in which such an event could benefit the Jews' mission in the world. He writes that people like to be creative and when there would no longer be room for a younger generation to help build within the Torah, they would focus their energies elsewhere. Therefore Divine providence has often dwindled in one Jewish community so that there would be room for the Jews to work to recreate the Torah in a new place. Ten years before the Holocaust, he clearly predicted that such could actually be expected in a generation which felt that "Berlin is Jerusalem."

Rabbi Yitzchak Kirzner writes similarly based on Rav Meir Simcha and the Maharal.

3. **Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner, *Making Sense of Suffering*, p. 180 – Clearing the way for a new beginning.**

Destruction in Jewish history represents the decay of the outer layer of the seed, as a prelude to the transformation of the seed into something new. The old must go before

the new can take its place. Whenever we turn away from God as a people, our former relationship with Him is destroyed, and cannot be recaptured. A new relationship, requiring a new type of people, must be forged from the ashes of the old. Destruction washes away the old embodiment of the Jewish nation. In its wake the Jewish people are reborn in a new form.

According to this approach, the Holocaust is not a break in the patterns of Jewish history but another awesome chapter of that story.

The return to the land of Israel is for many, even those who do not identify themselves as Zionists, another variation in this basic theme that the Holocaust was a preparation for the future. The Jews' return to their land and achievement of self-rule is an event whose significance is hard to dismiss.

4. **Neusner, Faith Renewed, article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Holocaust In The Context Of Judaism," pp. 41-2 - After centuries the Jewish people returns to its land.**

Even if a backward-looking explanation in terms of sin and punishment failed to do justice to the tragedy, there is another traditional approach, namely to look forward and attempt to understand the Holocaust not in terms of Divine punishments but Divine *purpose*. The Holocaust was not the end of the Jewish people. Three years later, a no less epic event took place, the creation of the State of Israel. Emerging from the shadow of death, Jews have returned to the promised land. And was this not precisely what the Torah had foretold? "When all the blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations...then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you."

The covenant had not been broken: it had been reconfirmed.

Some take a historical perspective but broaden the frame and feel the Holocaust can best be understood as preparation for nothing less than the final redemption. Rabbi Shlomo Teichtel, who was ultimately murdered on a train to Auschwitz, wrote thusly during the Holocaust itself in a work he published in 1943.

5. **Rabbi Shlomo Teichtel, Em Ha-Banim Semeichah pp. 95-96 - The decline that precedes Redemption**

The Maharal of Prague explains the reason for our troubles. The pangs of *Mashiach* (the Messiah) serve as "the absence before the existence" (*ha-he'eder kodem ha-havaya*.) The extent of "the absence" corresponds to the extent of "the existence" that God will bestow upon us at the time of the redemption (Netzach Yisrael 26). I also found this idea in the *siddur* (prayer book) of the brilliant Ya'avetz (Siddur Ya'avetz, Ma'amadot

le-Yom Sheni, p. 445a):

Greatness and prosperity generally develop following the despair which is caused by enormous calamity. The same is true of “existence,” for one of its four causes is “the absence” which precedes it. Accordingly, *Chazal* (our Sages) state, “[The chick] grows when [the egg] decays” (Temurah 31a). This explains how we, the Chosen Nation, have declined so drastically in the exile before reaching a state of tranquility and security. The last descent has been extremely difficult, proportionate to the absolute and everlasting good that will sprout after it. Hence, the Talmud (Megillah 16a) states that when the Jews descend, they descend to the dust, but from there they ascend, as it says, “He lowers it to the dust” (Yeshayah/Isaiah 26:5), and, “Our soul is bowed down to the dust...Arise, assist us” (Tehillim/Psalms 44:26-27).

According to this, it is natural that there be a great “absence” before our great “existence,” as is the case with all existence.

In historical terms, the Holocaust was a nullification of the reality of life in exile – in fact, an absolute loss of life – in order that a new form of existence could arise, namely, national existence in Eretz Yisrael.

But, again, we must remember we are not prophets to say precisely how such future events would occur. It is an interesting historical fact that many made it through the Holocaust with their faith intact, sure that these horrors must lead to the Messianic era but were overwhelmed when that did not occur immediately. After sixty more years without a full redemption, can we say we fully grasp the Holocaust from this perspective?

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI:

- ☞ Many place the Holocaust in a historical perspective as a preparation for the future. Soon after the Holocaust, after centuries of exile, the Jews reclaimed sovereignty in their land in an apparent fulfillment of age-old prophecy. Subsequent decades have seen a flourishing of connection to Torah and mitzvot that no one predicted. But the ultimate redemption that many Holocaust survivors were expecting has not yet occurred.

CLASS SUMMARY:

CAN A JEW CONTINUE TO BELIEVE IN GOD AFTER THE HOLOCAUST?

Clearly, witnessing such events was a huge test for those who wanted to believe in a benevolent and all-powerful God. But we see that many who experienced the Holocaust continued to believe and even derived the strength to go on from that belief.

Judaism does not say we have to understand God’s ways. They can be beyond our ability to grasp. Man can ask and wonder – and continue to believe even if he has no answer.

In fact, it would seem harder to deal with these events without believing they somehow came as another chapter in the longstanding relationship of God and His people.

WHAT DOES THE TORAH SAY ABOUT NATIONAL DESTRUCTION?

Events like the Holocaust seem to be predicted by the Torah and have occurred at other times in Jewish history. Although knowing these verses does not fully explain why the Holocaust happened, it did give at least some of those going through the Holocaust a framework in which to place it. For them the events of their time did not uproot the relevance of the Torah; rather, they felt they were living through those difficult sections of the Torah.

IS THERE A JEWISH RESPONSE TO SUCH SUFFERING?

The basic Jewish response to such suffering has been a humble silence. We cannot comprehend God's mysterious ways; yet, we know that everything God does is for the good, and there is a Heavenly calculation for everything. When our limited intellect impedes our understanding, our trust in God's goodness is manifest through silence. (It is recommended to read the Morasha class on suffering.)

WHAT WAS THE DIVINE PURPOSE OF THE HOLOCAUST? IF GOD RUNS THE WORLD, WHY WOULD ALLOW SUCH EVENTS TO HAPPEN?

Without prophecy we cannot know God's ways. A final and simple explanation for events of such magnitude should not be expected. We must say that God had a distinct calculation with regard to every individual's suffering and how it was for his spiritual good. Several types of explanations have been given for the Holocaust in general, all of which could be *part* of the explanation even if not the *whole* explanation. One explanation sees the Holocaust as an atonement for past sins; this atonement comes through suffering. This is the simplest understanding of the Torah's verses that refer to national punishment. The generations immediately before the Holocaust had witnessed an accelerating abandonment of Jewish observance. The longer we declined in our commitment to Judaism without repercussions to that decline, the more the Torah seemed to be disproven.

But most Jewish thinkers do not believe that this is the whole explanation. They view the Holocaust, as they do all events, as somehow a step towards the final Redemption. Certainly the events of the Holocaust were widely expected to bring the redemption, just as the birth pangs of a woman in labor precede the birth of a new child.

Clearly we have not yet seen that final redemption and we cannot know the full role of the Holocaust in bringing it closer. But we cannot deny that since the Holocaust, and largely because of it, age-old prophecies seem fulfilled as the Jews have regained sovereignty in their land after centuries of exile. In the decades after the Holocaust, observant Judaism has

flourished in ways that also seem little short of miraculous. After decades of downfall and seeming obliteration in the Holocaust, the traditional Judaism that was widely dismissed as a soon-to-pass relic, plays a growing role in Jewish life.

All this seems to be linked to the spiritual merits accrued by the Jewish people through their spiritual heroism and martyrdom during the Holocaust. The perspective that the events of the Holocaust served as the background for incredible acts of spiritual greatness gives transcendent meaning to the destruction.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Ner Le'Elef Holocaust Book I: History, Uniqueness, Reasons, and Where was Man?