

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00 – 15:30

The Religious Jew in the Holocaust and After

by

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1. From time to time, someone burst into choked sobbing that he stifled immediately as the rest of the worshippers stared at him in bewilderment, as if to ask, “What are you crying about? What’s the point of crying for the dead, when they should really be envied? Aren’t we the living also doomed to die? Aren’t we just counting the hours, the days for death to come?”

The prayer leader—he was a novice; the skilled prayer leaders were annihilated in the *Aktionen*—hummed Kol Nidre. The congregation, immersed in memories of past days, did not accompany him in the melody, so beloved, as they had in the good days before the torrent of blood began. When the leader raised his voice and began to warble, “The whole Israelite community shall be forgiven” [Num. 15:26], only a few members of the congregation repeated the verse; the others let the cantor continue with his personal devotions. When, with a stifled sob, he began to recite the *sheheheyanu* blessing [“Who has kept us alive . . . to greet this time”], the silence was shattered by savage screaming from a dark corner at the end of the barracks: “An absolute lie, an absolute lie” . . . The worshippers started to pound the wooden benches with their fists. “Oh, oh, sacrilege, shut up, be quiet. In the middle of *Kol Nidre!* Be quiet, shut up!”

The heckler paid no heed to their shouts. Instead, he raised his voice and drowned out their pounding. It was none other than Reb Hayyim, an honest, God-fearing man, who for all his sixty years had observed the commandments painstakingly, even the most trivial, never swerving from the path of the law and the faith. One bitter day last January, his entire family was taken from him. Miraculously he survived but could not explain to himself how he of all people, the old man, was still alive while his young sons and daughters were taken to the death pit outside of town.

Something in his mind apparently snapped that day. Reb Hayyim began to curse the God of the Jews and repudiate the principles that he had so ardently sanctified all his life.

The few survivors in the ghetto understood what had befallen him. It did not amaze them to see a man lose his mind. Reb Hayyim stood in the middle of the barracks, his prayer shawl disheveled, his eyes ablaze. Cynically he began to imitate the prayer leader: “ ‘Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and delivered us to this time.’ Should we really thank Him for having done us the great ‘kindness’ of leaving 150 Jews out of a community of 5,000 alive for a short time? Should we stand here all day long and lie shamelessly, without believing a word we say? ‘You chose us from all peoples, you loved us and desired us, and you elevated us over all tongues’ “ . . .

Reb Hayyim clapped his hands in satisfaction and began to speak in a wavering voice that emanated from the depths: “Gentlemen, have you ever heard of a God Who wipes His people off the face of the earth for its sins and misdeeds? Isn’t it nonsense to believe that? Doesn’t the God who knows ‘every creature’s innermost mysteries’ also know that the slaughter of His chosen people will not put anything right?”

“After everything He has done to us, have people abandoned their evil ways and begun to believe that there really is a God in heaven and started to follow the paths of the Torah? On the contrary! Everything we are witnessing proves that ‘there is neither law nor judge.’ In the Yom Kippur service we say, ‘For we are Your people and You are our God, we are Your sons and You are our father; we are Your flock and You are our shepherd, for a merciful and pitying God are You.’ What would we say to a father who—if only in a moment of rage—kills all his children, down to the last one? Wouldn’t we call [such a] father a thief, a murderer, a bandit?”

Moshe Kahanowicz, “Incident on the Eve of Yom Kippur 1943,” in Mordechai Eliav, *I Believe*.

2. “To believe in God after Auschwitz is an insult to the intelligence, a genuine sacrilege, an offense to the deepest sense of ethics. There is neither law nor judge.”

Alexander Donet, “Voice from the Ashes,” *Yalkut Moreshet*, 21, 1976.

3. In view of this terrible destruction, [an act] unparalleled in human history, of nearly all Jewish communities—that were obliterated, destroyed, and wiped off the earth in central, northern, and southern Europe; in view of the slaughter of six million Jewish souls, and in view of the great, terrible, horrific holocaust, in which the greatest [members] of our nation, its towering minds, its pious souls, and its saints, its rabbis, and the heads of its academies were burned alive—with trepidation and shame I retell the miracles and wonders performed for a tiny lichen like me, who will never know what to credit for the miracle of his salvation. Certainly I cannot credit my own merit; instead, it is for my paucity of merit that I was not included among those who sanctified God’s great and awful Name.

Rabbi Weinberg, *Seridey Esh*, Part A, p. 1.

4. On Heshvan 10, 5703 [October 21, 1942], R. Moshe Hayyim Lau boarded one of the railroad cars that would deliver the remnants of his devastated congregation to Treblinka. They say that in the car he delivered a fiery sermon about martyrdom. In this sermon, he mentioned for the last time the dictum of Rabbi Akiva that he loved to repeat in his wonderful sermons:

“All my life I was saddened about the verse fragment ‘with all your soul’ . . . [in which Jews are commanded to love God to the extent of forfeiting their lives]: when would I have an opportunity to observe it?” . . .

Recorded by Josef Friedensohn, in Yitzhak Levine (ed.), *Eleh Azkara, Historical Collection on the Martyrs of 1940–1945*, Vol. 4, p. 316, and 1961 (Hebrew).

5. Remarks on Terminology

Let us return to the original question: whether to accept the term “Sho’a.” The answer is *definitely not*. The Hebrew word *sho’a* denotes a special disaster that cannot be likened to anything that has occurred or that will recur, like an earthquake or high and low tides. As we have seen, such an approach is far from the Torah view of Jewish history. The destruction [*hurban*] of European Jewry is an integral part of our history, and we dare not isolate it and deprive it of its monumental importance for us. In fact, the isolation of one part of Jewish history, the separation of one segment of the Torah from its other segments, has done much to thwart our ability to deal with events such as the destruction of European Jewry. Much of our education concerns itself with the “lustrous side of Judaism,” because we lack the courage and will to confront the disasters that have befallen the Jewish people at large. Here, however, lies one of the sources of our uniqueness. We take delight in teaching our children about our having been “chosen” to receive the commandments and to be close to God. But at our risk we disregard the fact that the Torah expresses reproach—reprimand and assurance of punishment—in three segments (*Be-huqotay, Ki Tavo, and Nitsavim-Vayelekh*). We are duty-bound to teach our children these parts of the Torah, just as we teach the more “lustrous” parts. These segments should become as much a part of the Jewish soul as the more “lustrous” parts. These segments must become as much a part of the Jewish soul as the commandments, which we make such efforts to instill in them. Therefore, when a Jewish child or adult first hears about the *yiddishe tsures* (The Jewish woes), i.e., the Jews’ suffering, he should not find them to be in shocking contrast to everything else that he has learned; instead, he should regard them as the living reproach of the Torah that he has received.

Rabbi Hütner

6 After the Holocaust, it seems to me, one can live only within a religious category—only within faith, even if it is not faith in the Master of the Universe. One can no longer exist solely on the basis of one’s own discernment. If what happened in Europe happened, if such thing could occur after decades of humanistic education, then there can be no explanation and no basis for the knowledge, inference, or thought that such a thing cannot recur. I see no reason to believe that education is more humanistic today than it was then. A person can live only with faith. A person may believe that it will not recur because he has a mystical faith in man. However, to be a believer, but without God is hell on earth, unmitigated agony.

There is, however, another kind of agony, that of a person like me: to live with the Holocaust and say, “A faithful God, never false, true and upright is He” [Deut. 32.4]. This is no simple matter. The problem does not concern doubts about faith. I did not undergo acute personal experiences as did my colleagues and my father. I was not in Auschwitz; I only saw Jews being taken to Auschwitz. What happened there, however, was such an abysmal, abnormal thing that no logical thought can grasp it. Thus, I can regard it only as a metaphysical thing, something emanating from the hand of God. No logical thought, no Jewish thought can conceive it.

I am faithful to the Jewish thought that requires, those forces, the entire Jewish people to desecrate the Sabbath to prolong a child’s life by one hour. That is a Jewish thought.

What happened there transcends all proportion. The expression “proportion” is out of place here. It was so incomprehensible, so anomalous. I clearly saw God’s hand but did not understand the meaning of that hand. I was bewildered, and so I remain. As we say in Psalms [119:85], “The insolent have dug pits for me, flouting Your teaching.” It is contrary to Torah thought! I must say, and I say, “A faithful God, never false,” and I must and do live with this. In moments of kindness, I say that I believe clearly, and in other moments I seem to flee from the one to the other. However, I stand there bewildered, as the prophet (Habakkuk 1:13) said: “You Whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, Who cannot countenance wrongdoing, why do You countenance treachery, and stand by idle while the one in the wrong devours the one in the right?”

I am not looking for excuses. I am not trying to reconcile things. Any reconciliation, any logical explanation that I can imagine is shoved aside. Just as saving lives supersedes the entire Torah, this supersedes all excuses. However, [as in Psalms 92:3] “[To proclaim] Your faithfulness each night”—faith is so meaningful to me, so much a part of me, my very soul, that I ask, whose distress is greater, that of one who must live within religious categories, with faith but without God, or that of myself, who lives and feels, who lives within faith, and who says, “A faithful God, never false,” amidst consciousness of the Holocaust?

Rabbi Yehuda Amital, *Yalkut Moreshet*, 23, 1977.

7. When God Shuns His People

The Holocaust era was an absolute manifestation, so to speak, of the absence of reason and rationale. In this sense, it has delivered to the Holocaust victims—both those who died and those who survived; after all, we are all victims—a stinging blow. In fact, the magnitude of the Holocaust cannot be incorporated into any criteria of meaning. Any attempt to attribute meaning to the Holocaust obviously and factually verges on sacrilege. Only a confession that includes an intellectual and spiritual surrender in the search for meaning can prevent desecration of the Holocaust martyrs’ dignity.

I must admit that my opinion in this respect makes a rather bold assumption: that apart from the presence of God’s hand (His hand, outstretched over the Jews) as evident in our very survival, nothing in Jewish history since the destruction of the Temple has been “meaningful” or has left any “impression.” I admit that this is quite an audacious thing to say. However, I cannot but say it when all of our religious sources concur and even point to it. God is being hostile to us; we are immersed in the situation that the Talmudic sages call *menudim la-shamayim*: we are being shunned by God.

When I say that *hester panim*, God’s concealing of His countenance, is an era of meaninglessness, of course I do not intend to state automatically that Jewish history is devoid of meaning and value. (I do not belong to the David Ben-Gurion school of thought that dismisses the importance and value of Diaspora history.) I do believe, however, that the inclusiveness of Jewish history, from its inception to its Messianic denouement, is the highest form of meaning because it expresses proximity to God. By saying “meaning,” I am referring to the universal, redeeming nature of history.

However, there is a void, a bubble of sorts, in this process of “meaning,” in which meaninglessness predominates. In this era of *hester panim*, Jewish history in itself lacks all-purpose and meaning. It is a time in which nothing occurs beyond the Jews’ very existence and survival.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, in *Hatsofe*, “The Holocaust and *Hester Panim*,” April 28, 1989.

.8. Obviously, God cannot be good or bad. By His nature, He is incapable of doing evil. However, since He is essentially incapable of evil, He is incapable of good. God’s inability to behave unethically excludes Him from the category of ethical entities. For Him, good is neither an ideal nor a value; it is a reality, literally a fulfilled entity. Justice, love, peace, and mercy are ideals for man only. They are values that only man can fulfill. God is perfection. However, because of His very perfection He seems to lack one value: the value that results from the effort to attain a value. Because He is absolute light, He lacks the light that emanates from darkness. One may even say that while goodness is a value for man, it is a reality for God. Only man can create a value; God *is* a value. But if man alone creates values, if he is the [sole] creature who aspires to fulfill values, he must be given freedom to choose and decide. God must honor this freedom. The rule is that God cannot intervene whenever He finds man misusing his freedom. By intervening, He could make it impossible to commit evil but would also rule out the possibility of doing good. Man can be intimidated but cannot be flogged into doing good. If God were to disrespect man’s freedom to choose his course of action from a stance of personal responsibility, not only good and evil would vanish from the face of the earth but also so, along with them, man would himself. After all, freedom and responsibility are the very essence of man. Without them, man is not human. For man to be man, he must have the latitude to make his choices freely. If he possesses such a freedom, he will put it to use. However, the use to which he puts it will often be a misuse; he will opt for evil. When he does so, he will inflict suffering on innocents.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovitz, *Faith After the Holocaust*, pp. 94–95.9.

9. Had the *haredim* [the Ultraorthodox] lent their support to those engaging in this holy enterprise sixty, fifty, or forty years ago, and had they inspired the Jews to participate in it, we would have expanded [our presence] in Eretz [Israel] greatly and thousands of Jews would have settled there, [they] would have been spared from death, and would have fulfilled “. . . [the] rescue [of] those taken off to death” [Prov. 24:11]. However, they opposed it, and not only did they oppose it but they also incited the simple minds of the *haredim* to loathe the enterprise of building the land [of Israel]. Thus, the *haredim* have come to detest and revile anyone who expresses himself or shows emotion about building our country. Such a person is roundly rebuked—you’re a loathsome, repulsive Zionist, [he is told]—and this creates disgust and loathing for the Holy Land as well. Simple people who cannot judge the truth or falsehood of this attitude from the Torah perspective, and who wish to be considered God-fearing and righteous, shout at the top of their lungs against those who wish to engage in building our country: You’re a criminal and a Zionist, [they say]. By so saying, they demoralize themselves and our Holy Land, whereas in fact they are simply naive souls who do not know how to ask the right questions and cannot tell their right hand from their left. Even if several genuine scholars think favorably about this holy enterprise and admit that its sole purpose is to rise up, rebuild our eternal abode, favor our land, and appease its stones and

soil, they keep this auspicious thought to themselves. This is because they lack the courage to speak their minds, lest they be rebuked and called loathsome and despicable Zionists. Thus [the *haredi* leaders] have incited the *haredi* world to hate and defame the sect that has pledged itself to rebuilding our land on its ruins. Perforce they have also made the Holy Land loathsome and committed the offense of the [Biblical] spies, about whom it is said, “They grumbled in their tents and detested the desired Land.” Now, after the spies created an everlasting woe by their misdeeds, what became of them? They compounded woe upon woe until we reached our current state, in which the Jews have witnessed scandal upon scandal and woe upon woe—all because we rejected the desired Land . . .

Teichtahl, Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo, *Em ha-banim semeha* (Happy mother of children), 70:20, Budapest, 1943, Jerusalem: Pri ha-Aretz, first printing, 1973.10.

10. “The Measure is Full”

Obviously the answer is very clear. God performed a reckoning step by step, a lengthy reckoning spanning centuries, until it added up to a reckoning of six million Jews, and so the Holocaust occurred. A Jew must believe this, and if a Jew is not at peace with this belief, he has denied the essence [of the Jewish faith]. The simple explanation is that [the Holocaust] occurred at God’s counsel and is by necessity a punishment. If we do not accept it as such, we deny belief in God, as it were; Heaven forbid that this be so.

Now that the six million have been exterminated, a new reckoning with the Jewish people has begun. We have no idea how many years this reckoning will last, when the measure will become full—one year, two years, or perhaps ten years. We only know that God remains true to His word and carries out His decrees. Thus, we should consider the matter in the following way: For now, things are tranquil and good for us, for the measure has not yet been filled. However, when the measure is filled and God’s reckoning so indicates, a new reckoning will occur. Is this not true? Is there anyone who can deny it? It cannot be otherwise, and one must not say otherwise.

We see that the evildoers are in control, but they will remain so only until the measure becomes full. As the spiritual situation worsens further, the measure fills. [It may fill totally] in another year, another ten years, or even tomorrow. Before the Holocaust, they waited centuries in tranquillity until the measure filled.

The young generation does not know how many yeshivas there were out of the six million Jews who lived in Russia before the war. How few, so few! Vilna, a Jewish city, had two or three yeshivas in all. Kovno also had a yeshiva, but the men who learned there came from locations in the vicinity, not from the town itself. Where were all those thousands of young men? They obtained their schooling in the Russian gymnasium and the Haskalah battered them mercilessly, until the measure filled.

I wish to tell you that I myself am still unable to fathom these matters. The Holocaust, after all, was a terrible disaster that took the lives of towering scholars and saintly Jews [as well as the others]. There can be no doubt that God has a reckoning, and God does absolutely nothing for any reason.

Remarks of Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Schach

11. Last Remarks by the Holy Rebbe of Gradzisk, the Martyred Rabbi Yisrael Shapiro of Sainted Memory:

When they led the people—a crowd of thousands—from the camp to the extermination yard at Treblinka, the crowd turned in the direction of the Rebbe. “What is our rabbi saying now?” they asked. Our holy rebbe began to speak calmly: “Listen, my brothers and sisters, God’s people! It is not for us to challenge God’s actions. If it is decreed that we shall be the victims of the Messiah’s birth pangs at this stage of Redemption and must go to the pyre, we should take delight in being so privileged. Where [the Sages spoke of Jews not accepting the Messiah’s advent], they were referring to an earlier phase [of Redemption]. But we, who have reached this stage, should rejoice at being privileged to purify the entire Jewish people with our ashes. I command you neither to hesitate nor to cry as you walk to the furnace. On the contrary: take delight and sing “*Ani ma’amin*” [reaffirm your faith in song] and, like Rabbi Akiva, depart [while reciting] *Shema’ Yisrael*, at the word *ehad* [i.e., reaffirm the Oneness of God with your last breath].”

The congregation did as the holy rebbe instructed, sanctifying God’s Name in public by singing *Ani ma’amin* and crying *Shema’ Yisrael*. May God avenge their blood; may their memory be blessed.

These remarks are cited as reported to Rabbi Isaac Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Palestine, during his visit to Europe during the rescue operations in the summer of 1946, by a refugee who had survived by a miracle. It was reported in a letter we received from a refugee in Europe who survived the inferno.

Rabbi Yisrael Shapiro, *Emunat Yisrael*, World Association of Gradzisker Hasidim, Jerusalem, 1978, Part A, no page number.

12. Just as God is not revealed in nature, so is He not revealed in history? If He were revealed in history, in what way would faith in God be remarkable? Faith is the crisis that occurs in the consciousness of an individual who, failing to discover God in history, undertakes to worship God even though God is not revealed in history—which [history] one of the great historians described as nothing but “the history of the crimes, madness, and disasters of the human race.” This is the truth but not the whole truth, because history also includes man’s struggles against the crimes, madness, and disasters. It is a timeless struggle since it never leads to final victory. This struggle shows what is noblest in human history, but it does not end in victory. The world—the world of crimes, madness, and disasters—carries on in its own way. This is God’s world in history, just as beasts and whales are God’s world in nature. The believer in God must free his religious consciousness of all dependency on historical events. God is neither a functionary of human society nor the traffic cop of history. Therefore, there is no difference between successes and failures in history insofar as religious consciousness is concerned. Every undistinguished historical event is religiously indifferent. Historical events are religiously meaningful only insofar as they are acts committed by people for the sake of God, with the intention to worship God. A historical event is also meaningful if it is a suffering that people suffer because of their Divine intent.

In contrast, I cannot attribute religious meaning to the Holocaust of our generation, which shows what happened to helpless people in the clutches of eternal evildoers; this is part of the “own way” in which the world of history carries on.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Faith, History, and Values*,